

## EXHIBITIONS

### Linden Frederick

Linden Frederick (b. 1953) is a contemporary nocturne painter, enamored of twilight. The word *twilight* describes dusk's equivocal light effects, and threshold or liminal times and spaces. In the nineteenth century, connoisseurs of half-light tended toward the urban poetics of James McNeill Whistler or the mystical spirituality of George Inness. Frederick, however, approaches the nocturne genre from a fresh angle, as the title of his exhibition at the James A. Michener Art Museum suggests. "Linden Frederick: Roadside Tales" (November 28, 2015–March 13, 2016) hints at the road trip, a staple of American literature and film. Indeed, Frederick's images of small town streets and prosaic rural houses look something like film stills and make us curious about the potential narratives hidden behind closed doors.

Sometimes, the magical effects of *l'heure bleu* almost completely transform everyday buildings, as in *Summer House* (2009). The simple wooden house and a spindly bare tree occupy the right foreground, perched on a field of



Linden Frederick, *Bee Keeper*, 2008

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lunar-tinged snow. The off-season isolation of the house contributes to the otherworldliness of the setting; beyond it lie a dark lake, edged with a roseate smudge at the horizon, and a vast, blue-black sky. Frederick usually signals human presence with lighted windows, but this summer house is cold and dark. The house in *Right of Way* (2010), while shrouded in darkness, has a half-dozen windows illuminated with golden light. The silhouettes of the trees, with their rich foliage, fill the center of the composition with graceful vitality and show off the rich blue of the sky and water. These two works may look like relatively traditional landscapes, but Frederick has a different agenda.

“What drives me,” he writes in an artist’s statement, “is having a certain mood and that implies a human element....My work is not about place. It really is about people. I think inadvertently I’m setting some kind of stage so the drama can play out within the viewer.” *Summer House* and *Right of Way* are both immersed in the sapphire of oncoming night, but they express very different moods. If the windows of a house are its eyes, and metaphorically the eyes are the windows of the soul, the dark windows of *Summer House* convey desolation, while a companionable warmth draws us to the life in *Right of Way*.

Like a filmmaker, Frederick might use terms such as *interior* and *exterior* to describe his settings. *T. Rex* (2014) is pure exterior. Its title refers to the U-Haul van that dominates the composition—a symbol of transience, homelessness, at least temporarily, observed on an ill-lit urban street. The darkness is fitfully pierced by isolated spots of harsh industrial light. Frederick lives in Maine, but it would be interesting to see him try something in the vein of Midwestern noir, like the great television series *Fargo*, based on Joel and Ethan Coen’s movie of the same name.

In most of his paintings, Frederick includes a house or other buildings, piquing our curiosity by showing us the exterior and letting us imagine the life inside. There is only one light on in the modern apartment building at the center of *Triple* (2014). Or is that just a reflection from the crepuscular fading rose of the sky, barely visible through the woods behind the building? We look at the structure from across a dark street; enigmatically, a turning arrow on the pavement directs our eye towards the principal subject. Nothing seems to be going on, and yet the scene is ripe with potential meaning. I was reminded of the long closing minutes of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Eclipse* (1962), in which the film’s protagonists do not appear at a scheduled meeting place, and the emptiness of the street becomes sublimely poignant. Absence plays a role, too, in Frederick’s *Bee Keeper* (2008). The eponymous character is represented by a neat row of white hives running along the horizon line, between blue sky and rough grass.

Sometimes, Frederick opens the wall, as it were, between exterior and interior. In a study for *Wedding Night* (2004), wedding guests appear in an illuminated shop window—are they mannequins? They also look like actors in a stage play—somewhat surreally taking place at a small-town intersection,



deserted except for the car approaching from a distance. The sky here is still bathed in light, azure softly fading.

Many artists explore the ambiguities of twilight by blurring forms (as Inness did) or simplifying and flattening shapes (as Whistler, inspired by Japanese art, did). Other artists choose to keep contours clean while acknowledging contradictory light sources. René Magritte's *Empire of Light* (1953–54) pushes this strategy into the realm of the surreal by combining—with seamless plausibility—daylight with artificial street-lamp illumination.

Frederick stays within the bounds of realism but finds something like Magritte's eerie magic in *VFW* (2009). A nondescript low-slung meeting hall for the Veterans of Foreign Wars—the title of the picture comes from the big letters on the roof—sits dead center. Our view is from the back, with the parking lot's painted lines becoming nifty little perspective lines, like a tiled floor in a Renaissance painting. The sky's dimming light, a cloudy blue-grey, duels with the artificial lights over a couple of doors. A lighted window suggests human presence, but the parking lot seems deserted, its black surface streaked with reflections from the building's sparse lights. The VFW hall, once a social gathering place in small towns, has become less prominent as the generations change. There is a feeling of loss and regret, a melancholy in sync with the fading light. Frederick does not editorialize or offer any exposition. As a passerby, as we all are at one time or another, he is momentarily intrigued or touched by what may lie behind the façade of the everyday. As an artist, he takes the time to look, to translate those moods or feelings into eloquent visual form.

"Linden Frederick: Roadside Tales" was on view November 28, 2015–March 13, 2016, at the James A. Michener Art Museum, 138 South Pine Street, Doylestown, Pennsylvania 18901. Telephone (215) 340-9800. [MichenerArtMuseum.org](http://MichenerArtMuseum.org)

—Gail Leggio