

TIM GROEN

Adam Cvijanovic, Artist

By Tim Groen

Had I a ballroom, or a substantial anti-chambre in my apartment, and a fund of the hedge or trust variety, I'd waste no time giving New York-based artist Adam Cvijanovic *carte blanche* to create one of his all-over murals painted on Tyvek. My introduction to Adam's work was the installation "Love Poem (10 Minutes After The End Of Gravity)" at the now-defunct Bellwether Gallery.

Love Poem was described by *The New York Times* as "an expansive, airy mural depicting what could be a scene in a Spielberg movie: a Los Angeles suburb that appears to have been violently uprooted and elevated into the sky."

His "portable murals" have been bought and shown by Saatchi, installed in the Hammer Museum and MASS MoCA, and are being commissioned by institutional and private clients. A bit of trivia I personally happen to enjoy: one of those private commissions ended up getting shot by Steven Meisel for the cover of *Vogue Italia*, where Adam's art almost steals Linda Evangelista's thunder.

Adam juxtaposes the impressive beauty of nature with man's influence. To me—misanthrope and pessimist that I am—it says something about our adversarial relationship with the environment and, in a way, I see Nature winning the battle in Adam's world. Not in a high drama, post-apocalyptic sense; it's more organic and gentle than that. Perhaps because Man himself is absent, his presence only hinted at (if at all) by trash among the tumbleweeds, or by a derelict fun ride in the desert. In other words, whether we are there or not, nature *is*. As it turns out—and unsurprisingly—Adam's own take is a little more nuanced than that.

TG: What's behind your fascination for these people-free landscapes?

AC: I think of the work you're referring to—because I've also done things that do include people—as making a stage set. Ultimately these paintings are a kind of happening, because they're designed to be sets with actual people—the viewers—in front of them. It's a landscape and its supposed to be filled up with whatever happens around it.

TG: (Feels the coin drop) And that's why you always have references to stage sets in your work! I can't believe I never figured that out—duh!

AC: Yeah! (laughs) It's highly theatrical, the whole business. And the ones that you're talking about are almost all *American* landscapes in one way or another.

They're about the idea of the ultimate American landscape being this funny combination of the sublime and the utterly transitory. Las Vegas is the summation of this, the town being completely transitory, with the Red Rock Mountains behind being extremely beautiful. And I've always been interested in mashing those ideas together. Those mountains feel like an easily recognizable "background" rather than being the original landscape. So, in a way my work has a postmodern slant—although I detest that word.

Yes, the whole thing together is a set, Vegas and the mountains, but at the same time it's not all phony.

TG: To me your work seems like a comment on civilization versus nature, with both of them being powerful forces. Am I reading that correctly?

AC: That's there! But I'm not sure that's at odds with my position about the 'sublime' versus the 'set'. It's an American position, because unlike Europe, America was a wilderness not that long ago. It was a wilderness in the memory of anybody's great-great-grandfather; it's a wilderness *within* memory. That drama of what happened when people settled is still so close, that it's part of how Americans—or people who move here—see themselves. Even the idea of ultimate civilization, like in Italy, where everything has been tended for thousands of years, is a recent invention, given the time-span of how long humans have been around. We still feel ourselves as being in a relationship with nature that is both adversarial and complementary...(pause)

TG: But?

AV: *But*...right now the entire thing is coming to a head. Given that there are umpteen billion people on the planet, and we have resource and space issues. And how we are as individuals, and how we feel in the environment around us, is suddenly of paramount importance to how you settle in your own head. What is it to be on the frontier? What does it mean to see an untouched landscape? Since there are no frontiers or untouched landscapes left, the subject has a currency, and will have a currency for a long time. It's interesting because human nature never changed; we're confronted with an unknown situation, but we're the same.

TG: Yeah, I almost wish that wasn't the case...that we hadn't missed the boat to the Age of Aquarius.

AC: We'll figure it out, one way or another. And even if we, as people, don't figure it out, it will sort itself out. It's kind of up to us in a way; we *do* have input after all. We can make it less bad.

TG: Well, speaking of total destruction—because I feel like we're rapidly sliding to that subject just now—do you ever find yourself far along in one of your big set-like pieces, only realize that it was total crap and you need to throw it all out? I'm curious because each one of these room-like installations must be so much work!

AC: Yes! I have done that! Sometimes it just doesn't work out, you know? It's a very painful moment, that. But what can you do? There's other moments when I can successfully correct, and paint something over. But every now and then something just comes along that turns out structurally wrong...and then I have to throw it out.

TG: Your work is usually site-specific, and it's large. How does that translate to sales?

AC: (Laughs)

TG: I mean, do you sell what you show, or do you sell the smaller studies and take on commissions for the larger pieces?

AC: Enough of the larger work sells to keep me in the game, in a certain way. It's funny, because these pieces are a giant commitment for a buyer. I mean, it's not something you hang over the sofa. It pretty much *consumes* your house. And for sure, a part of what I do is taking from individuals and institutions commissions for site-specific work. And that makes total sense, because if you're talking about such a major spatial commitment, it *has* to work.

