



Sex and Cataclysm

Would an all-out orgy be the inevitable prelude to the Apocalypse? While it's an amusing cliché to envision ourselves in a spontaneous romp (with a stranger, if necessary) as a final human expression just as the bomb drops or the earth opens up, three locals painters approach the unholy trio of sex, violence, and nature with more deliberate intent, making multiple freaky couplings in chaotic natural worlds that teeter on the brink of oblivion.

Story by Tony Martins / Paintings by Andrew Morrow, Nicolas Tchernov-Ivanenko, and Dave Cooper



Dave Cooper, *Eye/Book Suck*

equally productive to look at one's complicity or commonality rather than difference ... I like the idea that my paintings, maybe upon repeated viewings or after enough public discussion, can help orient a viewer towards a different way of looking at things."

"In combining pornography with a gentler mode of representation, namely pastoral allegorical painting, I'm not saying anything new," adds Morrow. "Rather, I'm making explicit a shared space that has always existed between the two, and in doing so, hopefully, pointing to aspects of both that are often overlooked while providing an analogue for a larger cultural reality."

Digging around in dark crevices

For these artists, the artistic pairing of sex and violence has become a natural occurrence, but what are we uninitiated viewers to make of it?

While Cooper's more whimsical style doesn't so much threaten the destruction of the world as it does invent a scary new one, each of his fanciful environments is a gloomy, freaky, and sexual place that undermines our knowable human civilization.

When asked about the coupling of bizarre sexual beings with fertile but alien settings, Cooper said: "I almost see them as one in the same these days. The strange worlds I design are a weird utopia/dystopia filled with obsessed nymphs fixated on themselves and their environments ... These have become my only subject matter in a way."

Like Morrow, Cooper does not necessarily aim for a sexual or erotic response but he acknowledges that his work appeals to a particular taste: "The people who like my work tend to like it a lot," Cooper said. "It's definitely not for the majority, but it appeals to those who like digging around in dark crevices."

As for the sexual actions and postures taken up by his figures, Tchernov-Ivanenko explains they usually arise from the unconscious, "in a very sexual, bizarre, and uninhibited scene, maybe to add some energy, some kind of violence."

"Since I don't like to paint dead bodies," he continues, "I prefer to express violence through life, sexual relationships, and even love. This is very violent, too!"

Painted with a pornographic and anatomical realism that can be particularly threatening, Morrow's work elicits both hostile reactions and zealous appreciation.

