

ENTERTAINMENT

Some time in the early '70s, John Scott was convinced his art career would be over before it started. "I was sure the revolution was going to start any minute and I'd get killed in it," Scott says with a quiet smile. "It's hard to believe I actually took that seriously, but I really did expect to get shot."

Forty years on, Scott's politically charged idealism, however tempered by decades of cold, hard reality, endures in a career stamped by those early revolutionary beliefs. Characters, images and motifs recur time and again in Scott's work, such as the looming spectre of the Dark Commander, a black Napoleonic silhouette that stands in for nihilistic authority, or the skull-like bunny figures who wrestle haplessly to endure the churn of Scott's dark, often violently militarized worlds.

Both have become signatures of Scott's work in recent years, and at a show just opened at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery, they appear in force — a Commander with a severed arm, red eyes glowing from the inky shadows, a grim looking bunny figure holding a placard that says "resist" (above it, in a nod to Scott's grim humour, floats the word "why").

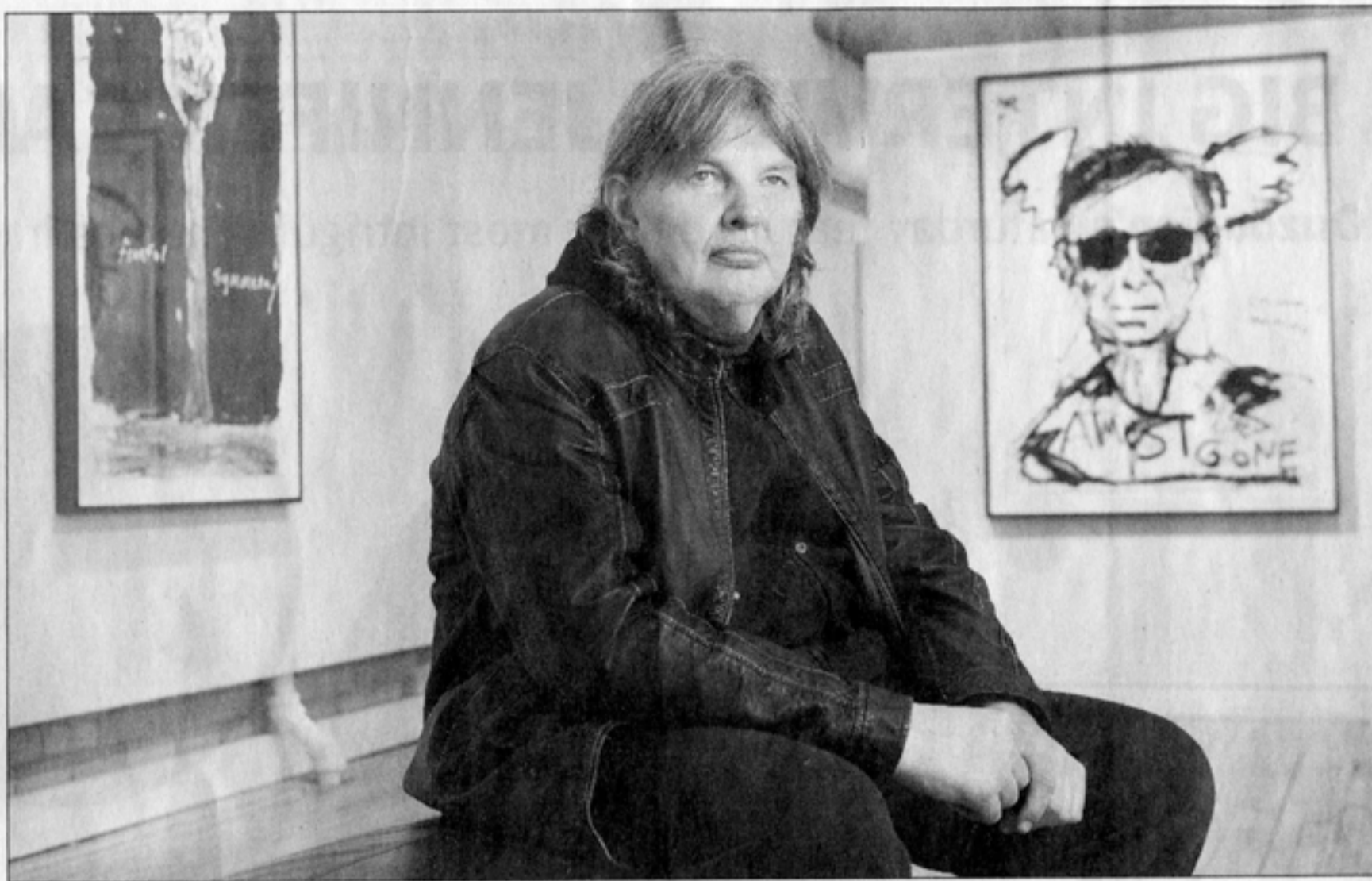
Looming much larger in the background, though, is a broad retrospective of Scott's work that's just starting to take shape. Mounted by The Falconer Gallery at Grinnell College in Iowa, the show, tentatively scheduled for January 2013, promises to be the largest exhibition of Scott's work to date.

