

One of the last truly angry artists

Being scary has always been John Scott's thing



Peter Goddard

In John Scott's overwhelming drawings at Nicholas Metivier Gallery, all hell breaks loose in the form of a shark-snout bomber zooming in for the kill, atomic explosions blasting out of a skull and a smiling skull attached to a brain stem piloting a jet.

So when gallery manager Dionne McAfee says there's another painting hidden away in the back deemed "too scary" to show, one doesn't know whether to run out screaming into the safety of King St. W., or to risk everything and go back for a peek.

Too scary? Being scary is Scott's thing. In 2000, he won one of the first Governor General's Awards in the visual arts for being scary. He's really good at it, going back 30 years. A John Scott scare makes Stephen King's worst nightmare scenarios seem like a stroll in the park.

Who can resist? I opt for taking the peek. And we place the drawing, *D-Sade* (2006), unframed on the gallery floor. Its background is a bilious, toxic grey-green that looks the way a bad hangover feels, with every nerve ending totally frazzled. Typical of Scott, the surface of the worked is messed around with all sorts of hacks and scratches. The words "the D-Sade (2010)" are scrawled on the top, perhaps as a reference to the perverted debauchery of war via a link to the sex-obsessed Marquis de Sade.

Another note, "Leaving Kuwait," is over a sketchy outline of some military vehicles. Dominating the entire work is a great, malevolent smudge in black streaked with white on a piece of roughly cut paper pasted onto the larger surface. The image is part plane, part mechanized vulture and totally your worst nightmare. It teeters on the edge of being something you recognize and the thing you fear.

It's a real stunner. So is the whole show.

It's also more of Scott's obsession with "the glamour of technology," as he tells me later, "and the way people are always attracted to it and the images of power. People are drawn to the malevolent beauty of these things."

Scott is one of the last truly angry artists in the world. Until recently, his anger was aimed at all the usual suspects, mostly the military-industrial complex and all those who push its buttons. These days, it's aimed squarely at society's apathy to the war in Iraq and the resulting international distress — and the artistic apathy too.

"It totally disgusts me," he says. "I can't believe there's such a lack of response. It's not that there are no atrocities. There's simply no reporting of atrocities. You hear nothing in the highly structured information stream we have."

"I've always taken the position that you have to accept the limitations of the visual arts in their ability to have any effect on society, which I think is mini-



There is nothing for the faint-hearted to be found in John Scott's show at Nicholas Metivier Gallery, where all hell breaks out as the artist again condemns "the glamour of technology."

mal. I think we're interior decorators in the forum of ideas. Still, I think we can do something."

Maybe it won't happen though, he grumps. "The kids today are interested in abstraction in one form or another. They all want to be art stars."

To him, Iraq is only an extension of "the continuous state of using technology to impose political will, going back to World War I," he says. "In a sense World War I happened just yesterday. It was the war that started the new technology."

"John Scott: Icons, Winners & Losers" reflects the artist's vision of the never-ending state of psychological siege. Its wartime imagery covers centuries ranging from *Napoleon* (2006) to World War II to images of "planes that are only coming into production now," says Scott.

(His paranoia is legendary around town. He wouldn't give me his age when I asked — he's 56. "Because this way some people will think I'm really young and haven't caught on to the ways of the world. Others will think I'm an angry old fart who hasn't learned anything about post-modernism, that I'm like Eeyore, the donkey.")

The quick leap from *Napoleon* to the old grey grumpy mule in *Winnie the Pooh* who always keeps his head down while chewing on thistles says something about Scott's breadth of understanding of popular culture. It's a subject he taught for years at the Ontario College of Art & Design, although his current teaching mandate has to do with the work of fourth-year students.

His *Napoleon* is not the brooding, sexualized Beethoven-like figure that so obsessed fellow Toronto painter Tony Scherman in his 1999 book, *Chasing Napoleon*. Scott's *Napoleon* is a sad, jockey cartoon of a figure; a bit wonky-

looking in the very space he's supposed to dominate. "Wounded commander" is written near one of his feet. A parallel pair of paper tears are slashed into the figure's back.

Scott is not ambivalent about leadership and achievement, though. He's celebrated this subject for years with personal, mostly non-militaristic heroes. Portraits of William Gibson, Isaac Newton and Alfred Hitchcock in the

show reflect the artist's deeper understanding of his subjects' humanity and the pain and loss that went into their achievements. (Scott himself has suffered from osteoporosis for years). In *Hitchcock* (2005) he's replaced the late director's passive, pouting lips, familiar to us from most photos, with a jagged set of square, angry teeth. This is the Hitchcock who in 1960 made *Psycho*.

But if that doesn't send shivers,

there's always *D-Sade*. A day or so after I was at the gallery, I was informed that the big scare was now framed and up on the gallery walls.

Bombs away.

"John Scott: Icons, Winners & Losers" is at Nicholas Metivier Gallery, 451 King St. W., until March 4.

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