

*SCOTT EASTWOOD: THEY NEVER DIE  
THEY JUST GO TO SLEEP ONE DAY*

JANUARY 18<sup>TH</sup> - FEBRUARY 23<sup>RD</sup> 2013



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MASS GALLERY, AUSTIN, TX JANUARY 18<sup>TH</sup> - FEBRUARY 23<sup>RD</sup> 2013

ESSAY BY **ANDREW BOURNE**

Not quite half-deep into the summer of 2012, I met with Scott Eastwood at the screen-printing studio of Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop & Museum, where he hunkered over a large sheet of acetate, paintbrush in hand, considering a coil of bloody intestines. The space was furnished with tables long enough to unfurl an eight-yard bolt of cloth onto and busy with a dozen artists tooling their wares. Like Eastwood himself, the room seemed cheerful, unhurried, and sociable. There was a frightful amount of quiet contentment and positivity going on, but spread across the table were those heaping, dead, bloody intestines dripping with excremental seepage at each kink and fold. The guts had the coral-reef look of brain tissue and the slack of Rat Fink's cartoon skin. This mess of split bowels was depicted strung upon a stretch of wire fencing, as if hung out to dry for jerky—a potent image of gore and possibly a half-serious invitation to read your own fate in the entrails the way ancient haruspices divined omens from lamb's liver. Nevermind that this field of human entrails has a pleasing pattern and that the gestures are rather calligraphic, even arabesque, or that it might somehow resemble the garlands of genteel wallpaper. Nevermind that these guts are the sweet blue of artificially colored candy.

Why intestines though? Surely, at face value, there is a purely optical appeal. Parallel lines or tubes that squiggle and enwrap themselves are visually energetic and potentially psychedelic, tricky in the undulant little cul-de-sacs found squeezed into mazes. Indeed, I've seen Eastwood fill a notebook from cover to cover with such maze-like textures, and with all the ease of soft-serve, but there in the sprawl of guts and moreover in the drawings of this exhibition, his motif of semi-abstract globules of extensible form congeals into identifiable representations, even words. Examples: This tubular form is clearly a common extension cord; that volley of liquid is beer from a can; that whorl of markings is the grain of wood. But what else are we shown? And how does the figure play its part? Let's hazard an answer: It's the artist, whom I know to be perhaps the very exemplar of gentleness, depicting himself quite fully dead, more often than not dismembered, eviscerated, reduced to scraps, or blown apart. Can there be any doubt about just whose intestines are drawing flies, about who has lost a hairy arm torn off ragged at the socket like a drumstick?

So what makes an otherwise exuberant and life-loving Scott Eastwood go about the morbid task of dealing us (and more pointedly, himself) the death card again and again? There is doubtless a hearty dose of humor here, but it might side-step a gross-out-Garbage-Pail-Kids-type sensibility and fall headlong into actual gallows humor, where impending death (and death is always impending, isn't it?) can show its funny side. In Danse Macabre we find skeletons reanimated, sipping liquor, plucking at lutes, nibbling playfully on the

living, festive and otherwise incorrigible, but we need not resort to allegory to prove a thing so plain. The human skull itself, that wonderfully expressive hollow of bone, when picked clean and emptied out, seems to smile entirely on its own, minus the flesh, and continue to do so until eventually reduced to dust, all of which makes it the still life par excellence and the quintessential element of vanitas and memento mori in the history of art. But is Eastwood, in depicting his dead body, trying to moralize the way these past forms have, whether in a medieval-Christian sense or a nineteenth-century existential sense? Are we to take his remains into our hands, so to speak, and say like Hamlet, "Alas, poor Scott! I knew him. Where be your gibes now?" Raymond Pettibon's contemporary take on the classic memento mori, an ink rendering from 1997 depicting a trepanned human skull, is captioned: HE SEEMED ALMOST TO HEAR THE WORDS ACROSS THE STILLNESS: 'DRAW.' Perhaps it is enough then, when staring down immense uncertainty, a stillness of something so terminal as death, to go ahead and draw in spite of oblivion, to enliven a sheet of paper even though (or perhaps because) your time will soon be up. We might also take note of the aphoristic little imperative written on the underside of a skateboard Eastwood has placed near his own severed hand in *Big Wheel*: GET A GRIP [on the inevitability of your demise].

