

## Tom Harker: Multiple Choice Fairytale Ending Allan Gardner

We often talk about the fabric of reality, the idea of our cognisant existence being framed within a giant, cosmic sweater. I've always liked that way of describing reality as a fabric, anchoring something as nebulous as our individualised perception within a ubiquitously known material. It doesn't matter what kind of fabric you're picturing, that's the beauty of the metaphor, whether it's some space-age soft alloy that stretches boundlessly without distortion or a raggedy old piece of scarf knitted by your Granny says more about you than anything else.

What if the fabric of reality were Cashmere? Or some kind of fine silk? Something that needs to be hand-washed with care, allowed to air dry outside of direct sunlight lest it should bleach and wear and fall to pieces, destabilising life as we know it forever. How do we feel living under the supposition that the fabric of reality is in fact very thin?

As an artist, Tomas Harker has built a practice of tugging at that fabric. In the metaphysical game of good cop-bad cop, Harker adopts the position of neither - he is the tacit observer, draped in reality's rich fabric, combing over the surface and stretching it at the points it wears most thin, cataloguing frays and tears in an ever-evolving series of paintings stacked with metaphors, easter eggs and a duplicitous wit worthy of the cerebral paintings he creates.

Existing on the fringes of popular culture, this new series of paintings try to make sense of a cosmic order becoming increasingly disordered, a situation too nuanced to be summarised by buzz-phrases like Post Truth. These new works reflect the increasing murkiness and confusion of contemporary life whilst remaining mindful of the power structures for whom the propagation of uncertainty is a clear benefit. Increasingly present in Harker's recent work is a visual language of distortion, placing images within compositional kettles from which they are able to interact with the rest of the painting, treating the canvas like a Physicists blackboard, unravelling complex pictorial equations across the surface in oil paint. They traverse the spiritual landscape of contemporary western existence whilst retaining room for a personal visual lexicon to establish itself, entering into dialogues around value and aesthetics pertinent as much to discussions around socio-economic classifications as much as painting.

In John 'Bud' Cardos' 1977 film Kingdom of The Spiders, a rural Arizona town is descended upon by killer Tarantulas, with the local Veterinarian attempting to do anything possible to stop the violent onslaught. Typical of seventies schlock cinema, the film is rife with plot holes, poor acting and centred around a deeply flawed premise - the spiders in question, while looking quite frightening, are absolutely not an aggressor. The hammy actors attempt to make it look like they are being ravaged by murderous tarantulas, howling in fear and backing directly into the path of scrambling groups of arachnids doing their best to get out of the way of the humans, of which they are clearly far more afraid.

The visual confusion of the film acts as the inspiration for Necrophobia Emersion Therapy (2022) in which a prone figure is overrun by spiders, set within a background of swirling grass. Spiders are a common fear, as well as a paradoxical one, in that they are most often unable to and invariably unlikely to cause any harm to humans - in fact, they will only attack in a situation where there is no other option. The fear of spiders is an irrational one, an aesthetic fear speculatively rooted in our evolutionary past where there was a greater potential to come into fatal contact with venomous spiders through hunter/gatherer practices. The spiders here act as a metaphor for fear, a ubiquitous aesthetic horror that can be understood by anyone, they ask very little of the viewer because everyone (even if they don't personally share this fear) can understand it.

The spiders are a pressing fear, one which must and can be vanquished, like the vet in Kingdom of The Spiders, we have the ability to put on a brave face and defend ourselves and loved ones from the oncoming threat. This narrative is present across the history of modern media, the presentation of an evil which can be defeated - the perseverance of the human spirit. However, this is not the horror that Tomas Harker is painting.

Put simply, rampaging spiders are a more manageable fear than impending economic collapse. Ghosts in the attic create a departure from a reality in which we are increasingly pursued by real and immediate concerns - environmental, social, cultural, political and financial turmoil already finding footing as the typifying states of the decade. It is no coincidence that the popularity of genres such as Horror, True Crime and Thrillers have increased exponentially in popularity since the beginning of the pandemic - the omnipresence of an intangible threat to life as we know it that crept and juddered through bureaucratic structures, increasingly politicised and appropriated far beyond the concerns of working people to become an amorphous, increasingly difficult to pin down state of existence.

The tracks are too complex to trace, begetting a sense of detached pursuit, being hunted and feeling insouciant towards it. The ever-presence of the undefinable pursuer, just outside of our field of vision, of definition by our current stage of language, creates a distortion. The thin, wearing parts of the fabric where fiction becomes capable of rubbing up against reality, often becoming a more fitting interpretative tool for understanding truth than those we find in the real world. Driving home, on very little sleep, road signs racing up to meet the headlights in violent bursts of colour, backed by towering rows of trees rendered in demonic contortions against a sky now comfortable with streaks of absence.

