



JULIAN FORREST · LEAVE A LIGHT ON IN THE WILD

JULIAN FORREST
Leave a Light on in the Dark

Vernon Public Art Gallery

July 25 - October 2, 2019

Vernon Public Art Gallery
3228 - 31st Avenue, Vernon BC, V1T 2H3
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Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Vernon Public Art Gallery
3228 - 31st Avenue, Vernon, British Columbia, V1T 2H3, Canada
July 25 - October 2, 2019

Production: Vernon Public Art Gallery

Editor: Lubos Culen

Layout and graphic design: Vernon Public Art Gallery

Copy editor: Alexandra Hlynka

Cover image: *We Live as We Dream #2*, 2017, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in. Photo: Mark Freeman

Printing: Get Colour Copies, Vernon, British Columbia, Canada

ISBN 978-1-927407-51-6

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The Vernon Public Art Gallery is a registered not-for-profit society. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Greater Vernon Advisory Committee/RDNO, the Province of BC's Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch, British Columbia Arts Council, the Government of Canada, corporate donors, sponsors, general donations and memberships. Charitable Organization # 108113358RR.

This exhibition is sponsored in part by:



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An agency of the Province of British Columbia

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

The Vernon Public Art Gallery is pleased to present this exhibition of paintings by artist and Associate Professor, Julian Forrest from the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus. Titled *Leave a Light on in the Wild*, this body of work looks at various aspects and historical characters from the migration and conquest of the West. These open-ended visual narratives leave the viewers with room to explore and interpret the work from their own unique perspective.

I'd like to thank our guest writer Blair Brennan, an artist and writer whose critical essays about art have been published in acclaimed Canadian art magazines such as; Artichoke, Border Crossings, C-International Contemporary Art and Cameo. His essay elaborates on the work contained in Forrest's exhibition featured at the VPAG and within this publication.

The Vernon Public Art Gallery also acknowledges the financial support of the Province of British Columbia, the Regional District of the North Okanagan, and the BC Arts Council, whose funding enables us to produce exhibitions such as this for the North Okanagan region and interested parties across Canada.

Our hope is that this publication will provide deeper insights into the work presented through the exhibition, *Leave a Light on in the Wild*.

Warmest Regards,

Dauna Kennedy
Executive Director
Vernon Public Art Gallery

INTRODUCTION - JULIAN FORREST: LEAVE A LIGHT ON IN THE DARK

Julian Forrest's exhibition of paintings address the issues of human existence on many levels, but the possible narratives the paintings represent are far from conclusive. Even at first glance, it is obvious that the protagonists of Forrest's portrayal are exclusively men. They are placed within environments whose historical eras are difficult to identify, but intrinsically they are alluding to some historical time in the West. The male protagonists are portrayed either in action filled circumstances, or in passive moments in the aftermath of some event. In a sense, the viewer is confronted with the portrayal of masculinity and a psychological struggle found within these different circumstances.

While some of the characters in Forrest's painting are fictitious, many others were reproduced from his autobiographical accounts of moving from Quebec, westward to Alberta. This narrative is perhaps parallel to Forrest's interest in the personal, but also in the historical time of migration to new environments in adventurous pursuits, for instance, to stake a claim during the Gold Rush. Forrest's nonlinear narratives are in a way contemplations about the significance of places, specifically the West. Forrest states that he has been looking at old photos of pioneers from the past in order to try to re-construct the reality of migration.¹

The figures in Forrest's painting are men in different and sometimes bizarre attire where it is difficult to guess the era that the events are unfolding in. The male characters may wear top hats, a raccoon hat, fur coats, an old era diving outfit, and sometimes a character is sporting a pair of wings; all this complemented by an image of 1950's era automobile. The environments that Forrest's protagonists inhabit are often broken and dilapidated and the men seem to be exhausted after some poignant event has occurred. The titles of the painting also allude to what can be attributed to rather negative experiences, trauma, and their consequences. Two of the paintings, *Fugue State #1* and *#2*, are titled after a condition of reversible amnesia where a person loses the sense of identity for periods of time, but the condition eventually reverses.² Similarly, some figures in Forrest's paintings display distress and perhaps an overwhelming sense of a disassociated state from reality in the wake of some traumatic events.

Forrest's paintings are activated by all male protagonists and it is hard not to notice the overt masculine energy or activity. He points out that his research of both historical and contemporary references is in fact focused on the examination of the contemporary masculinities and hyper-masculine towns in the West.³ Yet, Forrest's portrayal of masculinity highlights states of confusion and uncertainty and the feeling of disorder and vulnerability. This dystopian portrayal does not show the successful male protagonists; it shows the exhausted individuals existing in a flux between being celebrated heroes and fatigued anti-heroes.

