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***Irreality and America: Jonathan Beer on the Work of Kent Dorn***

America is a nation created by dreams, a culture assembled by the ideas of its people. A vision of a more desirable place in the world and an aptitude for reinvention has constructed a country where a national identity did not previously exist. A passage to the East, the fabled city of El Dorado, the fountain of youth, the California Gold Rush, and countless dreams of land, prosperity, and success all contributed to this mythos, and the nation has come to thrive on the resulting irreality found between dreams and their imperfect realization. Our self-made culture, built from pieces of so many other civilizations and peoples reflects our aptitude for revision. Today, an obsession with tailoring our histories and identities permeates the American consciousness; we select aspects of ourselves we wish to present, and rehang our own image.

Kent Dorn's work is born from that distinctly American irreality. Scenes of long-haired, plaid-wearing figures are staged in forests that seem familiar but avoid specificity—they are more like the visions of mystic painter Charles Burchfield than the photographer Ansel Adams. The eerie rivers and lakes that divide Dorn's dreamlike paintings cut through a territory that belongs to 1970s cult horror films rather than a geographic location. Even the characters themselves are uncertain of their origin and existence. They are lost in what should be an idyllic natural world yet their ghostly forms are always in danger of fading into the environment. Their destiny is uncertain. In *Down by the River* (2010), numerous figures assert their existence in thickly painted forms and face away from the viewer, staring into the same specter of a sun that haunts all of Dorn's images, searching for an unknown desire on the far bank of an ethereal lake. In some works, they have already disappeared. In *Dead End (Water's Edge)* (2010), we see a car still with its luggage strapped to the top. The belongings of its former occupants lie on the riverbank as a lone campfire blazes, yet the figures are mysteriously absent, vanished into thin air.

There is a clear sense of selection in Dorn's images; the characters and landscape are delicately arranged, placed like characters on a stage. They maintain independence from one another in how they are painted: thin washes create an illustrative façade that draws you in, not unlike a theater set or advertisement backdrop. We glide through his worlds until we are snagged on the visceral, thick, and often erratic paint application that bars us from slipping into the idyllic dream. It's as if the artist knows the dangers of his own irreality, and protects us from joining his characters on their indeterminate trance-like quests, and from the dark lakes and poison flora that might ensnare our minds.

Dorn invites this theatricality into his oeuvre. Works like *Fall* (2010) provide an entrance point into the narrative aspects of his work. One can gaze directly into this fallen man, dramatically poised after an imaginary plunge. One cannot help but picture oneself in his position; simultaneously one is part of the manufactured fantasy (or nightmare) but also tied to reality with the thickness of his paint. The paintings of Kent Dorn are paradoxical American visualizations, exclaiming their existence as valid while acknowledging the shallowness of their material nature. Dorn shines in his ability to make us believe in a world so fragile. We identify with his figures as they navigate a world of dreams on their search for something beyond comprehension. They are examples of a sublime American vision that is as beautiful as it is eerie, one that invites us to suspend reality and get lost in search of a dream.



## The Work of KENT DORN

*Dead End (Water's Edge)*, 2011 ..... 90

45" x 69" – Mixed media on canvas

*Down by the River*, 2010 ..... 92

45" x 69" – Mixed media on canvas

*Untitled (Van)*, 2010 ..... 94

45" x 60" – Mixed media on canvas

*Fall*, 2010 ..... 96

45" x 32" – Mixed media on canvas

Background Detail: *Dead Blue Jay*, 2010 – 18" x 24" – Mixed media on canvas

*all images courtesy of the artist and Freight + Volume, NY*















## No Explode

The grapefruit tree explodes with the power of its senselessness.

To hold this thought in my mind I had to shoo away many others.

It's really a leap to believe Howdy Doody was actually speaking  
when he sang all those songs, and not some semi-retired Oklahoman.

We don't seem to be working that hard at deflecting asteroids  
but we talk about them all the time, like diamonds we can't wait  
to meet in person, more charismatic moons. This cocktail of hardwood

and bamboo laminates might be my best friend tonight  
when my love is away listening to Mexican radio and the wind  
howls like a spooked cartoon, frisking the leaves of the grapefruit  
tree dead from last week's frost. If anybody comes looking for me  
tell them I've gone to be one of those big babes in the dipper.

Whatever speaks through me is throwing its voice from afar.

