

## Museum of Love and Mortality~ The Culture of Collecting



Molamdelove. "The approach to Cameron Hayes." *Museum of Love and Mortality: The Culture of Collecting*, June 1, 2012.  
<http://museumofloveandmortality.com/2012/06/01/the-approach-to-cameron-hayes/>

## The approach to Cameron Hayes

In 2004 I helped Cameron Hayes put together a publication to accompany his solo show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. When I went to deliver some to be stocked at the Arts Bookshop a rather peeved employee there complained: "but you don't have any information in here about the artist!"

It's true. I did try, but he refused, genuinely seeing it as erroneous information. "Just show the pictures", Hayes instructed, "and the only text should be about the stories." So that's what we did. No biography, nor exhibition history, not even a birth date. This time however, I happened to get a bit more out of him. So here goes:

Cameron Hayes is first and foremost a narrative painter. Usually his style of work consists of densely painted large scale canvases filled with figures and scenery, animals and architecture, playing havoc with retinal activity. Have a look at *Mathias Ungara captures Hajime Toyashima – 19<sup>th</sup> February 1942* – this is indicative of his usual style.



*Mathias Ungara captures Hajime Toyashima – 19th February 1942*, 2006, oil on linen, 167.5 x 254 cm.

But the Milikapiti show is slightly different. There are large canvases with empty spaces and small canvases with intimate scenes. This body of work, some painted in 2006, some as recently as this year, is in essence one work. Instead of many scenes in one canvas, individual scenes get their own canvas, and some characters have even evolved into soft sculpture format.

Hayes has decided to speak about this body of work, something he hasn't done often in the past. I think he is frustrated. Of being misunderstood, of people not taking the time and care to look at his work in equal measure to the care he puts into creating it. It can be frustrating. One thing I have noticed following Hayes' work is that he often tackles subject matter before the rest of us are quite ready to deal with it, or even recognise it. Years ago he painted a magnificent lolly coloured painting that investigated corporate paedophilia, the marketing of sexuality and childhood. A couple of years later it was a

hot topic in the media. I'm not suggesting he is some sort of trend-forecasting zeitgeist, but that's what happens when you have an observer like Hayes. They see things before other people do because he's not participating. He's watching and recording.



14 Kurdish refugees land in Milikapiti and ask, "is this Australia?" – 4th November 2003, 2012, oil on linen, 61 x 81 cm

Marketing and branding is something that still interests him today with this body of work. Many of these paintings were painted during an 18-month period when Hayes was living in a small Aboriginal community called Milikapiti Melville Island north of Darwin (Northern Territory, Australia) the home to the Tiwi people for the last 7,000 years or so. Fascinated by the clash and melding of Tiwi culture and European culture, the community life and Tiwi history acts as a backdrop. It is a microcosm for a global pattern of displacement, expansion of dominant nations, corporate/social branding taking over culture and identity. Take the painting *The least convincing rap band in the world – 11 August 1997*; or *14 Kurdish refugees land in Milikapiti and ask, "is this Australia?" – 4<sup>th</sup> November 2003*. The latter work referencing the sinister use of marketing in politics and the media. Based on a true story, a group of refugees were spotted on a vessel in the bay at Milikapiti. The conservative Howard Government of the time did a fantastic job of instilling a fear and hatred campaign of refugees through the media, basically branding them as potential terrorists and possible carriers of unknown diseases. It worked. So pervasive was this strategic political message that it even reached across the nation from capital cities to remote small communities. So here we have asylum seekers in the guise of *The Raft of the Medusa*, instead of ragged cloth they are waving brand name t-shirts representing our new dominant culture – the well marketed Brand. Would they have more success by appealing, not to empathetic fellow people, not to other displaced victims, but to those who like the same brands – who do you identify with? Are you Nike or more of a Burberry? Are you Apple or PC? Are you Right or Left?



*The least convincing rap band in the world* – 11 August 1997, 2012, oil on linen, 31 x 41 cm

Displaced people. We have a world full of them now, don't we? Indigenous people, migrants, refugees, the old, the young, women, the battered, the misunderstood, the abused, hell, even just the lonely. Hayes believes his role as an artist is "to tell a story" and in the Milikapiti works the story is this:

"Most art has a sub-text and a text. The text is the scenery and the characters, the location. The subtext is the motivation, the idea behind it. The Tiwi islands are just the text. The stories are mainly about what happens when you have a group of people and someone from elsewhere comes into the group. No matter what happens, even when someone has good intentions to do everyone a favour, usually that person usurps someone, their position within the group. Milikapiti is a good metaphor for that, because when the Europeans came in they (mostly) tried to help, and even then the result was that it did someone out of a job. For instance, when they gave everyone the dole [welfare] it meant that Tiwi hunters weren't required to provide food, or when they gave everyone ladders, the best tree climbers that could reach mangoes were out of a job. And so that is part of the story of Milikapiti, the celebrity status of a lot of people had been lost. Their purpose had been lost."



Dog torturers behind the Milikapiti Clinic – 17th June 1979, 2006, oil on linen, 213.5 x 198 cm



*Halfway to Milikapiti from Darwin the old Tiwi man admitted they were lost – 29th July 1964*, 2005, oil on linen, 213.5 x 198 cm

The Missionaries themselves are a good example of this type of displacement, from various angles. *Half way to Milikapiti from Darwin the old Tiwi man admitted they were lost – 29 July 1964*. “The nuns come in to try and help, and overall they probably did, but there were a lot of casualties along the way.” Hayes doesn’t judge these individual missionaries, on the contrary he seems to have a real affinity for their sense of adventure and bravery, in essence their own displacement. But what does it achieve all of these good intentions? A perceived superiority of technology, values, lifestyle, or belief systems – what happens when people meet, groups combine, cultures collide, and one inevitably has more power than the other?

