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Lawrence Tarpey at Institute 193, Lexington

By Maddie Klett

On a frosty Friday in Lexington, Kentucky, my feet slid across the sidewalks leading to Institute 193. The small art space featured comparably small folk-surrealist paintings by local artist and musician Lawrence Tarpey. After covering clay or gesso board with oil paint, Tarpey etches biomorphic figures and shapes into these surfaces with a razor blade, creating delicate markings of humanoid forms that have the character of stick and poke tattoos. The artist's process combines the arduous tradition of oil painting with the immediacy of drawing in a sketchbook—apparently his preferred way of etching is sitting on his couch with a painting on his lap.

The paintings are spatially divided on the gallery's two walls between color and sepia-toned. I spent the most time with a lone color portrait hung on the back half-wall leading to the

bathroom. *Twenty Twenty Profiles* (2020) is a profile of a head that appears bisected, exposing anatomically incorrect fleshy inter-workings behind a living eye, nose, and toothy mouth. Its exaggerated nose, hairline, and other physical features can be seen in other characters throughout the show.

Tarpey is a Lexington, KY punk music icon, founding and participating in bands since the early 1980s. I lived in San Francisco Bay Area for a while and to me, the work evokes the American folk aesthetics of the so-called "Mission School"—artists in that



Lawrence Tarpey, *Twenty Twenty Profiles*, 2020, oil and graphite on claybord, 10 x 8 inches

city's muralist, graffiti, and music scenes in the 1990s. Tarpey's exaggerated portraits recall the cartoonish-yet-dignified personalities in paintings by the late Margaret Killgallen, and the humor in those by Chris Johanson. Still, the ghoulish specters in Tarpey's dreamscapes, like those in *A Much Better View* (2020), also suggest the mysticism and magical realism of surrealist paintings by Leonora Carrington from a much earlier era, in the 1940s and 50s.

I mention these artists to position Tarpey's work according to my own limited purview, and of course I don't know if they are also on his mind. Still, I imagine the impact and transient origins of folk or "Hobo Art" in North America—artists working while jumping trains and scribbling notebooks on-the-move, making art because it's just what they do—is an inclination Tarpey shares. His paintings put a piece of his interiority on display, and are a testament to how wild dream-reels still animate the mind, even during the sedentary COVID-19 era in the deep Kentucky winter.