

The Second Coming

By Christopher Mooney



Once upon a time, billions and billions of years ago, a Big Bang took place. Planet earth came into being as part of the Solar System, orbited by planet moon and nurtured with energy for life, by a large star. The earth was round with a fluid heart of hellish fire, which forced its way out, creating mountains and smoking craters. On earth's surface the natural world came to life: oceans, lakes and rivers, continents covered with trees, plants and flowers, inhabited by insects, fish and reptiles and warm blooded mammals. And then, as a crown on creation, the human being came into existence.

In the beginning, animals and the first human beings lived together in peaceful harmony in what we call Paradise. But human beings, in th Karen Hackenberg goes down to the beach, which is just out the door of her Pacific Northwest home, and what does she find? What e.e. cummings says we always find (and lose) in the sea—ourselves. Not ourselves in the form of maggie and milly and molly and may, fashioned from experience and nature, made of sweet singing seashore shells, smooth round stones and scuttling crabs. Ourselves as plastic bags, balls, and toys made in China. Ourselves as floatation foam and flip flops. Coors cans, tarps and Tide bottles. Car tires, shotgun shells, disposable lighters. Plastic fireworks tips. Nylon rope. Silicone boobs. Candy wrappers. In short, ourselves as our trash and our trace, what we leave behind, our litter, our progeny—no longer people but, for the most part, polymers, chains of carbon atoms cast, pressed and extruded into the shinningly beautiful awesomely ugly hugely depressing plastic throwaway mass culture crap we wash down with our happy meals and see wash back on our sad shores—or imagine, far out in the middle of the ocean, trapped in the currents, turning and turning in the widening gyre.

(Apologies to Yeats, and a thought: why can't the falcon hear the falconer anymore?
Because it's too busy trying to dislodge the plastic bottle cap stuck in its crawl.)

maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach (to play one day)

and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and

milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

ee. cummings, 1956

High sea, low culture: the meaning of trash, like all things under and over our ever-more pitiless sun, is contextually bound—it's stuff out of place. Which is why gazing upon, and enjoying, a Hackenberg painting can be so disconcerting. Every piece of jetsam, front and center, begs the question: “what the hell is THAT doing THERE?” Why is that giant plastic water bottle hogging the foreground of that fabulous seascape? Why is that gorgeous cresting wave, shimmering in the late afternoon light, breaking on an empty bag of Goldfish Baked Cheddar Snack Crackers? And that Mickey D cup, dropped by some boob with an Arctic Thirst—as the slogan goes, I'm lovin' it! Why?

Because, well, obviously, it's art and it's smart, disruptive and playful, astutely assembled and masterfully rendered. But also because an undertow of truth ripples its shimmering surfaces—aesthetic truth, and political truth. That thing there should not be there but it is there, because the artist put it there, because she found it... there, because we put it there when we dropped it, when we stopped thinking about it, when we let it fall into the fuhgeddaboudit. And now it's back, as art, tidal pulled to the represented shore of the real, no longer just another lost Buzz Lightyear action figure but a figurative call to action, angry, activist, in-your-face. But not didactic. Or rather, not overly didactic—intended to teach, but with wit, with humor. It doesn't tell, it shows. It shows by just being there, and it's just so damn nice to look at, even though it's still trash, still a stupid Starbucks cup, still a damn can of green paint or a yellow jug of motor oil — who the fuck chucks these things overboard? — aestheticized, but not stripped of it's political power to offend. If anything, Hackenberg's art supersedes this power, makes it monumental, inescapable, weaponized.
(The *Flash Point* matchstick sculptures are downright incendiary.)

Turning too in her pelagic gyre is the history of art. And not just in her series of parodic “History Paintings,” in which, for example, Buzz incarnates the heroic westward dreams of Manifest Destiny. The biggest school to swim into view is Pop Art: the beached banalities front and center remind us of the monstrous whimsy of Claes Oldenburg's sculptures, or Andy Warhol soup tins, or James Rosenquist's shiny bright embrace of all things all-American. There's maybe a splash of pop in the water, too—a sprinkle of David Hockney's high-contrast palette, a spritz of Wayne Thiebaud. Trailing in the wake is a raft of readymades, including Marcel Duchamp's Bottle Rack, here cleverly reconfigured into a plastic water bottle chandelier (*Recycled Readymade, 2010*).

The seascapes peaking out from behind the Pop and Found Objects team with even more art-historical reference. The landscape painters of the New York School, for example, some of whom Hackenberg studied with while at the Rhode Island School of Design. Hackenberg works from photographs—as she says, shot “ear to the sand” to reproduce what the late great Jake Seniuk, in a fine essay on Hackenberg's work, described as the “crab's-eye view”—but the en plein air chops she picked up on New Jersey painting trips with Gretna Campbell and Paul Resika show in each stroke.

Out from the rocky shoreline scuttle earlier antecedents. Thomas Cole, the first American landscape artist, recording and grieving the ax-leveled woods of his beloved Catskills. Caspar David Friedrich's charred forests. The crumbling, dream-lit ruins of Claude Lorrain. These artists, too, immersed their viewers in the vastness of nature, and gave testimony to civilizations in decay or under assault. Yet they put the decline and fall, the sense of loss—everything, in fact—in the background. Hackenberg moves it all to the fore, forcing us to see it for what it is: our irresponsibility, our trashy selves, our selfish trash. In a word, us, the rough beast loosed in the plastic-dimmed tide, circling the drain as it slouches towards Starbucks for another Iced Blonde Vanilla Latte.