Painted in 2012 *Waiting for a confession 31<sup>st</sup> October 1967* shows the absurdity of the formal ritual of confession taking place in the incongruous context of the bush. A 20-year-old priest takes confessions of octogenarian Tiwi people. He’s somehow dragged a portable confessional that is placed in the untamed bush. They’ve lived a long life so the list is long!

The humour found in the incongruous meeting of cultures has also been used in the soft sculpture installation *The Hunters*, 2012. Three elderly women are going hunting. They are wearing inappropriate t-shirts. Those who have ever lived in remote communities would recognise such a scene. Often there is only one shop with limited stock, usually the clothing range is t-shirts featuring popular rap bands, song titles and slogans, or multi-national brands. Here Hayes has used the lyrics from a song called “Horny” (yes, really) by Mousse T, a ludicrously banal pop song that was very popular on Australian radio. The figure is also carrying a ‘Hello Kitty’ bag, one of the world’s largest brands it has permeated nearly every remote corner on earth! The incongruity of the cuteness, the inappropriate slogans, the blood, and carcases – it displays the unique way of life, the idiosyncrasies of the Tiwi people. Hayes also uses this simple, funny scene as a metaphor for what he describes as an ‘ill-fitting culture’. The European choices, the white Australian lifestyle just doesn’t quite meet the women’s needs.



*Three Tiwi women, three Hello Kitty handbags and bits of hard to identify axed up native animal – 31st March 2012 (or The Hunters), 2012, felt and mixed media, dimensions variable around 50 cm high*

The soft sculpture installations are interesting aesthetic devices. They are visual references to scenes and motifs in the paintings, but they also act as light relief, objects of colour and texture, fictional characters in 3-dimensions. They bind the 2-dimensional works together as a series, much the same way as the artist uses visual devices in his large-scale canvases to link different scenes together – whether that be repeated characters (human or animals) and patterns (poles, trees, rivers) or colours. Hayes describes his formal approach to painting as such:

"In reality there is very little difference when you walk around the streets between colours when you look at things. They're quite close. The problem is when you are a kid and you start painting you paint a red dress, blue pants, and a white background. But in reality that dress is either dark red or light red and the pants are the same and everything looks quite similar in tone. So that is something you learn as you get experience. If you don't want it to look amateurish, or to be like a Mondrian or Matisse picture, most colours are quite similar. Also it's a lot easier to look at if you haven't got colours jarring against each other, and when you are painting you try and make everything conservative which leaves you the option of doing bold colours later to attract peoples attention in different directions. So you paint a picture, you try and get the colours – say if 1 is white and 10 is black – you try to keep everything about 5 & 6 so that at the end of the picture you can use your black & your white, or bold colours as highlights, as a way of directing. Because if you start off with bold colours you've got nowhere to go because your eyes just look at the bold colours first and everything is compared to that. You lose control of the viewer looking at a picture if you use too many bold colours because people look straight at that."



Installation shot of soft sculpture poles, teeth, and various animals, felt and mixed media, dimensions variable, about 170 cm high at highest point

This body of work spans over 8 years. It is a compelling approach to universal themes from a considered and accomplished artist. Some of the artist's own text used in his work is perhaps misleading, or like his work, a type of fiction. It is not a re-telling of Milikapiti history as much as it is a narrative ploy. He uses his experiences, the visual feast of Tiwi culture and history, as a metaphor for the issues discussed above: displacement, global branding, homogenising culture. The fallout of this is a growing trend of alternative cultures, ideas, values, anything that contravenes the structure and value system of the dominant society becoming victimised casualties along the way.

But wait, there's more!

#### Semi-authorised abridged artist biography in point form:

- Cameron's full name is Cameron Kingsley Hayes. He was born on Halloween in 1969. He's lived in Sydney, Melbourne and Melville Island. He works in his studio every single day – EVERY SINGLE DAY. I have only known him to take a break on rare family holidays and trips to attend exhibition openings in New York. Even then he will suffer great anxiety about leaving his studio and will assuage his guilt by sketching, planning and conducting research for further work.
- For his larger scale canvases, which is the majority of his work, it takes approximately 3 – 4 months to complete, and he will often work simultaneously on 2 – 3 canvases at a time.
- He doesn't have studio assistants, every brushstroke is his and every sculpture is hand made. He even taught himself to sew to do the soft sculptures. He went to art school at RMIT, Melbourne.
- He admires the work of Cat Rabbit, Henry Darger and Hieronymous Bosch. The idea of creating soft, toy-like sculptures was inspired by fellow artist Chris Humphries.
- He can often be found at the Melbourne City Library doing research. He reads a great deal about every subject he paints about.
- If you ever truly wanted to get a different perspective on something, problem, social issues, political figure, anything really, he would be the person to ask. He will enlighten the topic from such a vastly different perspective it will amaze you. If he ever stopped being an artist (which will never happen) he could get a job as someone who

thinks so far outside of the box he could revolutionalise think tanks. However, he'd probably unintentionally offend you at the same time.

- He runs every day and clocks up to 100 kms a week. He umpires A grade Amateurs football.
- If, for some reason, you needed someone to take care of \$50,000 in cash you could give it to Cameron. Even if you couldn't pick it up for 10 years or more, you can be sure it would still be there and he wouldn't have spent a dollar.
- He doesn't like to ask for favours.
- In response to the question "how are you, Cameron?", he will respond "I'm the same", without exception.
- Even as a child he was an observer, and already much like an old man. Observations of his elders influenced a very strong code of ethics.
- When he was at St Kevin's he was the captain of the cross country and known as a good artist. His family lost everything when his father was sent to prison. His school kept him on with a scholarship.
- He has had the same haircut forever. He has never been drunk and has never taken drugs.
- When the warm months start to turn cold he wears less clothes because he thinks it is a good way to train his body to get used to winter. When he catches a cold he wears a raincoat to go jogging because he thinks he can sweat it out.
- When I warned him that I was going to "do something different which you probably won't like" by doing this bio section, he responded "anything but flattery".
- His greatest fear is running out of time before he gets to complete all of his paintings.



