Come What May

The past few years have unquestionably been very difficult. Devastating climatic conditions; economic recession; social and political turmoil; and a devastating global pandemic have all taken their toll leaving many wondering what the future will hold. While some assert that life will return to 'normal', others are not so sure. Will things return to what they were or does this time presage the development of different systems of government, economic structures, ways of social interaction and ways of actual living? What does the future hold in store?

For thousands of years many artists have either reflected on current situations in their work or created alternate worlds which comment on the present or, through their own fantastical narratives, hint at how the future may unfold. The TREX exhibition Come What May features the work of three artists who, through a focus on fantasy and imagination in their creative endeavors, reflect on the world as they find it or create new worlds which may envision a different course for the human race.

Despite the chaos of these present times, Edmonton artists Brandon Bilhete and Byron McBride are optimistic concerning what the future may bring. Though he populates his works with demons and scenes of destruction, Bilhete's focus is on angels and saints overcoming obstacles. While his works do not present answers to the pressing questions of the present age, they do demonstrate his belief that there is 'light at the end of the tunnel'. Mcbride, meanwhile, reflects upon the sense of isolation everyone has experienced over the past two years and the increasing impact media and other forms of technology have on our lives. Choosing to put a positive spin on these developments, McBride posits a future where people will shed the things they do not need; enjoy their spaces and selective social groups; and focus on actual rather than manufactured happiness. Finally, as described by Calgary artist Gary McMillan, we are all on a continual journey into the future and, as an artist, he is always looking for new imaginary places to observe in order to think about how the world may transform itself. Like Brandon Bilhete, however, McMillan does not attempt to foretell the future. Rather, his paintings are rife with ambiguity, reflecting present uncertainties. While McMillan wants his paintings to have a positive impact, the images are also slightly 'off-kilter', leaving the viewer questioning what is actually going on.

It is an aspect of human nature to want to know the future, especially in times of difficulty and uncertainty. This second decade of the 21st century definitely qualifies as such a time with many wondering when, or if, the pandemic will end and what effect these years will have on society. The exhibition Come What May features the work of artists who contemplate the present and ponder the questions it presents.

The exhibition Come What May was curated by Shane Golby and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA TREX program is financially supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

FRONT COVER IMAGE:
Brandon Mario Bilhete, *Looking for Love*, 2022
Mixed media on panel
Collection of the artist

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition to venues throughout Alberta. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves over 60 venues in approximately 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The artists
The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

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The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

Come What May

TREX

Alberta

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art gallery of alberta

Brandon Mario Bilhete
Trinity 1, 2022
Mixed media on panel
Collection of the artist

Brandon Mario Bilhete was born and raised in north Edmonton and has lived in the city all his life. Raised in an artistic environment – his father is a dancer while his mother was an artist - Bilhete has always been interested in art and states that *...my parents tell stories of me drawing in my crib.* Bilhete's interest in art continued throughout all his schooling and he indicates that

...the only thing that saved me from being bullied (in school) was drawing. I was bad at everything in school except drawing; I'd draw things for people and the bigger kids would protect me.

While Bilhete enjoyed art his experiences in High School art classes were not positive and so, after High School, he went a different direction in pursuing a career. At the age of 26, however, he decided to return to school and attended Edmonton Digital Arts College where he focused on digital illustration. Around the same time, he received employment with the Art Gallery of Alberta and began to immerse himself in Edmonton's art community and concentrate more fully on his art practice.

Bilhete's art practice focuses on figurative work with a heavy emphasis on illustration. He is very interested in graffiti and street art and integrates these into his drawings and collage works, blurring the lines between what is beautiful and what is ugly. In his work, Bilhete considers himself a 'mixed-media guy' and uses ink, collage, aerosol paint and graffiti to create his pieces. As an artist he hopes to make viewers 'feel something': to really look at his work and feel some sort of emotion, no matter what that may be.

Bilhete's collage and mixed media works in the exhibition make use of religious imagery and graffiti to comment on contemporary concerns. Recognizing the current bleakness caused by the COVID pandemic and the present state of world affairs, Bilhete populates his canvases with demons and destruction. Despite the chaos displayed, however, the focus of each piece is on the angels or saints as evidenced by their size and placement. Also, while the artist uses an overall dark colour pallette, the scattered flowers and bright colours splashed across the canvas provide contrast and illuminate the darkness. As expressed by Bilhete, while he acknowledges contemporary troubles, the angels and saints are shown overcoming obstacles and the scenes are all about there being 'light at the end of the tunnel'.
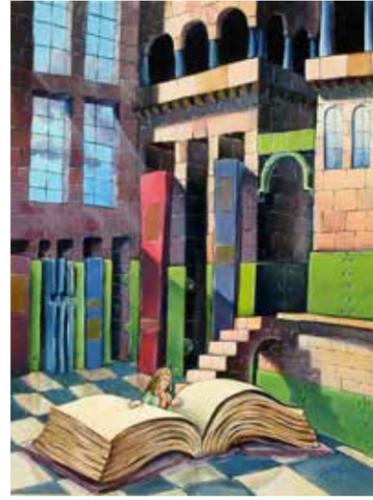
Byron McBride
The Reporting, 2021
Acrylic on panel
Collection of the artist

