

A hedge against the recession of sentience

A friend of mine recently returned from California with a curious story of a woman who professed “to not like art.” Which if true would be akin to not liking oxygen or water—a miserable state in which you’re bound to constantly consume that which you despise.

More likely, we decided, was that she had an idea of “art” as something alien and difficult, something that had little to do with her. For to not like art is to not like being human, to yearn for the recession of sentience, to be swaddled by numb, dumb animal darkness. I don’t think she meant it.

Art is vital stuff. It stirs in that frontier of consciousness we sometimes call the soul.

It is convenient to think of art as a human invention, to believe ourselves distinguished by our will to create, our urge to establish ourselves as petty gods capable of authoring our own worlds. But the evidence suggests that art may have arrived before we did, for the creatures who pressed their palms to a cave wall in a place we now call Spain may not have been true men but doomed Neanderthals, struggling to cut through the sensory interference and arrive at something like sense and meaning—an awareness of themselves as beings in a not particularly welcoming world, a wakening wonder at being alive and autonomous, a cold creeping intimation of the possibility, if not inevitability, of death.

They were working through the mystery before we had language, before we had logic and math and science, all those tools that simulate orderliness and give us comfort. They were engaged in arranging



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and re-purposing elements of nature, making something stand for something else. How can a scrawl of charcoal be perceived as a prehistoric bison or your grandmother? How is that not a miracle? How is that not magic?

We went to the wizard David Bailin’s studio recently.

The studio is in a two-car garage attached to a two-story brick house in west Little Rock. It is not the sort of house that you might imagine a professional artist to inhabit. It is large and pleasant, redolent of an untormented family existence. A friendly well-fed black Lab pads about the premises. It is the sort of place you can drive past without wondering what the people who dwell within might be getting up to. I’m not sure I could pick it out of a lineup.

But inside, tacked to the walls, are wonders as fantastic in their way as those first cave paintings are in theirs.

Bailin, whom I have known for more than 20 years, is one of my favorite artists. He works primarily in charcoal on paper. He draws with a sometimes frightening accuracy; he makes marks on paper that he stains with coffee. He obliterates, obscures and rakes his surfaces with instruments in service of producing visions. Now, after years of eschewing

color in his work, he is adding pastel and oils, mostly blending them in but sometimes blocking out blue streams or white air.

At the moment he is preparing for a show, *Dreams and Disaster*, which opens Thursday at the Arts & Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in Pine Bluff. He invited us because some of the drawings in the show are influenced by the novels of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, in which Karen and I are both deeply interested. In particular, Bailin cites Murakami’s novels *Kafka on the Shore* and *1Q84* (first published in 2002 and 2009, respectively).

Kafka on the Shore tells the converging stories, in alternating chapters, of a 15-year-old who calls himself Kafka, the son of a remote sculptor, who runs away in search of his long-departed mother and older sister, and an old man named Nakata who makes a living by finding stray cats in Tokyo. (When Nakata was a child during World War II he suffered trauma that wiped clean his mind and stunted his intellect but gave him the compensatory ability to talk to cats.) *1Q84* is a sprawling 900-page novel, first published as three separate books in Japan, which begins with a female assassin caught in a Tokyo traffic jam. She gets out of her cab, climbs down an emergency escape ladder and somehow enters an alternate reality.

The works Bailin showed us—you can see some of them at his website bailinstudio.com—are big drawings, about six feet high by seven feet wide, that echo Murakami’s otherworldly novels in that their well-observed, prosaic details are interrupted by dream-like visions in which human figures, their fac-



Yellow Lines by David Bailin. 2013, 73 x 83 inches, charcoal, pastel and coffee on prepared paper.

es blurred or turned away from the viewer, seem to drift or float toward some inarticulate salaryman’s dread, represented by textural roiling and black scrawls. Bailin’s works look like worlds besmirched—or attacked—by chaos, where sucking vortexes disturb the ordered plats imposed by residential developers.

Bailin often draws the moment of when the surreal breaks in on human routine, and he realistically sets these terrors in the suburban neighborhood that abuts his own, a place of ’60s-style ranch houses and split-levels ornamented by traffic circles that feel both alien and whim-

sical. Like Murakami, Bailin renders the outlandish with a laconic equanimity. The magic that rings through both artists’ works is not necessarily mind-blowing—the characters caught up in these episodes seem to accept that there must be an explanation, even if their little human minds cannot generate one.

They are flowing toward something they cannot understand. They are resigned, yet awake to whatever’s out there. They are human.

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