

MICHAEL MARKOWSKY by Amarie Bergman

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In his new installation of paintings, drawings, and videos, "Errol and George: Two Sad Swashbucklers," Michael Markowsky gives us an inside view of his journeys of self-discovery. The 5-minute video, *George At The End Of The World* (all work 2008), shows Markowsky standing at the prow of a speeding boat, following in the wake of famous Vancouver forebears. Drawing on the power of rapid eye movement, Markowsky collapses the gaps in time, crisscrossing between the known and the unknown, risking personal injury through an (often) amphetamine-like headspace. In passing, he leaves the scene with graphite sketches on paper, to be materialized later as paintings—proof positives, as it were, of his own transit.

There's a point to why Markowsky always looms large in his videos. In the 3:45-minute *Errol's Last Ride*, one finds oneself in the back of a fast-moving white limousine, glasses set for bar service, the white-shirted artist all the while sketching, drinking in springtime views: the luxurious estates of the British Properties area of West Vancouver, Burrard Bridge, English Bay with its

beach and sparkling water, Cambie Street, West End apartments, blossoming cherry trees, the Sylvia Hotel, and then, suggestively, the entrances to Vancouver General Hospital and the Coroner's Court. Moments later, Markowsky exits the Cadillac and, portfolio in hand, walks swiftly away.

In ARCC's main room, meanwhile, the viewer only "sees" a large diptych of paintings, each 18 feet high by 24 feet wide, set slightly apart from the sidewalls by wooden scaffolding. Behind, hidden and pinned to the walls, are some of the original on-site "rapid drawings" that conceptually informed them. Markowsky designed the space to mimic Vancouver's harbor and to juxtapose his reconstructed histories of two legendary local figures, George Vancouver and Errol Flynn, who was each in transit in this area at crucial moments in their lives. Because the configuration ensures there is only one way in and out of the room, the resulting environment is intensely claustrophobic.

On the left side, one painting depicts the arrival of Vancouver in the eponymous harbor at 5am on the morning of June 13, 1792. Vancouver had left England two years before, charged with exploring and surveying the Pacific Northwest. Imagine his chagrin to discover upon entering the harbor that the Spanish had already been there. *Vancouver as seen from the deck of a speeding boat* (*George at the End of the World*) interprets the moment in dramatic Hiroshige style, building up Maori tattoo lines into roiling waves and smoky clouds, presaging the "end" of Vancouver. Indeed, minor infractions related to his onboard discipline ultimately led to censure by the British Admiralty, public derision, and unrest in the streets of London. The explorer died, humiliated, less than three years after completing his epic 1791-95 voyage, at the age of 40.

Vancouver as seen from the back of limousine (*Errol's Last Ride*), on the right, relates to the very last day of another tragic maritime adventurer, Errol Flynn. Renowned for his





swashbuckling roles in films like *Captain Blood* (1935) and *In The Wake of The Bounty* (1933), Flynn also earned notoriety for his self-indulgent womanizing, brawling, drinking, and drug abuse. A target for idle gossip and ill feeling, the film star was even accused of statutory rape and of being a fascist sympathizer during the war. He traveled to Vancouver on October 9, 1959, ostensibly to sell his deluxe schooner-rigged yacht to millionaire George Caldough. The 50-year-old Flynn also came for an alcohol binge. Five days later, en route to the airport, he felt ill and was taken to an apartment in the West End near English Bay. During a party there, Flynn suffered a massive heart attack and died.

Markowsky seeks to capture Flynn's clash with destiny just as circuitously as he did with *Vancouver's*. With chaotic and too-easily spontaneous gestures, the artist lambastes the painting with seasickness-inducing waves that crash against and eventually inundate a forested Pacific shoreline. Or just as likely, it's a fiery downpour eating through a pile of body organs and buildings, swallowing up the surrounding scarlet underbrush and a flotilla of triangular maritime signal flags in the process. On the far right stands a dark cedar tree gradually being consumed by the waves of fire, its trunk's wobbly bull's-eye the damaged heart of the painting. To quote from Jeanette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries* (1997), Markowsky's rewinding around past and present is a reminder that, "A wave function spreads indefinitely, though at its farthest it is infinitesimally flimsy."

(OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM) MICHAEL MARKOWSKY, *DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE WHILE STANDING ON A SPEEDBOAT* (FOLLOWING IN THE WAKE OF CAPTAIN GEORGE VANCOUVER), 2008. VIDEO STILL. *VANCOUVER AS SEEN FROM THE BACK OF LIMOUSINE* (ERROR'S LAST RIDE), 2008. OIL ON CANVAS, 18 X 10 FT. (ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM) *DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE FROM THE BACK OF LIMOUSINE* (RETRACING ERROL FLYNN'S FINAL MOMENTS), VIDEO STILL. *DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE WHILE STANDING ON A SPEEDBOAT*, VIDEO STILL. COURTESY THE ARTIST & ACCESS ARTIST RUN CENTRE, VANCOUVER.