

Particularly disappointing is the result of a visit by Liu Xiaodong (who is, according to the MFA, “celebrated as the most talented oil painter of his generation”) from Beijing to paint portraits of local students in a loose *Rolling Stone*-illustration style. He then had the teens write on his painting about violence, because he’d heard about the horrors of American schools. It’s a well-intentioned outsider’s simplistic, stereotyped view. From an American artist, it would read as patronizing.

A spot in my heart is reserved for Li Jin’s colorful ink drawings, which were inspired by his visit here from Tianjin. His cartoony style teases the old masters without needing to compete with them. He portrays himself as a chubby, bearded glutton running around like some traditional-Chinese-scholar-turned-rock-star having a deliciously debauched time with naked ladies, Red Sox fans, and full-figured dudes in nothing but thongs. More, please.

➤ Neal Rantoul of Cambridge is one of the eminences of local photography (in part because he’s headed Northeastern University’s photo program since 1981), yet he occasionally falls off the radar screen. So until one of our museums gets around to an official retrospective, we’ll have to make do with Panopticon Gallery’s sharp survey of the 64-year-old’s landscapes and cityscapes from 1980 to 2005.

The show begins with Rantoul’s 1980 “Boston Infrared” series — vertigo-inducing portraits of local skyscrapers. The camera feels tipped up and off balance as it records with impressive Modernist formalist rigor the repeating patterns of windows and moldings of towers against soft clouds above.

Subsequent photos come out of the New Topographics style. This is often affiliated with straight-on, deadpan, “objective” photos of sprawling, cookie-cutter housing developments in the American West — yet

it also includes Nicholas Nixon and Frank Gohlke in Boston and Providence’s Joe Deal, who wrote the foreword to Rantoul’s first monograph in 2006. Rantoul records train tracks running along the bottom of a rocky Utah cliff, a road barrier along a lush residential California neighborhood, a cemetery amid vast, middle-of-nowhere wheat fields in Washington. These precise, controlled, seemingly disinterested shots of (often) dreary places can feel arid, yet they can also seem as fresh as a crisp starched sheet.

Rantoul favors vistas devoid of people, and a couple of series from the mid 2000s look at actual ghost towns — there’s Old Trail Town, a collection of relocated 19th-century Old West buildings in Cody, Wyoming, and the abandoned WW1-era military housing on Peddocks Island in Boston Harbor. On the island, he shoots the brick houses, with their empty windows, mainly head on. But I’m taken by a photograph that gazes upward at a brick ruin through a stand of shimmering trees. There’s a haunted romance to its mood of absence and abandonment.

➤ Proof Gallery rounds up a compellingly idiosyncratic snapshot of local talent in its fourth annual “Boston Does Boston” show. Gallery director Kara Braciale invited three artists — Suara Welitoff of Cambridge, Rebecca Roberts of Newton, and Kurt Ralske of New York (he teaches at RISD) — to exhibit. Each was also asked to pick a local artist to join the show; they chose, respectively, Jonathan Calm, Julia Featheringill, and Meg Rotzel.

Welitoff makes brief looped videos, often of found, grainy footage that’s been slowed down, with the color contrast pumped up. Most are not narratives, but at their best they can suggest curiously mesmerizing amplified dream moments: two hummingbirds seeming to kiss, police running off protesters, a couple chatting. Here she