

DAVID EAGER MAHER

Distant Fires

by John Hutchinson

on the works of the solo exhibition *Children & Flowers*
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Among the more radical features of the 1960s counterculture were an emphasis on positivity, experimentalism, opposition to consumerism, and the rejection of conventional hierarchical structures. In the popular arts there was an interest in informality, imagination, and the visionary, often brought together in forms that combined words and images - exemplified, for instance, in music posters and album sleeves, as well as in widespread admiration for the work of artists such as William Blake. Overlooked at the time, but perceptible in retrospect, was a current of Romantic conservatism, perhaps a response to the anxiety and fear in society that have since become endemic, and the movement's progressivist idealism was soon to fade and crumble, other values, superficially similar, taking its place. Not long afterwards the development of punk subculture, which was negative, angry and anarchic, did much to undermine what remained of the ethos of the liberal 1960s, although its anti-establishment attitudes and endorsement of individual freedom and libertarian ethics were closer to the nonconformist spirit of its predecessor than might at first appear.

In the void created by the foundering of countercultural idealism and, more generally, of the progressive aspirations of liberal modernism, less benign values and structures have continued to emerge. In Europe, authoritarian nationalism is growing; in the Middle East, militant Islam endangers peace, stability, and freedom. The United States has been troubled by an electoral crisis, caused by the rise of populism and the polarisation of Left and Right; Brexit has compromised the integrity of the EU. After the fall of the Soviet Union, liberal capitalism seemed to be consolidating its position as the dominant global ideology, but the West has become fraught with social fragmentation, a growing consciousness of environmental dangers, and racial problems. The furtive expansion of the corporate state, driven by the rapid development of cyber-technology, continues to pose unsettling threats to freedom and privacy, and the recent pandemic caused extraordinary restrictions on social freedom, urgent legislation subverting much of the independence that we usually take for granted.

It is against this background of unease and disturbance that contemporary art is shaped and defined, and David Eager Maher's complex paintings reflect the collapse of cultural certainties and conventional social narratives. Nevertheless, there is tenuous but stubborn coherence in his visual stories and theatrical *mise-en-scènes*; their disparate elements are held together by imagination and a faint sense of hope, connections that may be obscure to the viewer but are surely felt by the artist. They are positioned somewhere between the past and the future. Several of his most recent

pieces, small in scale and with fragmentary texts rendered in rough handwriting below the images, bear traces of cultural nostalgia. ‘Demo’ (2023), for example, depicts a group of long-haired musicians, reminiscent of hippies, sitting in a circle in the open air, but its accompanying commentary sharply punctures the initial impression of relaxed friendship; ‘Stretch’ (2022) attaches an ironic apocalyptic text to a vivid psychedelic landscape. These allusions might be read as approving references to the 1960s counterculture, but their undertones are doubting and sceptical.

There is something ‘hauntological’ about Maher’s images. Inspired by Jacques Derrida, the writer Mark Fisher described ‘hauntology’ as a kind of nostalgia for failed dreams, a yearning for what he called ‘lost futures’, which are possibilities and aspirations embraced by the modernist project but never realised, nullified by neoliberalism’s empty promises. It is sometimes suggested that progressive modernism has disappeared, and that contemporary culture has all but abandoned enlightening goals, but ‘hauntology’ shows that the past can sometimes return to trouble or encourage us. The counterculture of the 1960s created a temporary hiatus between the increasingly bland ambitions of mainstream modernism and the shallow emptiness of much that came afterwards; despite elements of self-delusion, its awkward utopianism was hopeful and inspiring. In that light, a new form of cultural resistance might be welcome, to be identified, in society at large, by positive actions and attitudes that help to transform today’s

fears, threats, platitudes, and anomie, and in art by the making of images and objects that are truthful and beautiful. Such changes, if they are to be meaningful, would not be effortless, but they may no longer be optional. Their urgency is signalled in another of David Eager Maher's new images: as the text on 'Distant Fires' (2023) cryptically declares, 'Here everything is frozen. In the distance all is burning'.