

Chris Woods

## THE WRATH OF THE DEVOURERS

Chris Woods: *The Wrath of the Devourers*

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### Chris Woods: *The Wrath of the Devourers*

by Chris Brayshaw, 1999

Chris Woods was born in New Brunswick in 1970, and soon moved with his family to Chilliwack, B.C. He studied fine art at the University College of the Fraser Valley. His paintings and drawings have appeared in numerous group and solo exhibitions, including exhibitions at the Richmond Art Gallery, Diane Farris Gallery, Artropolis, and the London Life Young Contemporaries Tour, organized by the London Regional Art Gallery.

For the last few years, Woods has produced large, realistic oil and watercolor paintings of his friends, posed in and around such recognisable icons of

Chris Woods

*The Wrath of the Devourers*, 1992

oil on canvas (172.5 x 262.8 cm)

SAG 1994.10.01

acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program/et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



An Open Book

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contemporary suburban culture as back yards, supermarket parking lots, fast food restaurant interiors, and tree-lined residential streets. Often these poses assume a mock-heroic or mythic quality, ironically referring to the poses depicted in classical historical or religious paintings. For example, one well-known Woods painting depicts a young man standing in a supermarket shopping cart outside the Chilliwack branch of Save-On Foods, supported by two friends. The young man's pose resembles that of a historical Christ, while the shape of the supermarket's roof

behind him curves over his head like an enormous halo, or the nave of a medieval cathedral. By pairing poses and gestures derived from art history with contemporary settings, Woods indicates continuities between historical and present-day interpretations of the world, while simultaneously acknowledging that religious and cultural "metanarratives" of the past have given way to a greater diversity of belief systems. Woods' characters often appear lost or rootless, casting about for the comfort of historical belief systems.



Chris Woods, *The Wrath of the Devourers*, 1992, oil on canvas (172.5 x 262.8 cm) SAG 1994.10.01  
 Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program  
 /et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

Woods' *Wrath of the Devourers* satirises the conventions of nineteenth century historical painting exemplified by the work of artists like Theodore Gericault and Jacques-Louis David. In a suburban backyard, a group of young men armed with styrofoam cups and Ripple Chips assault a young man who lies prone on the ground, clutching a two-litre jug of Classic Coke. In the nineteenth century, a painting of the size and scale of Woods' would have depicted a significant development in the life of a nation, like a call to arms or the discovery of a new world. Woods' painting's subject is, comparatively speaking, a minor incident with little relevance to politics or to the overall state of the world. On one hand, the painting is good-naturedly naturalistic and colloquial, depicting a group of young men clowning around, theatrically adopting the kind of body language art history associates with much grander conflicts. Unlike the figures most often seen in conventional history paintings, the teenagers Woods depicts aren't heroes, political leaders, or heads of state. On the other hand, the painting bears witness to a kind of violence that is growing more prevalent throughout North America. One of the assailants' t-shirts bears a caricature of Sigmund Freud, perhaps an ironic reference to the way that the devourers' libidinal appetites are bared to viewers. In this way, despite its initially light-hearted context, the painting makes a more serious point, conjuring the spectre of teenagers who have been shot or stabbed for possessions like sneakers or leather jackets.

## Chris Woods: The Wrath of the Devourers

By Robin Laurence, 1998

Chris Woods's large, photo-realist painting, *The Wrath of the Devourers* (1993), is an allegorical tableau set within a landscape of consumption. This is a landscape circumscribed by suburbanism and social conformity, and by our relentless reordering of the natural world.<sup>1</sup> Although nature is reduced here to a patch of shaggy lawn abutted by a wooden fence, these very elements function symbolically within ancient and archetypal concepts of paradise and the walled garden.<sup>2</sup> Gardens -- including suburban backyards -- are places in which nature has been subdued, enclosed and rearranged; they reflect not only cultural attitudes towards the natural world but also personal convictions and compulsions relating to the need for order and control. (The longish grass here suggests a state of incipient neglect, a creeping in of the chaos that the fence is supposed to exclude.)

Woods is a young painter who has been preoccupied since the early years of this decade with social relations amongst his generation and with contemporary culture, especially the ways in which we "acquire foodstuffs". He paints from his own photos of scenes he stages, using his friends as models, in or around fast food outlets, supermarkets and suburban homes located in his Fraser Valley community. Woods' work asks us to examine the impact on our culture of mass production and over-consumption; our condition of estrangement from the production or even preparation of our own food; and the Americanization of food cultures worldwide. It also asks us to consider the absence from our everyday lives of informing myths, legends and rituals -- the dearth of any set of beliefs that would help us make spiritual sense of consumer culture.



