



SYLVIA ZIEMANN

ACCIDENTAL UTOPIA

ART GALLERY OF REGINA



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1. *Just Another Crisis of Creativity*, watercolor and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inches
2. *Traumdeutung*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches
3. *The World is on Fire*, ink on paper, 22 x 30 inches

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I have a bad feeling about this

What hungry ghosts stalk your dreams? Fill the chambers of your heart? Your skull, lungs and gut? What is the weight, the heavy anchor, at the core of you? In the liminal space between sleep and wakefulness, Sylvia Ziemann's pen and ink drawings infiltrate – "The World Is On Fire" tattooed on a cranium where the third eye would be, rabbits hunched in the nasal cavity. Is there a more potent image of fear than rabbits, ears up, quivering in anticipation of an unseen predator? How to proceed with your day when, in the place of insight, of clairvoyance, there is a bold statement of apocalypse?

According to cultural geographer, Yi Fu Tuan, fear is a complex feeling of which there are two strains: alarm and anxiety (Tuan 5). Alarm is triggered by an "obtrusive event" in the animal's environment. The rabbit darts for the thicket. Anxiety is more pervasive. A sense of dread, "a presentiment of danger when nothing in the immediate surroundings can be pinpointed as dangerous." Tuan adds that "the need for decisive action is checked by the lack of any specific, circumventable threat" (Tuan 5).

We live in anxious times. As I write this, 15,000 scientists from 184 countries have signed a letter issuing "a warning to humanity" about systemic, environmental collapse. Tens of thousands of white nationalist protestors march through Warsaw carrying banners with xenophobic slogans. In the dark bowels of Ziemann's drawing, words float: *river oil spill North Saskatchewan Muskoday crude chemicals toxic benzene xylene headaches irritation symptoms throat vulnerable health conditions*. A train whistle blows in the distance. The locus of fear is too diffuse.

"Now what will you do?" Ziemann asks.

How much uncertainty can you tolerate?

What ghosts stalk your dreams? Wake you from your sleep? An animal experiences fear when it is in an alien, disorienting milieu, "separated from the supportive objects and figures of its home ground (Tuan 7).

What lies at the edge of our comfortable slumber? On the other side of the border, a pack of wolves, their wet-eyed stare. Imagination intensifies fear in the human world: the more fertile the imagination, the greater the fear (Tuan 6).

We experience fear in our minds, but it arises from external circumstances – the omnipresent chaos, natural and human, that exists beyond the boundaries of our known worlds (Tuan 8). And the boundaries continually shift and palpitate as chaos launches incursions into our ordinary lives. In one of Ziemann's bursting hearts, the phrase: *Mom, angiogram, August 8, 2016, pacemaker, corrupted artery*. In another: *Deep love = fear of loss*. Everything is made strange when chaos invades.

as I mark, I am marked

Our bodies, too, bear an ever-present border between the known and the chaos beyond. Normally we are supported by our bodies, but they are capable of turmoil,

of eruptions that destroy our peace (Tuan 27). We try to contain the wildness of the body. We take our vitamins. We arrange our hair. The word “cosmetics” comes from the Greek root *kosmos*, to order. By decorating and deodorizing, we try to make of the body familiar (though we are teeming with monsters).

the importance of my anguish

We are afraid. Our dreams disturb us. We try to order our bodies. We try to order our worlds. Tuan writes that every human construction – material or mental – exists to contain chaos. Our homes and cultivated fields are fortresses meant to defend us, to keep inimical forces at bay (Tuan 7). Similarly, fairy-tales and philosophical systems “are shelters built by the mind in which human beings can rest, at least temporarily, from the siege of inchoate experience and doubt” (Tuan 6).

“Now what will you do?” Here’s what I think: Ziemann aims to order chaos through drawing, “an almost impossible task.” In doing so, she engenders a new myth for our anxious moment. “Red Riding Hood’s adventure into the belly of the wolf could not have turned out better,” Ziemann writes. “By going deep, she [Red Riding Hood], (wearing a fox-stole) was able to turn everything on its head.”

art is the only thing that can make the pain stop

In an ethnographic survey of “fearless” societies, that is, of societies relatively unoppressed by the aegis of fear, several common traits emerge: an economy in which people do not impose their wills on the environment; small social groups, which allow for cooperation and genuine care for individual members; and rootedness to a particular place (Tuan 43).

How like the world Ziemann depicts in her paintings: a farmstead, a haven, worked communally by human-animal, hybrid-others. By “monsters,” whose bodies defy “natural,” that is, restrictive boundaries imposed by our late capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchal milieu. Indeed, the word “monster” comes from the Latin word, *monstrum*, a sign or portent that disrupts “natural order.” And *monstrum* derives from *monstro* to show, as in demonstrate.

With *Accidental Utopia*, Ziemann goes into the belly of the wolf, the fear and the chaos, wild black curls, adorned in a fox-stole, and she returns with a story that might give us ease. That might give us hope. That might demonstrate or show us the potential for another way.

Sheri Benning

Works Cited

Tuan, Yi-fu. *Landscapes of Fear*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1979

Sylvia Ziemann: *Accidental Utopia*
December 9, 2017 – February 23, 2018

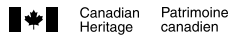
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