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PAINTING CHEKHOV'S GUN

Matthew Ryan Smith

Early in Anton Chekhov's drama *The Seagull* (1896), the protagonist Konstantin casually walks across the stage carrying a rifle. The audience learns that he is a young playwright seeking the affection of Nina, an actress, who dismisses him for the attention of an older, more successful novelist. During Act II the gun goes off for the first time; the target, a seagull that Konstantin shoots and unceremoniously lays at Nina's feet as a morbid gift and bitter metaphor for his recently-failed play. Two years later, Konstantin and Nina are reunited and tenderly share the latest sufferings of their lives before Nina abruptly departs. Devastated and alone once again, Konstantin proceeds to tear up his manuscripts and exits the stage. Shortly after, the audience hears a gun discharge: this time Konstantin has used it upon himself, and the play ends in tragedy.¹

The Seagull illustrates the narrative precept known as Chekhov's Gun, which stipulates that every element introduced in a story should be indispensable to the plot. The term is often spoken about in the same breath as a red herring or foreshadowing, but doing so woefully misses the mark.² In a letter to a friend, Chekhov speculates that "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." His remarks confirm that, rather than prognosticate or mislead the audience, as red herrings and foreshadowing intend to do, understated elements should eventually rear their head and often to maximum effect. Today, Chekhov's Gun is recognised as a productive strategy of concision and routinely cited as a canonical element to creative writing.

In Coming Down the Mountain, Matt Bahen adopts the notion of Chekhov's Gun and applies it to a series of paintings that primarily feature water cascading down mountains to collect in valleys and marshlands below. Knowing Bahen, this is not altogether surprising. His impastoed surfaces have appropriated core themes and devices found in contemporary literature and film for years, notably those of Jeff Vandeermeer's Southern Reach trilogy (2014) and Andrei Tarkovsky's Stalker (1979). In painting Chekhov's Gun, Bahen seeks to elucidate the causal relationship between past political (in)action and present social and environmental catastrophe. The descent of water down the mountain serves to function as a poetic metaphor that affirms how the past has a way of catching up and consuming us, as it did for Konstantin.

We need not look far for examples; take Russia's war in Ukraine. Approaching its second anniversary, the war has only exasperated the looming threat of nuclear hostility and subsequently turned the Doomsday clock to 90 seconds to midnight, "the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been." This is due, in part, to the siege of Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and President Vladimir Putin's allegations that he will, if its borders or sovereignty are compromised, "use all available means to protect Russia and our people – this is not a bluff." In response, Canada updated its emergency protocols to account for the potential of nuclear fallout or a tactical nuclear strike in Europe. The embryo of disorder can be traced to 1991 when Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union after the latter's empiric collapse. Three years later, Ukraine eliminated its nuclear deterrence capacities by relinquishing its arsenal of 1700 Soviet-era nuclear weapons back to Russia, a critical event, according to some, that primed the territory for future occupation. If the trajectory for conflict was initially registered in 1991 (or 1994), it took over thirty years to materialise with full-scale invasion. And once this gun went off, it did not stop firing.









Although Bahen's paintings drive towards metaphorical interpretation, it is their inherent ambiguity — slipping effortlessly between Edenic vistas and nuclear winters — that imbues them with an electric tension. In other words, they invariably fail to rest comfortably on the wall because they wrestle with the tangled dualities of beauty and horror. This quality is evident in the first book of the Southern Reach trilogy (and ensuing film), *Annihilation* (2014), where a team of operatives enter the mysterious Area X to investigate supernatural phenomena in its flora and fauna. Likewise, in *Stalker*, a guide, a writer, and a professor infiltrate a post-apocalyptic hinterland to locate the Room, a divine space where all their desires can be fulfilled. Similar to *Annihilation* and *Stalker*, Bahen's paintings prompt the viewer to ruminate over the detrimental impact of human activities on the natural environment, from industrial pollution to mutually-assured destruction. I would argue that they go so far as to suggest that nature itself is a sentient being with the faculties to throw off the yoke of human capture for the sake of self-preservation.

This idea is elaborated upon in the memorable *From a Trickle to a Flood* (2023). In the painting, Bahen pictures glacial mountaintops in the distance that transition into a meandering trickle of white water as it calmly falls down the mountain. Snow and rock make way for immense green pines that flank the sides of the lush valley below. At the centre of the painting, the water suddenly transforms into a violent deluge that spills out into the marshland and, rather symbolically, floods the viewer's visual space. Here we stand in the water, in the river's raging path, wholly implicated in the scene. What is the reason for this? Is the painting simply a pretty landscape or, following the logic of Chekhov's Gun, does Bahen submit that human fallibility lit the fuse for catastrophe long ago?

