



Jimmy Baker

by Emily Mello

There is no beginning or end in this group of Jimmy Baker's most recent work, but one can find a bit of "Once upon a time" in *The Wind of Change*, a small landscape depicting a tidy civilization on the banks of the Ohio River, quietly waiting for the red clouds above to unleash toxic disaster. This elegiac pastoral seems like an anachronism within its slick plastic frame, a silhouette of industrial wasteland reflecting a cemetery and toxic buckeye roots. Conflating a history of foreboding images as old as the anxiety accompanying every techno-industrial advance, Baker hangs his meticulously rendered oil painting, appearing as a relic of American allegoric traditions, against a splash of real Ohio river water on the wall behind it.

We can imagine a lone figure racing away from this approaching disaster on *The Interceptor*, a bicycle taking the name of Mel Gibson's car in Madmax. Here, painting takes a turn from the psychological preparation of imaging the future, to a utilitarian camouflage - the bike further fortified with metal plates shielding spokes, and nails protecting the grip of do-it-yourself gumption on the handle bars. We have our doubts, as does the artist with his tongue and cheek titles, as to whether such a defiant spirit can out pedal the imminent catastrophe, or if the rider's hopefulness derives from watching too many movies.

A viewer raised on science fiction films may be inclined to plot a linear narrative through Baker's pieces, but while *The Omen* presents a canary signal of inevitable apocalypse in melting miniature, a clear trajectory of progress continues to be undermined elsewhere. A museum quality vitrine supported by a handicap rail houses a police badge along with a certificate of authenticity, fabricated to seem as if it were a nostalgic treasure from the movie Terminator 2 Judgment Day. The film was produced in 1990, the same year that progress is to be measured against in the Kyoto Protocol, which mandates that participating countries reduce their greenhouse emissions by 7% below what they were in 1990 by the year 2010. Here the goal is to go backwards, perhaps the same regressive impulse of a culture that creates and collects memorabilia for fear of losing it all.

*Fantastic Distractions*, a collection of digital stills from sci-fi cinema, emerges as a constellation of oracles captured in clear resin capsules. At best the lore of science fiction warns us of what we already know, that the way we are living now cannot be sustained, but Baker carries this imagery to the quiet deterioration that exists in the present. An EPA building figured with the chemical erasure of bleach applied on a theatrically tattered banner, brings the mundane into view as a cinematic nightmare in *The Day After Yesterday*. This piece questions the effectiveness and trustworthiness of government agencies claiming the role of environmental protectors. More often the myths of science fiction, in all their grandeur, de-legitimize the scientific, social, political, literary or aesthetic voices reminding us of what we do not want to hear - the necessity of change. We continue to tell and live out these stories, recognizing these heralds as the eccentric characters that must be hopelessly ignored to continue the lived myth that acts of terrorism and environmental disaster appear as otherworldly accidents on our television sets; dress rehearsals for an ever-latent future. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio sees this voyeurism developing alongside popular cinema's special effects, "whose instantaneity and interactivity exclude any coherent narrative whatsoever, leaving the spectator no longer being provided with any kind of verisimilitude, but fed exclusively on the exhibition of accidents." Baker's thoughtfulness suggests that the catastrophes played out in our spectacular imaginations are as accidental as our belief that a splash of dirty river water on the gallery wall is no more than a haphazard afterthought.