



Sam Dargan
More Work For The Undertaker

Sam Dargan

written by Luke White

Critics writing about Sam Dargan's work have noted that its most obvious art-historical references are to Romanticism: to the late works of Goya, for example and the gem-like landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich (see for example Michael Glover in *The Independent*, 10th Jan 2007, p.20). Dargan shares with these artists a muted but robust palette of gloom and fire. His canvases are mainly on the same modest scale; in all three artists a reduction in size serves to intensify effect. The scenes Dargan depicts are often staged in Friedrich-esque, autumnal, twilight landscapes. However, the masked and maniacal figures that stalk these, the victims and perpetrators of acts of torture and violence could have migrated (pausing only to change into modern dress) from Goya's Black Paintings or the Disasters of War.

This is not, however, simply a matter of quotation. The significance of these echoes between present and past should not just be located at the level of artistic intentionality. Rather, there is an elective affinity between Dargan's position in history – belonging as he does to the generation that came of age between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the "War on Terror" – and that which saw the outpouring of Romantic art following the collapse of the political hopes of the French Revolution. Our own moment renews the disillusion and defeat of two centuries earlier. The Enlightenment project, as it has unfolded over the intervening period, seems often only to have plunged us deeper into darkness.

Goya and Friedrich are thus useful in making sense of Dargan's pictures, even if the two painters responded in very different ways to their time, and both of them very differently to Dargan. Goya looked head on at the defeat of the project of Reason, tracing its end in the atrocities of the Napoleonic wars in Spain. Goya's art offers little hope



My Door Is Always Open
Oil on Board, 2008

that rationality might dispel the persistence of a madness that appears, in his late work, endemic to human life. But if Goya's work seems lacking in hope, Dargan retains an angry humanist radicalism and a sense of comedy as critique – however black his humour – which mark a spark of hope and energy belying the Goya-esque bleakness which might otherwise characterise his work. There is, this is to say, as much of Brecht as there is of Goya in Dargan's paintings.

It may be rather more controversial to read Friedrich as responding to the French Revolution: his work, after all, looked back to pre-Enlightenment Germanic traditions, positioning itself against the Cosmopolitan ethos associated with the French experiment. But such a position was itself a reaction to the crushed hope which Beethoven's generation of German intellectuals had invested in Napoleon. Culture in Germany retreated from politics into the private contemplation of "nature," and from Enlightenment universalism into older national traditions. (The English Romantics, in fact, did just the same). The melancholy of Friedrich's landscapes can thus be understood not only as expressing mourning for traditions being wiped out by modernisation; it can also be read as a response to the blockage of revolutionary desire.

Dargan's work, unlike Friedrich's, offers us no retreat from the political and social crises of the present, either in nature or the private world of the individual. Spanning both the personal and the political, his paintings map out, in their narrative fragments, the paranoid globalised landscape of the contemporary imagination. To plot out the spaces of this imaginary, Dargan mines its archives. Thus as much as Goya or Friedrich, Dargan's visual references are to a tradition of film which spans from the dark mid-century visions of Kurosawa or Carol Reed into the high-tech conspiracy thriller of the last few decades. Alongside these, Dargan's images also echo the

newsreels and newspaper photos which have presented the history of the twentieth century as a sequence of crime scenes.

In Dargan's works, the private realm, far from constituting an escape from the political, is its uncanny mirror. Failed private lives seem the cipher here of failed utopias. At one end of the spectrum we have scenes of individual isolation and anomie, the privatised results of a dysfunctional capitalist society, with its impoverishment of working, sexual and personal relationships, transformed at each point into competition and hostility. But these scenes segue seamlessly into the fantasied spaces of revolution and counter-revolution, espionage and counter-espionage, conspiracy and counter-conspiracy which have haunted both the fact and fiction of politics over the last half century and more. The paintings, then, speak of the powerlessness of the individual within a globalised world order, and are redolent of the paranoid fantasies which now structure our way of accounting for the incomprehensibility of the modern world and for the persistence of a form of malignant power which we do not fully understand or control, but which we fear forms the ground of the very conditions of our existence.

Dargan's work, then, may embrace the melancholy which characterised Romantic art – and perhaps remains an axis of modern historical experience – but with its critical exploration of the mediascape through which we imagine the world, it does not re-enact Romanticism's retreat from the political or from a post-Enlightenment project of human betterment.



20's/30's Powderkeg Europe!
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Oil on Board, 2008

Biography

Sam Dargan graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2002 and is represented by Rokeby, London. He was nominated for the John Moores Painting Prize in 2008 and in 2006 won The 16th Mostyn Prize. His work has been exhibited regularly throughout the UK and beyond and is in several international collections. Recent exhibitions include 'Burth of a Nayshun' at Rokeby, London; 'The Golden Record' at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh; 'John Moores 25' at Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

Luke White is a lecturer at Middlesex University in the Art History department. Alongside Claire Pajaczkowski, White has written 'The Sublime Now' (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

Sam Dargan
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More Work For The Undertaker
12th November - 6th December

Next at The Wasp Room
4th - 21st February 2010:
Naomi Terry - In a City Not So Far Away

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