

Humour lightens morose vision

Visual arts

A BAD YEAR FOR PEOPLE/ SAM DARGAN

Rokeby Gallery

LONDON ★★★★★

It's a ho-hum sort of an afternoon of leaden grey light and spitting rain-cum-snow in the West End of London, but through the window of this small and youngish gallery in Store Street, I spot a vision to cheer the heart: a quite sizable painting on a wall at the back of a long, thin room shows promise of a new dawn... Hallelujah, I think to myself, turning up the coat collar.

Clouds scud through the sky, and a kind of light is breaking across a wide, open bowl of sky. Three stark trees announce their presence in bold silhouette. The whole thing looks, in its intimations of immortality, like something that Caspar David Friedrich might have painted about 200 years ago. Even the three trees seem to have some kind of half-memory of the three crosses on Golgotha's Hill. Yes, the

whole composition puts one in mind of Friedrich's beguiling and intensely Christian vision. Well, it does at this distance anyway.

So I slip indoors out of the cold to warm my hands and take a closer look. This is one of a show of new works by a young painter called Sam Dargan. Dargan graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2002, and this is his first solo show.

Closer attention shows that Dargan had played a bit of a trick on me - or, to be fairer to him, put it down to my inability to spot detail at a distance of 20 yards or so. Yes, there's something I'd missed altogether from the road. One of the trees is being part-embraced by a mangled, crashed car. It's a terrible, jarring detail amidst the serenely symphonic landscape, and it turns what had seemed to be a landscape study into a puzzling, quasi-anecdotal piece. The car looks well established around that tree. There are no humans around, and no other evidence of rush or violence. This is a puzzlingly settled situation. I ask for a list of works so that I can read the

title: "La La Lovely Landscape (with political assassination)". So the luscious landscape is self-consciously lovely in order, in part, to point up the violence.

That painting is the most self-consciously flamboyant and painterly of all the works in this show. It's amongst the largest too - Dargan's work is sometimes no bigger than an over-size seaside postcard. Look at a fine series of 25 paintings down in the basement called "A Bad Year for People", for example. These paintings look as if they might have arrived on this wall by happenstance, perhaps blown there by some wind. More a cloud of helpless, wind-blown insects than works of art on a gallery wall. Their size and their relative positioning to each other make them feel like snatched and wholly unpretentious moments of observation. It makes you feel surprised by how humanly significant their subject matter seems to be when you come to examine each one closely. And each one merits close examination. Much of Dargan's work is also painted on board,



On his way up: Sam Dargan and his 'No One Gives a Toss Anymore'

which gives it a certain hard, brittle sheen. This seems to suit the mood of much of the work. It is as if he is standing apart from his subject matter; not so much the maker as some fairly disinterested third party.

Generally speaking, Dargan is an acute, funny and baleful observer of the absurdities of the human situation. Most of the

paintings in this show include human presences, often men in suits who are painfully at odd with their destinies. It's a morose vision, which is enlivened and lightened by Dargan's humour.

Imagine a group of middle-aged men, for example, foot-slogging their way up a wind-swept hill on a day such as this one. The one in the lead is carrying a white

flag. They are followers, all right. But of whom? And why, in heaven's name? This is the story of one of Dargan's best small paintings. It's called "No One Gives a Toss Anymore", and it's down in the basement, sulking a bit.

Poor old Sisyphus. Poor old us.

MICHAEL GLOVER

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Sam Dargan

★★★★★

Rokeby West End

Despite their source in news stories and political biographies, Sam Dargan's paintings of skulls, the walking wounded, torture victims and wretched or oppressed men speak more of the flippancy brought about by political disenfranchisement than real engagement. His deadpan style, grungy palette and restricted painterly language impart a laconic self-consciousness that signals mannerism rather than gritty attitude. Like much of the bad-boy blood and guts so often depicted in art of the last decade or so, it is wilfully of its era and yet detrimentally anachronistic—not because it is politically incorrect, but numb to the point of vacuity.



