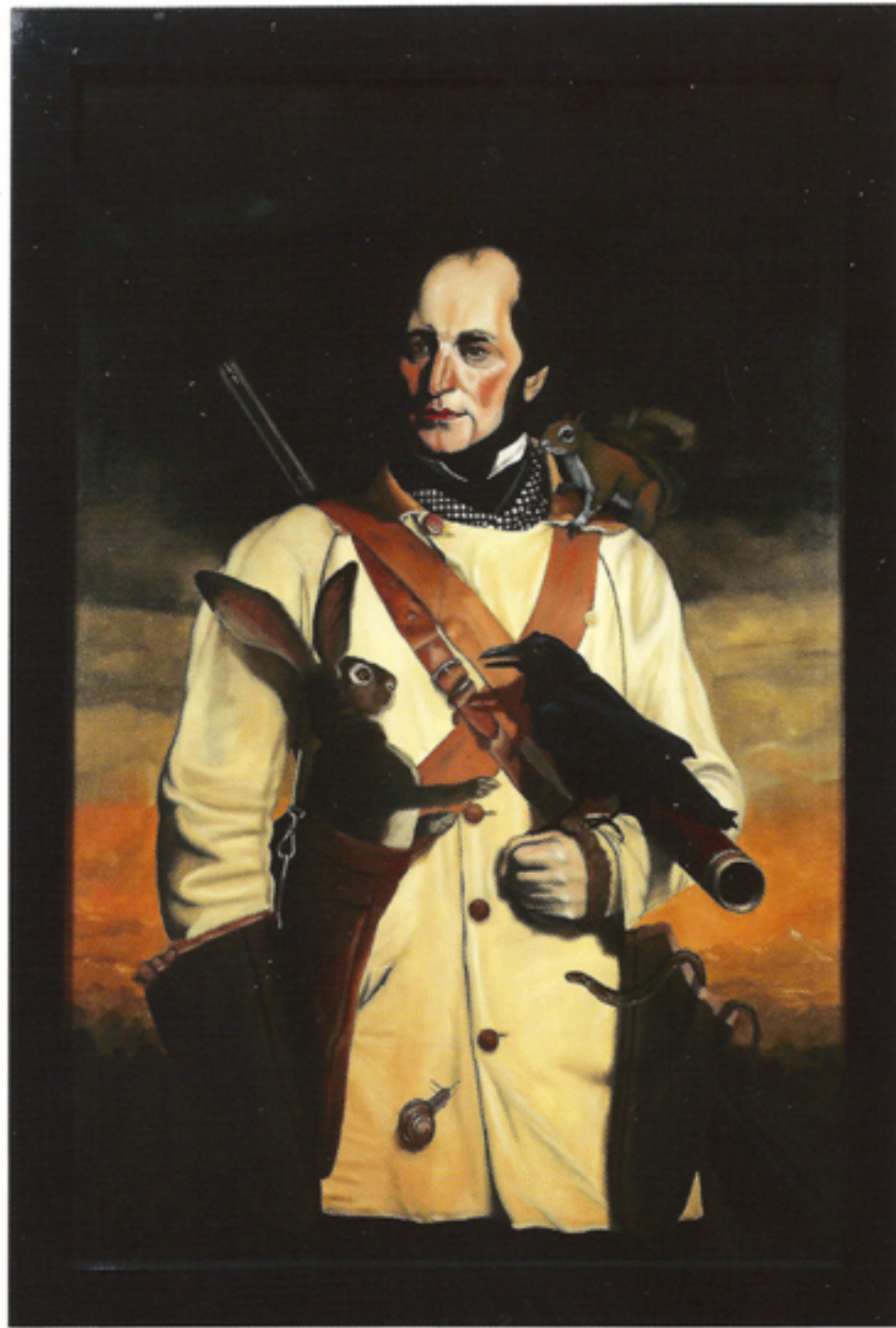


WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE



ROBERT McCAULEY

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The world, we are told, was made especially for man –

a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves.

In the same pleasant plan, whales are storehouses of oil for us, to help out the stars in lighting our dark ways until the discovery of the Pennsylvania oil wells. Among plants, hemp, to say nothing of the cereals, is a case of evident destination for ships rigging, wrapping packages and hanging the wicked. Iron was made for hammers and ploughs, and lead for bullets; all intended for us ... (From John Muir's "Man's Place in the Universe.")

