

GREG DAVIES



CHRONOS

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Curated by Andrea Terry

StFX Art Gallery  
Saint Francis Xavier University  
Antigonish, Nova Scotia



## OF OLD STYLE & EXTINCTION

The history of western European art gives great weight to the periodization of styles. As a result, it is often difficult for us to look at old works without seeing them as inextricably bound to their time. But would it be fair to say that viewing them in our own time thus makes them anachronistic? And, if we are inclined to see them as disconnected from the art and experience of our time, might it be reasonable to call this position into question?

As a concept in art history, periodization has generally proven a useful contrivance to map the progress of painting, sculpture and architecture. Consider, for instance, the narrative of Italian Renaissance art which tells of a shift from the late Medieval style of the 14th century to a new 'visioning' of the world beginning with the paintings of Giotto. This story follows a trajectory which takes us through the advancement of techniques and ideas in art from the 15th-century work of Botticelli and Donatello to the High Renaissance paintings and sculptures of Michelangelo and Raphael: a narrative that has reinforced the logic of constant innovation displacing outmoded art. Over this period of roughly three hundred years, there were workshops across Europe which continued to produce devotional paintings in a style faithful to those made some nine hundred years in advance of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Even today, there are artists who specialize in making devotional panel paintings according to old Byzantine tradition. Was this art not also contemporary in Raphael's time? Is it not contemporary, even now? Can the same not be asked of other 'period style' works that have survived into the present day?



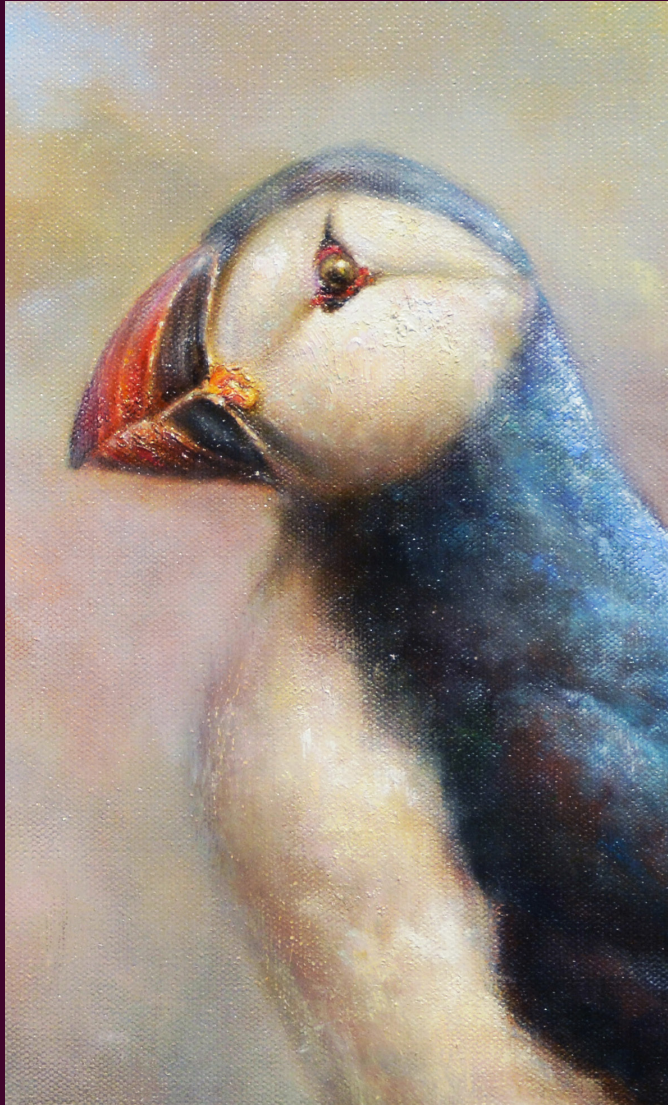
**STUDY FOR UMBRA SUMUS**



BEATA INFANTIA



IN DIVINIS



**TEMPUS EDAX RERUM,  
DETAIL**

To reflect upon the ongoing agency of 'old style' seems a far more useful exercise, I would suggest, than to dwell upon its outmodedness. Few would contest that when we look at visual works from earlier periods in history, they still speak to us across time. And, just as significantly, we might observe that they offer us, in the visual language of their 'old style', a means of continuing to understand our world through an historic lens, in much the same way as Shakespeare's plays still offer insight into the human condition.

These considerations have very much informed the development of the paintings featured in this exhibition, each of which has been inspired by the art of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The visual modes of expression in art developed during these historic periods were highly attuned to the communication of ideas shaped by dramatic changes in modern society. Major shifts in belief systems, the rise of capitalism, colonialism, and the development of modern corporations, as well as advancements in philosophy, science, and technology, were each addressed in the art of their time in ways that reflect the cultural, societal and moral impacts of modernization.

