

Globe Arts' Artists of the Year: Kim Dorland, champion of the wild



JAMES ADAMS

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It takes guts for a contemporary painter to put his work not only in the same gallery as the paintings of Tom Thomson but in the same rooms, often on the same walls where Thomsons are hanging. After all, after almost a century after his mysterious drowning death, Thomson remains, for many, the country's most beloved, most iconic and, yes, greatest painter.

Not that Kim Dorland, the 39-year-old contemporary painter in question, has any ambitions or intentions to knock Thomson off those perches. He loves Thomson, too, ranks him with Vincent van Gogh, in fact, as his favourite painter of all time. But as he told me a couple of months ago, even though many of his pictures, like Thomson's, involve gouts of paint, eye-

punching colour and outdoor subjects, "I am not Tom Thomson Jr. ... And I don't want the Tom Jr. moniker to follow me around."

There's no chance of that happening, as visitors to *You Are Here: Kim Dorland and the Return of Painting* can attest. That's the name of the superb exhibition at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection near Toronto where since late October some 90 Dorland paintings, most of them newly created for the show, have been in fruitful conversation with 38 Thomson sketches and canvases along with 12 or so other works by Emily Carr, David Milne and members of the Group of Seven.

The exhibition, the biggest yet for the Alberta-born, Toronto-based artist, affirms his reputation as a virtuoso of the brush, be it sable or air, while the intensity, commitment and utter freshness of the work routs the notion of painting as a retrograde art form for the 21st century. That Dorland and his curator Katerina Atanassova have done this (it runs through Jan. 5, 2014) at the McMichael, the Valhalla of all things Thomson and Group of Seven, seems entirely fitting. Here's a show that simultaneously brings painting and the McMichael up-to-date while substantiating the

possibility that Dorland could become that *rara avis* in Canadian contemporary art: a commercial, critical and popular success.

Admittedly, there's nothing terribly consoling about much of Dorland's art. There's majesty, certainly, in the show's indisputable masterpiece, *French River*, a bravura, eye-consuming triptych, 2.5 metres high, almost six metres wide – but more often than not, Dorland's natural world is eerie, scary even. It's a place where, take a wrong path, you could find yourself lost and freezing to death – that or encountering the ghost of Albert Johnson, Mad Trapper of the North, the reincarnated Jason from *Friday the 13th* or perhaps those weird partiers from Charles Burns's graphic novel *Black Hole*, with their vestigial tails, hydra-headed tongues and facial boils.

"Reasonably proficient" in a canoe, Dorland, wife Lori Seymour and sons Thomson, 4, and Seymour, 7, paddled into Algonquin Park's Canoe Lake, site of Tom Thomson's demise in July, 1917, this summer. It was "a pretty amazing experience," at once pilgrimage, research and homage. "There is this sensation of you entering into [Thomson's] sketches. There was a supernatural charge to the air, definitely." Yet

for all this avidity for the outdoors, Dorland's a city guy, university-trained, in fact, with a downtown studio and a coterie of dealers here, in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere. "If you threw me in a canoe, handed me an axe and told me to survive, I'd be dead pretty quickly," he laughed.

Yet it's precisely this urban sense of the outdoors – its embrace of the kitschy and the exalted, the pristine and the profaned – that makes Dorland and his art so appealing right here right now. Here's a guy recognizing, being inspired by and interrogating our ongoing thralldom to Thomson and the Group, someone attuned to tradition yet clearly responsive to the great commands of modernism propounded by, respectively, Ezra Pound and Jean Cocteau: "Make it new;" "Astonish me."

RUNNERS UP

Seth The Guelph-based cartoonist/illustrator has been doing the covers for Canadian Notes & Queries, a thrice-yearly magazine, since 2010. Each one's been a beaut, a double-truck of graphic enchantment invoking, more often than not, a Canadian past whose vanishment is made all the more piquant by Seth's affectionate imagination.

Shary Boyle *Music for Silence*, Shary Boyle's mixed-media installation in the Canadian pavilion at the 2103 Venice Biennale, earned mixed reviews upon its opening in June. Nevertheless, an estimated 250,000 visitors were enticed into Boyle's fantastical grotto by festival close last month. Boyle's achievement occurred within a constellation of triumphs by other Canadian female artists including Erin Shirreff (winner of the Aimia/AGO Photo Prize) and Colleen Heslin (RBC Painting Competition winner).

Duane Linklater A triumphant year for the multidisciplinary Northern Ontario artist, with a \$50,000 win at the Sobey Art Award competition, well-received presentations in Toronto, Thunder Bay, New York and Vancouver and a lengthy stay (until June 15, 2014) at the Art Gallery of Ontario with *Modest Livelihood*, a mesmerizing silent film collaboration with fellow aboriginal artist/Sobey laureate Brian Jungen.