The Falconer, with its 7,500 sq. ft. of exhibition space, is a generous venue. With its priorities centred on a significant collection from Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* series, the Falconer pinpoints artists "who are engaged in social-political commentary," says Daniel Strong, the gallery's associate director. Despite its out-there Midwestern location, this ethos has helped put the gallery on the art-world map, producing significant exhibitions of such internationally renowned artists as South African William Kentridge, among others.

Scott, Strong says, is a perfect fit. "If John didn't exist, we would have to invent him," he says. "He seems to have seen the 21st century coming."

The show will be an opportunity to open the back catalogue on Scott's long history of art-based dissent. His blackly comic cross-fertilization of industrial economies and military aggression has proved both fruitful, and long-lived; his first-ever work, an ominous, indistinct silhouette of an SR-71 spy plane ("I loved the lines of it — it was completely black, long and thin, very wicked looking," Scott says).

It's an easy line to draw through the decades that followed, through Scott's prodigious output of works on paper to monumental sculpture



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

Artist John Scott's politically charged idealism endures in a career stamped by revolutionary beliefs.

'He seems to have seen 21st century coming'



MURRAY WHYTE

that gathered up all of his grim fascinations.

One of these, a late-'70s Pontiac Trans Am that Scott painted matte black then inscribed, in jagged, hand-scratched script, the full text of the Bible's apocalyptic Book of Revelations, has become the stuff of Canadian art-world legend — a blunt conflation of vapid consumerism, industrial production, and the end-times that toxic pairing had sent the human race hurtling towards.

Scott made it in 1993, and called it *Trans Am Apocalypse*. There are two: One, owned by the National Gallery in Ottawa, is making a rare public appearance there right now; the other, owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario, is stored in a facility outside of Toronto. When talks for the Falconer show began, Strong

and Scott trekked out to see it, and it charged Strong's intentions with greater force. The piece is an essential, Strong says; he's not sure how he'll include it, only that he will. "It's my job to make things happen," he says.

It's too soon to say whether or not we'll ever see the show in Toronto, but we should: Scott is the rare artist who launches unafraid into overt political commentary, and has never wavered from it. The product of that is a riveting body of visceral work that embodies bursts of fitful energy: Rough, gestural swipes of black, grey and red coalescing to form ominous figures in a wash of rabid-seeming intensity. Crude text scrawled in the background often embodies Scott's priorities: "Rotating Darkness" under a commander figure blurred in a ruddy, reddish black; or another figure, small and squat, shackled to a post, with the words "It wants no chains."

"A lot of people start off with an edge, but over time, their teeth become rather dull," Scott says. In 2000, when he was among the first to receive a Governor General's Award for visual arts, Scott showed



Dark Commander



Blue Bunny



Tyger Tyger

his to be sharp as ever: In his acceptance speech, he said plainly that it was important as an artist "to bite the hand that feeds."

His reactive force was installed early on. When Scott was growing up in Windsor in the '60s, his father had died of industrial emphysema, while his mother developed tuberculosis. Both, he believes, were the result of working in toxic conditions in the city's various heavy industries. "There was a lot of stress brought on to the family by the general ravages of living in a consumer-based, industrial world," he says. "It set the stage for a continuous feeling of anger."

He had no intention of becoming an artist. Scott's older brother was at the University of Toronto when he quit school at 14; not long after, he moved to the city and started sitting in on classes. "I decided university lectures were a lot more interesting than high school geography," he says.

The city was roiling with the political radicalism of counter-cultural youth movements of the '60s, and Scott was energized by the rage they embodied. But it was quickly deflated. He joined Rochdale College, the infamous experiment in high-liberal free education in a Bloor St. apartment tower that, by the early '70s, had devolved into a haven for drug dealers and other criminals. "I lived there until I had to admit it was a complete failure," he says.

Scott's revolution had fizzled. Now adrift, Scott turned to the Ontario College of Art. He had no artistic ambitions, but OCA was a famously loose institution; there, he could study neo-Marxist theory and dream of the overthrow and nobody would bother him.

Things don't always work out the way you plan, though, and on a bet fresh out of school, Scott, who had never made a thing in his life, ended up in a show of young artists at the prestigious Sable Castelli Gallery that launched his career. "I had to invent something — quickly," he laughs. It was that SR-71, a sleek, sinister, hovering icon of death from above that Scott had drawn in large, expressive black strokes.

The rest, as they say is history. Though with Scott, it's never quite that simple. Highs and lows have been a constant feature of his career, and his life. But if ever there was a moment for a reckoning, with both fresh work on the walls of his hometown and a keen interest from afar in his long history, this is it.

But that's just Scott's career. His life and practice are inseparable things, bleeding into one another in a symbiotic haze. This is both his blessing, and his curse: It's the rare artist I admire whose retirement I would look forward to, but there's really no danger of that. As long as the world gives us oppression and despair, John Scott will give us art. John Scott continues at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery to Dec. 11.