Lubos Culen
Curator
Vernon Public Art Gallery

Endnotes

- ¹ Julian Forrest in communication with Lubos Culen, October 8, 2018.
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugue_state, accessed July 10, 2019.
- ³ Julian Forrest in communication with Lubos Culen, October 8, 2018.

JULIAN FORREST: THE DARK PLACES OF THE EARTH

By Blair Brennan

At first glance, Julian Forrest's bright palette, grand scale and depictions of men (almost always men) engaged in a seemingly farcical activities might lead viewers to think they have stumbled upon a picturesque idyll; however things are not quite right in Forrest's painted Arcadia. Forrest employs his superior technical ability as a representational painter to depict ambiguously dangerous scenes. Some undisclosed menace is always present in Forrest's paintings. Men react to devastation, the result of deliberate attack or natural disaster. They hunker down and defend themselves against real or imagined enemies, or they tend to the wounded or dying.

Forrest seeks to "explore themes of migration, alienation and mythic notions of the frontier".¹ Reading, note taking, reflecting on language and ideas are an essential part of Forrest's practice and these activities often precede his images. Much of Forrest's recently exhibited artwork examines civilization, savagery and the aforementioned themes through the lens of Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella, *Heart of Darkness*. The paintings in this exhibition follow other bodies of work that have been influenced by diverse literary and visual sources: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the short stories of Israeli writer Etgar Keret, the films of David Lynch as well as the work of other visual artists like Neo Rauch, Mattias Weischer, Justin Mortimer and others. Even without knowledge of Forrest's specific literary influences, we might echo Marlow (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* protagonist) and say that these paintings reveal "the dark places of the Earth"².

Marlow tells his story and poetically summarizes colonial ideology: "Hunters of gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream (the River Thames), bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire."³ Forrest does not specifically illustrate his literary sources, nonetheless the men we see in works like the two large diptych paintings *This Is Not a Century for Paradises* and *Torschlusspanik (or The Death of Kurtz)* have much in common with Marlow's gold hunters and fame seekers who carry with them the "seed of commonwealths" and the "germs of empires".⁴

This Is Not a Century for Paradises depicts men preparing for some onslaught though the only visible danger seems to be ghosts of the past: figures obviously drawn from historical photographs,

perhaps specifically from that problematic colonial past. *Torschlusspanik (or The Death of Kurtz)* presents a contemporary spin on the lamentation or descent from the cross scene: a type of historical painting that depicted Christ's removal from the cross while his followers stood nearby mourning. Though not specifically religious, there is something of "final judgment" about Forrest's work.

Discord and destruction abound on Forrest's mythic frontier. His characters often react with action, but not in all paintings. In *Fugue State #1*, its mirror painting, *Fugue State #2* and related smaller sketches, a figure sits in the midst of ruin in anguish with his head down and hat in hand while another person simply removes the head of his bear costume, a sublimely absurd gesture in light of the devastation all around. Our bear suited friend and other recurring characters make appearances in different paintings, dropped into scenes of unrest or into a near blank limbo. These characters pictorial assimilation is intentionally awkward, more like a collage than a painting and for good reason. Forrest honed his Photoshop collage skills while recovering from a severe ear problem that would not permit him to work on large canvases. When he returned to the studio this new stylistic technique worked its way into his paintings.

Forrest's tableau-like compositions suggest a sort of theatricality. "Each painting captures a catalytic event shortly before an imaginary *second act*; each scene suggests a turning point in (a) chronicle"⁵. The repetition of characters makes it tempting to ascribe specific meaning to each character but this is not easily done. Like generous actors, their "performance" is different every time (in every painting) and much affected by the ensemble that shares the stage (or canvas). Forrest works from photographs and live models. It should be noted that, in this body of work and for the first time, Forrest employed actors as models. Forrest has had up to four actors modeling in his studio at one time. They posed, following Forrest's guidance, however they also provided welcome improvisation, suggestions and, at times, costumes or props.

In many of these paintings, ghostly monochrome figures stand passively nearby. Forrest's use of historical photographs as source material ensures that his painted figures appear to come from the past. In two paintings, *We Live As We Dream #1* and *#2*, we see the heads of two of these figures either forming or eroding. We may consider them ethereal or fading versions of the full colour figures or, conversely, they could be unfinished people on their way to completion both psychically (with more experience, compassion or empathy) and physically (literally "finished"

with more paint). In all these cases, some ghostly limbo is implied and, along with *This Is Not a Century for Paradises*, these works suggest that our past may be a threat to our present.