*Dr Clyde Fenton delivers yet another baby – March 7 1932*, 2006, oil on linen, 44.5 x 53.5 cm. Dr Clyde Fenton was the Northern Territory's first Flying Doctor in the 1930s. He attended Xavier College, and although he did graduate as a medical doctor in 1925 from Melbourne University, he was a self-taught pilot. A disaster to the Civil Aviation Department, but a hero to the Tiwi people, as he was their only hope for medical assistance at the time.

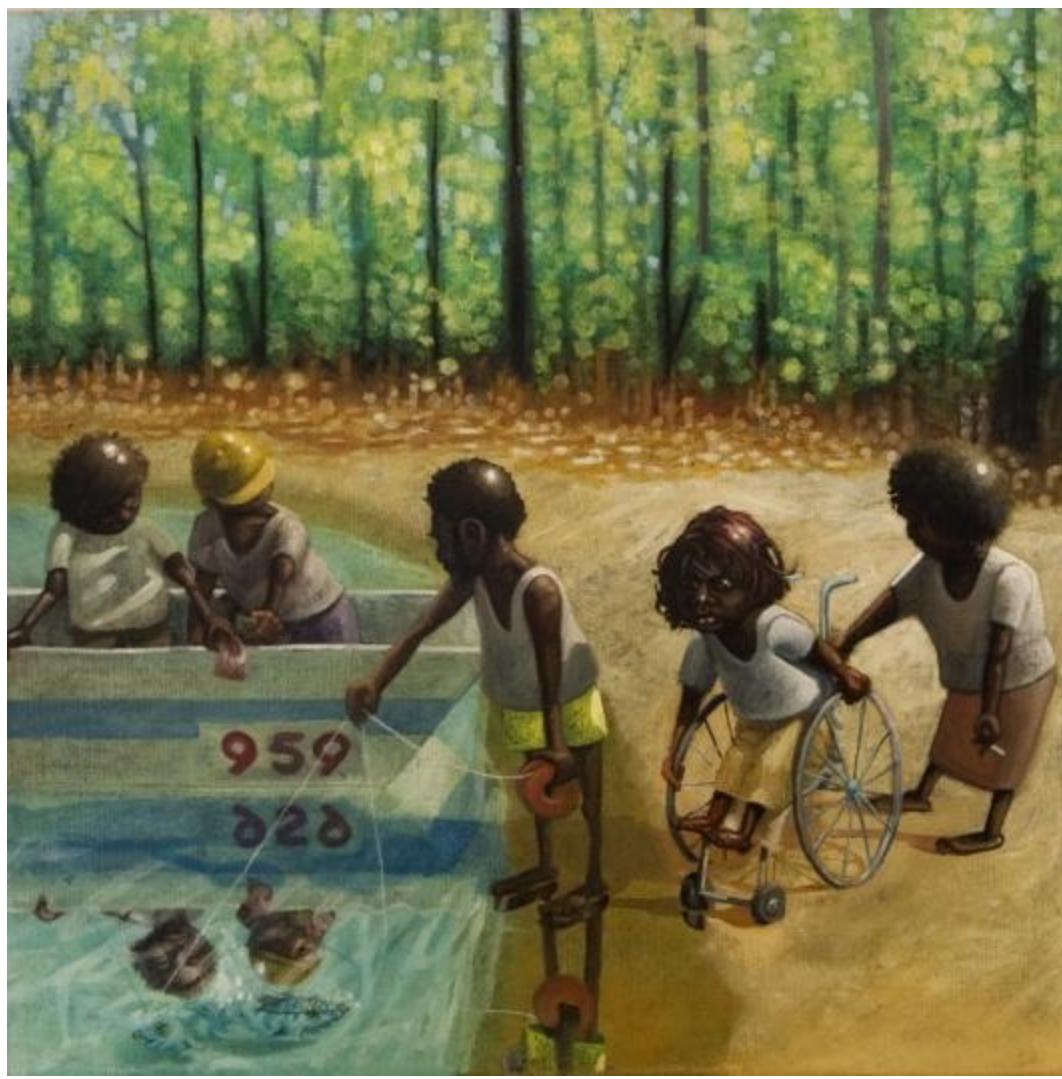
Cameron Hayes is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, <http://feldmangallery.com>

POSTSCRIPT:

This body of work was scheduled to be exhibited in Melbourne in June. Unfortunately, the exhibition is not proceeding at this point. There has been some call for censorship due to the artist's use of indigenous subject matter. Not only is this a seeming misunderstanding and reduction of Cameron Hayes' work it is a serious censorship of discussion about the role of art in current social discourse and the relationship between indigenous and contemporary art in Australia. No doubt there will be further developments on this story!



*Kick after the siren, Tapalinga Hawks vs. Milikapiti Magpies – 3 December 2002*, 2006, oil on linen, 101 x 152.5 cm.



*Swimming caught fish* – 12 October 2011, 2012, oil on linen, 35 x 35 cm

# Best in Show

## Recommendations by Robert Schuster

Cameron Hayes: 'Tattles'

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

31 Mercer Street

212-226-3232, feldmangallery.com

Through May 7

## Mayhem City

Dystopian visions don't get much darker than those of Cameron Hayes. Influenced, it would seem, by Hieronymus Bosch, underground comics, and Richard Scarry's cluttered drawings for kids, the Australian artist paints meticulously detailed panoramas of urban mayhem. From afar, these sprawling cityscapes present loose organizations of motion and color, with cartoonish figures engaged in some vague collective activity. But closer inspection (the richness demands study) reveals a shadowy madness: murder, enslavement, sexual deviancy, and squalor.

