

Exhibition Guide

Marcel Dzama *Tree with Roots*

24 May – 16 July 2006

Second Floor Galleries

This is the first solo exhibition in a UK public gallery by Marcel Dzama, comprising approximately 50 drawings, sculpture, video, dioramas and scrapbooks, including new work, previously unseen.

Born in Winnipeg, Canada in 1974, Dzama now lives in New York. His interest in art began at an early age. As a child he made his own comics, creating characters from his toys and basing the villains on children that he grew up with. He started painting at high school and went on to illustrate the college newspaper.

The artist has been strongly influenced by his upbringing in Winnipeg. The city's climate is extreme, with temperatures known to have reached -55°C in winter and exceeding 35°C in summer. Since going outdoors in colder months was often not possible, Dzama tended to find solace in creating a cast of characters for his drawings and paintings, keeping him company during long periods of isolation. Geographical remoteness also meant that he heard about the rest of the world mostly by radio, so his understanding was filtered through this medium. Sometimes, when the news was bloody and fearful, it was reflected in his artwork.

This sense of distance and of seeming endlessness is conveyed by Dzama's work, showing characters out of touch with the rest of the world. They often float in pictorial space, devoid of background or landmarks, with no clues to suggest an actual location.

Whilst at the University of Manitoba in 1996, Dzama and a group of fellow students formed an artists' group, *The Royal Art Lodge*. It provided a vital social life and involved weekly meetings, where members produced collaborative drawings, fanzines, stuffed dolls, collages and puppets. They developed a group activity whereby each artist began an artwork and passed it onto the next person to continue until somebody pronounced it complete. In Winnipeg, hunting lodges

greatly outnumber artist collectives and the playful title of this group refers to the notion of a 'monarchy' of artists ruling the city. The Lodge produced a vast amount of artwork which has subsequently been exhibited worldwide – a far cry from what was intended when the group was founded.

At first glance, Dzama's work evokes a world of childlike innocence, yet on closer inspection, it reveals a darker, more sinister side. Often with a muted violence, faux naïve imagery features a range of absurd characters, some animal, some human, some hybrids. These include cigarette-smoking bears, menacing tree-people, musical cowboys, drunken bats and gun-toting girl guides. "They're just images that pop into my head." The artist teasingly remarks "I don't really know what they are."

Dzama's drawings involve traditional materials and straightforward draftsmanship. He uses a distinct colour palette including moss green, black, grey, deep red and a special brown made from root beer. Whilst making root beer at his grandparents' house, he spilt some syrup onto his sketchbook and observed that it dried like a shiny ink. He was not able to find a similar colour that he liked as much and now uses this mixture to produce a kind of 'military' brown.

Many of Dzama's works are inspired by dreams. He draws during the day but his ideas come at night, and he keeps a notebook beside his bed for sketching thoughts that emerge from semi-subconsciousness. He comments "When I'm drifting off to sleep, a lot of ideas come from that moment when you're not quite but almost asleep." His multiple sheet, large-scale drawings depict particular episodes, whereas the smaller, single sheet works are like a fragmented storyline, with characters recurring in surreal scenarios.

More recent work in this exhibition includes video, dioramas and sculpture. Dzama's three-dimensional pieces relate to the bizarre characters that feature in his drawings and video work, involving animation combined with live action. They resemble pantomime costumes, presenting a fantastical drama where, for example, trees and a crocodile-headed figure have morphed into humans. At once delightful and menacing, Dzama's work similarly transforms childhood fantasies into adult nightmares and the audience is left to reflect on this strange, yet strangely familiar, world.

A limited edition 30 x 22 inch lithograph accompanies the exhibition. This work, *Ceremonies of the Horsemen*, in an edition of 30. An illustrated publication also accompanies the show, available for £12.95 (special exhibition price of £10.95). This exhibition is supported by Canada House Trust and the Canadian High Commission.