While John Muir's characterization does not describe everyone, it does effectively portray our nation's present psyche and the actions and behaviors of many of its people. We continue to feel the same sense of entitlement and self-righteous authority, using or abusing the earth's resources in whatever amount and manner we choose. Sadly, many of the plants, animals and minerals that existed during Muir's life are now extinct, endangered or less readily available.

An inventory of how this abuse has impacted our world's social and environmental existence would reveal a disturbing symphony of cause and effect, culminating in war, genocide, global warming, and a subsequent increase in hurricanes, floods, pollution and famine. As millions die, corporations and governments continue to plunder the world's resources at the expense of our environment and welfare. Muir's essay appears quaint, but evaluating man's place in the universe should be viewed as a sacred exercise.

Robert McCauley's early experiences provide insight into his own unique vision of man's relationship to the world. Like Muir, McCauley is a product of cultural sensitivity and environmental awareness. Born in Washington State to a family of loggers, his father rebelled against the industry's destructive practices and became an activist. Having lived on a reservation, McCauley also developed an awareness and appreciation for Native American culture and their requisite respect for nature. McCauley works from an ethically based foundation, steeped in the indigenous spirit of our land and its pre-existing interrelationships, contrary to the opportunistic behaviors which characterize our nation's conspicuous history, culture and present practices.

McCauley's early works, such as "When Worlds Collide" rely on an inter-play of painting, assemblage and text to address the conflict and ultimate collision of Native American and Anglo-Saxon cultures during our country's westward expansion. The globes, which rest on a glass shelf, exist on a separate, three-dimensional, elitist plane, apart from the painted two-dimensional Native American village which lies behind them. The increasing size of the four metal and cardboard globes, with their precise mapping, represent the insistence of progress, along with Anglo-American man's desire to develop, control and expand his empire. Francis Parkman, a respected American historian from the period, wrote that Native Americans were "destined to melt and vanish before the advancing waves of Anglo-American power, which now rolled westward unchecked and unopposed." (Wikipedia)

Other works focus on inner existential dilemmas, artistic and social quandaries and institutional pressures. In "Don't Expect Me to Illustrate Your Fears," nature is depicted as a powerful, unknown force, capable of provoking fear, dread and doubt. McCauley directs us, along with our ancestors, to accept the mysteries, uncertainties and responsibilities of life and self. Presented as institutional archetypes, manifestations of self and remnants of our historical past, these lead hats sink or swim based on their ability to discover, resolve and overcome their social and psychological deficiencies.

Removing objects and phrases, McCauley's recent paintings focus on altered images and manipulated situations to generate dialogue and content. While these paintings seduce viewers with rich Romantic surfaces, atmosphere and accessible subject matter, their charming exterior belies a disturbing subtext, veiled by historical inconsistencies, hypocrisy and hubris. McCauley's pasty white figures epitomize arrogance and conceit. Oblivious and ignorant of the creatures which crawl over, hug and surround them, these vacuous men refuse to interact or contemplate their relationship with the New World. "Explorer II, (After Pearce)," describes the audacity of those who claim discovery and ownership of a land which has been lived in and cared for by an indigenous population for several thousand years.

It is the discrepancy of elements and the rift within these historical fictions which encourages the search for the identity and context within paintings like "George Caitlin and Friends (After Fisk)." As we piece together the events of our nation's past, and the individual histories of artists like Caitlin, we realize the dramatic consequence of human existence and the repercussions of our actions. By remembering the impact of the Indian Relocation Act, the racial bias and elitism perpetuated by Manifest Destiny and the link between religion, capitalism and the protestant work ethic, we can develop a more comprehensive view of how westward expansion changed our culture and crushed an indigenous way of life.

These newer works include backgrounds resurrected from museum dioramas, signifying historical remnants and objects for study. McCauley's orange and black skies suggest the toxic atmosphere of a compulsively industrialized society that has lost touch with nature. In "Discovery of Slowness V" and "Travelers III", functional teams of animals coexist and develop new relationships while continuing to climb beyond man's ethical reach. Their vicarious approach toward experience and perception suggests an empathetic understanding often missing in our own species. An enchanting, ethical model of alternative history is thus formed, distinct from the one we've experienced, suggesting new pathways, directions, behaviors and possibilities.

While McCauley does not explicitly state that our culture could have developed differently, he does suggest that ethics and reason should become part of the dialogue. If they are not, we will continue our chaotic march of futility, watching as the spectacle of consumption and destruction spirals toward additional catastrophes, lost cultures and extinction, ending in the final chapter of our Manifest Destiny.

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