

**Essay by Nam Le for *Lost Divers* catalog and exhibit at
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I was first pulled into Josh Dorman's work by a painting called NIGHT FISHING. It's one of his wood panel paintings – collage, ink and acrylic – and depicts an underwater scene: a bulging white net in black, puce, green, blue water. In the net are parts of fishes, a shrunken whale, an outsized seahorse, a squid, and a coagulum of unidentifiable plant and organic matter. Outside the net are more shadows and sea creatures. Beneath the net the sea floor is piled with man-made detritus – all weirdly scaled, again, to about the same size – machines, industrial parts, a colonnaded building, a yellow bottle, broken bits and ruins. The painting's dark phantasmagoria is clearly sired by Picasso's NIGHT FISHING AT ANTIBES but where Picasso is electric, sinister, Dorman is subdued, beyond peril; the world in Dorman's work is long drowned, its reasons long exposed as isolated artifacts.

The deeper you venture into Dorman's vision the deeper underwater you go: your senses shorted, your logic cut loose. The apprehensive apparatus you've learned to trust lose their use. Your body that receives, your organs that sort and substantiate experience – these are revealed as the blunt, bent instruments they are: approximate and, in important ways, arbitrary. Why sight like ours, in this range, according to these dictates of line and form? Why this angle of access from vision into mood? From symbol into signification? Why this object and not that? In his layerings, Dorman creates a universe of objects that are, as in our universe, coexistent but never apprehensible in toto. He uses a visual language which he goes on to render nonsensical. He manifestly, actively distrusts the assumptions of art. His layers are both interment and exhumation, they muck up earth and steel and bone and then bury them again. And in this way each of his paintings is a process: an archaeology of its own inexplicability, its own obsessions: a history-making where time is collapsed, ageography where place becomes mere cartography. In Dorman's work there is only memory, but even that is unmoored from meaning.

An artist of Dorman's talent could easily have ridden this intuition into the ether. He could have followed rendition with rendition of surreal automata. If any random object is as good as another, if all meanings are void, if anything goes – art can allow itself an infinite mandate. What I most respect about Dorman's work is its resistance to this – is its self-resistance. Its loyalties are divided. And that division, I think, is defining. Dorman's work is unapologetically imagistic, even as it strips its images of significance; it is full of beauty, even as it cuts, pastes, and bullies beautiful representations into absurd, obsolete, anachronistic relations. It is open to chance and negative capability – take a look at it – and yet his arrangements are only as undirected as they are disciplined in their execution; they are only as powerful in their explosive dreamlike possibility as they are precise.

This is Dorman's key force: his faith, against everything, in 'this and not that.' He believes, ultimately, in the connectivity of things because they are connected,

somehow, in his consciousness. A giant seahorse, a shrunken parliament. Fish and man and monster. The fact he doesn't fully understand the connection doesn't make it any less real; in fact, the more comprehensible a connection, the less charged it is likely to be. Dorman offers us what he can of his own charged reality, and in doing so reawakens us to ours; he offers us a shared visual field – a shared illogic – that maunders like the mind, that honours its own eccentric questings, its pointless cataloguings, its rampant, fecund combinings. There's a narrative aspect at work, too – how could there not be? – invoked through character, landscape, historiography, taxonomy.

-Nam Le, author of *The Boat*