Written by Michelle Garrison
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The phrase “the elephant in the room” is a metaphor for the obvious things we choose to ignore. In *The Great White Elephant*, Diane Naylor treats those words literally to explore our often contradictory, yet rarely acknowledged, relationship with the animal kingdom. Naylor’s work presents our simultaneous tendency to idealize and dominate nature.

The painting is part of the current show – featuring 57 pieces by three local artists and running through April – at the Quad City Arts gallery inside the Quad City International Airport. Naylor’s work is narrative and analytical, which creates a well-rounded exhibit when combined with the art of Elizabeth Shriver and Louise Rauh, who address nature with a focus on form rather than concept.

The bulk of Naylor’s show is composed of mixed-media paintings, roughly four by three feet, that include animals in constructed settings. *The Great White Elephant* is exemplary of this style. An elephant with a circus-style headdress dominates the left side of the composition. It is in profile, in a casual standing pose, facing the right. The background is a blue sky with fluffy clouds over an empty landscape. Cleverly, Naylor has made it appear to be a backdrop, rather than a literal landscape, as the elephant is casting a shadow onto the “sky.” In the bottom right corner is the Eiffel Tower,
sans

any sign of Paris. Leaning against the tower is a ladder.

Naylor's use of mixed media adds to the sense of staging. She has collaged a filtered photographic image of an elephant on top of her realistically painted clouds, but has rendered the ladder with thicker paint application. This causes a subtly disjointed quality, which works well with the content.

The elephant outside of its habitat should seem as jarringly out-of-place as the Eiffel Tower outside of Paris. Naylor compares the false homes animals are often placed in, such as the implied circus, to stage backdrops.

She makes a similar comparison in *The Great White Buffalo.* The composition is split in half by a cross-section of a wall. To the left of the divide is a buffalo's body standing on a shore. To the right is its head, appearing mounted on the wall. The left shows the natural existence of a buffalo, while the right shows humanity's appropriation of it into our habitat through its destruction. This is further stressed by a landscape painting hanging on the wall of the house – another example of nature in artifice.

This layering of symbolism adds initial intrigue to Naylor's art but at times seems vague or excessive. In *The Great White Elephant*, the ladder could mean progress or ascension. Elephants are associated with strong memories and bodies. The Eiffel Tower is identified specifically with France. The title's use of "white elephant" refers to a burdensome gift. The written quotes from philosophers on the side edges of her canvases add yet another layer. The use of so many potent, multifaceted symbols risks steering the viewer away from the central message.

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