

Your Disco Needs You: Dale Lewis and the 'Then and There'

By Will Ballantyne-Reid

In José Esteban Muñoz' conclusion to *Cruising Utopia*, he compels the reader to "Take Ecstasy With Me." Under the banner of this seemingly concise directive, Muñoz' explains that "we must vacate the here and now for a then and there [...] we need to engage in a collective temporal distortion [...] queerness is not yet here; thus, we must always be future bound in our desires and designs."¹ When I look at these new works by Dale Lewis, created through and in response to this pandemic, I am reminded of Muñoz' propulsive vision for a queer future. It's there in the temporal distortion of his tableaux - the clock-stopped, locked-down, locked-in hours of a party that just keeps going. It's in the wildness of his urban landscapes, and in his conjuring of queer subjects beyond bodily limits. Figures dance and distort, hurtling around and over each other; disco lights seem to burnish the bright colours of his paint; drinks are spilled, drugs are consumed; there are boats, bras, axes, and tattoos; torsos writhe between tube stations and lush forests; birds and ghoulish boys pass through in frenetic parades, or cluster between trees where strangers are getting off, still-masked.

Commissioned by Block 336, the paintings in *No Place Like Home* were created in relation to a number of sites between Brixton and Bow - many of which are deeply linked with the LGBT+ community and its histories. After a period in which it became a civic duty to sacrifice indulgence, his works are a tonic - vibrant, chaotic canvases that celebrate the city's intoxicating sprawl. If, perhaps before the pandemic, his works once held something apocalyptic and dark, they now possess a damning directness - mirroring all we've missed and mourned. The threat of destruction - or perhaps, of disintegration - lingers throughout. From the gay bars that barely survived (and the queer experiences necessitated by their closure), to the human lives lost. Skeletons abound as whirling dervishes in a danse macabre, clambering over wine bottles and stolen watches.

In the space, the works are lit like Stations of The Cross in an Italian church and the title piece of the exhibition is a memorial - an offering - set around a coffin draped in rainbow stripes. Exotic flowers sprout in a wild arrangement from its centre, and drinks are served from its lid. The painting marks the loss of a family friend - a queer NHS nurse from New Zealand - who died as a result of complications from COVID-19. It is a painting that connects two worlds, assembled via a funeral broadcast online. From the mournful mouth of a vicar, a rainbow-coloured jet stream is carried into the mouth of an indigenous Māori warrior performing the Haka, echoing the cladding of the coffin. Red, ruby slippers appear from one end on stubbled calves - a nod to the painting's title and, in turn, the muttered mantra of the young Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). As Dale and I discuss the painting, it occurs to me that the late Judy Garland wouldn't look out of place in one of his scenes; wide-eyed and glittering, heeled and heavy-lidded, replete with demons and a voice that soared from barbiturate-ravaged lungs.

Inescapably, I first meet Dale over Zoom. He is bunkered down at Block 366 amidst preparations for the exhibition, I am huddled in the corner of an artist's studio in Latvia, and COVID-19 continues to loom over both our conversation and his canvases. It's halfway through a strangely stifled semi-summer - the first 'proper' summer since the pandemic began. Since March 2020, the virus has cast a long shadow - warping and distorting our lives with its varied madness, miseries, and mundanities. That the experience has so often veered between tragedy and absurdity is exactly what Dale captures so acutely in these new works. His practice has long dealt in the carnivalesque - with its garish aesthetic, subversion of conventional order, and warping of symbolic power relations.

Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of carnival frames it as a socio-cultural tendency and aesthetic framework that "inverts the everyday hierarchies, structures, rules and customs of its social formation [...] through exposure of the grotesque aspects of the body and exorbitant exaggeration of its features."² This fantastic inversion and exaggeration allows for a critique of things as they are. As an observational mode to explore the absurdities of pandemic life (and death), it is both poignant and provocative but, more importantly, precise. An extinct bat, chosen for being native to New Zealand, echoes virus origin theories whilst fleeing from the corner of the painting. Zoom stands as an ominous central totem, personified - five-eyed and hard-wired, a microphone proffered out at the viewer like a scythe.

Each work in the exhibition pulsates with movement - figures rarely stand alone, or set apart, and instead collide across the canvas, embodying references that grow out of the artist's own personal observations and obsessions. These extend from an etching by Hans Holbein the Younger, to the sailor tattoos of *Love Island*, via Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Riding With Death*, and the smoking area of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern. The latter becomes the setting for another key work in this exhibition, a sort of standing last supper filled with references to a different Madonna. Figures interlock in various stages of queer embrace - gossiping and kissing, cruising (or perhaps thinking about it), singing and spilling drinks, dancing their way back into the club. It's riotous and joyful and captures the spectrum of intimacy offered by LGBT+ spaces - and the loss felt by their absence - in a way that so many have struggled to verbalise since the first of the UK's multiple lockdowns. For those who have known (and missed) these spaces, it is a painting you can almost hear.

Muñoz describes the queer future as a "destination" - a "propulsion" - that we must both give in to and pursue. In *No Place Like Home*, Dale holds a mirror up to the derangement of the last eighteen months - the fear, sacrifice, boredom, and loss. But he also invokes the memories that kept us going - that shared belief in an eventual return to community, and pleasure. A belief that couldn't help but be future-bound. So what of our potential to affirm our communities as things begin to open up? What of our ability to future-proof our most precarious spaces? In the fortnight following my first meeting with Dale, a gay man was murdered in Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park - the well-known cruising ground - in what is believed to be a homophobic crime. Police have advised gay men to avoid "dimly-lit areas", and "listening to loud music."³ In the parallel world of Dale's paintings, queer subjects exist without compromise; encountering danger, yes, and even death, but resolute in their power and rage. The nights never end, and the lights are wild and bright, and the music is never too loud. "We must vacate the here and now for a then and there."

¹ Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009, p.185

² Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986, p.183.

³ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/ranjith-kankanamalage-roy-homophobic-murder-tower-hamlets-cemetery-b952556.html>