

**DAVID B SMITH**  
GALLERY

Josh Keyes

*Collision*

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David B. Smith Gallery

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Josh Keyes' Collision: Ecopocalypse and Regirrection

Exhibition Essay by Caleb Neelon

Josh Keyes paints things that we could imagine, though he gets there first. The realism of animal and human landscape brings his work to us; the icy white backgrounds isolate the images in stark, scientific relief. And while Keyes' work gives us a few little clues that what we're dealing with is fantasy, his images of ecopocalypse – of nature living on in a man-made world without man - stand just close enough to reality to fiddle with it. Thus in that spirit, ecopocalypse is a word close enough to the dictionary that it may as well reside there. After all, it exists in our own world, sometimes powerfully enough to notice on a large scale.

In the coal mining country of Pennsylvania, there's a town called Centralia – or there was. Once a busy little mining town, today its streets grid out blocks of grass, occasionally punctuated with a single former row house, lonely as a single domino set on narrowest edge. Almost fifty years ago, a trash fire leaked into the mine system beneath the town, the rich veins of anthracite coal demonstrating exactly why it's the best coal in the world. A slow smolder burns to this day and will burn for... well, nobody knows, but even conservative estimates say it'll be a hundred more years before those nesting bowls of anthracite coal veins exhaust themselves.

It's no good to live above a fire, slow-burning or not - that's why you bought that carbon monoxide detector for your basement. The rowhoused town of Centralia cleared out in a decades-long evacuation, leaving only the staunchest locals to live above, locals who today keep mowed their now enormous lawns, lawns they used to call their block, their neighbors. Today, the blocks' grass is quilted in varying shades of green, the most vivid the legacy of an especially aggressive chemical lawn treatment of decades past.

Many of the city blocks of North St. Louis felt the same, formerly tight rowhouses that now stand alone, bizarrely slender without their neighbors. This, too, was a busy neighborhood, even more so for its urban proximity. And yet here were these blocks, soon to be fields, slowly. The patchwork of green lawns looked eerily similar to Centralia.

Nothing of note lay below the surface, evicting residents with toxins real or imagined. The danger was human, a deadly combination of racism, crime, and neglect. The neighborhood isn't being razed to clear land for some great civic project; it's simply being razed as a desperate last civic measure. As rowhouses became abandoned, they were demolished, removing empty nests in which criminal cuckoos might alight. Like Centralia, North St. Louis is an ecopocalypse, but it's mankind who repeated the work of an act of God, Chance, or Accident.

We are a messy animal, one increasingly fascinated with exploring the consequences of our own messiness. Post-apocalyptic, post-diluvian, post-bellum, and – Keyes' strain – post-ecopocalyptic – art is on the rise, and collectively nails the zeitgeist of the new millennium. That awful day in 2001 had to be the spark – how could we say otherwise? - but Katrina, Indonesian Tsunamis, Port-au-Prince, the Gulf of Mexico, and a pair of messy and endless wars beaming across new media allow us to easily envision the little that Hollywood has not yet prepared us to imagine. Reality television fills in any remaining cracks in our imagination of things that are not fantasy, but possibility. Yet so much of this comes at us with lightning speed, quick-moving acts of God and man. But as seen in Centralia and North St. Louis, both of which have drawn out for decades, the real ecopocalypses move much slower, and it's this more pensive material that Josh Keyes is mining.

This intersection of fantasy and possibility, of science and magic, abounds in Josh Keyes' work. Alchemy, and the artist as an alchemist, is a frequent and chewy idea for Keyes, mixing science and magic to create something new, rich, strange, and potent. *Collision*, his current body of work, draws from a set of allegorical images of a king's death and resurrection that Keyes found in a sixteenth-century set of engravings.

*Collision* marks a new direction for Keyes in that this body of ten paintings form a story line and a sequential set, loosely paralleling that set of sixteenth-century engravings of regicide and – another word that may as well be real – regirrection, a king's rebirth. In order, Gnashing, Ambush, Torn, Trophy, Dancers, Assemble, Gestate, Throne, Emergence, and Sowers – form a story line and a sequential set. Also new in *Collision* is a new working style for Keyes – where he previously had worked on one piece until its completion, here he works on all the pieces simultaneously, just as he conceived of them all as a group as well.

*Collision* is also the first installment of a larger story to come in future shows. Yes, Keyes fans, he might be starting a trilogy here – one which depicts the fall, disintegration, and reemergence of the protagonist – though for Keyes, protagonist and antagonist aren't necessarily separate. In *Gnashing*, three hyenas await signal to pounce on a hapless deer. In *Ambush*, the trio of hyenas snarl and begin to attack. In *Torn*, the poor creature is lunch. The set pieces – a street sign and a dumpster – provide an odd window into the fiction of the piece. The dumpster is astride a street's median strip, perhaps rolled on its wheels to its current location, but essentially an unlikely place to find a dumpster. The sign is an odder clue: it's installed not along the street, but into the middle of the lane, where it has no business. Looking closely, the head of the pedestrian in that oddly sited street sign is covered with a cogwheel sticker – another day, another dollar? - in *Gnashing*, but in *Ambush*, that sticker switches to a radioactivity symbol. Fallout has begun.

In *Dancers*, the fantasy begins, and butterflies in the shape of a lion visit the bones of the deer. For Keyes, this image reifies the energy of nature, its cycles of death and rejuvenation. In *Trophy*, a hyena runs off with one of the deer's antlers while a road sign's graffiti reads "State Prison", "City Center", "World Wildlife Zoo" and "Camping" – a greedy consumer, the hyena as d-bag. The graffiti, interestingly, is a bit of a change. Keyes previously had used graffiti carefully, reproducing groups of actual tags in a way that would make sense to a graffiti writer in the know. Just like the particular street signs or specific monuments he reproduces, such tags indicate a particular place in the world, whether that was Oakland – his former home, or Portland, Oregon, his current one. He is gradually dispensing with such locative elements – a development that he is able to do as his work gains strength of concept, composition, and execution such that it doesn't rely on the clever touches.

In *Assemble*, the deer skeleton is rebuilt with help from birds. Keyes smiles that it's his Disney moment – and is careful to note that Disney is not a bad thing. With *Gestate*, the deer skeleton is fully constructed though the loss of the hyena's trophy horn still shows - and inside the rib cage is a baby lion cub. Next, in *Throne*, a tyrant king sits at the base of the elk monument, the monument's head wrapped by wasps' nest. This statue is actually Portland's downtown elk, but it's an elk qua elk, so to speak, standing above antlers and bones from previous kills and hyenas that mill about. Finally, in *Emerge*, the mature lion rises from the deer's bones, shedding that bony chrysalis.

For Keyes, the deer, lion, and hyena – protagonist and antagonist – are often one, a cycle and part of the changes and history that nature forces upon us while our technological world makes us live in the moment in the most counter-Zen manner possible. Perhaps that's what will play out on the streets and alleys of our world when we leave, whether after our own abuse of nature causes our eviction, as in Centralia, or whether after our own abuse of our fellow humans, as in North St. Louis, makes us take the greatest urban planning mulligan available to begin again, for want of any other choice. This is where Keyes begins – and we have future installments of Keyes' story to anticipate.