If you spend time, too, reading Hayes's descriptions of each work—freely mixing fact and fantasy—you'll discover that he has created imaginative allegories that often touch on recent events, particularly confrontations between the rich and poor. The wild *Kings of Werribee* makes a direct reference to the Australian thugs who, in 2006, filmed themselves defiling a handicapped girl. Before a graffiti-covered wall, malevolent youths loom over their conquests while on the other side, a chaotic factory—replete with its own acts of degradation—appears to be manufacturing clothing. The satire broadens in *Orphanages Make the Best Skyscrapers*. In a sickly yellow fog, chaotic groups of suited men build rickety towers while, in the lowest rooms, fatherless boys—who constantly seek parental approval—are nurtured for corporate success.

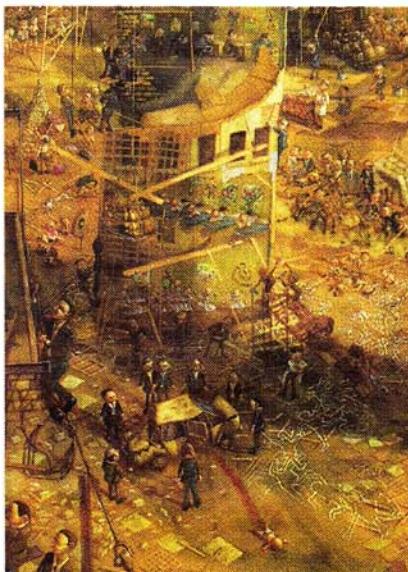
Elsewhere, a more straightforward painting depicts another real situation, this one from India's Mumbai Zoo. In a gloomy cage eerily tinted red, two sad monkeys, hanging from ropes, peer down at rats devouring their food. The symbolism could apply to any number of circumstances, but whatever your interpretation, Hayes gives us a striking portrayal of hell.

### Józef Robakowski

Sleekly remodeled, the tiny but ambitious satellite gallery of the Goethe-Institut offers an intriguing introduction to experimental filmmaker Józef Robakowski, a prominent figure in his native Poland but little-known here. A sampling of work demonstrates the artist's wide-ranging interests over the past 50 years.

Structuralist investigations of spare imagery define a number of the films. There's the minimalist abstraction of *Test I*, a 1971 piece that "animates" white circles of light from perforations Robakowski made in the film itself. In the same year, *The Dynamic Rectangle* looked at the purity of a basic form; an oddly compelling geometric exercise set to pulsing electronic music, it plays like an homage to Malevich's Suprematism. In the back room, the more conceptual *Attention: Light!*, echoing synesthesia, flashes colors according to

# Art



Schuster, Robert. "Best in Show: Recommendations." *The Village Voice*, LVI, No. 16, April 20 - 26, 2011. p. 23.

**Orphanages Make the Best Skyscrapers, 2011 (detail)**

certain pitches in an accompanying Chopin mazurka—a collaborative effort conceived by Robakowski's fellow avant-gardist Paul Sharits, but one that feels a bit dated now.

Social and political concerns made their mark on later films, notably *From My Window* (1999), a personal look at Poland's recent history. Splicing together two decades of footage shot from his apartment, Robakowski observes and wryly narrates the changing life around a bleak concrete courtyard. In the 1970s, under a regimented Communism, neighbors make predictable but comforting appearances. During the martial law of the 1980s, the space succumbs to authority and becomes a parking lot. Finally, with capitalism, the construction of a five-star hotel eliminates the view entirely—a development that leads, Robakowski ironically states, to "The End." *Ludlow 38, 38 Ludlow*, 212-228-6848. Through May 15

### ArtSewn'

Sewing may never shake its association with grandmothers and tchotchkes, but the nine artists in this quiet, thoughtful show take their work well beyond notions of craft. Emily Barletta uses needle and thread like a pencil, writing dense rows of angular shapes that appear on the paper as personal hieroglyphics. Likewise, Linnea Glatt's *Filled* gives almost imperceptible body to the "drawn" line in an encircled, Agnes Martin-like grid.

A Minimalist spirit continues with Cyrilla Mozenter's soft rectangular containers, made from industrial wool and reminiscent of sculpture by Eva Hesse. Elisa D'Arrigo, too, evokes Hesse in marvelous little wall-reliefs; stitched-together cubes of handmade paper, piled into mounds, suggest living organisms, growing cell by cell. It's also a delight to see another embroidered "brainscape" from Jessica Rankin, whose *Empty Night* connects clusters of black text with sinuous pathways of pale thread on a window-like swath of gray, translucent organdy. *FiveMyles*, 558 St. Johns Place, Brooklyn, 718-783-4438. Through May 8

