

MICHAEL ROQUE COLLINS: GARDENS OF MYSTERY

LEWALLEN CONTEMPORARY
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Paintings of the natural world weren't really necessary until The Great Age of Industry fired up the steam engine (patented in 1796) and labor augmented by machine could make a capitalist a tidy sum. Naturally enough the old codgers needed a place to rest the revenues. The idealized landscape was, well, ideal, and gazing wistfully at it offered a nice break from the day job (less coal smoke). Thusly Romanticism was born. A cult of nature that would first focus on the disappearing natural world, take a bundle of drugs, and slowly go crazy over humanity's inhumanities for the next hundred years. What else was an artist to do?

And what's the connection between a budding environmentalist critique of corporate capital and finding refuge in the irrational, the mythic, and the mystical? The lust of the Romantic for alternative consciousness arises from the industrialist's mad claim—"With our scientist pawns and statistics we have things empirically figured out, though there are always a host of unforeseen, often grave, consequences excluded from our equations, tee hee"—to the achievement of machine-like rationality. Nothing is more worrisome than claims of perfect sanity. No one is more convinced of the rightness of his logic than the madman.

Michael Roque Collins makes landscape paintings at the crux of this collapsing Romantic/Industrialist dichotomy. In a post-Guston style that could be described as the cartoon-sublime, he constructs weirdly beautiful vistas.

In some, a crumbling architecture, pieces of the Roman Forum say, stand in for vestiges of human morality while the steady, steamy growth of the jungle regains the upper hand. In others, the landscape itself seems awesomely bleak and not a little sickly. *Chemical Garden* stands the viewer before a toxic river and what appears to be a refinery in the distance, as if industry has had its way and we're watching the planet choke. There is an ominous post-apocalyptic darkness here, as if every day were gray. Swim in the river of evil, but do not drink from it.

And all the work here partakes of mythos and an abiding sense of the supernatural. Ghostlike forms flicker in and out of the paint like so many subtle, immeasurable spirits and energies. "Smokestacks belching steam could become a ritual mask..." Collins has asserted when talking about his process and the haunted quality of his paintings. Long live Romance.

JON CARVER



Michael Roque Collins, *Chemical Garden*, oil on linen, 100" x 72", 2002