

ALEXANDRE

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By Thomas M. Disch
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In the simplest theory of art, the artist's job is "to hold the mirror to nature," and in the simplest interpretation of that theory, nature is synonymous with Mother Nature, the goddess in charge of the great outdoors. Ergo, the job of Art—that is to say, painting – is to adventure into the woods to see and paint what's there.

My grandparents had such a picture in their home – a solitary stag painted on a pine plaque, the intact bark serving as a frame. I had another over my bed – a wolf high on a moonlit hill, looking down at a town in a snowy valley: unforgettable, archetypal, a child's first intimation of the Sublime.

Embarrassing? For art-world insiders probably, but not for Tom Uttech, whose stunning exhibition at the Alexandre Gallery could have been hung 150 years ago to the same wide-eyed admiration. Mr. Uttech paints the American Wilderness in all its galumphing natural glory, and then adds embellishments: the Northern lights, spiraling swamp gases, ghostly elk, and hosts and multitudes of birds and beasts in frantic flight. All these are presided over by the totemic figure of an upright black bear confronting the viewer head on.

Like the Luminist painters of the Hudson Valley School, Mr. Uttech heads straight for Mother Nature's greatest moments: apricot sunsets, autumnal riots of color, winter white-outs, waterfalls in full spate—all that is Cinemascope, Technicolor, and over-the-top. Yet there's no sense of exaggeration or undue theatricality in his works. Rather, as with Gothic architects, or Bach at his most thunderous, one feels Mr. Uttech is just giving Nature its due.

In the catalog for his forthcoming retrospective at the Milwaukee Art Center, Mr. Uttech speaks of yearning to be the place he paints. That place is, very specifically, the bogs and muskogs of the North Woods along the Minnesota/ Canada border.

Like the Everglades, these woods are one of the last areas in North America where civilization has not been able to get a toehold. The very land is treacherous, a maw that can swallow the unwary. To commune with Nature in these latitudes is to dine with murderers. The bears that look out from Mr. Uttech's paintings want more than just to snuggle up.

Menace, a menace that is supernatural and coequal with life, is an essential part of the Sublime. Death pervades Mr. Uttech's canvases in various vegetative forms: Fungus, roiling vapors, broken branches, rotted tree stumps. One of the most imposing canvases, "Nin Mamakadenima" (2003-04), would make an ideal poster for a horror movie. It is as mesmerizingly scary as the gaze of Medusa.

For "nature-lovers" this side of Mr. Uttech's art poses something of a problem. Lucy Lippard, in the retrospective's catalog, would like to see Mr. Uttech as a Sierra Club eco-activist, whose apocalyptic visions are intended as a warning. In this view his appropriations of Native American imagery and language (all the paintings bear titles in garbled Ojibwe) are intended, like the Reggio/Glass film "Koyaanisqatsi," to be didactic and reprimanding: "Get back in harmony with Nature—or else!"

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My own sense of the matter is that Mr. Uttech, like many Romantics before him, is more than half in love with easeful death – even with death isn't so easeful. Whatever force is terrorizing the flocks of birds that fill his skies may be the same that rots the black stumps of the trees in his swamps, a force entropic and inescapable.

Our darkest fear in this new century is the death of nature and exterminations on a global scale; Mr. Uttech's paintings are fit decoration for the temple of that fear.

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