

Waxing on about landscapes

REVIEW | Toronto-based artist puts his spin on a Canadian tradition

TONY SCHERMAN

Monte Clark Gallery, at 2339
Granville St. until July 24

BY JENNIFER VAN EVRA

A nuclear bomb explodes on the far wall of the Monte Clark Gallery — a full nine feet of fiery oranges and pinks and blues ripping into dense browns and blacks. The chunky lines of wax emanating from the mushroom cloud seem to fly in all directions toward the edges of the canvas in a veritable visual meltdown.

It's called *Ciao Gaia* — in other words, goodbye mother nature. All around are serene landscapes and images of North American birds with names like Georgian Bay and Near Sundrige, their blue and grey skies quietly giving way to the soft pinks and breezy oranges underneath, as layers of lush greenery blend softly together.

Taken on their own, the landscapes could easily be seen as a peaceful meditation on nature. Next to the image of the nuclear explosion, however, their layers of molten colour can take on a whole new meaning — that is, if that's what the viewer chooses to see.

"Fixing meaning is like nailing jello to the wall or parting clouds with a sickle," says painter Tony Scherman, on the phone from his home in Toronto. "And that has always interested me. In this case, the melting wax or the burnt-out portions of the paintings signify the literal melting from the bomb. But in another context, they are rather poetic, even romantic, landscapes. Like words in a sentence, they have a meaning within that particular sentence. And all art has meaning in a given place at a given time in a given sentence — a cultural sentence, a historical sentence. But that meaning shifts completely over time, and may even disappear completely."

Considered a modern master of painting in encaustic — an ancient technique that uses coloured pigments mixed with hot wax — Scherman is known around the world for



Tony Scherman's painting *Ciao Gaia* explodes from the wall of Monte Clark Gallery.

his striking, up-close portraits, which include subjects that range from Macbeth to Elvis Presley. And while he has exhibited many landscapes in the past, the current Monte Clark show marks the artist's first complete exhibit of scenes from nature — many of them depictions of Canadian locales and wildlife. Of course, this country has a long, and some would argue paralyzing, tradition of landscape painting — and that's one of the very reasons why Scherman decided to wade into the form.

"One of the challenges in

painting the Canadian landscape is to overcome the history of the Canadian landscape painting, to paint pine trees out from under the shadow of the Group of Seven and all the pine-tree paintings that you have ever seen, and still see, in shopping malls and hotel rooms," says Scherman, whose works include locations in rural Ontario, and Canadian birds with Latin names such as *Pinicola enucleator*. "The challenge is to make them my own, and to throw in another set of associations around them."

While many of Scherman's

works hint at humankind's destructive impact on nature, they also touch on nature's power to encroach on human beings.

He has learned to appreciate nature's awesome beauty — and that from up close, it can be a different picture altogether.

"I'll see beautiful trees on a river, but then when I actually go into the woods and I get in the river, there's crap on the bottom and the mosquitoes are biting," he says. "And that's like walking into a painting."

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