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The Opposite Forces

David Hall, *Série Marine*, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montréal,
September 25 - October 23, 1999

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David Hall, *Castaway*, 1999. Oil on canvas; 109 x 189 cm. Photo: Paul Litherland.



David Hall, *Wake*, 1999. Oil on canvas; 136 x 206 cm. Photo: Paul Litherland.

MONTREAL THE OPPOSITE FORCES

David Hall, *Série Marine*, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montréal, September 25 - October 23, 1999

“Then he thought of the Island and defined it as unattainable proximity.”

Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before*

We see a shoreline. We are above the waves on the deck of a ship. The water is choppy and the shore is far enough away that we would not attempt to swim there. This is the situation in which Umberto Eco placed his 17th century castaway in his novel *The Island of the Day Before*. Marooned on an abandoned ship in the uncharted mid-Pacific, he believed the shoreline to be that of an island on the other side of the international dateline – he believed he was looking at the day before. Not only did the island occupy an unattainable space it also was in an unattainable time.

Although David Hall had not read Eco's novel when making *Castaway*, his recent painting depicts a scene similar to that viewed by the marooned protagonist. On the large canvas, the shoreline is painted as narrow bands of dark green and light yellow that divide the predominant steel blue surface of the choppy water reflecting the dark sky. We, the viewers, are placed at a distance from the shore looking down on flotsam (from the shipwreck?) bobbing in the waves beneath us. We can identify trees and a beach and know the landmass on the horizon is or was inhabited – we cannot tell by the shore if it is insular or continental. Hall has meticulously painted what seem to be the remains of a breakwater on the left side of the beach and a large orange ball on the right that could be a buoy.

With *Castaway*, Hall puts us, his viewers, in a situation similar to the paradox Eco invented for his hero. We are placed in a position to see a landscape beyond our reach, from an “unattainable proximity” to the subject. This distance appears not only in the diegesis of *Castaway*, as the rough sea comes between the shoreline and us but also in the way the picture is painted. Upon closer inspection of the canvas we see drips and spots of an almost fluorescent orange above the shoreline. These marks could depict traces of flares or artillery fire, rendering the scene even more unsettling for the castaway. But they are also very much drips of paint and remind us that we are looking at a picture, an artist's rendition of a landscape which may or may not exist.

I have followed the evolution of David Hall's work over the past seven years through a series of solo exhibitions in Montreal that began with a show at Galerie Clark in 1992. These exhibitions have tracked the development

of an original and engaging approach to landscape painting that blossomed in Hall's first solo show at Galerie Lilian Rodriguez in 1998. On one level, Hall's landscapes resurrect the Romantic tradition; his paintings evoke the sublime. They are charged with what Edmund Burke described as “vastness, obscurity, and a capacity to inspire terror.” With his solo exhibition *Série marine* in the autumn of 1999, also at Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Hall continues this investigation of charged landscape while calibrating his scope to nature's most sublime manifestation, the sea.

With this latest series of paintings, Hall explores the formal aspects, the colour and atmosphere, of the marine landscape but also its referents, the military and colonial history of ocean travel, and its historical depictions. In *Série marine*, Hall takes on a sub-genre of landscape borrowed from the history of painting.

Seascapes became popular in the 17th and 18th centuries as reports from colonial sea trade and naval battles reached the European capitals. In the early 19th century, seascapes, and landscape painting in general, attracted a new enthusiasm. The sea often figured in the paintings of the Romantics who showed an affinity for nature, especially its wild and mysterious aspects. Painters like Caspar David Friedrich and Théodore Géricault, in their dramatic depictions of shipwrecks, invoked the feeling of melancholy, isolation, and human powerlessness against the ominous forces of nature.

Hall's seascapes, however, are not Romantic investigations of the sublime, but rather inquiries into our collective memories of that paradigm. In *Castaway* we do not relive the force and beauty of the sea but experience rather an evocation of a period and style in the history of painting. In our era of jet travel we do not hearken back to our experiences of sea voyages but rather to our memories of aesthetic experience in museums and picture books. Hall's sources are encyclopaedic rather than direct. Thus, in *Série marine*, Hall's primary concern is not the sea but the seascape (the sub-genre of landscape) itself.

As with Hall's earlier landscapes, the seascapes of *Série marine* invite a second reading. The sublime presence of the sea is marred by traces of human interaction. These are not virgin seascapes but colonised nature, wild expanses that have been discovered, captured and abandoned. Another large canvas in the *Série marine* exhibition is *Floe*. Here a polar landscape of luminous cracked ice reflecting blue, yellow and green floats in aquamarine



David Hall, *Plume*, 1999. Oil on canvas; 138 x 134 cm. Photo: Paul Litherland.

water. The ice is scratched, as is the painting's surface. Hall has painted traces of something that passed over, that has scraped the icy surface – a sled or a more destructive tool of human intervention.

Wake, the large canvas hung beside *Castaway* shows a rough sea in a yellow twilight that is made rougher by the wake of an aircraft that has just passed. There is a well-defined jet stream rising from the path of the wake and veering right above the horizon. As a counterpoint to the duration of the sea Hall inserts fleeting temporal elements, traces of technological intervention. In *Wake* the forces of nature are bold and luminous, the forces of technology insidious and invisible.

The first painting we see upon entering the gallery is *Plume*. Set against a yellow ochre sky a pillar of billowing black and grey smoke dominates the composition. We look across a beach and over a bay of deep blue water to a sparsely wooded shore above which rises the charcoal plume. Is this the dust and ash rising from a volcano, a sublime expression of the forces of nature? The sketchy, almost unfinished, quality of the painting leads to its ambiguity. If we scrutinise the feathered details elsewhere we begin to construct, as if from memory, a narrative for the scene. A curious pile of rounded grey forms on the beach that we first saw as rocks smoothed by the tides becomes an abandoned stack of military helmets. The wispy vertical brushstrokes in the mid-ground are metamorphosed into the ruins of a city. The plume is likewise transformed from being the after effects of a geological phenomenon, to being the visual manifestation of a not too distant bombing campaign, an omen of technological destruction.

The rolling ocean vista depicted in *Wake* is marred by jet streams. Debris floats in the foreground of *Castaway*.

In *Plume* the empty beach features a forsaken pile of helmets. Echoing this marred imagery is Hall's technique of scratching and sanding the surface of his paintings. Hall's paintings reveal the time he required to complete them. The artist's process, layers of gesso and paint that are subsequently sanded down or scraped away before new coats are added, is recorded on the surfaces of his pictures. In a smaller painting on wood, *Hot Rock*, duration is implied by the image of a weathered boulder in the desert and also embodied in the picture's scraped surface that exposes the sanded down grain of the wood.

In *Wake*, the artist's mediated source is in evidence. A modern imaging technology – time-lapse photography – is referred to. Unlike with conventional photography, painterly time is not frozen. And like with time-lapse photography, in *Wake* we experience not a fixed moment but a passage of time. We witness a simultaneous present and past: the immediate effect of the aircraft and its passing from view.

Hall's canvases embody a kind of unfinished marine time. Like the polar ice in *Floe* we are held in suspension – like water between solid and liquid. In *Castaway* we are in the water looking at the land. We are in a purgatory between the voyage and the destination. Being at sea, metaphorically and literally, means being cut off from landlocked references to time of day. It means being outside of time, like Umberto Eco's marooned protagonist looking at the day before. Viewing David Hall's seascapes we are reminded of that feeling of being outside of time, of being at sea.

PAUL LONDON