Highway Hypnosis (2022) is a diptych rendering this experience, conceived on a night drive like the one I just described, encroached upon by a gnawing at the edges of experience - the feeling that somewhere, something's not quite right, the gas hob left on in an alternate dimension. The painting is influenced by William-Adolphe Bouguereau's Dante and Virgil, a depiction of Dante observing a fight between damned souls in hell, backed by ecstatic demonic figures. In a world increasingly titillated by apocalyptic ideations, Harker refuses to buy in, positioning the viewer within the relative safety of the vehicle on the morphing highway, constantly aware of the potential of damnation but without giving in to fatalism.

The transient space depicted here is duplicitous, presenting two possibilities in unison. The looming horror hidden in the trees could render the road itself, the journey, under peril - our motion, potential, kinetic energy under threat by the mystery of the old gods but equally, the perpetual motion of the anonymous highway can induce a state of ecstatic splendour. To be without rooting, without a horse in the race to the bottom, is a state of freedom akin to enlightenment, the root note of a tone hummed for unison with brahma, or any other footnote in the history of artists bastardising eastern philosophy, chopped and screwed, slowed and reverbed. Enlightenment has been found and lost on highways scattered across the globe, languishing in the backwash at the bottom of the bottles strewn along the hard shoulder.

When learning to lucid dream, one can be trained to recognise the presence of a certain subject, object or aesthetic anomaly as an indication that they are dreaming. By establishing the fact that one is asleep, consequence is removed and dream-logic takes over, creating an opportunity to experiment and observe. The dreamscape, in this instance, acts as a testing ground for reality, however an unstable one, due to the untrustworthy nature of its physical makeup.

Over the last several years, Harker has increasingly blurred the lines between reality and unreality in his painting - often subtly, playing with notions of the uncanny, moving now into a territory whereby our figures of the unreal approach the subjects of the paintings as emissaries of alternate understandings, the lone coyote observed on a trek across the astral plane.

The distinction between the actual uncanny and common usage is important here and present visually within the paintings. The mythologies leaking into these works are not simply an exploration of fantasy, the blurring of the lines between fairytale and reality, they act far more directly as indicators that a real-world circumstance is not quite what it seems. They are uncanny like bureaucracy becomes uncanny, like losing faith in a system of protection - they're uncanny like the dole offices in which millions slowly find themselves navigating an increasingly twisted (but always banal) labyrinth. If Dante's inferno was fire and brimstone, pitchforks and demons, ours is an endless maze of automated phone menus and an increasingly dilapidated safety net, not with the ire of a benevolent protector scorned, merely the absence of one.

The slow infestation of Tomas Harker's painting by mythical aesthetics acts as a point of entry to the abstract network of thoughts through which they come into being. In order to approach these works, one must suspend disbelief, adopting an exploratory detachment through which pixies and ghouls become another semiotic marker, an aesthetic con-lang in the simulacrum.

The history of Western European mythology can be broadly approached as a set of stories or superstitions designed with the express purpose of preventing harm and/or explaining the unexplainable. What have become tropes of horror began as attempts to assuage dangerous behaviour, preventing children from wandering into the woods or playing by water, discouraging hunting or exploration of certain areas etc. The pragmatism of myth as a means of demonstrating safe practice is not a purely physical one, the still waters' undercurrents from which we're warned away can just as easily be psychological. The cautionary tales act as a framework for interaction, communication and the preservation of community. They are equally guides for traversing mental space, a framework for navigating our own psychology without falling prey to dangers of the mind. The woods we find ourselves lost in are rarely bark and trees but these fables largely still apply - Their history built into the fabric of human evolution as a means of preventing our own curious stupidity from running rampant, providing a space for credulous suppositions to develop into legend.

When we encounter these aesthetics of folklore in the paintings, we are being offered an invitation to undertake an alternate perspective, to engage in forms of critical thought often deemed un-useful or unfashionable in a society plagued by the ills of Late Capitalism. They act as indicators that the content of the work may not be what it seems, informing the viewer that they are in a position to be subject to mischief should they try to force the internal logic to obey their own.

In spite of their relationship to complex, significant systemic and social issues, the body of work comprising *Multiple Choice Fairytale Ending* manages to retain a lightness of touch, a sense of irreverence, through the inclusion of mythical aesthetics. Far from magical realism, the paintings act as thought experiments providing the viewer with material by which interpretative systems can be created - they insist that we move beyond the surface, beyond defined aesthetic language and into a mode of thinking capable of establishing connections between disparate chunks of metaphor, reference and symbolism as a means of better understanding the physical sensations capable of dominating experience, opinion and existence.