

In the visionary work of late artist John Scott, 'the future is coming at us with knives'

CBC Arts

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Feb 25, 2025

<https://www.cbc.ca/arts/in-the-visionary-work-of-late-artist-john-scott-the-future-is-coming-at-us-with-knives-1.7467980>



Installation view of John Scott: Firestorm at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2024. (McMichael Canadian Art Collection)

In a second-floor gallery overlooking the Humber River Valley, a fire-breathing warplane sketched in black oil slices through the heavens. The posters and paintings hanging nearby wear phrases like "ground zero," "cruise missile" and "2nd strike." At the opposite end of the room, a mutant motorbike sheathed in plate armour idles, as if on patrol. The blade of a scythe hangs menacingly from its side.

At the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., the exhibition *Firestorm* focuses on the late Toronto artist John Scott's depictions of what he called "engines of history" — the violent instruments, mechanisms and vehicles through which power has been brutally won and maintained over the last century.

Spanning four decades, much of the artwork of Firestorm was made through the Cold War lens of arms races, nuclear brinksmanship and the Doomsday Clock ticking toward midnight. Even just a few years ago, this same assortment of objects and images may have looked historical. But today, the work of the artist — who died in 2022, one week before Russia began its invasion of Ukraine — appears eerily prophetic. His stubby black brush has left us dire warnings about political strongmen, Big Data, techno-fascism, the military industrial complex and Canadian sovereignty jeopardized by American imperialism.



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"The future is coming at us with knives," says art historian and exhibition curator John O'Brian, surveying Scott's grim vision. "John seems to be a sort of talismanic figure for our times."

It is no coincidence Scott made work inspired by the story of Frankenstein, the curator says. "That is the original nightmare vision of scientific experiment gone wrong. And it hasn't abated. Lots of people hoped it would following the end of the so-called Cold War — which never did end, it continues to this day. If anything, it is more dangerous now than it was before."

Scott was born in Windsor, Ont., across the Detroit River from Motor City. His dad worked in the local factories and died of industrial emphysema when Scott was 11. As a young teen, Scott left home and began taking factory jobs himself. He was fascinated by mechanical power, O'Brian says. "He loved motorcycles. He drove them; he cracked them up." He had a deep attraction to the "hyper-masculine

machinery" of his day. "At the same time," the curator explains, "there was a deep revulsion to what those machines did and could do."

Stretching 30 feet across one gallery wall, *Between the Eyes* is perhaps the exhibition's centrepiece. The mixed media work from 1989 shows a shadowy rendering of the Lockheed SR-71, a high-power reconnaissance aircraft that still holds world speed and altitude records three decades after its retirement. The sinister-looking spy plane is flanked by photographic prints of the artist's own eyes, emphasizing the all-seeing power of the military state. As O'Brian notes in an exhibition essay, the artwork occupies the same square footage as Picasso's famous *Guernica* — an anti-war painting that pictures the carnage after the titular Basque town was razed by air attacks. Scott considered the work foundational to his own art-making.



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In characteristic style, *Between the Eyes* is annotated with scratchy fragments of text, owing as much to diagram labels and comic books as bathroom graffiti. "Between the eyes/Over our heads/Under our noses," reads the main inscription. "The fastest plane on the planet," says another. Sharp-eyed visitors will find the words "ubiquitous," "cruel," "pitiful" and "helpless" marked faintly against the background. It's a device Scott long used to intone, contextualize and comment on his own images, O'Brian says. It's also a technique shared by some of his best-known contemporaries.

"It seems to me that he has been insufficiently recognized for being the Neo-Expressionist equivalent in Canada of [Jean-Michel] Basquiat in the United States," says the curator. "Not enough can be said about Basquiat, and his paintings sell for tens of millions of dollars. Meanwhile, John Scott, the Canadian, has not received that international recognition."

Nearby, the hood of a Pontiac Trans Am held aloft by a narrow plinth resembles a stealth bomber in flight. The sculpture does a double duty, acknowledging the absence of Scott's magnum opus, *Trans Am Apocalypse*. The full-size muscle car etched with the Book of Revelations couldn't have fit inside the McMichael's doors even if they'd wanted to include it, says the curator. But the soaring car hood near the exhibition entry winks as if to say, "You know about *that* apocalypse; here are some fresh visions of hell." It draws visitors' minds toward the sky and the threats that seemingly always hang overhead.



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Hiding around the next corner waits the armed and armoured motorcycle, known as *The Conqueror Worm*. Scott conceived of the sculpture after visiting Beirut at the height of the Lebanese Civil War. There, he witnessed the realities of conflict first-hand. He imagined the metal beast as a sort of juggernaut. "This is a creature," he wrote, "which spans the globe, from which there is no escaping." The autonomous war machine was mainly speculation in 1997, when Scott completed the work, but today, such Conqueror Worms have revolutionized every battlefield — land, air and sea — with the rise of drone warfare.

In contrast with the displays of military muscle, Firestorm contains dozens of drawings and paintings of Scott's soft-bodied rabbit-like characters. They weep and flail. They congregate in masses. Vulnerable, scared and expendable, Scott's bunny-men represent the populations beleaguered by state oppression. The symbol, O'Brian says, derives from the artist's stint working at the University of Toronto's zoological labs, where he cared for the animals used for experimentation, including countless rabbits.



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Unlike the bunny figures, which are plentiful, Firestorm includes just one image of another important Scott persona. The Dark Commander is a Napoleonic figure who wears a tricorn hat. He stands imperiously, presiding over the gallery from a tall canvas installed in one corner. A later character to join Scott's universe, the Dark Commander signifies authoritarian power as well as the fascist tendencies latent to humanity. Behind the figure, Scott often included a matrix of numbers — a representation of algorithms and "the power of data," says O'Brian. "You need only to look south of the border with the tech oligarchs surrounding Trump to have some clear idea about who the dark commanders are these days."

Near the back of the exhibition, playing from a small monitor, Scott shares some of his most acute and startling prophecies. *Born Near the U.S.A.*, named after the Springsteen hit, is a monologue from 1988 animated with Scott's drawings. Here, in a lucid, stream-of-consciousness rhapsody the artist reflects upon growing up in Windsor in the shadow of a cultural and political superpower, his family's generations

of manual labour and a future in which workers become more and more integrated with their machinery, transforming what it means to be human.

"There's a link between those machine lines — those assembly lines — and the submarines off our Atlantic and Pacific coasts," says Scott's narration. "We're all part and parcel of making a new future, of reinventing even the biological form of man and woman. God knows what the worker of 2020 will look like. We might be just lumps of industrialized protoplasm. The new worker — mysterious and unknown and ... ugh. And the new sex, who can even imagine that? The delirious beauty of new diseases. Even the idea of our bodies, even the idea of our identities might be really different, and we might be parcelled up in unique ways."

The accompanying sketches are messy and quick — messier and quicker than anything that hangs on the walls around. It's as if Scott is racing just to keep up with the speedway of visions roaring through his mind.