

The Great Day

By Daniel Culpan. Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Dale Lewis: The Great Day* at Edel Assanti, London, 2020

A lot can happen in 24 hours. If Hieronymus Bosch had been born a few centuries later on Bow Road - and smoked DMT for breakfast - *The Great Day* might have been the kind of demented vortex he'd have created.

In this 360-degree panorama - 10 panels of acrylic paint whipped into hallucinatory, acidic tornadoes - the viewer is taken on a deranged joyride: Fear and Loathing in East London. The streets themselves are reincarnated as teeming and monstrous, bad-trip flashbacks that glimpse the horror submerged beneath civilisation's thin veneer.

The first panel opens with the artist enthroned. Sitting on a toilet besieged by cyclops-like swarms of flies, the day begins as it does for us all: attending to the call of nature. Yet nature itself has turned mutant. A giant spider dangles from the ceiling, cigarette in mouth: an arachnophobic nightmare directed by David Cronenberg. The white bathroom tiles flow into the blood-red bricks of the local park: winos' corner, where bottle-brandishing soaks howl into oblivion. With an X-ray-like flash, we see one's innards, homemade Millwall Football Club tattoos on his pasty arms. Another broken boozer sits, mouth agape in Munchian homage, his body infested with boils. A stuffed toy elephant - sad-eyed and blue - lies abandoned on the grass, along with strewn cigarette butts and a fluffy gremlin. Details like these amp up the surreal flavour of reality: an unhinged circus in which people both play their allotted roles and veer nightmarishly off-script.

Urban wildlife becomes as voracious and opportunistic as human society. In these days of plague, headlines about sex-starved cannibal rats and desperate pigeons have abounded. Here we see the whole crazed bestiary: a beady-eyed rodent perched on a drunk's head; birds raining from the sky like a Hitchcock out-take. The patch of bottle-green grass is the only healthy-looking trace in this sea of vomiting delinquents molesting each other. One drinker metamorphoses into a human-avian hybrid: a harpy with a shaved head and a fag clamped in her beak. Is this humanity regressing - or simply the grounded flight of our doomed species?

A bearded man, a white stick in one hand and a bottle in the other, stares through flashing, eerie eyes. He looks like a Biblical prophet, cursed and gifted with some secret knowledge of the carnage around him. Part of the potency of Lewis' vision is that it's always the maimed or undone who are given the upper hand. Respectability and aspiration buys no easy status in this gleefully inverted moral universe. Deprived of bourgeois comfort, his shambolic cast are instead emboldened by squalor and deformation, their freakish passport to the freedom of going nowhere.

In many ways, Lewis' modern London harks back to the Hogarthian streets of the past. He also embraces the messy public maelstrom as its own kind of theatre, recalling the playhouses of Elizabethan London, where bawdy prostitutes caroused with punters, thespians indistinguishable from lowlife. Indeed, Shakespeare gave his best lines to the lowliest figures - gravediggers, clowns, even dogs - and Lewis feeds off a similar energy. Perhaps, his carnivalesque scenes suggest, it's when we're at our most base that we're truly alive. (As Samuel Johnson said: man makes a beast of himself to escape the pain of being human.) Furthermore, there's an affection that shines through in Lewis's depictions of these local oddballs, outsiders he knows well from the streets near his studio. Whereas a lesser artist might fall prey to a vampiric kind of voyeurism, we're made to see and overhear these people on their own terms - cracked mirrors through which we're dared to observe ourselves.

The East London neighbourhoods that Lewis haunts are the city's lifeblood. Where rapid gentrification meets dead-end poverty; historic synagogues are transformed into mosques that rub shoulders with hipster coffee shops and dingy old boozers formerly frequented by the Krays; where punks and queer kids mingle with burka-clad mothers and Japanese tourists, all in the shadow of the City's gleaming, glass-towered Oz. The hollow PR exercise of a united Britain, as typified by the flag-waving boosterism of the 2012 Olympics, now lies in ruin. Instead, amid Brexit's moronic inferno, a different kind of British psyche has emerged: paranoid and isolated. Social divisions are thrown into sharper relief. Streets slosh with Dickensian grotesques, surreal scenes colliding with the mundane everyday. Though conceived long before COVID-19, the painting itself has, inevitably, become a diary of its imprint: the anxieties and oddities that now haunt our days, capturing the feral texture of our locked-down lives.

Yet for all the antic energy, there's a disciplined rigour to Lewis' technique, with all the sweep and grandeur of a Renaissance study. The eye is drawn along in waves: a locomotive of grotesquerie. An Amy Winehouse lookalike is sprawled on the pavement with her haunted-looking dog. Her gnarled mouth is mirrored by a yawning street sweeper, his bright orange uniform a scorching blast of colour. Next to him, a sleeping baby with the raddled face of a 50-year-old alcoholic lies abandoned in his pram, his black-and-yellow romper suit like the warning stripes of a wasp. The artist is vividly attuned to the ways surfaces communicate, and the self-expression of people who usually don't have a voice, only the markings of a disenfranchised species prowling through the urban jungle: Adidas stripes, Sainsbury's logos, English flags.

Next, we're greeted by a pair of burka-clad women, implacable eyes staring back.

They're carrying Lidl and Tesco bags and incongruously plastered in Nike ticks. It's perhaps the emblematic image of twenty-first-century London: a delirious hypermarket where ancient faith meets the new religion of shopping.

One of the women pats an obedient dog by the wheelchair of a beer-bellied man-beast, his gimp baby ball-gagged at his feet. His hulkish, steroidal mate raises a Red Stripe in a toast, while behind them a shuttered shop front becomes the backdrop for a black cloud of flies. These scenes demolish the postcard vision of London as the cosmopolitan capital. Instead, we find a diabolical dumpster peopled by the living dead.

