

ALEX KANEVSKY

Hollis, 2015
Oil on Wood, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

ABBEY HOOD

Madame Mustache

1. Madame Mustache

After the last game, after the last of the money Elanore had borrowed was gone, after she had gone home and changed into her best dress, after she had hawked her last good piece of paste jewelry, after she had gone first to one pharmacist and purchased a little bottle and then crossed the street to the other pharmacist and purchased another little bottle, after she had adjusted her hat using her reflection in the shop window, then she opened the first bottle and started to drink.

She drank and walked down the uneven boards of Main Street, across the muddy, horse-applied expanse. When someone called to her, a man and shouted “Hey, madam, want a glass of mother’s milk?” she tucked her bottle into her bell sleeve so he wouldn’t see and lifted her head. She stroked her mustache and snarled a smile across her teeth, raising her empty hand. Yes, she called, Yes I would.

“Crazy bird!”

She walked toward Bridgeport, though she had no destination in mind. Late enough to be quiet here except for the endless breaking of the stamp mills. She didn’t want to die within earshot of them, so she walked.

Past the last house to where a narrow path dwindled up the sage-crusted hill. Over one of these hills was a meadow and some scrubby willows, a brook that sometimes leaked clear water in the right weather. She wanted to be there. Quiet.

Quiet in a way the Paris of her memory had never been. All that noise there. Perhaps that’s why she had slept so well in the towns and not on the ranch that had, briefly, been hers.

Foolish. What did she know of cattle? What did she know of harvesting anything but men’s pockets?

She dropped one bottle, empty now, and opened the next with her teeth. Her head drifted. Heat mellowed through her though her breath rose in a fog toward the moon. It felt like summer even without a coat. Above her the stars rainbowed and quaked. They hummed at her. Had they always been so loud? Had stars always sung “Ave Maria” in her mother’s voice?

Her mother a second-tier opera girl, always in the chorus. She hadn’t the connections to do better. Nor the