

Kim Dorland: Strange Fire

There are many ways to describe the psychic toll of modernity (or postmodernity, or post-postmodernity, or metamodernism). Malaise (Walker Percy), disenchantment (Max Weber), twilight or decline (Oswald Spengler), brain-rot (Henry David Thoreau) and a new term coined by Brad Troemel—‘zirpslop’—referring to that ubiquitous, soul-sucking algorithmic sludge. But no one described the spiritual vacuousness of modernity better than T.S. Eliot did, one hundred years ago:

There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

The Hollow Men is a good companion for Kim Dorland's art. Both use landscape to harrowing effect. Both describe malaise, twilight, brain-rot. Eliot's metaphor is the scarecrow. We hang from "crossed staves/ In a field/ Behaving as the wind behaves." Dorland's metaphors are scarecrow's cousins—skeleton and zombie, smartphones gripped in their cold, dead hands.

In late-modern life we feel our souls thin out, even as we gorge on virtual content. "The telos of the digital order is total availability" wrote Byung-Chul Han in *The Palliative Society*. There's the feeling also, of simultaneous collapse and expansion—within society, but in art as well.

Dorland has been painting the landscape for over 25 years. His scenes have been described as hallucinatory, which may have been accurate a few years ago. But things have changed. The dark sci-fi prophecies of yesteryear are our 'new normal'. The distance between surreal and real has become a tiny gap, one we can easily step over. There are even occasions where Dorland's paintings and my own life completely overlap.

I've sat at a picnic table, for example, and stared across the lake towards the blackened trees. The entire horizon line, charred. I've stumbled through thickets of birch and spruce, looking for a sign. THIS WAY BITCHES it read, in spray-paint, when I found it. I've stood under the northern lights and watched them gather into the blue form of Skeletor. I've heard their laugh echo through the

night: *Bwahahahaha!* In the Northwest Territories, where I live, wildfire smoke is part of the weather report. Shrouds and scrim—acrid, choking—fall as regular as rain. In the wider world, a sense of evil is growing.

Marshall McLuhan once described art as “a distant early warning system.” But art isn’t so far ahead, anymore. Dorland’s work is happening now, and now, and now.

Now, I am walking through the woods. I am looking down at my white Adidas. Against the scorched earth, they are glowing. I am looking up to realize the sky has turned Halloween orange. Firelight! Ash is falling. My flesh is gone. My hands are bone. I am the subject of a Dorland painting: a Canadian hoser in a toque and plaid jacket, flashing the peace sign for the camera as the wilderness burns.

I won’t be at all surprised when I touch my face and feel wet paint.

Dorland’s paintings are so richly viscous. Paint is piled on so thick it turns sculptural. Such verdant goop! There’s a kid-in-the-backyard feel to the portraits of his wife especially, like *Lori*. The artist as child, stirring his mud pies. This is elemental creation. “For God formed man of the clay of the ground” (Genesis 2:7).

I’m convinced Dorland’s canvasses are not heavy with oil and acrylic but with the medium of consciousness itself—gelatinous, fatty, packed with neurons. All the best artists are just reincarnated cavemen, after all. Metaphysicians with their little pots of soot and marrow.

But here’s the rub. There’s a little question in Dorland’s work: What time are we living in? Is it the dawn or the dusk of our civilization? Is something ending or is something beginning? Some paintings, like *Pastoral*, feel like a fresh start, a new day. Some are so life-affirming, with plate-sized pink hibiscuses. Others, like *The Big Tree by the Air BnB*, are a blazing golden hour. The tree of life, so magnificent as to be lurid, a veritable smack across the face. Here is heaven, you zombie jackasses! Just outside the banal details of your wasted life. Wake up!

My favourite Dorlands though, are the darkest ones—those that are pregnant with dread, those that depict the hyperreal, like the bevy of burning rabbits in *Doomscrolling*. It’s possible to read these with a tongue-in-cheek, ironic detachment, and I do, when in a certain mood (“Hop drop and roll” is my favourite ha-ha comment on Dorland’s Instagram). But really, the doomiest ones embody a deep sincerity. When the chuckle ends, an almost unbearable sadness begins. Thankfully, some have an almost-hope, a faint glimmer through the charred trees, a premonition of glory. In Dorland’s lexicon there are two kinds of fire—the one that consumes the earth, and the one that animates the soul. But what if the two are one and the same? This is strange fire indeed. Primeval, or outside of time, impossible to comprehend.

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The unbearable sadness also comes from the fact that these paintings come from a deeply personal place. Dorland's wife Lori is sick, and he is her main caregiver. He made his latest suite of paintings—much smaller than his usual scale—when taking short breaks from the bedside. Lori, who he paints often, has been his best friend, soulmate, muse, and collaborator for 37 years. The strange fire is also one of intense love, gratitude, awe.

“Pain and happiness,” said Nietzsche, profoundly, “are two siblings and twins who either grow up together or remain small together.” It's the same, I think, with hope and doom, heaven and hell. They are often conjoined. They bear each other along. The triangle of light in Dorland's *Tent* does this—carries on its back the whole sad, dark forest. The only way forward is through.

The tumid river is bulging with algorithmic slop. Dorland's proverbial skeleton pair are Adam and Eve (and he and Lori), walking through the briars and burrs of dying Eden, through a hellscape of pain, searching for the bush party. “There are no eyes here,” wrote Eliot. Scarecrows cannot see. Zombies too, are blind. But sometimes, there are eye-flames flickering inside Dorland's skulls. Will they fizzle out? Or will the strange fire bloom brighter and brighter, growing like the multifoliate rose at the end of Eliot's poem, “The hope only of empty men?”

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