

AARON MORSE  
ACME., Los Angeles

IN HIS NEWEST exhibition "The City On a Hill," Aaron Morse continues to mine his seemingly inexhaustible imagination for visual clues to the all too complicated human condition. The fabled "city on a hill" to which Morse refers seems to serve as a makeshift city of images, and the further the viewer moves into it, the more is at stake, but the outcome is always inconclusive.

Morse has always had a fondness for specific imagery, which seem to serve as "visual tropes" to which the artist returns again and again. In his painting *Peace in the Valley*, the lion and the lamb occupy the same landscape as detonated bombs and madmen brandishing weapons. Planes crash into mountains, yet strangely, a prevailing calm overrides the obvious violence. Buried dinosaur bones rest alongside the remnants of an American flag strewn across a piece of barbed wire. For Morse, the discarded leavings of an American dream comprise a complicated historical tapestry of human failings, although viewed without judgment as part of the ever-widening, and predictable terrain of human experience. Other works like *Back of the Tiger*, reflect both the vulgarity and brutality of the American hunter's skewed ideology, yet in Morse's world, this flagrantly pompous figure, displaying his bayoneted rifle as though it were a substitute sex organ, finds himself very small and anguished in the belly of the tiger. This drawing operates within a "before and after," sequence of events, the hunter seen at first to be a virile, overwrought character until, much later, he succumbs to the forces of nature. The natural world, like the hunter, can also be brutal, however it is a brutality that is hard-won and forged in hunger and honesty, and this makes it more genuine.

Other works in the show are more clearly political, though again Morse incorporates a deft humorous pathos. *Aging Energy Hegemony* shows a teetering, strangely skeletal creature made of space shuttles, dead whales, leaning towers and aircraft carriers, with the head of an eagle, poised over the earth as though it were a satellite circling the globe, gathering information. Hegemony is defined as the controlled or dominating influence of one group over others, or one political structure declaring dominion over another. Morse posits here that perhaps the things we kill (whales, sharks, the forests, the earth itself) hold their own ghostly dominion over us — the earth's temporary and arguably parasitical occupants — and will may in the end, take it all back. Despite all the bombs we detonate and the manmade machines that roam the earth perpetuating conflagration and bloodshed, it is nature that will eventually evict us from her priceless little planet, which has, after all, become our fort with mile high walls to keep the unpredictable elements of nature at bay, this our "city on a hill."

—Eve Wood



Aaron Morse, *Back of the Tiger*, 2006