

Our Town, 2019

Bonnie Marranca

I have always admired Thornton Wilder's innovative clarity in opening a window onto ordinary life while there was always something extraordinary and profound at the indiscernible far away. Seeing Amy Bennett's *Our Town*, one of the new paintings in her "Nuclear Family" exhibit in Chelsea this summer, I was confronted by an all-too timely imaginative new staging idea of Wilder's 1938 classic that is one of the most enduring works in the American dramatic repertoire. The original Grover's Corners, NH setting brings along a portable philosophic statement wherever it is transported, retaining fundamental paradoxes for any era. Bennett's small painting—not a mere "appropriation" but a striking affirmation of the livingness of canonical works—depicts an audience sitting outdoors on bleachers inside a bright white tent, watching the last scene of Wilder's play: the graveyard. In the darkness behind them are tall evergreen trees, a few houses, and a low mountain range configuring a highly theatrical landscape that seems unduly calm yet artificial. Indeed, it is, based on the three-dimensional models that Bennett builds as inspiration for this painting, and others in her show. In effect, then, it is somewhat of a stage design. Scattered in the space outside the tent are the dead—you remember their names: Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, among them—now sitting in rows on twelve chairs facing the audience. A procession of townspeople mourning another neighbor's death, young Emily, stands behind them. It is 1913, the eve of World War I. What is unusual about the scene in the painting I am looking at is the presence of armed guards at the corners of the big tent and near the ticket counter. A Hopperesque mood fused with Wilder's sentience generates its snapshot suprareality.

Summertime is the season for plays and concerts and country fairs in the open air. Local parks and rural landscapes transform into exceptional public spaces as people turn aside their troubles to celebrate the breeze of summer's freedoms and its harvests. This is a time for communities to come together and organize events that add a spiritedness to their everyday work lives. "*Everybody knows in their bones that 'something' is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings,*" Wilder's stage manager muses.



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Amy Bennett, *Our Town*, 2019.
Oil on panel, 20 x 26 inches.
Photo: Courtesy the artist and
Miles McEnery Gallery.

And so it was at Christmas Hill Park in the town of Gilroy, California where the yearly Garlic Festival was played out in so many small white tents before a trespassing shooter went on his murderous path. Many thousands had come to the festival on the weekend. What new recipes might I find?—some wondered. How many kinds of garlic are there? Is it an herb or a vegetable? Armed security and police were already on-site, prepared for who knows what. On the airwaves year after year we hear: “This is not who we are.” There must be some mistake. This *is* who we are. Anxious communities under white tents crisscrossing America on a summer’s day in any one of our towns.

As I write this from the Hudson Valley, the annual fall garlic festival is about to take place in the nearby small town of Saugerties: latitude 42 degrees 4 minutes; longitude 073 degrees 56 minutes.

It is now 2:28 p.m. on August 7, 2019.

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