

ALEX FISCHER: SMARTER TODAY

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by Rachel A. Farquharson

Painting as a practice, before all other media, has undergone copious amounts of inspection from without, and introspection from within. This may be because, as critic and lecturer Caoimhim Mac Giolla Leith suggests, recent painting seems 'to be characterised by a persistent refusal of its own self-containment,' a fitting statement given today's globalised and technologically progressive climate. Even more complex is the analysis of an artist practice which relies upon digital techniques and modes of production to create what is finally thought of as a painted work. Such is the case with Alex Fischer, whose recent show at O'Born Contemporary in Toronto speaks to a curatorial trend in the redefinition of the painted canvas within art's discourse. As the first solo exhibit hosted at the gallery's significantly more artworthy (re)location on Ossington Avenue, the pluralism inherent in the works of Smarter Today bespeaks a double bind of low culture in dialogue with high art that first resurfaced in the practices of post-modern painters like Neo Rauch (B. 1960) and David Salle (B. 1952).

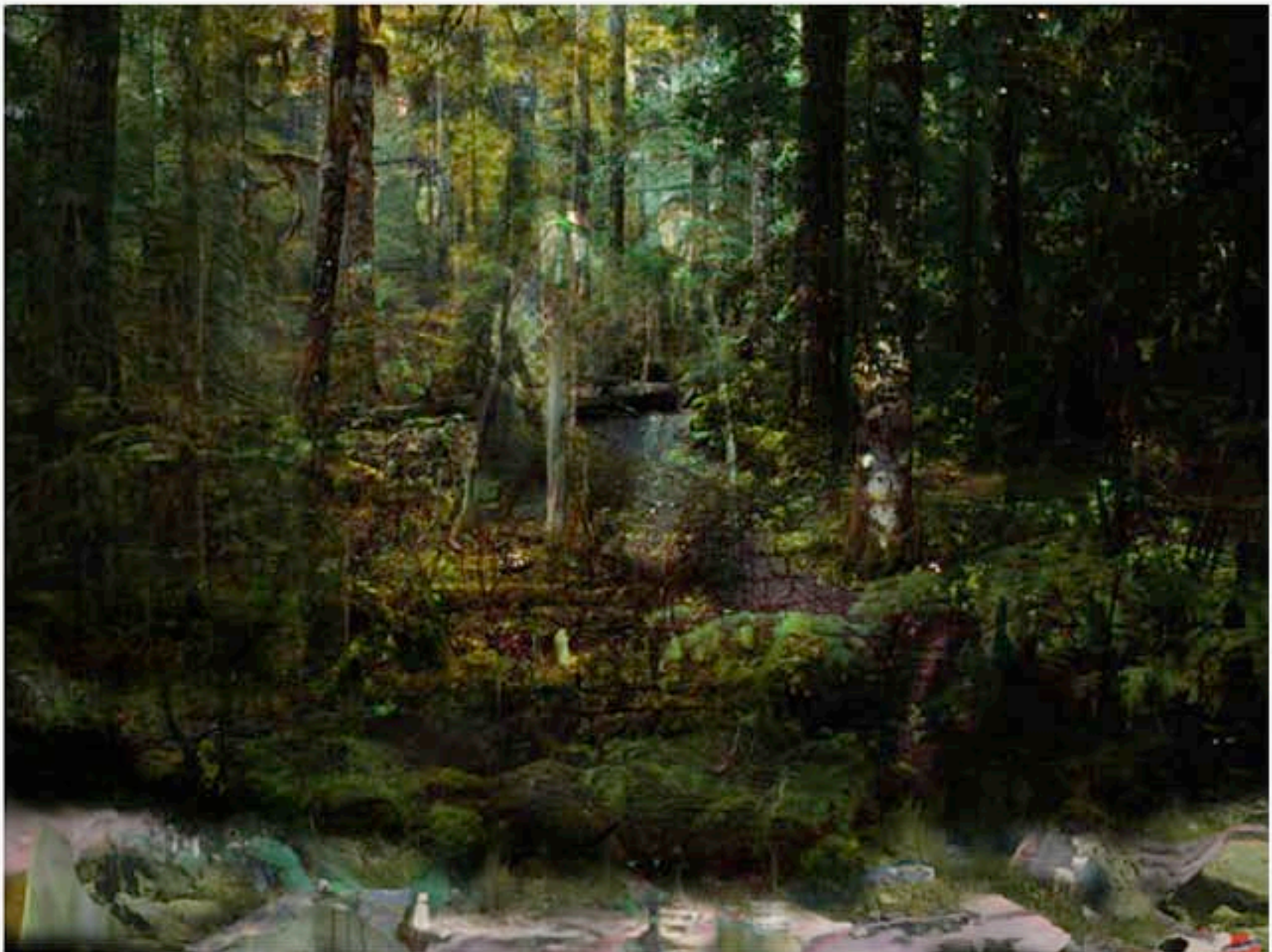
Though the last decade has seen more than seven major international exhibitions in dialogue with painting as gesture and act, the theme of medium redefinition is not hackneyed in the capable hands of this twenty-four year old MVS student at the University of Toronto. By turns virtual maverick and sculptural visionary, Fischer outputs two-dimensional imagery with an object status that feels palpable.





