

Ian Forbes' The Big Foldy Painting of Death

grunt

By Noah Becker



Photo Credit: Aspen Zettel, Latitude 53 Gallery (Edmonton, Alberta) exhibition photos, 2012.

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Ian Forbes' *The Big Foldy Painting of Death* surrounds us with his perception of politics, nature, and the unconscious. As we view this massive painting, we notice Forbes' visual take is playfully surreal yet serious. *The Big Foldy Painting of Death* is a kind of west coast Canadian visual journey through its creator's mind in large scale. It's not an illustration of death or an entirely allegorical painting, but more a meditation on environment and social structures of Western Canada. It's also part of a process that comes out of Forbes' interest in book making. "I made it specifically for Latitude 53 Gallery in Edmonton," Forbes told me. "I wanted to bring what I had done with accordion-fold books into a larger format and see what happened in the transition from drawing to painting."

Forbes does a lot of drawing and he can often be found drawing and drinking beer in a pub atmosphere, where he plans out his work in an almost stream-of-consciousness manner. This process allows interaction with other people in the room and liberates Forbes from being a studio-bound painter thinking up concepts in isolation. The work of Ian Forbes has the intellectual vitality found in the tradition of pub culture and late afternoon conversations about art and politics over a few pints.

Influences on Forbes' work are varied and numerous. His painting resonates with the work of such figures as Monty Python filmmaker Terry Gilliam, specifically Gilliam's film *Time Bandits* and the sense of scale found in the film. We see hints of psychedelia reminiscent of Peter Max, but in a darker palette. Forbes' palette evokes artists like Edvard Munch (1863–1944) in a much more direct sense than other artists. The socio-environmental and socio-political sensibilities of Northern Renaissance painters such as Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1560) and Pieter Bruegel (1525-1569) come into play as well. This aspect of Northern Renaissance art and its political and environmental concerns relate to current situations in Western Canada. "I don't deny it," Forbes says. "There is a real mixture of things in it; I was thinking a lot about the oil and gas industry, oceans and fish and a lot of other things." Forbes also cites the work of Kiki Smith as an influence



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“The idea of landscape as a place that you travel through when on an LSD trip is one aspect, but landscape as pattern and landscape as a shifting, surreal, dreamlike domain figures in as well. We can also see the landscape as a metaphor or staging area for literary situations or performative interactions between characters or disparate two-dimensional elements.”

as well as Anselm Kiefer’s sense of scale. James Ensor’s social conscience and the surrealism of Joseph Cornell also make perfect sense in relation to Forbes’ interests. The chain reactions that occur as we read the surface of *The Big Foldy Painting of Death* painting are also similar to the kind of intricacies found in the work of the late American cartoonist, sculptor, author, engineer and inventor, Rube Goldberg. Forbes’ work also shows the pervasive and perverse influence of erotic fantasy or sci-fi art as seen in such publications as *Heavy Metal*. The list could go on.

Aside from fine art, art historical or filmic influences, *the Big Foldy Painting of Death* contains non-literal aspects such as the psychology of the painting. The idea of landscape as a place that you travel through when on an LSD trip is one aspect, but landscape as pattern and landscape as a shifting, surreal, dreamlike domain figures in as well. We can also see the landscape as a metaphor or staging area for literary situations or performative interactions between characters or disparate two-dimensional elements. Absorbed in it like the minds of children with crayons, Ian Forbes is an imagination on overdrive. We are run through *the Big Foldy Painting of Death* as if we are on an amusement park ride. This ride is not just about thrills, however: here we have a political statement and a sociological position at work. There is also an amount of horror tempered with dry wit. “I try to make imagery applicable to multiple readings,” Forbes says. The Peninsulas of Ian Forbes’ painting take us through what we are doing to the environment and what we are doing to ourselves. Triumphant groupings of elements create a large format where escape is not an option. The darkness of the palette is

another aspect of psychological torment. In Forbes' painting, Freud's observation that we recall things as a result of certain shapes, images, or colours is well demonstrated.

When we enter the gallery, the first thing we notice is the scale of the piece. Its long format measures 127 feet long by 8 inches by 6 feet. This reflects Forbes' interest in the German artist, Anselm Kiefer, who similarly uses scale for grand effect. It also comes from Forbes' interest in drawing as a means of spontaneous investigation. Two skeletons at the beginning wall of the painting hold a sign that reads "WELCOME FRIEND TO THE BIG FOLDY PAINTING OF DEATH." These skeletons are surrounded by a blue glow reminiscent of being underwater. They are in moonlight near the sea; the sky is glowing faintly from a total eclipse of the sun. Further along in the painting, at the edge of the sea, there is some kind of machine—part meth lab, part human organ—which leads up towards a beehive shape at the top. The water pipes are sucking up resources and spitting them out. These open pipes send ferocious water cascading down upon a starlit area, which shows a sun character within a larger sun. A figure with the same beehive shape seen earlier has it as a hat and is now reaching out of a hole in the sky and pressing a button. The exploding painting of water now washes down into another zone.

"It was the realization of that stream-of-consciousness process on a large scale," Forbes says of this work. One leaves an extended viewing of *the Big Foldy Painting of Death* with a series of both literal and non-literal experiences.



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