

In Marcel Dzama's Work, the Climate Crisis Is Fuelling a Crisis of Imagination

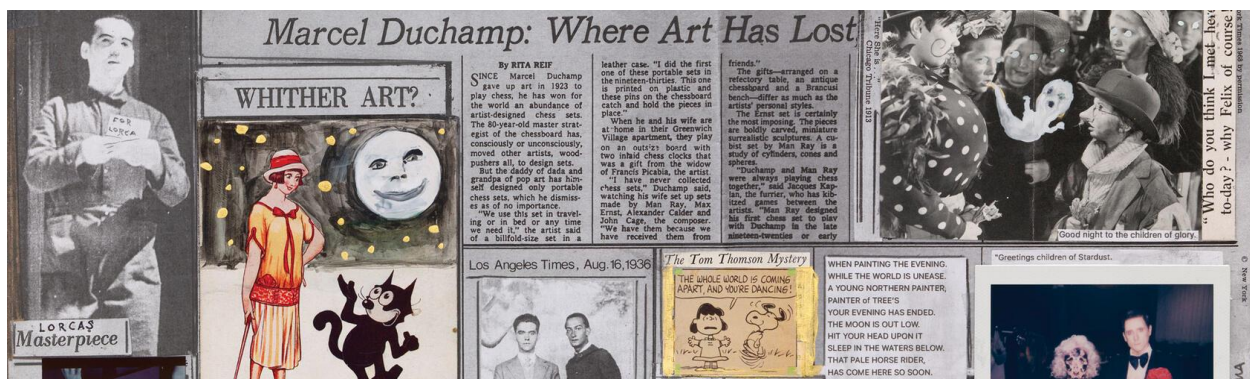
Frieze

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March 1, 2024

Original URL: [In Marcel Dzama's Work, the Climate Crisis Is Fuelling a Crisis of Imagination | Frieze](https://www.frieze.com/article/in-marcel-dzama-s-work-the-climate-crisis-is-fuelling-a-crisis-of-imagination)

At McMichael Canadian Art Collection, the artist revisits landscape painter Tom Thomson's Canoe Lake as it's threatened by floods and forest fires



Canoe Lake, in Algonquin Park, Ontario, is where the great Canadian landscape painter Tom Thomson occasionally lived and worked – and where, at the age of 39, he drowned. Thomson's influence lives on in the Group of Seven, with whom he was associated, and in 'Ghosts of Canoe Lake', Winnipeg-born Marcel Dzama's first exhibition in Canada in nearly a decade. Across three dozen pictures at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Dzama transplants the vision of Thomson's and the Group's landscapes onto our ecological reality.

Effective landscape painting beckons the viewer with nature's majesty, and works by Thomson and the Group will transport them to the foot of a river in British Columbia or to the top of rolling mountains in Quebec. Dzama has long been captivated by Thomson's paintings, yet here his interest seems less in landscape as a genre and more in how such exalted scenes occupy our imagination – and how the climate crisis in turn fuels a crisis of inspiration.



Marcel Dzama, *We can not abandon such beauty*, 2023, pearlescent acrylic, ink, watercolour, graphite on paper, 30 × 36 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner

One epiphenomenon of climate collapse is a certain permeability of place: melting Antarctic ice caps threaten Miami shorelines; a burning tree in Australia sends its ash to New Zealand. In the Anthropocene, beauty becomes an engine of death that even the characteristic ebullience of Dzama's paintings cannot escape. Throughout the exhibition, the artist complicates the geographic and temporal borders of Canoe Lake, which, as both Thomson's subject and the site of his death, endures as a quintessential cultural symbol of the Canadian outdoors. Where Thomson's landscapes of the lake eschewed figuration, Dzama's work is populated by whimsically rendered people and animals. Dancing, singing, swimming – the figures take on an alien presence, eliding the distinction between the lake as a cultural symbol and a geographic site threatened by floods and fires.



Marcel Dzama, *Grandmother passing the ecstatic forest in a swarm of star light*, 2023, pearlescent acrylic, ink, watercolour, graphite on paper, 33 × 34 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner

Take, for example, *We can not abandon such beauty* (all works 2023). In the foreground, a figure wearing a polka-dot costume, as if visiting from Francis Picabia's ballet *Relâche* (Cancelled, 1924), pets an owl. The allusion to dada and surrealism imparts a dreamlike element. Behind, a forest is draped in hellish fire. Above, wispy clouds stretch across an idyllic, turquoise expanse. Dzama creates a feeling of sublime in disaster – of spatial depth and synchronicity of time and place.

This isn't landscape as we know it: this is a landscape of the mind, one that beckons and threatens with equal force. Dzama offers his own memories of his childhood in Manitoba and of vacations with his son. In *Grandmother passing the ecstatic forest in a swarm of star light*, the artist's grandmother gazes into the distance, a nurse's cape tied around her neck, giving her the appearance of a comic-book superhero. *Our son found a puppet & a puppy* depicts a family vacation at the lake: Dzama's son – his facial features ill-defined – holds a dog while gazing directly at the viewer, penetrating the picture plane. Although the artist's penchant for whimsical in-jokes and allusion can feel cloying at times (see *To Live on the Moon [For Lorca]*, an incongruously eccentric digital video first exhibited at the Performa Biennial 2023 and installed here in a central tent), his style mostly effectively supports this phantasmagorical realm where space-time has collapsed.



Marcel Dzama, *To Live on the Moon (for Lorca)*, 2023, pearlescent acrylic, ink, watercolour, graphite on paper, 28 × 43 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner

Under climate change, disparate natural beauties threaten one another. In the spring of 2023, swaths of the same Canadian forests painted by Thomson and the Group erupted into fires, sending smoke billowing into the US and as far as Europe. In Brooklyn, where the artist now lives, the sky was tinted orange. While Dzama may have located some of the ghosts of Canoe Lake, others are surely to follow.

*Marcel Dzama's **Ghosts of Canoe Lake** is on view at McMichael Canadian Art Collection until 9 June*

Main image: Marcel Dzama, TBC (scrapbook), 2023, pearlescent acrylic, ink, polaroids, collage on board, 28 × 43 cm. Courtesy: © Marcel Dzama and David Zwirner