

Contemporary art is experiencing a moment of juvenilia. In an attempt to unshackle art from its serious pretences it moves toward the adolescent. The images, previously suspicious as fine art, are now embraced for their teen dream-like qualities and video game and television references. The child's eye is a mythical paradise that offers a novel way to look at the world seemingly immune to the influences of traditional historical narrative, pictorial perspective, and skill. What happens when an adult artist knowingly employs the naïve in pictorial space? The art drops any pretense of "naturalistic" accuracy, and becomes more ambiguous, perhaps closer to something free; in any case a revised vision is offered. And what happens when that same artist employs the naïve in order to address historic violence between humankind; war, genocide, expulsion, the conquering of another people, the colonization of their culture and their mind? What of the contrast between historical content fraught with the mature and images stylized to appear naïve? For me, Mario Doucette's use of the child-like calls into question the certainty of historical narrative.

A Moncton artist of Acadian descent, Mario Doucette reinterprets the Acadian expulsion of 1755, the Grand Dérangement, and the conquering of the Native Americans by the Europeans. I see in Doucette's work a leaping back and forth from past to present, stylistically, contextually, in order to wrestle historical fact from stasis, to free it from dogmatic conformity. In these paintings one sees literal and symbolic representations of the defeated and the conquered, historical figures such as Cortez and Beausoleil and the Crusaders, juxtaposed with Wonder Woman, curling games, bright, fire-breathing dragons and sweet flowers. In this juxtaposition, Doucette asks a series of "what ifs?" What if Joseph Broussard dit Beausoleil, the leader of the resistance movement in the

Acadian deportation of 1755 had succeeded against the English? What if Native Americans had invaded the European continent instead of the other way around? What if the arrival of Cortez had ushered in a time of peace and prosperity for the Aztecs? What if the conquerors had been the defeated? Can we imagine another history?

Reflecting back on childhood, Mario Doucette expresses an unknown motivation in his drawings. “Why would I and other little boys draw those things? They’re pretty horrific but the colours are nice.” In the adult version the viewer has a keener sense of priority in his work. The references to the tumultuous Grand Dérangement in Acadian and Canadian/World history confirm the works’ imitation of the naïve, rather than the actual naïve. There is a folk art quality, the wood grain visible, the simple expressions on the faces. In many of the images the viewpoint is from above, lifted out of the violence, a safe bird’s eye view from which to explore alternate interpretations of the historic event. The images possibly humanize and humourize but also simplify, anesthetize and reduce the complexities of war and the Acadian deportation, allowing child-like hopes and heroes a fighting chance at a new story; a rescue from a sinking ship, a refuge amongst the flowers, the championing of the other ‘team’. There is a certain amount of fun to be had in paintings, the endless arrows stuck in the ground, the flying superheroes and the easy depiction of ‘good’ verses ‘evil’. One imagines interjections like ‘Pow!’ and ‘Put your hands up!’. Beautiful colors, richly depicted flora and fauna, like Henri Rousseau’s hidden pastiche jungles, recall the mystical idea of the New World, and the (Acadian/Angel) figures, naked as Adam and Eve, alternately in refuge or in persecution, echo an Eden that has quickly fallen from grace. Each painting reiterates the artist’s desire to release historical events from their dogmatic horror.

T. J Clark writes in the introduction to *The Painting of Modern Life*, “Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favorite models are irony, deadpan, the pretense of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished; the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.”

Mario Doucette’s paintings seem to exist on the cusp of adulthood, when often a child knows the facts but not yet what to do with them. The images are full of teenage-like awkward moments, rife with possibility. He utilizes his own childhood drawing techniques in this current work, reviving the innocent brush in the depiction of persons in battle and conflict, and I am reminded of the possible disconnect between image depiction and the reality of the human condition. For me, these paintings make the permanent- fluid and the closed- open to interpretation, confirming that things and pictures of things do not add up, not ideologically, not materially. The artist, through this work, urges the viewer to upend and make awkward his or her conception of history, in order to expose how it and we suffer when history is paralyzed by assumptions of the known.

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