These questions can be answered through a breadth of motifs including wildfires, whirlpools, acidic ponds, and floodwater that lie at the foothills of his paintings. Several of these, namely *Holy Fires* (2021) and *A Cascade* (2023), reference biblical accounts in the Old Testament. *A Cascade*, for instance, points to the Flood as it appears in the Book of Genesis and describes God's abhorrence for ten generations of human malfeasance since the creation of Adam. He floods the earth to restore it in His image and approaches the humble Noah to construct an ark that will save Noah's family and earth's creatures. For Bahen, allusions to the Flood archetype and other biblical records are closely related to present-day realities such as the Anthropocene. Geologists characterise the Anthropocene as the progressive alteration of the earth from an array of human-related activities.⁸ By repeatedly picturing states of *terra nullius*, landscapes devoid of human presence, his paintings propose that the conditions for anthropogenic loss were established long ago and are further degenerating. In this light, then, these are not painted landscapes per se but visions of the earth reclaiming itself.

Chekhov's Gun is a productive model for imagining how history unfolds. Through the "emotion machine" that is contemporary painting, Bahen unabashedly employs it "to understand what we're living in now." And what we are living in now is a period of global chaos the seeds of which were sown years and generations earlier. Although his paintings enact potent metaphors that harken back to critical events, they also contain a moral undertone that calls for responsibility and accountability in the present. Whether they are pessimistic or hopeful is entirely unclear, yet this ambiguity is part of their appeal since it opens each to a plurality of readings, from the spiritual to the end-of-days. Ultimately, like the books and films that inspire them, Bahen's paintings are stories in and of themselves.





ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Matt Bahen (b. 1979) was raised in Schomberg, Ontario and currently lives in Toronto, Ontario. He received his BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2002. His work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions including the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ontario and Glenhyrst Art Gallery in Brantford, Ontario. Bahen is represented in Toronto by Nicholas Metivier Gallery, in New York City by Claire Oliver Gallery, and in Edmonton by Peter Robertson Gallery. His work is included in several private and public art collections including the Hamilton Art Gallery, BMO Financial Group, and Sun Life Canada.

LIST OF WORKS

Cover: From a Trickle to a Flood, 2023. Oil on canvas, 72" x 78".

Holy Fires, 2020. Oil on canvas, 48" x 54".

And He Waited for the Wind to Answer, 2021. Oil on canvas, 48" x 54".

He Heard a Crack of Thunder and Saw a Brightness, 2023. Oil on canvas, 60" x 66".

To Parley With Ghosts, 2021. Oil on canvas, 36" x 36".

It Moved As If Some Sea Thing, 2023. Oil on canvas, 60 x 66".

A Cascade, 2023. Oil on canvas, 78" x 108".

The Patience of Stones, 2023. Oil on canvas, 60". x 66".

NOTES

- 1. This is the subject of some controversy since Chekhov regarded *The Seagull* as a comedy –the production's original subtitle was "a comedy in four acts."
- 2. Stephen Eldridge, "Chekhov's gun," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, n.d., https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chekhovs-gun (accessed 31 January, 2024).
- 3. Anton Chekhov quoted in Leah Goldberg, Russian Literature in the 19th Century (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1976), 163.
- 4. "2024 Doomsday Clock Statement," ed. John Mecklin, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 23, 2024, https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/ (accessed 31 January, 2024).
- 5. Vladimir Putin quoted in Guy Faulconbridge, "Putin escalates Ukraine war, issues nuclear threat to West," *The Guardian* (September 21, 2022), https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-signs-decree-mobilisation-says-west-wants-destroy-russia-2022-09-21/ (accessed 31 January, 2024).
- **6.** Jim Bronskill, "Nuclear threat from Ukraine war prompts Ottawa to update plans for catastrophe," *CBC News* (July 29, 2023), https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ukraine-nuclear-threat-ottawa-1.6910849 (accessed 31 January, 2024).
- 7. See Ellie Cook, "Bill Clinton: My Nuke Deal To Blame for Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Newsweek* (April 5, 2023), https://www.newsweek.com/bill-clinton-ukraine-war-russia-nuclear-weapons-deal-vladimir-putin-1792682 (accessed 31 January, 2024).
- 8. See Jeremy Davies, The Birth of the Anthropocene (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016).
- 9. Matt Bahen, interview conducted by the author (28 May, 2023).





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