

ACME.

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Review: Aaron Morse at ACME.: Paintings of sublime worlds gone wrong

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Aaron Morse's new paintings suggest, ever so subtly, that something has gone god-awfully wrong with the world we live in. The elusiveness of the problem intensifies the strength of Morse's user-friendly pictures, not to mention their emotional impact and intellectual heft.

At ACME., every one of the L.A. painter's 10 variously sized canvases, painted with oil and acrylic (often in the manner of watercolors), is as easy to read as the illustrations that fill 19th and 20th century encyclopedias, particularly those focused on flora and fauna, as well as weather systems and travel to far off lands.

Seven are cinematic landscapes, seascapes and skyscapes.

The seascapes recall Japanese woodblock prints, whose razor-sharp lines and roiling waves give potent form to the sublime side of nature. In contrast, Morse's gorgeously crashing waves are occasionally ridden by stealthy surfers, their toxic-green bodies camouflaged against the water, which glows queasily.

A mountain scene functions similarly, slowly revealing hikers, goats and ruins as your eye makes its way through the compositional complexity Morse has embedded in an otherwise postcard-style image. His painterly virtuosity is likewise double-edged, all the more charged because he doles out paint parsimoniously. It's as if he's halfway through his last tube and knows there's no getting any more.

The three skyscapes are knockouts, each of their hovering clouds aglow with unnatural beauty and arranged in a composition that is too orderly to be organic. Georgia O'Keeffe's great painting of clouds at the Art Institute of Chicago is evoked, as is a particularly insidious alien invasion, its armada of spaceships disguised as clouds. Morse's cloud-pocked skies also evoke fears of airborne pathogens.

The three most unsettling paintings depict fancifully tinted beasts of the air, earth and sea, all in close-up, all in profile and all headed to the left. Multi-species stampedes come to mind as do group portraits of aristocratic families. There's an every-man-for-himself desperation to these paintings, which throws them into stark contrast with the story of Noah's ark and its tidy inventory of animals.

Morse's subtly twisted images make rich use of the history of illustration and never let viewers off the hook by pointing out just what the problem might be - or even if there is only one. That's a pretty apt way to see the world, where everything seems interconnected and out of whack.

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