A Baphomet-like monster, wielding a crucifix and dressed like Big Bird, perches under a Tube map, carting a shopping bag filled with rats. A crisis of faith? Or an apocalyptic vision warning against false gods (or simply the horrors of the Circle line)? Even nourishment becomes a kind of poison. A pimply schoolkid, a skeleton clasping his shoulder, devours fried chicken from one of the many greasy joints lining the belly of the beast of Mile End Road.

Roadworks - those strange efflorescences of action, people surfacing from underground with sci-fi equipment - appear like strange mirages, gone as fast as they appear. A builder in a hard hat takes a break with a can of beer. Another with the head of a satyr, jaundiced yellow eyes and cigarettes for teeth, hauls a cartwheel of scarlet cable into the ground. A skull peeks from the yawning crater below. Next to them, a Tom of Finland-esque muscle man, his gloved hands rendered tiny and claw-like, dominates a builder in a hi-vis jacket, working the concrete with a mallet. It could be a scene of religious penitence, or a chav porn S&M fantasy. A mug with an English flag perches on the wall. In a lush, sweeping wave, we segue to a skeletal builder cradling a decapitated head, a leafless birch tree in the background emphasizing this cult-like world of physical drudgery.

Class may remain England's dirty secret (despite fever-pitch talk in recent years of 'the people'), stuffed in the closet, but here we see road sweepers, the homeless, drifters and ne'er-do-wells washed up in dingy pubs. It's democracy in action: the things every Londoner looks at, but rarely wants to see. As the viewer, what position do we inhabit? The scenes become an acid test for our own moral responses. Are we titillated, outraged, enthralled, envious? We're plunged into the rampaging id of the painting's surface, our defenses stripped bare.

In a smoggy launderette, a woman and her baby chainsmoke. An NHS 'Keep your lungs happy' poster winks from the wall. A disembodied head, its tongue lolling like taffy, falls out of one of the machines, while a dog chews up a bedsheet in a retina-scorching shade of yellow. This communal space is rendered like a newly discovered circle of Dante's hell: carcinogenic, reeking, with all the freshness of an overspilling ashtray. Yet there are moments of quiet beauty; flashes of possible paradise. Laundry folded into bright lozenges of colour. A kid eating an ice cream. The henna-red beard of a Muslim. The front-page of a newspaper shows the bloom-like spores of the coronavirus. To escape from horror - bury yourself in it.

The greasy spoon is another staple of London life, those halfway houses for loners, workers and layabouts craving company and a cheap feed. A woman dressed like a clown, a bow on her head and cheeks rouged pink, stares askance at her monstrous companion. Her tit hangs out of a dress as she devours a full English breakfast with her fists. A rat pounces upon a fried egg. Another woman transforms into a pigeon-footed fox. Deeper into the carpeted asylum, a man in a head brace - whatever catastrophe has befallen him left to linger unspoken - shares more artery-clogging cuisine with his mate. These scenes have a kind of punctuation: strewn cigarettes joining each visual explosion like commas; the syntax of striped table cloths; the full-stop of a squished head. Another pause for breath, before the riptide pulls you under once again.

The mise-en-scene warps into a barber shop that reverberates with the cartoon violence of a modern-day Sweeney Todd. One unlucky punter, dressed in candy-striped robes, gets his tongue cut out - and a bad haircut. Elsewhere, another waiting victim scrolls through his smartphone, oblivious to the aquarium of swimming heads behind him. A close shave. Then we gasp for another lungful of noxious air, before being spat out into Whitechapel Market. A dog shits brown pellets like a Pez dispenser. The living dead shuffle forward for their pound of flesh or a bunch of bananas. It's pot luck. A profusion of Daliesque mouths bare their tongues, growing like barbaric fruit. We see a butcher preparing to carve a human delicacy, the heads of previous prime cuts displayed alongside the day's watermelons. In the vein of Francis Bacon, our human shape takes on the form of so much meat: pulsingly alive, for a brief moment, before the maggots set in.

Throughout the painting, human relations fall into two distinct camps: the coldly transactional and the kind of brute survivalism where either to win or lose is beside the point. A lecherous shopkeeper, his belly bulging out of his jeans, touches himself with a tentacle-like arm. With his other hand he gropes a zombified junkie, a needle stuck in her shoulder. The sense of exploitation - the unnerving dance between user and used - is compounded by her parasitic boyfriend, hanging off her leg with mouth agog and a bottle of wine. Coming full circle, we end in the pub - exhilarated, spent, with that grimy aliveness under the skin that comes from the end of a three-day bender. Lonely and battle-scarred drinkers belt down lager in full flow. A woman sits with her husband's ashes on the table, while a drinking buddy watches the football. The line between the sane and the lunatic blurs like too many sambucas. A brassy barmaid in pawn shop-gold jewellery pours a pint. The bar is bookended by a tracksuited loner and a cocky young guy chatting up a cackling old crone, a rat tunnelling through his head. Whenever the possibility of sex is raised, death is never far behind - and even flirtation takes on the form of body snatching.

In the final scene, the artist ends on the checkerboard floor of the pub lav, pink arse in the air. He projectile-vomits into the toilet, while a plague-masked hand - the Grim Reaper himself? - pulls the chain. It recalls that great landmark of Modernism, Joyce's Ulysses, in which the wanderings of Bloom - a life lived entirely through the body - reach a kind of excremental apotheosis while he sits on the toilet. (In the anodyne world of conceptual art, how rare it is to see bodies at all, let alone leaky and unruly ones: shitting, puking, blood and guts.) Like a microbe that's passed through the painting's digestive tract, we're violently expunged - sweaty, dazed and relieved - back into the flow of London life. A great day, indeed. But get ready for the hangover.