

ART PAPERS

Reviews: West Coast Los Angeles

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If Gertrude Stein once boldly declared that a rose is a rose is a rose, one can surely argue that Aaron Morse's bear is a bear, despite the fact it exists two-dimensionally. Morse's most recent body of work [Acme; February 12–March 12, 2005] becomes its own visual testament to space as a verifiably living and moving phenomenon.

Morse's new works continue his own investigation into the strained and often complicated relationship between man and nature. He has, once again, turned up the volume, delving deeper into this necessary, though adversarial relationship. Here, nature's inherent brutality is justifiable, indeed beautiful, when compared with the cruelty man exacts against the natural world in the service of his will.

Though these paintings are populated by all manner of beasts, from quizzical bears to importunate antelopes, the work is no mere primer for those who desire their very own personal menagerie. It echoes both the tragedy and bizarre humor of children's stories such as *Brother Rabbit*, capturing the brutality of every boy's imagination—rifles explode, knives gleam, cowboys charge headlong into danger as nearby Indians bare their teeth.

Many of the paintings partake in a larger and sometimes oblique narrative, suspend in time like comic book stories where each panel reveals another clue in the fight against crime. In *Magua (#3)*, we are given snapshots of a battle between a marauding cowboy and his nemesis, an enraged Sioux brandishing a gun. Like many works in the show, this painting pivots on a strange tension, revealing snippets of a larger and more complex system of violence. No one here is the victor, and both cowboy and Indian willingly implicate themselves.

Other paintings are not as explicitly violent. In *Magua (#2)*, violence becomes a sort of ballet. This struggle opposes the Indian and the buff, blue-eyed blond cowboy who stands smiling at what appears to be a large bear claw. They are frozen in a kind of dance in one panel while, in another, a moose stands in a lake bed, quietly contemplative. If there is an ultimate winner in Morse's game of life, it is certainly nature itself. *Braniff*, watercolor of a jetliner flying over the ocean, best exemplifies nature's power. A bubble extends out from the inside of the plane where passengers sit, unaware, and most certainly unconcerned, with the sheer force and awesome power at work below them. Were the plane to falter, nature would take it all back.

Natural Beauty, the most striking painting in the exhibition, shows a black bear standing, arms out, and head cocked to one side. His expression is strangely serene. His large cumbersome body implores us to come closer. If his eyes are red, and his demeanor construable as threatening, this is not a menacing bear. His mouth gives away his humanity. His face wears a curious expression. It is as if, were he to speak, he would ask us to explain our predilection toward violence and our relentless devastation of the natural world. It is, in the end, our world too.