The Wild World's Face

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The hand in the painting must be that of a ghostly apparition—it is nacreous, green, and unfocused at the tips of its fingers, as if it were not quite solid to the touch. Living flesh is not this colour; it is not this texture, either. The light on the stem of the glass it is holding suggests a splash of pale ectoplasm. It is easy to imagine that this is a depiction of death in a vaguely human shape, offering up something fatal to the viewer in a cut-glass coupe. It seems made for the phrase "poisoned chalice." When I first saw Tomas Harker's piece *Great Gatsby* it was still untitled, and as such it did not register at all as an image of a star, perhaps because we do not tend to associate stars and mortality. And yet: in 2008, when Marlene Dumas painted the face of the late Marilyn Monroe on the autopsy table for *Dead Marilyn*, was the piece not one of her best? Did it not hum with an air of inevitability—a cool, dread certainty that even the loveliest forms are doomed to destruction and decay? The hand in question is in fact the familiar hand of the A-List actor Leonardo DiCaprio; more specifically, it is that of DiCaprio in character as one of literature's all-time greatest illusionists, the decadent, wealthy, and entirely ersatz Jay Gatsby. In Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film *The Great Gatsby*, as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's original 1925 novel, Gatsby is an elegant mirage of a man, just as every great movie star presents as an elegant mirage of themselves, both onscreen and in their media appearances. By the story's end, he's been fatally shot and is floating in his pool: a ghost for real, a face-down spectre in the water. Harker, in taking a glittering God and blanching him into deathliness, skips to

the finish, just as Marlene Dumas did with Marilyn Monroe. Conceptually, the result resembles one of those photographs that layers all the frames from a movie into one frantic blur, until all that remains is a glow, or a mood.

This mille feuille of slippage—*Great Gatsby* shows us, in effect, a famous actor pretending to be a famous con-man, and then further abstracts its source material in order to leave us with something less legible as human, and more broadly symbolic and unnerving—is characteristic of many of the works in *Sherwood Forest*, a mysterious and beguilingly sinister show whose central fixations are the uncanny, the ambiguous, and the grotesque. A crashed white van decorated with a cartoon of a green-skinned witch; a cherry-red Ferrari, also junked, with a decal of the devil on its door; the bodies of three naked, nymph-like women who appear to be sculpted from glass; mad revellers at a rave; a human skull made of molten-smooth gold; a masked man, looking set for either murder or an orgy; four owls, black and white, looming out

of the night like emissaries of some satanic force; a pretty young woman, seen in close-up, with lightless and alien-looking eyes, her mouth opening to gasp or to scream. These are paintings united not only by their murky, spooky-fairytale aesthetic, but by their depiction of disparate, flashbulb scenes of bacchanalia and ruin—scenes which the viewer is encouraged to connect, per the Kuleshov Effect, until a nightmare emerges from the darkness like the image on a Polaroid. This is a representation of the forest as a thorny metaphor for the untrammelled corners of the id; a site of secret, stolen pleasure and of private bad behaviour, even evil. In *Sherwood Forest*, to quote the surrealistic '90s murder mystery *Twin Peaks*, the owls are not what they seem.

A more literal nod to the work of David Lynch appears elsewhere in the show, in *Dream of Horses*, which is based on a still from the auteur's 1997 *Lost Highway*—a film about a murderous husband whose jealousy and rage split his psyche in half, producing two distinct and dissimilar selves. *Lost Highway* is just as mysterious, uncanny, and beguilingly sinister as many of the works which appear in *Sherwood Forest*, and although it ultimately uses the Californian desert instead of a Nottingham wood to represent that ungovernable hinterland in which our desires are set loose, it still plays out its psychosexual climax in nature all the same. As a medium, cinema itself might be said to be something like a forest, or a desert—unpredictable, expansive, untamed, a space in which anything can happen. When a director like Lynch is the one who has scouted the psychic location, viewers are apt to find themselves in territory that is utterly uncharted. Harker

exerts the same unmooring effect: lost in a Sherwood Forest of the mind, a landscape dotted with the sodden pornography and rumoured occult rituals and shattered fender-bender trash of the English rural imaginary, we are forced to plot our own mental map to make an exit. Such an experience is both humbling and invigorating. "Nature shows its blank, grand face to us," Slavoj Žižek once wrote, "and we are nothing...the drama of our life and death is fleeting." The artist's use of a dazzling multiplex bauble like Gatsby as a visual source makes perfect sense when we consider that even the great Jay Gatsby must turn grisly-green and rot; that even the shiniest sports car can be smashed to smithereens by a collision with a centuries-old tree. (One, perhaps, like the real Sherwood Forest's thousand-year-old, twenty-three-ton Major Oak, around which there have long been rumoured sightings of child-aged ghosts, hooded figures, and flashing, floating lights.) Feeling like nothing can be frightening; it can also set us free, letting us be anonymous, libidinous, and animalistic. Acknowledging the grandeur of the wild world's face, as we must in *Sherwood Forest*, permits us to see own faces more clearly than ever. We can see clearly, too, all the urges behind them. Harker does not offer us a coupe glass of champagne—what he is holding is a mirror.