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Anton Orlov

End Times

Darren Waterston paints an apocalyptic vision on the walls of the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

By MICHAEL S. GANT

WALLED IN
Darren Waterston's new installation fills the walls at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

WHEN VISITING the new installation at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, it helps to remember the rule of the left hand that saved Theseus in the labyrinth. Start on the left and circuit the room clockwise to take in the panoramic narrative painted on white boards covering the walls of the gallery.

Darren Waterston, a San Francisco-based artist, created *Was and Is Not and Is to Come* on-site over a period of about two weeks, working with the help of 10 volunteers. The medium is simple—nothing more than Kelley-Moore house paint he tells me—but Waterston wrestles, like Job and the angel, with some very deep themes.

The title derives from a line in the Book of Revelations identifying the beast that is “about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction.” The alteration of being and nonbeing—“is not” and yet somehow “is to come”—catches the sense of seeming impossibility yet inevitability of apocalyptic prophesy.

Inspired, he says, by 15th- and 16th-century Flemish painters, Waterston conjures up his own abstracted version of the apocalypse mythologies that play a prominent part in many religions and cultures. The piece does not literalize any particular tale of pending world conflagration; instead, Waterston distills ideas of the end times from many traditions.

The journey begins in a cave, often the place where prophets receive visions of terrible events ahead. Shadowy rock forms in black, gray and blue slate encircle a furious floating vortex with a burning red heart, like a star being born deep in space. On one long side wall of the gallery, the cave opens out into a scarred wasteland. Stalagmites begin to grow and morph into tall tree trunks, stripped of all but the stub ends of their branches. These trunks tumble to the right providing a sense of movement pulling you along. Wafting through this monochromatic netherworld, a wisp of gray paint coils and grows, puffing up into a bulging cloud shape.

In a bravura passage of paint

applied so freely with such a wet brush that drops slide down to the floor in a rainfall effect, Waterston has executed a great swooping stroke that curves low then arches up and out of the forest. On the back wall, a chaos of objects—some mere blobs, others vaguely recognizable as busted tree branches, vine tendrils and small, exquisitely rendered fungal spores—are splattered in profusion, exploding outward and then falling back to earth.

A resurrection of sorts appears to take place in the narrow corridor at the back of the gallery, where a flight of blackbirds (the first completely figurative images in the piece) soar upward. But a closer look reveals more discord—some of the birds tear at each other's entrails.

Finally, as the birds disappear beyond the top edge of the wall, an amorphous shape shading from light pinks at the edge to rivulets of dark crimson in the center fills the wall. This efflorescence of color could be the mushroom cloud of final conflagration or an aerial view of two rivers coming together and flowing to

a new sea of possibilities.

Was and Is Not and Is to Come can be studied up-close. Some of the botanical forms are rendered with the precision of scientific illustrations; the birds with minutely detailed wings expressly reference the angel wings of Dürer's woodcuts for the Apocalypse of St. John. In spots, the quick inky strokes flow with the controlled speed of a Chinese calligrapher's hand. But the piece works best as an unfolding drama. The design continually draws the viewer along in a powerful, wavelike rhythm of soaring up and crashing down; the installation always “Is to Come,” never finished, never “Was.” That dynamic of creation can be seen in a video compiled from still images of the making of the work taken by Anton Orlov and shown in a back room of the gallery along with Waterston's preliminary sketches.

WAS AND IS NOT AND IS TO COME, by Darren Waterston, shows through Jan. 6 at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 560 S. First St., San Jose. The artist talks on Thursday (Nov. 30), 7–9pm. (408.283.8155)