

Lifeworks

Chimeras and character

We often imagine it is only scientists who conduct experiments, yet David N-Dorrington is an artist whose visual experiments lead his audience into difficult territory. At first, the characters in his paintings have a brightly coloured charm, but this quickly yields to an eerie stillness. N-Dorrington's series *A Calendar of Shadows*, exhibited at the Richmond Art Gallery in 1998, features over 25 paintings and is concerned with the fundamental question of what makes us human. Issues raised by genetic tinkering and xenotransplantation lie under the surface of his exquisitely detailed oils. Titled simply by date, they are characteristically diminutive, partly because this British Columbia artist works in a studio the size of a small closet, but also to encourage the viewer to move close to the images and the issues they raise.

N-Dorrington does not regard the future of science dismissively or with paranoid angst; he understands that certain kinds of suffering are alleviated by scientific advances. Yet he has nagging concerns about our increasingly complicated relationship with the natural world. Throughout this series N-Dorrington muses about what our dreams will be like when our genes and organs

are spliced with those of other animals. His paintings have a suspended, dreamlike quality, yet they are not the outright nightmares of medieval artists Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. They are visual responses, not answers, to unanswerable questions. Currently a human body would reject a pig's heart — but, if accepted on a physical level, how would such a transplant affect a person's soul, instincts or yearning? N-Dorrington considers Rupert Sheldrake's idea of "morphic resonance," the notion that our bodies have memory on a noncerebral, cellular level. Would one wake up from a pig-heart transplant with a craving for truffles?

Each character represents less a proposed genetic construction than a broken archetype.

They no longer have any specific identity but have become strange, hyphenated hybrids: cat-human, rat-human, heron-goose, human-bird. Instead of responding with revulsion, one is struck by the empathy with which the artist paints his imaginary subjects. Mother human-bird tenderly shelters her haggard-looking child in a

universally recognizable maternal gesture. The rat-human's gesture of holding his elbow in the opposite hand is the pose of someone in deep thought. His greyish, naked skin evokes illness: perhaps he is cold. The cat-human grips the wheel of the barrow with the delicate hands of a child. These creatures are all vulnerable.

The rat-human and cat-human both look out of the frame toward something approaching, or an event in the distance, but the human-bird and her child look directly at the viewer. Art history takes a strange leap from the Madonna and child of centuries past to this human-bird and child. The child seems to be a throwback: it lacks a bill. Perhaps it has been teased in the schoolyard and needs reassurance. Perhaps N-Dorrington is experimenting to see what human



David N-Dorrington, 1996. 20 May 1996. Oil on canvas, 5.25" × 7"



David N-Dorrington, 1999. 21 January 1999. Oil on canvas, 34" × 25.5"



David N-Dorrington

David N-Dorrington, 1995. *4 September 1995*. Oil on canvas, 5.25" x 7"

qualities might survive the blurring of genetic boundaries. What aspects of these characters are still us? And how do

we in the present feel about our ethical responsibilities toward them? The human-bird's gaze is unflinching. The viewer will look away first.

N-Dorrington sets many of his works in twilight or nighttime. As he points out, this is the time of dreams and of heightened imaginings. It is also the time we tend to be afraid and, perhaps, discover humility. The onset of night also evokes the need for a nest or shelter. N-Dorrington's creatures seem to have homelessness in common. The rat-human sits outside a small structure with an impossibly small door. Even if he could squeeze into it, there appears to be extreme heat glowing within, as if the structure might burst into flame. The cat-human and bird companion sit outside large, boarded-up buildings and hide partly behind a cardboard-thin, house-like shape on the wheelbarrow, yet there is nothing to offer them security. The human-bird is suspended in the dark blue background; the only

place for her to perch is on the very frame of the picture. Perhaps this is what N-Dorrington sees in the future: a solution to some problems, but an overwhelming diminishment of the natural world which, ultimately, provides us with more than shelter and food. It gives us the underlying architecture and security of our own identities.

In his book *Reading Pictures: Stories of Love and Hate*, Alberto Manguel writes that artists "help us phrase our questions, they don't provide answers, and they allow us to remember what, in a very literal sense, we never knew." N-Dorrington's images indeed help us to phrase many resonant, persistent and disturbing questions.

Bettina Matzkuhn

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Room for a view

Birth chasm

My patient is from a developing country. She speaks no English, and I do not speak her language. We communicate through her husband and the female friends who sometimes accompany her. It is clear that the translation is imperfect. It is hard for it to be otherwise: we have completely different sets of cultural norms to work with. My patient will not allow herself to be seen undressed by a male physician, even with her husband and a female chaperone in the room. She does not allow a pelvic exam.

She experiences everything as a maximal stimulus. Every ache and pain, even every fetal movement in the first months, prompts an office visit without appointment. She complains of these problems to her husband, who responds by bringing her to me. Yet vaginal bleeding at 17 weeks, which generates genuine fear in her husband, is brushed aside as unimportant when she is told it necessitates a vaginal exam.

She does not convey to me where her worries come from. Any form of questioning that I pursue through her husband, who appears genuine, concerned and, most

important, unimposing, is generally met with a shrug. He asks good questions. But they seem to come from him, not from her. I get the distinct impression that she is relying on other women for the real lowdown on being pregnant and what to expect in childbirth. I don't know what she knows and I have no way of finding out.

At 23 weeks she delivers a stillborn child. This tragedy has a history: bad endometriosis with surgery twice in her native country, attendant relative infertility and late maternal age. Compounding her grief is the fact that this was a son, a highly desirable first child in her culture.

She grieves in a way I don't understand. I am sure that my empathy and concern do not survive the translation. I hate the fact that I sound clinical with my explanations and discharge instructions, even to myself. I can find no way to reach her across the chasm that divides us.

Richard Gruneir

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