# EMERGING INFECTIOUS DISEASES®

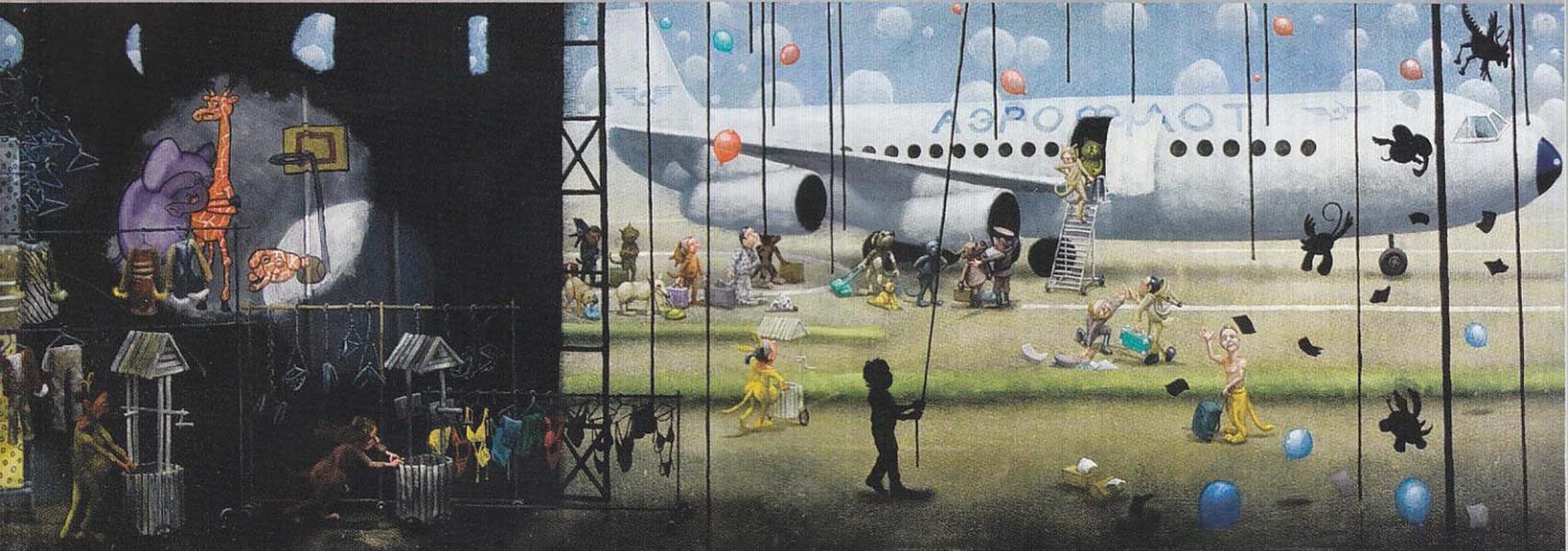


Potter, Polyxeni. Traveling Light and the Tyranny of Higher Expectations." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 15, no. 1 (January 2009): cover, 140-41.

Travel-related Infections

January 2009

Copyright Cameron Hayes. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York





Cameron Hayes (b. 1969) *The Russians knew perfectly well that the happiness of the African animals was that they had such low expectations—before the pets were introduced (detail)* (2008). Oil on linen (203.2 cm × 254 cm) Copyright Cameron Hayes. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

## Traveling Light and the Tyranny of Higher Expectations

Polyxeni Potter

“**T**hree tribes of Babylonians,” Herodotus wrote, “eat nothing but fish, which they catch and dry in the sun. They pound the dried fish in a mortar with a pestle and sift through a cloth then mix with liquid and bake like bread.” Such are their customs, he reported, “Having no physicians, they bring the sick to the agora to receive advice from passers-by who have similar ailments.”

Travel anecdotes fill Herodotus’ histories. He recorded them so that “happenings will not be lost to human memory nor great and fantastic deeds … fade.” Mocked for his accounts of outlandish behavior, Herodotus got no respect until centuries later, when similar unlikely behavior was seen elsewhere, and its anthropological and ethnographic roots were verified. Human fascination with travel to mysterious lands has occupied artists as well as writers throughout the ages. Australian painter Cameron Hayes, whose work graces this month’s cover, offers his own narrative version of travel.

Hayes, whose interests in human behavior are reflected in all his work, traces his roots far from today’s art centers,

even if he exhibits in galleries all over the world. Born in Sydney and now based in Melbourne, he has explored the effects of European settlement on the Aboriginal population in Milikapiti on Melville Island off the northern coast of Australia. He has articulated in his art the loss of cultural identity and health to often well-intentioned outside influences. This journey inward sharpened his vision of today’s global scene, which he views with suspicion and satirizes without mercy in his paintings.

Hayes’ style, resistant to prevailing art trends, is narrative. His work tells a story, in the tradition of Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), who painted fantastic images derived from biblical and folkloric sources to address the moral conflicts of his day. Hayes also monitors human behavior and evaluates its effects. In complex scenes packed with minute detail, he projects the absurdity of human interaction in a globalized world gone mad. His acid humor is reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s, only he takes on not just the country yokel but humanity at large.

Unlike many contemporary artists whose work often relies on theory and explanation, Hayes says little about his paintings, allowing the viewer to draw conclusions directly from his densely populated, multifocal, fictitious scenes and their hidden messages. “Far out to sea and west of

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Spain./There is a country named Cokayne," goes the poetic description of medieval utopia that could be describing Hayes' destinations, "No place on earth compares to this/For sheer delightfulness and bliss." At first glance, his colorful paintings appear playful and lyrical, full of movement and intrigue. "There's no fly or flea or louse/In clothes, in village, bed, or house;/There's no thunder, sleet, or hail,/Or any nasty worm or snail." But on closer inspection, a story unfolds that is often disturbing as much as captivating, dark as well as enlightening.

"They bury their Dead with their Heads directly downwards; because they hold an Opinion, that in eleven Thousand Moons they are all to rise again; in which Period, the Earth (which they conceive to be flat) will turn upside down, and by this Means they shall, at their Resurrection, be found ready standing on their Feet," wrote Jonathan Swift about the inhabitants of Lilliput, in *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift, continuing in the tradition of Herodotus, wrote about travel adventures. But, an inveterate satirist, he spiced them liberally with biting wit intended to upset and reform a malfunctioning society. "The chief end I propose to myself in all my labours is to vex the world rather than divert it."