The above analysis might lead one to believe that Forrest's work is difficult and humorless but this not the case. The works are deep or provide as much depth as the viewer is willing to seek but Forrest's reading of multiple literary sources yields some absurdly humorous scenes. In *False Dilemma*, and other works from this series (not exhibited), men seem involved in some private violent ritual. We might imagine the comic events that would lead two men to settle a difference and restore honor with a bare knuckles boxing match on stilts. The decidedly Monty Python-esque humor temporarily diverts us from Forrest's incisive link between ritualized violence and the absurd.

Forrest subtly directs viewers to create their own powerful narratives from his images. If we know his literary sources, specifically his connection to Conrad, we may say that Forrest's cast of characters have no grand purpose to "set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to..."⁶. If we have reflected on the nature of colonization or considered the creation of the mythic west, we might believe that Forrest's characters are the survivors of some flawed civilizing mission. In some unspecified past or future (or perhaps both simultaneously), they guard a meaningless frontier or remote colonial outpost. They hide behind the car and load the guns; they fight with nature and they fight among themselves. In most paintings, suffering and struggle are their plight and their trial.

In his paintings, Forrest presents an exaggerated version of our world, a place characterized by destructive forces and a realm where we are often tested. This is an idea expressed by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* though it appears as a more prominent theme in a later work, *The Shadow-Line*, from 1916. Here, Conrad's protagonist is a sea captain commanding his first ship. He loves the sea and views ships as a "test of manliness, of temperament, of courage and fidelity—and of love".⁷ Forrest's *dramatis personae* are sorely tested and he paints the violence, environmental crisis, death, destruction, absurdity, ennui, and anxiety that they must endure. The tools, tactics, and reasoning that worked for them in the past have become untenable. With these paintings, Forrest delivers a clever admonition: these men are lost or cursed and our culture may share the same fate.

Endnotes

- ¹ Email correspondence between author and Julian Forrest, November 11, 2018.
- ² Joseph Conrad and Robert Kimbrough. *Heart of darkness: an authoritative text, backgrounds and sources, criticism* (New York: Norton, 1972), 5.
- ³ Ibid, 4.
- ⁴ Ibid, 5.
- ⁵ Email correspondence between author and Julian Forrest, November 11, 2018.
- ⁶ Joseph Conrad and Robert Kimbrough. *Heart of darkness: an authoritative text, backgrounds and sources, criticism* (New York: Norton, 1972), 7.
- ⁷ Joseph Conrad and Jeremy Hawthorn. *The shadow-line: a confession* (Oxford England New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

Blair Brennan practices his own brand of quasi-mystical anarchism from his home in Edmonton. His drawings, sculpture and installation art have been exhibited internationally in numerous group and solo exhibitions. Brennan has contributed articles to a number of national arts and cultural publications.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Since moving to Edmonton from Montreal in 2003, my work has largely focused on contemporary constructions of masculinity (archetypes and stereotypes; examples of conquest and failure), the impact of place and landscape (literal, cultural, and imagined) on these constructs, and most recently on the Hero's Journey (the call to adventure and transformation).

I generally begin in the studio by reading texts – I need to make something from something. In preparation for this series, I revisited several novels from my youth: books by Joseph Conrad, William Golding, Joseph Campbell and others who dealt with shifting cultural/physical landscapes and notions of the wild. For example, this passage from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was instrumental:

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The resulting work (this series of non-linear, narrative paintings) is a meditation on migration and alienation, profit and loss, and mythic notions of the frontier. These allegorical, sometimes absurd, often paradoxical works are my attempt to unravel a story that has no fixed beginning or end. In them I capture a catalytic event shortly before or after an imagined *second act*. Imagine, for example, walking in on a play mid-production and finding every actor frozen in place. The story in this exhibition is fragmented: threads are left unresolved, plotlines are pursued over several canvases, and characters recur in arbitrary roles. Ultimately, these paintings are my ruminations on the frontier, and what happens when we make our way out into the wild.

Julian Forrest
Edmonton, Alberta
June 2019

LEAVE A LIGHT ON IN THE WILD
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

This Is Not A Century For Paradieses, 2017, oil on canvas, 60 x 144 inches (diptych). Photo: Blain Campbell





This Is Not A Century For Paradieses (left and right panels), 2017, oil on canvas, 60 x 144 inches (diptych). Photo: Blain Campbell











Torschlusspanik (or, The Death of Kurtz), 2018, oil on canvas, 72 x 120 inches (diptych). Photo: Mark Freeman





Torschlusspanik (or, The Death of Kurtz), (left and right panels), 2018, oil on canvas, 72 x 120 inches (diptych). Photo: Mark Freeman



