



Cruel Optimism
by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Painting

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University of Alberta

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Cruel Optimism:

An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Adrienne Dagg,

MFA Painting

The paintings and drawings in my thesis exhibition are about anomie, anxiety, and the inevitable confusion that results from the collapse and breakdown of ideological systems. In this work I am looking at the breakdown of bourgeois ideology in North America and its conflicting attachment to “The Good Life” in an increasingly unsustainable world.

I use collage along with cubist, and illusionistic pictorial space to disrupt visual hegemony within the image. Collage represents a fractured viewpoint; it disrupts the visual field, breaking down the viewer’s understanding of what is being depicted. I make stylistic choices that clash, referencing ideological friction and contradiction. Through this clash I search for balance in a bid to push the work forward into new, unimagined realms.

Through practice-based research I have produced large-scale paper drawings and oil paintings on canvas. Both drawings and paintings depict narratives of contemporary female figures in psychological distress within domestic interiors of the 1960’s and 1970’s. These narratives are based on personal memories combined with invented scenarios to position the figure within a space that is familiar but alien. Codes of behavior break down for these women as they try to navigate a space that is recognizable but obscured by not having any guidance to support them.

There is conceptual significance in the materials used in each piece. The oil paintings carry notions of stability, consistency, and permanence. However, the drawings exist in opposition to the paintings: created out of charcoal, non-archival newsprint, tape, and pins, their existence is fragile and temporary and their disintegration can be witnessed in real time. This material makeup of the work contributes to their narrative interpretation. Oil paintings being archival represent the structure of dominant ideology and its powerful hold on individuals, while the paper drawings symbolize fragility and the precarious nature of ideology.

As I begin each piece, it is integral to the work that I not know its ultimate visual outcome because the paintings are in a process of becoming undone. New forms in the work are created and broken apart until equilibrium is eventually achieved. I employ this process to analyze contemporary anomie. Anomie refers to a social state where there is no moral regulation. It can develop in societies in transition. As new situations develop, society provides order to help people adapt. In times of extreme change, societal structures can erode or break apart under the pressure. We are living through such a transition in the twenty-first century as we are being confronted on numerous fronts - changing social norms, changing gender roles, and a looming environmental catastrophe.

The antidote to this anomie is the creation of new narratives through shared experiences and the construction of novel ways of being. However, in times of distress, solutions are difficult to imagine. Painting offers a unique and powerful opportunity to sort through these impossible situations, because it can connect with intensely personal and broadly social issues simultaneously. The works presented in this exhibition are an expression of the phenomenology of contemporary social decay. They depict the madness of “normlessness” experienced under patriarchal, capitalist ideology in contrast to what it promises. By depicting anomie, I am creating work that centres those who are in the midst of their own anomic turn and asking: what is left?



Dagg_001 **Time out**, 2020, oil paint on canvas, 60 x 60 inches



Dagg_002

Nearly Normal, 2020

Oil paint and Mylar on canvas on wood,
40 x 68 inches



Dagg_003 **Two Girls, Tarred and Feathered**, 2020, oil paint and Mylar on canvas on wood, 40 x 68 inches



Dagg_004 **A Potent Brew**, 2018, oil paint, charcoal on canvas on wood panel, 20 x 24 inches



Dagg_005 **Double Scotch**, 2018, oil paint, charcoal on canvas on wood panel, 20 x 24 inches



Dagg_006 **Compression**, 2019, oil paint on canvas on masonite panel, 36 x 30 inches



Dagg_007 **Ophelia**, 2020, oil paint, pins and Mylar on canvas, 48 x 60 inches



Dagg_008 **Much Of Madness**, 2020, oil paint on canvas, 48 x 60 inches



Dagg_009
Almost Utopian, 2020
Oil on canvas on wood panel,
40 x 68 inches



Dagg_010 **Untitled**, 2019, oil paint on canvas, 40 x 48 inches



Dagg_011 **FAB Gallery** install, Feb.18 – March.14.2020



Dagg_012 **FAB Gallery install**, Feb.18 – March.14.2020



Dagg_012 **FAB Gallery install**, Feb.18 – March.14.2020

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