Figure Head, 13680 x 13200 pixels (57 x 55 inches), digital image, 2010

Figure Head, 2010, which bears down on the viewer at 140 x 145 cm, invites entry and interaction, the centrally located, dog-faced girl just grotesque and fragmented enough to evoke Francis Bacon. Bacon, who intended 'to distort [the figure] far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance' finds a voice once more in the flurry of layers that both dis- and re-assemble Fischer's complex compositions. Figure Head draws upon the veritable archive of images that the internet has become, capturing a glimpse of today's epistemological development in the process. The artist's espousal of digital collage and illustration 'allows [him] to visually interpolate resources' in a way that speaks to humanity's greater consciousness and, furthermore, to its very future. Quite simply, as a race we are careening towards an intersubjectivity that makes each of us a flesh-bound collage of experience, landscapes, and concepts.



Untitled Greens, 6000 x 4500 pixels (20 x 15 inches), digital image, 2010

This is perhaps the most salient point that Fischer advances with a piece like Untitled Greens, 2010, a moderately sized work that takes as its conceptual and physical ground a photograph of a forest by Traci Matlock and Ashley MacLean. The image has been altered such that its tone and formal nature combine "the Real" according to Hal Foster with an ephemeral quality that shrouds most people's childhood memories. The idea that forests are vehicles for strange and mythological happenings is one transmitted from generation to generation in many cultures. Fischer uses the accumulation of memory, belief, and narrative to make a statement about humankind. The near dissolution of forest trees contrasted against the appearance of

ghoulish faces grafted to their trunks visualizes the interplay between the real and the mystical that the artist is trying to access. Although Fischer has spoken of his own upbringing in the Ontario countryside as a cognitive influence, the images he employs already have a registered meaning that he maintains is important to acknowledge. In appropriating the work of other artists, Fischer always attempts to gain a good grasp of both the context in which the image was created and the nature of the artist's practice itself. Thus, once the artist found Matlock and MacLean on Flickr, he followed their practice and artistic output for several years prior to starting a dialogue with them and their work.



Three Fates, 25208 x 16440 pixels (92 x 60 inches), digital image, 2010

Finally, it is the rigid duality of mind and body as a primary mode of existing in the world that Fischer rejects, using the phenomenology of perception suggested by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to advance his own novel conclusions. Consider a populace whose foundation is the collective embodiment of each other's personalities and souls. Just as figures are iterated in Fischer's art through the superimposition of images onto each other, each person is philosophically a summation of his or her cohabitants. The large scale work, *Three Fates*, 2010, is a reflection of the syncretism that the artist holds responsible for the creation of his body of illustrated subjects and characters. The largely barren urban landscape here depicted is not as bleak as conventional subjectivity would have us believe—to Fischer, the diluted palette is more peaceful than forbidding. In this future world, subjectivity is no longer as useful therefore evolutionary theory would demand that it atrophies like a muscle in disuse. Though the landscape is only host to two people, the artist conceives each person as a collective of thousands. "Actually, the composition is very crowded," laughed Fischer when questioned about the piece. What is obvious to him seems ironic given the few objects to behold in many of the works in *Smarter Today*.

Three Fates is evidence of a recent challenge Fischer has created for himself: to be in compositional dialogue with the traditional diptych/triptych. Bisecting the large proscenium arch arrangement in this piece is a totem pole, imbued with enough life force to be considered the third fate in the image's narrative. Other possibilities for this third figure are the viewer or, interestingly, the art work positioned directly across from *Three Fates* in the gallery. A concerted curatorial choice by the artist and O'Born Contemporary director Natalie MacNamara, the opposing image is the tripartite *Cooks Cape*, 2010.



Cooks Cape, 25200 x 18000 pixels (84 x 60 inches), digital image, 2010

Thus, the two large works were made to face each other to ignite a conversation about their similar obedience of an art historical compositional precedent. The challenge, or as Fischer describes it, "risk" in working with the diptych or triptych format is allowing an image to exist when different realities are positioned to reflect each other—the adjacent two/three sides expose the fact that their subjectivities do not necessarily agree. There is a risk in getting lost in the work, as if the worlds are facing mirrors wherein your reflection becomes so dislocated that it can actually disappear. Theoretically, the totem in *Three Fates* acts as the joint in a mirror between the two subject bodies, putting both or either in danger of extinction. Frankly, in an imagined world where subjectivity has been eliminated and only collective identities exist, the transformation of material bodies to virtual whispers seems completely à propos.

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