With these observations in mind, I have set out to paint my own canvases in a manner that might bridge contemporary subject matter and issues with the earlier art of our modern history. Some of the paintings presented here carry references to specific works from the past. Joseph Mallord William Turner's late whaling paintings of 1845-46, for instance, inspired the *Beata Infantia* featured in this exhibition. Those familiar with



Turner's art will know that he was inclined to reflect critically upon the developments of his day, commenting on the displacement of the past (the steam tug towing the grand old warship *Temeraire* to the scrap yard, for instance) and the modern industries of the age. His whaling paintings are a case in point; documenting the operations of the industry while highlighting its cruelty with dramatic brushstrokes, carefully orchestrated accents of colour and details to emphasize disparities of scale between ships, whales and men. The *Requiem Aeternam* references the terrifying creature in John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1775-78), albeit with intent to invert the dramatic and menacing horror of the original, 18th-century painting. Where the animal in Copley's painting threatens the young Brook Watson as he swims in Havana Harbour, here, it is the mako shark that is presented as a tragic victim of contemporary finning practices, descending to its watery grave. Other works by Caravaggio, Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, Nicolas Poussin, Antonio Canova, Philippe de Loutherbourg and Edwin Landseer, amongst others, have provided inspiration and guidance in the course of painting this series. Some have offered direct models, as in the case of Jacques-Louis David's revolutionary *Death of Bara* (1794), the composition of which is quoted in the Study for *Umbra Sumus*. Others are referenced in a more oblique fashion, inspiring titles, palette and lighting choices.

## REQUIEM AETERNAM

The general themes of time and mortality inform each of the paintings in this exhibition. We are now, collectively, facing a global crisis of cataclysmic environmental and social change, one sign of which is the accelerating extinction of animal and plant species in our time. Literal references to the endangerment of animals and the natural world are clearly referenced in many of the compositions, though some offer more general, figurative reflections on trauma and vulnerability, as in the examples of *Credo (Wound)* and *Mortem Obire*. But just as these paintings direct attention to notions of endangerment and extinction, so too do they hold a mirror up to the viewer; for in looking at the damage we inflict upon the environment, we must recognize the risks we take in becoming the architects of our own demise.



## ET IN ARCADIA EGO

As visual meditations upon our troubled relationship with the natural world, and the broader subject of mortality and extinction, it seems fitting, perhaps, that the formal qualities of the paintings exhibited here reflect, in the same moment, a sense of 'old style', implying something outmoded about the works as both physical objects and bearers of meaning. Should the viewer be inclined to see the visual style of these paintings as 'old', yet somehow still relevant, I believe they will have achieved their aim; for there is surely both meaning and value in any meditation on extinction, inspired by a visual art that asks to be seen as anachronistic in its own right.

Greg Davies



**SPIRITUS MUNDI**

## THE PAINTINGS

*Credo (Wound)*, oil on canvas, 2017

This painting began as a study for the *Mater Dolorosa*, also featured in this exhibition. The title draws upon a subject addressed in devotional art of the Baroque; the *Incredulity of St. Thomas*. In particular, the painting was inspired by Caravaggio's rendering of the aforementioned subject.

*Mater Dolorosa*, oil on canvas, 2017-18

The *Mater Dolorosa* takes its cue from a subject popular in Renaissance and Baroque art, the *Mother of Sorrows*. Poaching remains a serious threat to the survival of the world's elephants. The two sides of the painting reflect life and death in the same moment and seek to connect the viewer with the beauty of these animals and the tragedy of the violence inflicted upon them by humanity. As with all of the paintings featured in this series, the works are as much portraits of humanity as they are of the animals shown.



MORTEM OBIRE



LUX ET VERITAS

*Beata Infantia*, oil on canvas, 2017-18

The *Beata Infantia* was inspired, in part, by the late series of whaling paintings by Joseph Mallard William Turner, executed in the 19th century. Set against the backdrop of a dramatic evening sky, the painting depicts a beached sperm whale which has died of unnatural causes. In the lower left foreground a plastic bottle may be seen, partially submerged in the pool of water surrounding the deceased animal; a direct reference to the growing problem of plastics contamination of the oceans. To the upper right, along the horizon, a set of billowing sails allude to the whaling ships of the past. The diachronic references to threats past and present draw attention to the ongoing troubled relationship between humankind and the natural world.