Edmonton artist **Byron McBride** became interested in art while a young child. As he relates, he was diagnosed with dyslexia in elementary school which made school quite difficult and so he spent much of his time drawing and doodling. Drawing, for McBride, was an escape, a means of therapy, and a way of reconciling what he could take in and understand. Despite this interest, however, he did not begin practicing art until after he finished high school. He began his artistic practice by taking some art classes at the University of Alberta Faculty of Extension and then entered the Fine Arts Department at the University and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2000.

Prior to attending University McBride focused on drawing and working with tone. At this time he was interested in architectural drawings. His university studies introduced him to painting and working with colour which, as he expresses, *...pushed my work forward...*and allowed for more naturalistic expressions and led him to working with more naturalistic landscapes.

Since graduating from University McBride has been constantly working on his art practice and building his repertoire. After his formal studies he began to try and capture or express emotions in a space and create environments which tell a story. This has allowed him to bring in figurative elements to his work and his aim at present is to make the spaces he creates look lived in and loved.

Through his art work Byron McBride wants the viewer to tell or make their own story. As he describes his practice:

I'm providing the building blocks and want the viewers to create their own stories. (In my work) it's not just my story; it becomes the viewers as well and I've embraced this.

For his works in the exhibition Come What May McBride has chosen to deal with the sense of isolation people have had during the COVID 19 pandemic and how people have been forced to interact and what that will mean going forward. Seeing things in an optimistic light, McBride states that 'we' are looking towards new ways of doing things and opportunities to rebuild and not go back to the old 'normal'. As stated by the artist:

The pandemic definitely shook things up and we have an actual opportunity to do things differently.
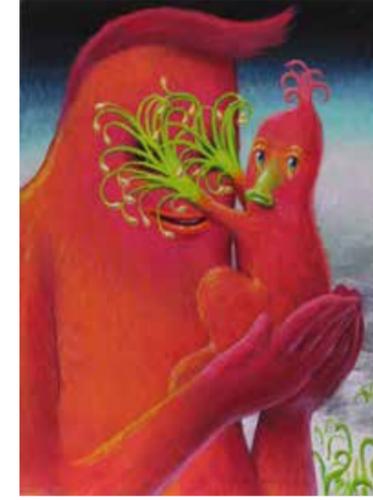
Gary McMillan
Samadaj, 2021
Acrylic on masonite
Collection of the artist

Gary McMillan was born in Germany but raised in Calgary. He was not raised in an art environment so finding his way in the art world was 'instinctive'. While he relates that he never saw 'real' art growing up, he did see photos of drawings and paintings and was *...wonderstruck by how real things could be rendered into realistic images*. McMillan's love of art began with such images.

Much of McMillan's art practice has been developed through self-study, although he did receive a degree from the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, and through a great deal of questioning concerning what he is doing and why. His practice has moved from realistic landscape and portrait painting through collage to the more fantastical images he is currently creating. As expressed by the artist:

A painting has to be 'charming enough' or intriguing for me to finish it. I have to be challenged by what I'm painting. There has to be some narrative/story, questioning that I'm 'poking at'. I am painting a lot of whimsical science fiction type images (at present). They are like speculative alternate worlds. They allow me to explore intellectual interests in a rather vague and unguided way. I also like to come up with new arrangements of colour and composition which are not constrained by the limits of pure observation.

As described by McMillan, the world is built on uncertainties and as humans we are always questioning and trying to find solutions. In his paintings there is always a sense of ambiguity in the works which reflects this. While his paintings present 'fun creatures', there is a deeper level to them and the viewer is always questioning what these 'creatures' are up to:

Each time I plan a painting, I want to entice myself into an imaginary world of paint and images which are unfamiliar, yet still elicit questions with regard to the real world. I want to give my viewers an experience of pleasure and wonder mixed with a vague disquiet that the world we live in can never be comfortably known. I am trying to represent the actual world through a very indirect analogy. Each painting is a distillation of my feelings about personal volition, ecology and the ethics underlying any situation. ...We are always travelling into the future. All my painted creatures form a microcosm of uncertainty resting with the familiar. That is exactly what the future is. Questions always.