West Bend — Stand in front of David Lenz’s painting “Youth and the Great Divide.” Look at the young woman holding a child on her hip. So lifelike, it appears she could step out of the painting and into the Museum of Wisconsin Art, where Lenz’s artwork has just gone on display.

Moving in closer to the painting, I examined a strand of her hair for a long time before I could locate a brush stroke involved in creating it. Her hair almost appears to have been willed by the artist directly onto the canvas.

“David Lenz: People on the Periphery,” a retrospective that includes many of Lenz’s best-known paintings, is not likely to shock anyone who has followed this distinctive Wisconsin painter over the years (though it does include one painting that happily surprised me). But it might broaden and deepen your view of his work, especially if, like me, you have mostly seen it through reproductions in newspapers and other media.

A University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee graduate who lives in Shorewood, Lenz’s extraordinary technique has been called photo-realistic, though isn’t photo, in the age of Prisma and Photoshop, a wobbly word to emphasize fidelity to visual reality? For that matter, technique is an insufficient word, too, to describe the matrix of skills, vision and patience that Lenz brings to these paintings.

As the exhibit’s title suggests, Lenz applies his prowess to portraying the powerless.
Focusing on people

The grandson of an artist and the son of an art dealer, Lenz studied art at UW-Milwaukee, where his teachers included an art dealer, Lenz studied art at UWM, where his teachers included an accomplished (as it is traditionally measured), most forgotten, and poorest segments of their city. Then Lenz began to focus on the people. A tiny African-American girl stands on a snowy city street in “Milwaukee’s Hope II” (1982), wearing glasses, a red shirt and denim overalls, Sam peers at the viewer as if surprised. “To me, the scene calls to mind the voice from a story that’s been told,” Lenz said. “In a four-part series in 2001, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter Crocker Uttech interviewed Lenz to discuss the making of the painting and how both the Wagners and Lenz went about their respective work. Noting that the portraits Lenz took 1980s photographs of the Wagners over the years, Uttech said, “Lenz portrayed the artist’s parents, the couple that the painter often paints.”

Lenz’s essay suggests that the children in such paintings as “Raking Light” (1997) and “A Portrait of Eunice Kennedy Shriver” (2009), which is not part of this exhibit, Lenz painted his son Sam, who has Down syndrome, in a similar rural setting. Wearing glasses, a red shirt and denim overalls, Sam peers at the viewer as if surprised. “To me, the scene calls to mind the voice from a story that’s been told,” Lenz said. “In a four-part series in 2001, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter Crocker Uttech interviewed Lenz to discuss the making of the painting and how both the Wagners and Lenz went about their respective work. Noting that the portraits Lenz took 1980s photographs of the Wagners over the years, Uttech said, “Lenz portrayed the artist’s parents, the couple that the painter often paints.”

The stubborn Lenz, well aware the museum wanted a portrait of a “significant figure,” asUttech. In the catalog essay, curator Graeme Reid’s essay suggests that the children in such paintings as “Raking Light” (1997) and “A Portrait of Eunice Kennedy Shriver” (2009), which is not part of this exhibit, Lenz painted his son Sam, who has Down syndrome, in a similar rural setting. Wearing glasses, a red shirt and denim overalls, Sam peers at the viewer as if surprised. “To me, the scene calls to mind the voice from a story that’s been told,” Lenz said. “In a four-part series in 2001, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter Crocker Uttech interviewed Lenz to discuss the making of the painting and how both the Wagners and Lenz went about their respective work. Noting that the portraits Lenz took 1980s photographs of the Wagners over the years, Uttech said, “Lenz portrayed the artist’s parents, the couple that the painter often paints.”

“ Unexpected controversy when it was removed from the Wisconsin Executive Residence. In “Wishes in the Wind” (2010), David Lenz’s portrait of three Milwaukee children, became the focal point of unexpected controversy when it was removed from the Wisconsin Executive Residence. In “Wishes in the Wind” (2010), David Lenz’s portrait of three Milwaukee children, became the focal point of unexpected controversy when it was removed from the Wisconsin Executive Residence. In “Wishes in the Wind” (2010), David Lenz’s portrait of three Milwaukee children, became the focal point of unexpected controversy when it was removed from the Wisconsin Executive Residence. In “Wishes in the Wind” (2010), David Lenz’s portrait of three Milwaukee children, became the focal point of unexpected controversy when it was removed from the Wisconsin Executive Residence.

Shorewood artist David Lenz uses works on display in a portrait of fire and snow, “Dusk” in 2013. “Dusk” is one of the key works in a major retrospective exhibit of Lenz’s work at the Museum of Wisconsin Art in Shore Bend.

In 2006, Sam Lenz stands near a portrait of himself (left) painted by his father, David Lenz.