

VISUAL ART » REVIEW

These aren't the Group of Seven's birch trees



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GALLERY GOING

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KIM DORLAND AT ANGELL

Until Oct. 11,
890 Queen St. W., Toronto;
416-530-0444

Painting, like poetry, drama and the novel, is always dying. And yet, mysteriously, somebody is always there to drag it back into robust health again. Four or five years ago, I would never have pegged Kim Dorland for the job.

Though obviously a big natural talent, with lots of brio and a powerful penchant for paint, he seemed awkward and boyish then, as if his eye-scalding colour and feckless use of subjects hitherto regarded as banal (city streets at night, the house belonging to your girlfriend's parents, hunting trips through neon-washed forests that were once safely the province of the Group of Seven) were powering *him* instead of the other way around. Sometimes I used to wonder who

was in charge.

But walk into Toronto's Angell Gallery during the run of his current exhibition, 4 Portraits and a Landscape, and you'll see the work of an artist who has done precisely the right thing: pushed really hard when he might just as easily have pulled back. Nothing is as aesthetically fatal as the middle way. Energy (whether for good or bad) lies only at extremities of things. "The road of excess," wrote poet William Blake, "leads to the palace of wisdom."

Still only 34, Kim Dorland is already at that delicious point in his art where he it looks as if he's bored and ecstatic at the same time: bored that he's not superhuman, and ecstatic in the discovery that there isn't really much holding him back any more (for my money, Dorland is now twice the painter the much-lauded Peter Doig is).

The work the Angell Gallery press release calls the show's "magnum opus" (and it really is) is Dorland's 5½-metre-wide *Woods #4*. This brawling, encyclopedic painting, made with oils, acrylics and (ah, the impurity of it!) spray paint on wood, is, at one level, simply a super-Panavision gloss on the oft-painted Canadian forest (a big, multichannel home-the-



Kim Dorland's gigantic painting *Woods #4*: An encyclopedic painting of a woodland teeming with life.

atre version of that most conventionalized of subjects). On another level, the painting's teeming embrace of pigment-ed bush and its offering of all manner of eccentrically rendered birds and beasts stands it in the same relation to normal landscape painting as Noah's ark stands to weekend house-boating.

Saunter along the painting's prodigious width (the work is so vast walking its length is like a foray into the woods) and see the pictorial inventiveness: Keep your eyes open, and you'll spy fluorescent, nuclear-powered squirrels (one little squirrel glows so gold you fancy it'd be too hot to touch), a lipstick-red bear, an eerie, fallout-green deer, a pink-white owl with yellow, googly eyes (the paint is as thick as rope), a moth as big as a dishrag. The creatures are woven into and about the copse of birch trees that anchors the painting from floor to ceiling, the weft to the mural-sized picture's lateral warp. The scene is heavy with blossom, Dorland's "blossoms" being warped discs of paint the size of teacups, with crud-

dy old bits of dried pigment at their centres. And lest the very act of painting birch trees strikes you as a sentimental one, please note that Dorland's birch trees – trees for our time – have been cunningly made to suffer graffiti, their trunks heavily scored by the artist's own virtuoso hand. These trees now have voices: One tree trunk reads, "I wish I was dead." Of course it takes more than a tiny moment like this to curb the painting's boundless exuberance.

The four portraits (of Dorland's wife and son) that make up the rest of the show are exuberant too – hyper, even. Each one is piled almost 15 centimetres high with pigment and must weigh a tonne (never mind that they probably won't be fully dry until about 2015).

GROUNDING AT EDWARD DAY

\$350-\$24,000. Until Sept. 21,
952 Queen St. W., Toronto;
416-921-6540

Unless you're prepared, as Dorland is, to torque a landscape into aesthetic overrevving, you're always in

danger of having it relax back into mere pastoralism. But painterly passion is not the only way to keep a landscape from nodding off to sleep. The 12 artists making up this interesting show (the gallery calls it "a Group Show from the Ground Up") attempt to demonstrate, in 12 different ways, that landscape is a matrix upon which many interpretations of the nature-as-idea can be inscribed.

Where Dorland goes for gusto, the contributors to Grounded are busy with quieter approaches to art making, with wit, with charm, with a certain kind of morphological rearrangement of given landforms and vistas – and even with satire (the landscape idea is not much given to satire).

I confess I've always been a pushover for Melissa Doherty's strange, tufted landscapes – where her pale trees and shrubs, often lined up like florets of broccoli and viewed from above, seem on the point of erasing the line between architecture and greenery. Her huge *Wind and Trees No. 4* (the biggest I've ever seen her paint) is so strange and so pro-

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foundly pixilated, it seems to belong to some fairy-tale world where trees are sentient.

Equally strange and mythically provocative is Andrew Morrow's visionary *Summer 1978* – a river gorge populated, on one side of the water, by hundreds of naked people (they're so small it's hard to learn much about them) who seem threatened by hordes of heavily clothed, spear-waving savages on the other shore. Disquieting.

ANNA PANTCHEV AT KEEP SIX CONTEMPORARY

\$750-\$2,500. Until Sept. 28,
938 Bathurst St., 647-436-6595

Given that Anna Pantchev graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design about 10 minutes ago, it's definitely okay for her to make these mostly pleasing but perhaps less than searching canvases (her show, which she shares with veteran glass-art maker, Alfred Engerer, is titled *Essential Motion*). Her paintings are jangled, constructivist essays in planes of gridded colour, most of them overlaid or interleaved with one another, the sliding and clashing usually accelerated by ropes of coloured bead-like things or strings of decorative and sometimes energizing abstracted objects.

Pantchev writes in her gallery statement that her "paintings utilize what paint does best: pouring, mixing, spreading, gliding, embellishing and lasciviously running across the surface in all its fluidity." Now this is curious, because all that is exactly what her paintings do not do.

Fluidity? No. Calculation, geometry, planning? Yes. I'll give her one thing though: She is an excellent colourist.