In *The Russians knew perfectly well ...*, Hayes' travel report seems to marry the wide-eyed astonishment of Herodotus with the edginess of Swift. Strange things happen in far off lands. But not even Hieronymus Bosch could have anticipated an angle as original and frightful as Hayes'. This time it is not the natives who demonstrate outlandish behavior but the visitors. Animals, he suggests, once lived happily in the wild, munching and frolicking in a potent state of anarchic freedom, living and dying their natural lives and deaths. Then humans arrived in their iron birds bringing their traps, their needs, their greed, their haplessness, and their neuroses.

The scene unfolds inside and outside the airplane and in some vacuous unreal landscape beneath. The panoramic view, a carnival of shape and color, yields a diminutive cosmos of stunning complexity. Animals, moved away from their natural habitat and become domesticated, have turned into caricatures of themselves, mindlessly engaged in meaningless tasks for no reason. The cartoonlike elephant on the upper left corner covers the eyes in dismay; the giraffe is clearly distressed. Awash in human fashions, the animals

exhibit bizarre symptoms, biting themselves and each other or perched weirdly on floating vegetation.

Human behavior, in ancient Babylon, Lilliput, or Mikapiti, has cultural, economic, and public health consequences. Ecotourism has attracted people to remote animal habitats, and commerce has moved animals to new environments. Despite evidence of disease risks, demand for exotic pets is high. Despite inherent hazards (Buruli ulcer, malaria, dengue, avian flu, norovirus infection), humans move freely around the globe. "People," Hayes says, "invariably find creative and elaborate ways of maintaining their perception, against all the available evidence, rather than questioning their perception of reality."

In the wild, animals had no expectations. They did not travel far, nor did they carry luggage. Their happiness was guaranteed. Now, part and parcel of public transportation, they have lost not just their innocence and wildness but also the natural quarantine rendered by the borders of their habitat. And their bags are packed with more than human expectations. They have joined the growing zoonoses network, unknowingly moving microorganisms around the globe and expanding the scope and span of disease.

#### Acknowledgment

The author thanks Louise E. Shaw for her help in obtaining permission to use *The Russians knew perfectly well* that the happiness of the African animals was that they had such low expectations—before the pets were introduced.

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## Reviews

### Cameron Hayes



*The Russians knew perfectly well that the happiness of the African animals was that they had such low expectations—before the pets were introduced, detail*

★★★☆☆

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,  
through Jun 28 (see Soho)

The first room of Cameron Hayes's show suggests that this Australian painter's interests lie somewhere in the anthropological. In a series of canvases, he moves across several continents (the first painting on the left is ostensibly set in India; a large Russian fairground provides the background for another work), packing urban scenes with hundreds of figures performing the daily absurd activities of modern life. The perils of globalization seem to be an undercurrent throughout.

However, trying to match the visual narratives to the artist's ridiculously long and often nonsensical titles becomes tedious, and wouldn't even be necessary if these panoramic views were convincing on their own. Instead, the large compositions amount to little more than disorienting accumulations of caricature renderings. The process of picking through them comes disconcertingly close to searching a *Where's Waldo?* illustration. Hayes's group of soft sculptures in the next room, which recounts white culture's deleterious effect on the aborigines, is similarly irksome.

This isn't to say, however, that Hayes can't make his subjects—imperialism, industrial blight—affecting. As soon as he stops painting in miniature, the image quality dramatically improves, and the color is better able to convey an emotive content. A painting about Helen Keller, for example, is a convincing and easily understandable portrait of rural poverty and hopelessness. You leave this show wishing for much stronger curating, which could have made the result a whole lot better.—T.J. Carlin

Glueck, Grace. "Cameron Hayes." *The New York Times*, Friday, February 27, 2004, p. E30.

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### Cameron Hayes

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts  
31 Mercer Street, SoHo  
Through March 13

Mad things happen in the Australian painter Cameron Hayes's visionary canvases, which satirize the follies of contemporary civilization. In each of his densely packed narratives, human circumstances spin out of control with very odd results.

One example: the residents of a nursing home win a local government commission to paint a mural for the massive columns of a new freeway. But instead of developing a coherent group theme, each individual proceeds with a concept that totally ignores all others. A Raphael cherub painted by one is adjacent to porno cut-outs produced by the person next door; an Indian resident depicts a pantheon of Hindu gods while his Muslim neighbor comes up with a cart pulled by devils into hell.

Mr. Hayes's notion here seems to be the vulnerability of social planning. In other works, he comments on the infantilizing effects of corporate-imposed culture; the treachery of the old sending the young into war; the ultimate ditziness of an engineered population.

These incredibly detailed paintings — influenced by comic strips, Indian miniatures and Hieronymus Bosch among other sources — have a frenzied intensity that demands close reading. Like most literary paintings, they get a little tiresome after a while. One reason to look at them, though, is their refreshing distance from what's hot on the current scene.

GRACE GLUECK

Upon close inspection, the cartoon-like figures in Australian artist Cameron Hayes' large-scale paintings are definitely not meant for children. While the bright, cheerful colors can deceive the viewer, Hayes' canvases are overflowing with figures that squirm and writhe in unpleasant and complicated situations. Some aspects are upside down, topsy-turvy and seem, at times, to be quite deranged. A small booklet was provided at the Ronald Feldman Gallery for Hayes' recent show with stories to accompany the works. The text was filled with stories of scenes present in the paintings and stories that stayed behind in Hayes' mind. The works allow the viewer to witness a world gone awry, and all at once, with countless situations frozen in mid-motion.