Untitled (green man), 2019, oil on board, 12 x 12 inches. Photo: Julian Forrest









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EDUCATION

MFA, University of Alberta (Edmonton), 2005.
BFA, Mount Allison University (New Brunswick), 1995.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- *Leave A Light On In The Wild*. Vernon, British Columbia: Vernon Public Art Gallery (July, 2019).
- *This Is Not A Century For Paradises*. Edmonton, Alberta: Peter Robertson Gallery (March/April, 2018).
- *Perceptual Disorders*. Edmonton, Alberta: Peter Robertson Gallery (September, 2015).
- *Perceptual Disorders*. Sherwood Park, Alberta: Gallery 501 (September, 2014).
- *When You Were Here Before*. Charlottesville, Virginia: 2nd Street Gallery (December, 2013).
- *(Be)longing*. Boston, Massachusetts: Bromfield Gallery (July, 2012).
- *In My Dream I Was Almost There*. Okotoks, Alberta: Okotoks Art Gallery (May, 2012).
- *In My Dream I Was Almost There*. London, Ontario: Forest City Gallery (March, 2012).
- *Suddenly*. Wood Buffalo, Alberta: The Post Gallery (February, 2012).
- *Loss of Control*. San Antonio, Texas: Cactus Bra Gallery (February, 2011).
- *(sir)rogates*. Edmonton, AB: Harcourt House Gallery (November, 2010).
- *Stop Resisting*. Calgary, AB: The New Gallery (+15 space) (August, 2010).
- *Self*. Grande Prairie, AB: The Prairie Art Gallery (March, 2007).
- *click here to meet me*. Edmonton, AB: Fine Arts Building Gallery (August, 2005).
- *Tantramar Geography*. Chatham-Kent, ON: Thames Art Gallery (2003).
- *Recent Work*. Saint John, NB: Peter Buckland Gallery (2003).
- *Untitled*. Sackville, NB: Fog Forest Gallery (2003).
- *New Work*. North Bay, ON: Joan Ferneyhough Gallery (2001).

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- *Biomythography: Recent Work* by University of Alberta (Augustana Campus) Fine Arts Professors, Keith Harder & Julian Forrest. Edmonton, Alberta: Fine Art Building Gallery (fall, 2018).
- *The Dream We Form By Being Together*. Edmonton, Alberta: Borealis Gallery (June 29 –Oct 1, 2017).
- *Landscapes Reconstructed*. Banff, Alberta: Whyte Museum (June 19 –Oct 16, 2016).
- *Brain Storms: U Alberta Creates*, Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Museums Galleries at Enterprise Square (November 25, 2015 –January 23, 2016).
- *Here & There*. Toronto, Ontario: Propeller Centre for the Visual Arts (March 2-13, 2011).
- *Collective Spirit*. Berlin, Germany: Turn-Berlin Gallery (June, 2010).
- *Human/Nature*. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Museums Gallery (April, 2010).
- *Thrust* (two-person exhibition: Julian Forrest and David Janzen). Edmonton, AB: Peter Robertson Gallery (February, 2010).
- *2007 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art: Utopia & Disaster*. Edmonton, AB: Art Gallery of Alberta (June, 2007); Banff, AB: Banff Centre for the Arts (October, 2007).
- *Landscape: From the Ground Up*. Sarnia, ON: Gallery Lambton (June, 2006); Chatham, ON: Thames Art Gallery (July, 2005).
- *BUS KINGS: Art Takes the Bus*, (installation of photographs and tencity buses: work by Julian Forrest, Paul Freeman, and Colin Birnie). Edmonton, AB: (January, 2005).
- *Fast Forward*. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta FAB Gallery (2005).
- *Vanity*. Edmonton, AB: Temporary gallery (2004).
- *Untitled*. Saint John, NB: Peter Buckland Gallery (2001).
- *Eaton/Forrest*. Fredericton, NB: Gallery 78 (2000).
- *Untitled*. Sackville, NB: Struts Gallery (1999).

EXHIBITIONS (AS CURATOR)

- *The Big Idea*, Edmonton, AB: Peter Robertson Gallery (2012).
- *Reality Check*, Sackville, NB: Struts Gallery, (co-curator). (1998).
- *David Milne: Eliminating Sentiment*, Sackville, NB: Owens Art Gallery (1997).

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS & AWARDS

Alberta Foundation for the Arts
Alberta Arts Council
Government of New Brunswick
Thames Art Gallery, Ontario
Eldon & Anne Foote Visual Arts Prize
Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Award

MISCELLANEOUS

Jacket cover: Letters to Thomas Pynchon by Chris Eaton; published in Toronto, 2010.
Jacket cover: Lean Days. Poetry by Steve McOrmand; published in Toronto, 2003.
Album cover: The World Was Hell to Us. Music by Rock Plaza Central, Toronto, 2003.



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