Funerary art still has life in it; there are wonderful Mexican calaveras and Ghanaese sculptural coffins, but for most of middle-class America death's aesthetic is the green of hospital gowns, the luster on a headstone, and perhaps a veil or bouquet. Our death fantasies reside elsewhere, in schlock-horror cinema and Halloween but also on LP covers and patches sewn onto jean jackets. From the stark catacomb photography of Dust's self-titled album (1971) to the glut of lavish 90s-era illustrations for *Cannibal Corpse* and then back again to the minimalism of Sun O))), the visual tradition of the macabre in metal music flirts with both the quiet actuality of death and its most extreme parodic distortions. Eastwood seems to have one foot in this metal mode, with its severed limbs and gushing wounds, its silliness and severity, and the other in a sort of self-portraiture by way of still life, something contemplative, where the body becomes a mere object and an eyeball is rendered as inert as an apple (see *Big Eye & Big Apple*). Indeed, vanitas often portrayed rotten fruit to show the transience of living matter.

As regards the eye, it's the lids and surrounding musculature that give it the power of expression and intelligence. When plucked out, as we see in these drawings, it's a haunting symbol of the body's reduction to mere meat, which is perhaps part of the subversive nature of the organ that Bataille found so titillating. The eye dug out of the head is dead and has the same blind stare of a nipple afloat on the breast, a navel in the belly, an anus or vagina between the cheeks, a mouth wide with terror, and perhaps the maw of a cavern or open grave, as in Eastwood's *Negative Big Wheel*—a sort of antimatter version of *Big Wheel*, an earthen vortex. Here we ostensibly have the least figurative picture of the show, but the play of light and dark can suggest a cycloptic eye or gaping orifice, and what we take to be fissures in stone could easily be tufts of hair along the pubis.

If there be any further doubt concerning just what this cycle of drawings is about, then we need look no farther than the diptych of sticky splats of gore that spell out a message covering the picture plane from corner to corner: THEY NEVER DIE THEY JUST GO SLEEP ONE DAY. It's a child's idea of death, a fantasy. These words are actually lyrics from a mid-Berlin- Trilogy-era David Bowie. The phrase seems to harken back to an earlier Bowie, the one preoccupied with fables of immortal beings—young gods idling in eternity. However, this whimsical statement has been struck through, marked up as it were. In both halves of the diptych, the huge lyric is canceled by a colossal X, alternately hewn of wood or scrawled in blood (need I mention the crucifix here?), negating the sugary sentiment beneath. Again, the lesson of the vanitas is dredged up and brought into conjunction with a fantasy.

But why do all this twice? There's certainly an obvious mirroring of halves in these diptychs, a formulating of equations—not just of life and death, light and shadow, but of the jumble of the material world forced into equivalence with the void, something with nothing, common cinderblocks with the precious organs of the body, the artist himself with the statue of Lacoön (who dies, according to Virgil, “fillets soaked with saliva and black venom”). The famous Lacoön, lauded for its writhing anatomy, its twisting naked chest, is a monument not to the actual condition of death but rather to the physical drama of acting it out. Here in the drawing the same anguished head is served up on a platter, the physique is entirely chipped away, reduced to an armature of rebar and divested of any power; alongside is Eastwood aping the torment, his own decapitated head impaled on the pike of a broken femur and balanced on a dirty carrot. Both busts are playing dead.

These pictures are all stewing with disparate hunks of rubble, wood, strips of flesh and shards of bone—fragmentary material gathered from the aftermath of a blast then neatly arranged along lines of symmetry like garbage swept into pentagrams. Indeed, the drawings actually seem to depict sculptural assemblages held together with tape, string, nails, or the tackiness of blood, but also by less probable means and a gravity that can keep a flotilla of chunks suspended in loose formation. However, the lone sculpture in this exhibition, *Time Machine*, is not such an assemblage of smithereens. It is instead single and whole—a coffin that combines the inscrutability of Stanley Kubrick's monolith with the glitz of a touchscreen tablet and the gyration of a disco ball. Eastwood explains: “It's a vehicle that frees you from space and time, frees you from the existential dilemma and your stuff, gets you outta' there.”

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Cover: **Scott Eastwood**. *Time Machine*, 2012. MDF, Plexiglass, LED lights, Motor, 12 x 24 x 72 inches



**MASS GALLERY**  
507 CALLES STREET  
SUITE 108  
AUSTIN, TX 78702

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