In *Before there were laws for corporate pedophilia*, the complex title only begins to delve into the perverse world exposed in this work. A general color scheme of baby pinks, purples, and blues soften the viewer before presenting an urban pandemonium with figures stacked on top of one another in a collection of occurrences, commenting on how corporate infiltration of social trends has resulted in the stripping away of innocence for many children. In a world where babies skip right to adolescence, without even a glance towards childhood, a symbolic pile of empty baby carriages sits in the top right corner of the painting. Billboards fill the composition featuring meaningless trivia about celebrities. This chaotic world is founded on fashions and meaningless commercial concerns. However, the work is not without hope. The protagonist, Lois "works for a women's magazine but is otherwise a kind of a terrorist, in order to get laws to protect girls' childhoods... When girls line up to be weighed by the government, Lois agitates to have the girls weigh their birthday cards, diaries, trophies, and drawings as well. Weight has become the gold standard." However, this so-called optimism is given on the most human scale, with Lois as the only figure among hundreds seeking to correct the backwards nature of her world.

Another work, *In the South Pole the explorers were so afraid of not having enough food for winter that they starved to death in summer*, appeals to slightly different aspect of human frailty; the characters are trying to survive in the wild. Hayes pushes the use of Candyland colors further in this painting with the addition of glitter on a canvas of bright pink and icicle blue, and uses segmented scenes to isolate occurrences over time. Scott and Amundsen are competitive Polar explorers, according to the booklet, who travel to the South Pole on dog-powered sleds. While the characters are revisited in other scenes, the main

## Squirming Derangement in Icicle Blue

@ Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Danielle O'Steen



focus is in the center panel where the explorers are shown traveling in bizarre patterns. The description continues on: "Many of the explorers were so terrified of being stranded inland during the Antarctic winter that they would not eat their supplies during the summer and consequently starved to death with a sled full of food... Many starved and skeletal explorers were pulled by overfed, fat dogs. The South Pole from 1910 to 1920 was covered with dog shit and dead explorers." While viewers can chuckle over the absurdity in this work, the content is not entirely from Hayes' imagination. Here the characters become actors, playing out parodied versions of real lives. The top section of the painting is a panoramic view of the figures in the story, all bowing with hands clasped.

Among Hayes' large and complex paintings, there is an interesting repetition of figures and colors that creates balanced abstract compositions when viewed from afar. However, when approaching the works up close, it is clear that Hayes is careful not to use a prototype for his characters. Each figure is individualized, adding another dimension to the messages ingrained in the paintings. Even more impressive is the sense of depth that he creates, allowing the viewer to accurately view numerous scenes at once. While absorbing, one can feel a sense of relief that Hayes' figures must remain on their canvases. □

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THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

March 15, 2001

## Cameron Hayes

Ronald Feldman Gallery through March 31

By Douglas F. Maxwell

If we were able to trace Cameron Hayes' artistic lineage back to the fifteenth century, it would invariably show that he is a direct descendant of Hieronymous Bosch or perhaps Breugel. For such artists, those who create dense paintings with a lexicon's worth of strange creatures and who communicate a sharp commentary about the contemporary world of the artist while having no apparent relationship to anything in the present, must be related to each other.



Today Hardly Anyone Could Forget Yesterday, 1996

What kind of mind could have made up these quasi-narratives is anything but normal, yet unquestionably these paintings have a charm and delicacy, which makes them impossible to dislike. Take, for example, *Today Hardly Anyone Could Forget Yesterday, 1996*, which seems to give a topsy-turvy synopsis of the founding and development of Australia, Hayes' home country, as a prison colony. Unlike almost any other painting I know of, *Today* reads from top to bottom, and astonishingly at the bottom, just when you reach the beach and the water, it turns upside down giving a special emphasis to the idea of "down under." And if you think that this upside-downturn is awkwardly handled, you'd be wrong. Hayes' ability to create a viable perspective out of what seems like complete chaos is uncanny. There is nothing calm here, but rather each and every inch of canvas is densely painted with plenty of action. It surely reflects the chaos present in contemporary society. And your trying to glean the meaning of all of the aspects of the canvas is overwhelming.

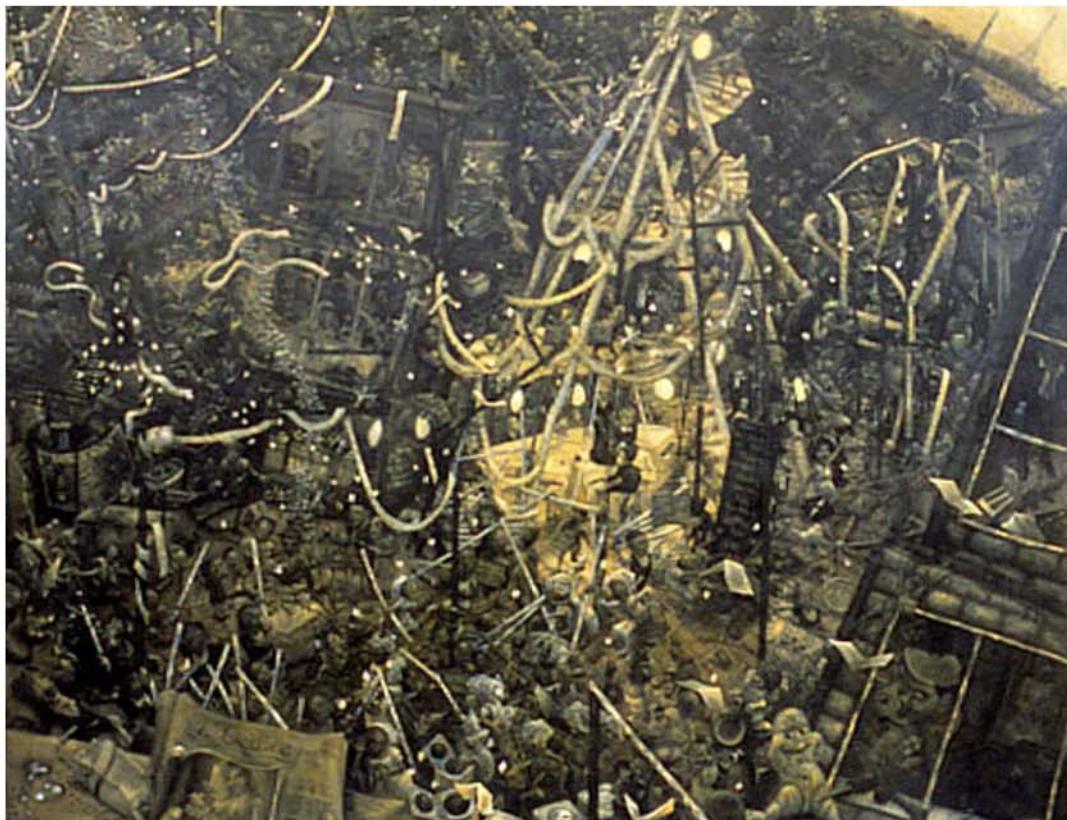
Hayes thinks of these paintings as narratives, and he has, in fact, created his own stories for each, and they are reproduced in a book at the desk, but I suggest not reading them because they make these scenes too concrete. The paintings' titles are enough to stimulate

