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Aaron Morse at ACME.

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--Christopher Knight

Visually, Aaron Morse's paintings on canvas and paper can be hard to read. That turns out to be a surprising asset. To see them requires slowing down.

The 13 works from the last two years at ACME gallery feature epic subjects, such as oceanic exploration, fierce buffalo hunts and awesome mountain treks. Often they nod toward episodes from history or myth. But the ways in which they're painted don't let you get caught up in the action or nostalgia.



Instead, Morse paints a kind of equilibrium. He mixes acrylic, watercolor and oil paint, which don't always chemically blend; subtle iridescence arises from colors reminiscent of an oil slick or a solar burn, and brush strokes pile up. Everything sits on the surface — interlocking shapes, mottled colors, painted daubs.

Submarines, alligators and fish; rearing horses, running cattle, soaring vultures and weapon-wielding hunters; mountain peaks, trekkers and evergreens; oil tankers and sea swells — everything occupies a shallow, cramped, even clotted space. Some figures warp, as if twisted on a computer program or compressed by the shallow space.

The compositions are like a cross-section taken from a landfill (the actual subject of one work), or a cross-cut from a mighty tree (“The Savage World” is backed by concentric

black curves, like an abstraction of tree rings). The image overload that these paintings describe is less a flashy and seductive spectacle than an inescapable reality with intimidating overtones.

In one work a moose stomps a wolf, a kitten toys with a mouse, a cartoon couple gorges on fancy meal and a sloth idly munches on leaves. Aspects of the seven deadly sins might come to mind, but instead of a moralizing treatise Morse offers a frank evocation of life's perfectly ordinary travail.

Pictured above: "The Savage World," 2007