Sometimes things have to break up in order to sell, which is a bit sad. I did a large piece of icebergs and half of the installation was sold to an institutional collection, and the other part sold to a private collector. Then I did another, giant, version which was shown at the Hammer in Los Angeles, which hasn't sold yet, but we'll see what happens, and in how many pieces that will end up.

The thing that interests me is that it's almost like a quantum painting; I decide that I'm going to paint ice, and it can have all the possible ways of existing around the world, and they're all valid. The piece itself, to me, is the idea of painting the ice. So to me, a commission is just a variation on that basic structure.

TG: I remember your installation in Miami of an entire room where the effect for the viewer was that

you're looking through a summery meadow, from the point of view of the flowers themselves. I thought it was spectacular. What was the idea behind that one?

AC: I started working on it in France, so it was initially a French field of flowers. But I had to leave before I could finish up my sketches, and it became a field in New Jersey. Which really makes no difference because all the plants are invasive species, so in a certain climactic zone, it could be anywhere.

It was all flowers and plants, and beautiful and green, and you see it from the point of view of, say, a chipmunk. And I think that was kind of unsettling to people, in way they couldn't put their finger on. Everybody said: "Oh, it's so beautiful and happy—I love it!" And a little later you saw them thinking: "Do I really want to be nine inches tall and risk getting *eaten* by everything else that runs around in the grass?" It goes back to the idea of nature and artifice, and backdrops, again. It says something about the way in which people instinctively read their environment.

TG: And therein lies the difference between the room you created that appeared on the Linda Evangelista-cover of *Vogue Italia*. It's all about a safe point of view, versus something that makes the viewer feel vulnerable.

AC: Totally. I worked with an interior designer on that one, and I had agreed on the subject matter. It was to be a birch forest for a dining room. And I did try to make it something non-threatening, and truly beautiful. It does have its complications, but more in the order of Disney, then of Hitchcock. With Hitchcock the complications are all about unsettled sexuality and existential threats—but with Disney the complications come from his use of shadow. And I'm talking about old 1930's Disney, not *Beauty and the Beast*-Disney. Everything he did was about shadow, and about shadow as a character, which had a direct relationship to German Expressionist cinema. So in the case of that room on the *Vogue* cover, that's what I used. And in the case of the piece in Miami, the complication is more of a Hitchcock take. I think it was Emmanuel Kant who said: "The sublime is a combination of beauty and horror."

TG: You're bringing up early Disney as an influence. So was it your fascination with Disney, which lead to the theme of *Defrosted*, your recent show at Postmasters in New York?

AC: It was kind of a coincidence; I was talking to my friend David Humphrey—my co-conspirator on this show—and we wanted to do a biography, a "history painting". And the question was who to pick. We wanted someone everybody recognizes and has an opinion on, and Disney was a great one, because not only does everybody have *childhood memories* of Disney, but he also left behind this enormous visual heritage. He represents that extraordinary, twentieth-century relationship between so called "High Art" and so called commercial art. Disney is at the commercial end of the spectrum, but in fact a lot of the conceptual ideas put forth by Disney wound up being "High Art" ideas, which trumped the serious art ideas that were happening at his time.

He was making his theme parks at a time when his contemporaries like Rothko and DeKooning were creating their deep, ponderous work. But in terms of people who are in their twenties now, it's all about Disney. All the information that's coming in to art world now, stems from this strand of creative thought which was never properly acknowledged in the fifties. It *kind of* was, through pop art. But more like; "Ha ha, I'm gonna borrow this, ha ha". But now it's really serious. I grew up looking at Disney, you know? I didn't *grow up* looking at Rothko. So from his theme parks to the concepts behind the early animations, he has really affected my visual perception.

TG: What's on the floor of your studio now? What are you working on?

I'm working on the Garden of Eden right now, but how it's going to sort itself out, I really have no idea. It's such an abstract concept there's only so much research I can do. But the idea of an Edenic landscape sort of goes to the core of all this exploration of the sublime and the set, and innocence and sin. It's all the same thing. Looking at the landscape of memory, the landscape of exile, whichever way you set it up, it's a dichotomy. So it relates to the dichotomy I've set up in all my previous work.

TG: And we all know how the Garden of Eden story ended. It ties in nicely with what you said about

our relationship with nature coming to head.

AC: For sure, for sure. It's very much about the beautiful things that are lost. But it's also about beautiful things that are found—*in exile*.

You can't just *read* about Adam's work, you have to *see* it.

Here are some links.

> [The Vogue Italia Cover](#)

> [Defrosted: a life of Walt Disney at Postmasters \(images by David L. Nicholas for Postmasters\)](#)

> [Love Poem \(10 minutes after the end of gravity\) at the Saatchi Gallery](#)

> [Niagara Falls, at the University of Buffalo](#)

> [Unhinged, at MASS MoCA](#)

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