



John Scott's *Eater of the Dead*, above, is based on the Boeing X-32 aircraft, famous for its huge, gaping mouth and overall ugliness.

EXHIBIT A JET AESTHETICS

Eater of the Dead Reviewed by Gary Michael Dault

John Scott's *Icons, Winners & Losers* continues at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451 King St. W., until March 4.

John Scott has always liked drawing airplanes. Or maybe he hasn't so much liked to draw them as he has felt compelled to draw them. In the early 1980s, at the beginning of his career, he made a gigantic, messy, mural-size drawing of a sinister black jet bomber nosing into the mostly empty picture from one side. This mega-drawing was called *Carnivore*, and it both made him a reputation and set him on the path to his future program: the watchful, agonized limning of the oppression of the little people — all of us — by the military-industrial, trans-governmental, post-national matrix.

The drawing reproduced here — which appears in the new Scott ex-

hibition called *Icons, Winners & Losers* that opened last night at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery — is called *Eater of the Dead*. The aircraft is the Boeing X-32, and it was the losing competitor in the U.S. Department of Defence's Joint Strike Fighter Contest (1994-2001). The winner was the Lockheed X-35. "My feeling," Scott told me a few days ago, over a chicken sandwich in a coffee shop near his studio, "is that the X-32 lost the contest on sheer lack of beauty. It's just a wedge with a huge gaping mouth," he says (industry wags promptly nicknamed the plane both the "Ugly Duckling" and, perhaps more inventively, "Monica").

In Scott's drawing the X-32, now a mottled pink the colour of bruised flesh, floats heavily over what looks to be either a ruined or exceedingly ragged city. The plane's blacked-out, Cyclopean eye of a canopy is as unseeing as its vapid, lolling, fish-mouth air-intake is predatory — the thing looks, in fact, like some spiny, unappeasable deep-sea creature cruising endlessly for sustenance. The drawing demonstrates many of Scott's characteristics as a drafts-

man: a certain aggressiveness and yet tentativeness of line, a hope-for-the best sense of perspective and proportion, a disorientingly cavalier way with scale, a disturbingly fearless employment of eccentric colour, and a scrawly, annotated linguistic agitation that lends each of his works rhetorical urgency.

The words *Eater of the Dead* rapidly scratched beside the failed fighter are, according to Scott, not so much a taunting description of the plane as they are a reference to the fierce and ancient concept of battling armies (and marauding civilians) actually consuming the dead; it speaks, Scott says, "to the body's not being sacred." It speaks, in other words, to the artist's troubled conviction, of which the X-32 is an emblem, that while there has always been a certain brutalism afoot, it appears to be getting more extreme: "I'm using an ancient kind of language here," he tells me, "because it's an attempt to resonate in an archetypal way, to illuminate the closing relationship between the primitive and the present. I think Jane Jacobs is right," he says, "that we are advancing into a dark age — a

dark age unlike any we've known before." (there is an eight-foot-square drawing of Jacobs in the new exhibition).

Clearly Scott is not the kind of artist — nor has he ever been — who makes delightful, escapist things. His work, of course, is not without a certain kind of mordant humour: His exhibition features, for example, a drawing of a jet fighter labelled *The D-Sade* ("I thought it would be a good name for a plane"), a portrait of sci-fi writer William Gibson with an arrow pointing to his "geek neck," and two portraits of Napoleon, one marked both "wounded commander" and "test drive". But for the most part, Scott's art follows a long, aching trajectory of anxiety, political engagement and colourful approaches to despair. "The new generation (of artists and otherwise)," he maintains, "doesn't seem to give a crap about an idealized future or a meaningful present." His art — like *Eater of the Dead* — is about what he feels is "the fantastic degree to which we seem to be oblivious to and unfeeling about the major issues of the moment."