'Bad Bad Boy', 2006

This disengagement is perversely befitting of the faceless everyman that Dargan represents. He places these drones in grim or compromising circumstances: a priest in his underwear with an eye patch and shaving cuts sits doodling on his blank sermon notes; someone receives the text 'dont cum bak afta lunch. Ur sakd. Fuk of.'; a monk peruses porn mags; two men sit in an empty room with a baseball bat, a Bible, a briefcase and newspapers with hysterical headlines, and so on. But although each painting is dotted with details so that it reads like a short story – a carrier bag is caught up in a tree or a piece of red thread has been tied around a wrist – their generic nature falls short of literary grace.

Sally O'Reilly



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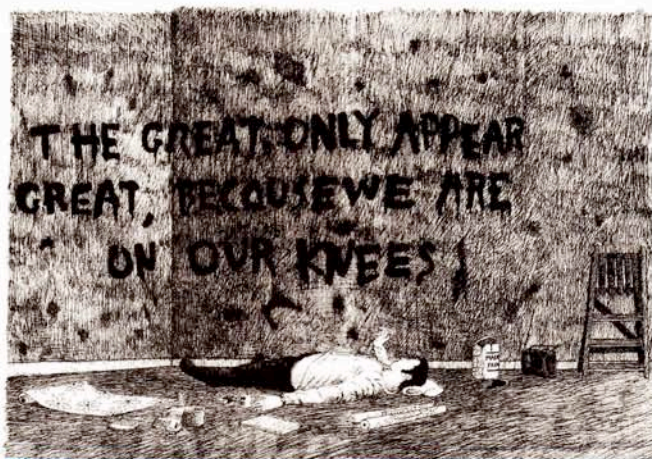
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Office apocalypse: SAM DARGAN



Left: *Suburban Cross Dresser*, 2006. Top: *Junk mail addressed to the Dead*, 2006. Above: *Compromise #1*, 2006

As the RCA graduate's first solo show of paintings at Rokeby proves, boring dead-end jobs can turn grisly as his characters become trapped in a tortuous and violent world.

Sam Dargan likes to stick a sore finger into the modern dissatisfaction with working life, though in Dargan's mind, things are a bit more savage, unforgiving and downright nasty than in reality. In his paintings, bland middle management characters going through the daily slog in soulless jobs disintegrate, scrawling desperate cries for help on walls or being tortured by invisible colleagues. The small pieces on canvas or board brim with hopeless atmosphere. Think *The Office* meets *The League of Gentlemen* shot by Kurosawa. In Dargan's world there is no way out.

Dazed & Confused: What inspired you to create this desperate series of paintings?

Sam Dargan: These characters came about while I was recovering from a broken wrist when I had a major deadline on the way. My experiences at work seemed to coalesce with my own frustration, so I began to produce work that showed people who were worse off than me, like snotty boys' adventures mutated

into revenge fantasies. Gradually, this evolved from a simplistic sense of antagonism towards a drone-like existence to a broader look at the nature of masculinity. I've tried to achieve a feeling of being trapped, frustrated and alienated by the situations the protagonists face and their inability to escape, whether that is because they are prevented physically or because of their reluctance to do so.

D&C: There is something very cinematic about the situations you depict. How do films influence you?

SD: The films of Carol Reed have been an important resource, particularly *The Third Man*, *Odd Man Out* and *The Man Between*. All these feature flawed heroes, anti-heroes, but they are all very charismatic. The noir atmosphere is important in Reed's work, but it is the mood of Akira Kurosawa's contemporarily placed movies such as *Stray Dog*, *High and Low* and *The Bad Sleep Well* that has influenced a lot of what I am doing right now. The latter is about one man trying to bring down the vicious corporation that he works for, but

again, he is an anti-hero as he has lied and deceived to get where he is and to get what he wants.

D&C: There's something very violent about your work, but we never see the actual act of brutality, only its aftermath. Why is that?

SD: I think it's important that the violence is absent and you only see the precursor to it or the aftermath – there is something romantic in that. I believe images that don't actually show violence but just its results are far more powerful and poetic than the incident itself. Often, the pain inflicted on the characters is cartoonish, or it may reflect a wider political point. I use a lot of images and stories from newspapers as reference. At the same time, there is a very dark humour in those pieces, which I think is a kind of hateful slapstick.

Sam Dargan is showing *A Bad Year for Bad People* at Rokeby, 37 Store Street, London WC1 from January 3 – February 13 www.rokebygallery.com