your imagination while looking at the paintings. *Bonnie and Clyde during a Petrol Strike*, 1999 is a good example. The overall theme is the breakdown of urban life when something like a fuel strike occurs, and we can all identify with the havoc which eventuates. In this painting, the city is relegated to becoming a roller-coaster ride in an outdated amusement park. Just like in the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*, it's almost impossible to tell the bad guys from the good guys here, and I'm not sure anyone would want to anyway. Hayes seems to have a preference for the movies which he often uses to provide one liners as he does in *Bonnie and Clyde*. In the middle of the painting is a billboard highlighting "The Seventy Year Itch" with an aged and unglamorous Marilyn Monroe. The point that everyone and everything once young grows old - often not too gracefully - is driven home.

As you might imagine, nothing in the imagery in these paintings is held sacred and irreverence reigns. There is something of R. Crumb in these paintings as well. They have a biting irony, which at best makes darkly humorous and poignant comments about contemporary life. But there is a caveat: Hayes is often treacherously close to letting the one liners overwhelm the rest of the significance of the paintings. This may be an inevitable risk in creating this kind of work, and I have the feeling that Hayes would be unconcerned about it. I'm not even so sure that he notices how densely populated each of the paintings is, but I sure did. I actually pondered how many different ways I could end up disliking each of them, but, in the end, I gave this up and just allowed my eyes to roam across and into the paintings while my imagination bubbled over with glee at the plethora of visual scenarios.

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# Devils in the detail



Detail of "The filming of 'The girl's got to have it' was cancelled in 1945 because of the horizontal collaborators. It was later made in 1957 in a sound studio in Hollywood with Jayne Mansfield", by Cameron Hayes.

## Visual arts

Cameron Hayes, Paintings  
Australian Galleries, Collingwood,  
until December 22

Review Peter Timms

CAMERON HAYES is a real anachronism — a history painter, a genre painter and a narrative painter, at a time when those forms couldn't be more unfashionable. He is also something of a mad painter. Just listen to this. It's his description of one of his own works: "In this painting, the musical actors try to convince the jeering mob that you can't control bodily functions like love, while the mob try to rebuild their bombed city with wallpaper and paint. In the background the big French perfume companies are trying to teach rabbits courtship and the waltz, and pigs table manners... The mob cruelly throw carrots at blind beggars and taunt old women who go naked while washing the only dress they have, their wedding dress. In an apartment block, a girl is beaten by her father in the kitchen while he entertains her black boyfriend in the living room..." And so on and on.

What is striking about this, apart from its dizzying multiplicity (and the startling proposition that love is a bodily function), is that it is entirely about subject matter. Most discussion about works of art these days is about style, technique and theoretical underpinnings: in other words, about art history. Hayes appears unconcerned about art history. His mind is on social history, which he satirises with a vengeance. Hayes is a Hogarth or a Daumier for the 21st century.

As the above description suggests, these paintings have lots and lots of subject matter. Too much, sometimes, for their own good. Hayes does occasionally lose the struggle to keep his fantasmagorical imagination under control.

Yet, at the level of style and technique, his painting is all control. Every crowded incident is depicted with painstaking attention to detail. The results, which can be incomprehensible when seen as a whole, demand intense scrutiny from the viewer. Hayes' paintings are vast fields of tiny details. The eye scans the surface, taking in each bizarre anecdote, and taking delight in their bitter humor.

But it's tiring. There is so much going on. And there is a frustrating sense that you're being given endless cryptic clues that are never going to gel into any satisfactory

resolution (which considerably weakens their power as satire). We see a distraught mother, for example, being comforted by a policeman on a rooftop. In the foreground is an overturned pram, with no sign of baby. All around, policemen are dusting for fingerprints and taking photographs. Inexplicably, a large rubbish bin nearby is stuffed with discarded placards, all of which read: "I'm good thanks". This whole shemozzle of a painting is buoyed along by surreal black humor, corny one-liners, and frankly cartoonish visual exuberance, even if its specific meaning is elusive.

The best paintings are those with a strong, centralised composition and a well-defined theme that we can latch on to, such as his acid-head parody of Gericault's *Raft of Medusa* (or is it Brueghel's *Ship of Fools*?) and his manic *Tower of Babel*. When he has a solid narrative idea to work with, he can pull all the individual elements together and tell a great story. Trouble is, he never seems to stop talking.

Hayes is a genuinely eccentric artist, if sometimes just a wee bit self-consciously so. This is an impressive first solo show, but given that he appears to have said it all, you wonder where on earth he is going to go from here. His images can't get any more frenetic than they already are.