**FORTUNAE NAUFRAGIUM,  
DETAIL**

*In Divinis*, oil on canvas, 2018

A painting based on first-hand observation of a mortally-wounded grey seal on the rocks of Ciboux Island, just off the coast of Cape Breton. The composition portrays the animal in profile, a format for portraits favoured by the ancient Romans and the artists of the Italian Renaissance. In this respect the painting strives to give dignity to the subject by imparting a sense of individuality to the animal. The rocks upon which the seal rests have been modelled on the carvings of Gianlorenzo Bernini and Antonio Canova. Particular inspiration came from Canova's remarkable sculpture of *Paolina Borghese* in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.

*Requiem Aeternam*, oil on canvas, 2018

The mako shark continues to be harvested for its fins due to ongoing market demand. While it is not the only shark to be hunted for this purpose, I selected to paint it as it set before me certain challenges as an artist. Some animals draw more empathy than others, perhaps because they are less feared. The culture we have built around sharks is one based on horror and apprehension yet, as we grow to learn more about these creatures we discover the fallacy of our thinking. *Requiem Aeternam* challenges this bias by portraying the shark as a victim, its fins removed and descending to the ocean bottom, unable to defend itself in the last moments of life.

*Lux et Veritas*, oil on canvas, 2019

Attempts to curb the ivory trade and poaching have led to mass burning of confiscated materials, including carvings and tusks. This painting was inspired by the spectacular and horrific media images of ivory bonfires in Africa. To my mind these images are reminiscent of the dramatic 19th-century 'fire paintings' of J.M.W. Turner, Philippe de Loutherbourg and Thomas Cole. They are strikingly sad and ironic, exposing as they do the senseless waste of life brought on by the pursuit of money and the ultimate destruction of the last vestiges of these animals. In painting the subject I saw the flames as a metaphor, representing light and truth against the darkness of human greed and ignorance.



**MATER DOLOROSA**

*Fortunae Naufragium*, oil on canvas, 2019

In recent years the manatee has seen an increase in numbers. While this offers some hope for progress, the threats to its survival remain. Recreational boating and environmental impacts to its feeding grounds are but two of the problems facing this gentle creature. The title of the painting is taken from the writings of Apuleius and refers to a “shipwreck of fortunes”.

*Et in Arcadia Ego*, oil on canvas, 2019

A pendant painting to accompany *Credo (Wound)*. *Et in Arcadia Ego* takes its title from a 17th-century painting by Nicolas Poussin, in which a group of shepherds gather before a tomb set in a mythical landscape. Poussin’s work is a meditation on the inevitability of death. “Even in Arcadia, I am (found)”.



**CREDO (WOUND)**

*Spiritus Mundi*, oil on canvas, 2019-2020

In March of 2018 the last male, northern white rhinoceros, Sudan, passed away. The news served as a reminder of the extraordinary scale of species extinction in our time. Prior to his death, Sudan had been featured extensively in media coverage drawing attention to the crisis of animal endangerment, inspiring me to paint an image relating to rhinoceros poaching. In 2019 I revisited the subject, this time painting a portrait of Sudan alive, yet fading into obscurity. The image of this powerful, yet tragic subject seemed to connect with the spirit of this moment in history.

*Study for Umbra Sumus*, graphite on paper, 2020

From December 2019 through early 2020, Australia was devastated by wildfires that burnt over 24 million hectares of land, displaced and claimed the lives of some 1.5 billion animals, and killed over 30 people. The terrible impacts of this disaster were reflected in many news images, amongst which were featured pictures of deceased or mortally wounded koalas. Perhaps it is the unique character of this marsupial that connected with those who watched this tragedy unfold; its almost 'human' qualities making its plight resonate deeply with viewers. In this study for a painting in development, a mature koala is shown deceased, in a recumbent position reminiscent of Jacques-Louis David's 1794 painting of the young martyr, Bara.

*Tempus Edax Rerum*, oil on canvas, 2020-2023

Goya's image of *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*, one of the fourteen black paintings from his home near Madrid, served as inspiration for the theme behind this painting; *Time, Devourer of all Things*. The Atlantic puffin is diminishing in numbers owing largely to starvation as the depletion of ocean food sources continues to impact their diet. This population shift has registered with environmentalists and the scientific communities but is less evident to the general public. In this respect it is, perhaps, a more discreet movement towards extinction. The painting brings the viewer to a remote and quiet place where the reality of it all is keenly felt.

*Mortem Obire*, oil on canvas, 2021-2024

*Mortem Obire* addresses the vulnerability of all living creatures with the depiction of inner organs exposed. It is a reminder of the fragility of life, alerting us to the body's susceptibility. The painting was created in response to the pendant works, *Credo (Wound)* and *Et in Arcadia Ego*.



TEMPUS EDAX RERUM



FORTUNAE NAUFRAGIUM