

REVIEW: "Dark Matter" at Arsenal Rolls in the Dirt While Looking to the Stars



by Benjamin Bruneau

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Dark matter is pervasive but elusive. While estimated to make up a large part of the total mass of the universe, it's invisible and as yet undetectable, exerting gravitic force from ubiquitous obscurity. In a sense, it mirrors the aura of art, ineffable and inexorable. "Dark matter" also evokes the prima materia of the alchemist, the primordial ooze of the first substance, from which comes all other substances. For art critic and historian James Elkins, that substance is paint, extruded from the tube, transmuted into something else by the artist, something greater, yet still, ultimately, so much muck. "Dark Matter" at Arsenal approximates both these realms, weighty and transubstantial, investigating a contemporary return to the material and affect of painting.

The exhibition "Dark Matter" (which opened Nov. 29, 2012, and posts no close date) barely fills two cavernous chambers at the Montreal gallery's Toronto location. With only one or two works per wall in the huge warehouse conversion, there's a lot of white showing, but empty space is part and parcel with the theme, and the massive works hold their own. Anchoring the two rooms, works by **Allison Schulnik** from her "Hobo Clowns" series (2008-9) gruesomely survey the gallery. In a deeply excremental palette, the figures rise almost sculpturally from the canvas like a filthy heap, embodying an affect that carries through the entire exhibition — a weight in the pit of your stomach, a disturbing visual fulfillment. Her clay-mation video from the series opens the show, and its psychedelic visuals and eerie soundtrack by Grizzly Bear follow you through the space. It's a wonderful work, meandering and soulful, yet firmly rooted in the simple squishiness of clay. Despite its beauty, the queasiness of Schulnik's painting roils beneath the surface.

Anselm Kiefer's "Melancholia" (2005), a monumental canvas with a polyhedral glass, steel, and dirt appendage overhanging it, has a sense of otherworldliness. Elkins would surely find something alchemical in paint, which in the artist's hands becomes a crust of oxidized mud and pooling pearlescent scum: a Martian landscape wholly lifted from the surface of the alien world. Extraterrestriality is reflected on the wall adjacent in two of the late Paterson Ewen's mixed media reductions. Gouged from plywood and smeared with paint and sand, they cannot be called paintings as such, but have a painterly touch and an ecstatic, spinning rhythm. "Full Moon" (1984) exudes color like bruised skin. "Rotating Galaxy" incorporates dirt and stone mixed into the pigment, and nicely aligns Kiefer, if only for its material treatment. Ewen's works enact a microcosm, the cosmos found in its smallest constituent parts—a feature of both medieval alchemical thought and contemporary physics. What's most lovely about these pieces, though, is their one-to-one relationship with the body of the viewer. You could almost spread your arms like the Vitruvian man, and be the size of the universe.

Like a black hole, Ugo Rondinone's "The Twenty-first Hour of the Poem" (2008) draws all the mass to the center of the space, placing everything else in its orbit. An absurdly large (and black) lightbulb cast in wax, it seems diminutive within Arsenal's universe, making the emptiness of the converted warehouse palpable, and somehow shrinking the largescale paintings around it. That apparent absence becomes full of gravity, the way the cathedral, depicted now as ruins in Marc Seguin's 2010 canvas on the westernmost wall, must have been when whole.

Resisting conceptualization but rewarding meditation, "Dark Matter" exults in the primacy of materiality, in what is base and crude, but holds cosmic significance. Standing within the gallery, we become just meat, profoundly humbled and subject to the same processes of decay, calcification, and erosion as the stuff around us, and in those transformations, exalted.