

Dan Hampson

Fitzcarraldo

Christopher Bucklow

Dan Hampson paints explorers. We see figures like Uri Gagarin, Dr Livingstone or Captain Scott engaged in their various heroic adventures. But I sense the artist is both admiring and amused. His point of view seems to be taken from a distant hill-top where the constitution of the white Western male can be seen with the advantage of remove. From this hill-top there is much to admire and much to condemn, much that is attractive and much that one can only laugh at. But the laughter is gentle, not mocking, and the attraction is coloured by amazed incredulity. There is also a sense of wonder that anyone can be so 'bought in' to a way of being; so motivated, so plainly "up for it"; all bull-neck and drive, energized by curiosity and patriotism. The sentence "So this is what it is to be a man", seems to hover over the images, with only an after taste of sweet irony.

But artists should be metaphor hunters. These big beasts can be elusive. One needs elevation, cunning, or luck. One way or another Hampson's instincts drew him to the metaphor of the explorer. So this is the artist as explorer. What better metaphor for life's journey, for *his* life's journey? The neophyte not as passive traveler or tourist but an active explorer, where curiosity, desire, wonder, humility and ego, intrepidly set forth into the dark interior of an unknown continent called human nature. This nature is variously formed in the art-world jungle, in the souls of the Great Dead, those spirit guides whose paths we follow or reject, and in the continent of daily life just trying to keep life and limb together. The scenarios he paints are noble, heroic, pathetic and comic as the artist struggles through tangled thickets and across vast deserts to explore his universe.

Of course, the universe explored is both external and internal, and the metaphors bounce between the two realms to create an absorbing and often amusing story. The title of the exhibition is from the 1980s Herzog film *Fitzcarraldo*. The hero penetrates the rain forest hauling a boat in order to exploit and trade rubber on an inaccessible river, his aim is noble and crazy for he wants to build an opera house in the jungle. Another perfect metaphor. Though are the natives internal or external? Perhaps they are both?

Hampson's paintings are worked fast with one-hit energy. There is joy and risk here and like *Fitzcarraldo* they balance on an ambitious, punch-drunk, line between success and failure. But from the hill-top from which they were painted, success and failure are equals which can be enjoyed with detached amusement.