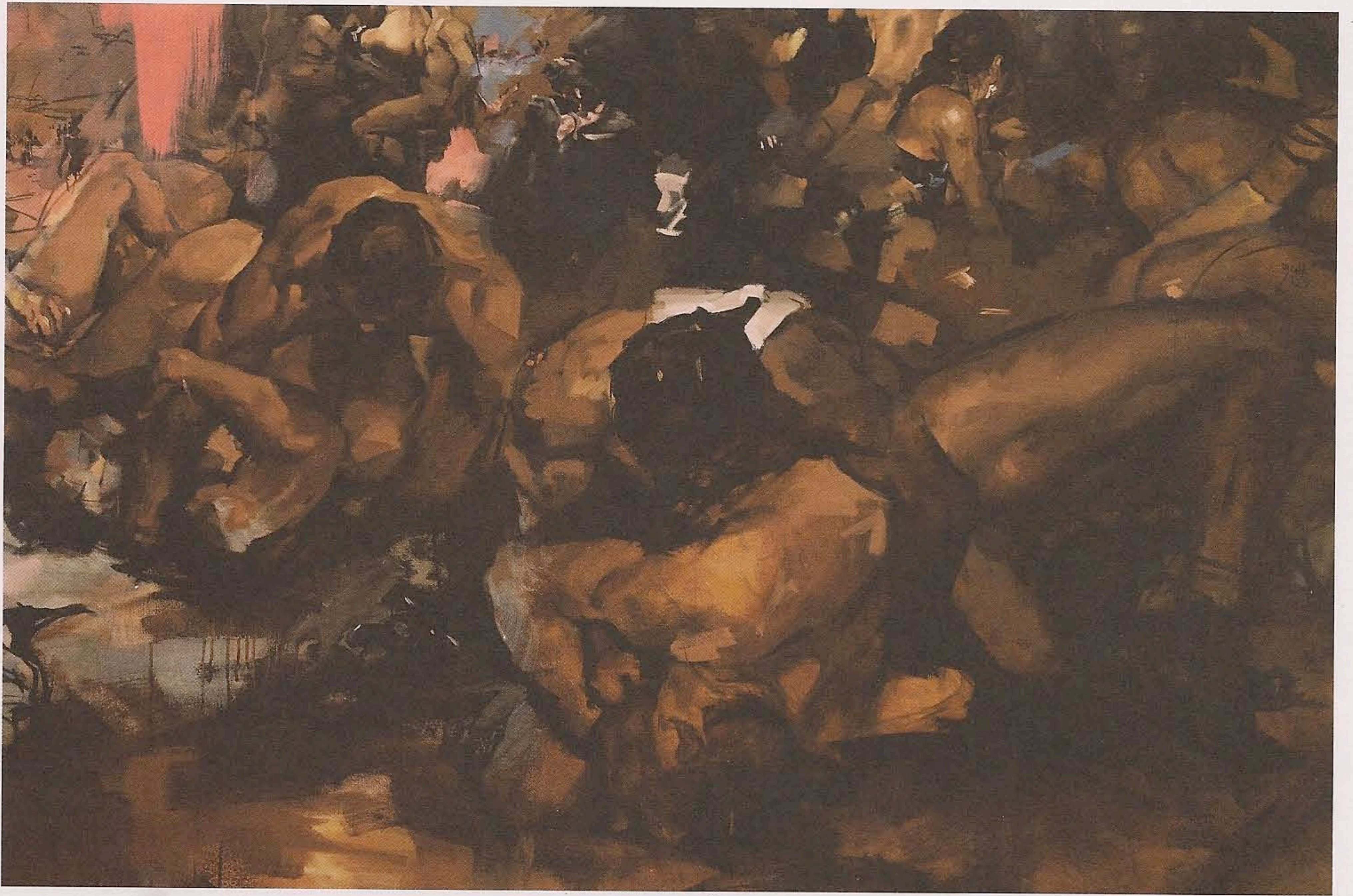
"As one can imagine, the work is greatly polarizing," Morrow explains. "The opposition is often a little hysterical, usually homophobic, and sometimes—and this seems quite reasonable—religious in nature. But on the flipside, this work seems to draw out an equally ardent fan base ... At the moment I have a very long and somewhat overwhelming waiting list."

From the beginning of civilization, we have been transfixed by overwhelming fantasies of catastrophic breakdown and societal demise—scenarios in which the emergence of our sinful and beastly nature sees us overrun by the natural world or by a vindictive god—or both.

On the entrancing blend of sex and cataclysm, Morrow offers this:

"There's a visual drama there, and a long standing history of their coupling in painting. On a gut level, sex and violence just work well together. In a painting like *Last Fuck* we see a final gesture that is both defiant and ultimately insignificant. I like this."

"Part of what makes life so desperately exciting is its fragility," Morrow concludes, with a sentiment that seems applicable to each of the three painters. "I like to include small reminders of this in my work."



Dan Ziemkiewicz hunts for the unconventional in the subjects he photographs—elements that offer uncommon beauty and are considered taboo. In his latest project exhibited in early March at La Petite Mort Gallery, *No Man's Land*, Ziemkiewicz captured the softer nature of the seemingly harder sex. Photographs of male nudes often imply impenetrable force or Herculean power, but here, sections of men's bodies are depicted both raw and relaxed, highlighting the curves and dark shadows of the male physique. Ziemkiewicz is an emerging presence in Ottawa but he has already established a bold charisma. In his first large-scale show—an explosive series of shots that appeared in a fundraising calendar for the Ottawa Wolves gay-friendly rugby team—the artist offered twisted references to fine art, pop culture, and Christianity. With a brazen disregard for conventional beauty, Ziemkiewicz explores the underbelly—and perhaps very soon, under *your* belly. His next venture, *The Penis Project*, will delve between mens' legs to illuminate the genital area in an honest yet mildly invasive manner. Ziemkiewicz knows the impact of a penis photograph is usually jolting and immediate, but, typical of him, he also aims to explore the tender side of this taboo subject.