If we interpret the setting of *The Wrath of the Devourers* as an archetypal garden, like the Garden of Eden, then the unpainted wooden post at the left would symbolize (or formally duplicate) the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, while the drain pipe slithering down its side would be the Serpent.<sup>3</sup> Not only have the roots and branches been stripped from this tree, but its fruit has long ago been plucked. (In contemporary consumerist terms, this is a post-industrial tree, logged, milled and transplanted to a post-paradisiacal garden.)

The (after-the-Fall) inhabitants of Woods' garden have turned on one of their own tribe, struggling with him for dominion over a large bottle of Coca Cola. As in *Cola Wars* (1993), a closely related work set in front of a supermarket rather than within the confines of a domestic back yard, *Wrath* has been invested with a sense of drama and symbolic intent, in contrast to its banal and absurd particulars. Wood's paintings are mythopoeic, seeking to raise the mundane incidents and accessories of our everyday lives to the status of myth or legend. (His vision draws heavily on Judaeo-Christian images and symbols, with some references to Renaissance paintings.)

The pyramidal composition of five of the painting's six figures, along with their exaggerated facial expressions and bodily gestures and a ferocity not actually translated into injury, all contribute to a sense that this is a scene of ritual rather than actual warfare. However, there is also a suggestion here of Biblical fratricide (think of Cain, the first murderer in Judaeo-Christian cosmology and, not incidentally, the first city dweller) or betrayal (think of Joseph and his brothers). Again in contemporary terms, the painting suggests an ambiguous incident of mob violence, peer bullying or youthful scape-goating, tied, it seems, to the tyrannies of consumerism

and society's determination to make its members conform. The metaphors of conforming (consider how like the clothing is of these young men) and devouring extend beyond the obvious references to junk food to include the whole of our over-consuming society. There isn't anything clutched here that anybody actually needs (junk food is devoid of nutritional value), yet the empty styrofoam cups set up a condition of craving or wanting.

The only individual not participating in the struggle is the young man standing at the right of this group. His figure operates outside the tightly composed pyramid, and his condition of dispassionate observation also sets him apart. Is he overseer or high priest, voyeur or artist? Woods doesn't resolve such questions for his viewers, but allows them to continue to trouble us long after we've walked away from his work.



Chris Woods, *The Wrath of the Devourers*, detail

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 Notes

1. In the past, “landscape” in Western art connoted the depiction of a beautiful rural scene or view (whether idealized or “actual”, pastoral or “wilderness”), and was predicated on the “ideological separation” [Oleksijczuk] between nature and culture, country and city. In the art and theory of recent decades, we have come to understand nature as a construct of culture, and the oppositions expressed in traditional landscapes have been deconstructed, politically and economically. Now, images of industrial slums, new housing developments, pulp mills or suburban gardens can claim as much legitimacy within the landscape genre as representations of forests and mountains or rolling hills and thatched cottages.
2. As has been pointed out in earlier garden-theme exhibitions at the Surrey Art Gallery, the English word “paradise” derives from an old Persian word meaning “walled garden” and relates to ancient myths and archetypal images of the Near and Middle East. Examples are the after-life garden of sensual delights described in the Koran and the Old Testament’s Garden of Eden (from the Hebrew word *edhen* meaning “place of pleasure”), from which humankind has been exiled. In the Western world, the making and maintaining of domestic gardens can be understood as a longing to regain paradise on earth – however banal and unparadisical the actual garden might seem.
3. Another powerful and enduring image of the Sumero-Babylonian world, perpetuated through the Near and Middle East and Europe, is that of the “world tree”, “cosmic tree” or “tree of life”, of which the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Book of Genesis is a variation. Through its roots, trunk and branches, the world tree joins together the realms of underworld, earth and heaven, and is often associated with a serpent, an image of wisdom or, alternatively, of evil. (Sacred tree imagery also corresponds with that of the walled garden.) In tree-worshipping cultures, the tree itself could be symbolized by a wooden object such as a stump, post, or cross.

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## Artist's Statement (1994)

Chris Woods

My new works are becoming more and more about the pop culture sensibilities I have come to enjoy over the past while. I am quite interested in our fast food/get it quick society and the way it shapes us as people. I am also interested in looking at this culture with a mystical and reverent sense.

What interest me most as a perfect example of modern consumerism is the fast food industry. By creating large scale oil paintings I want to try to blend the mass produced images of popular culture with the unique experience found at a personal level: mass produced items on an intimate scale.

By using a realistic style of painting I place human figures in locations such as fast food restaurants, convenience stores, beside vending machines, in and around supermarkets and any other places associated with fast food culture. I try to make the figures appear as if they are involved in unexplained

or ritualistic activities. By doing this I hope to add to these institutions a sense of the mythical proportions that they play in our lives.

Food is the basis of life and every living creature since the birth of the world centres their life around seeking it out, obtaining it. The way in which we acquire our foodstuffs in North America is unlike anything in world history. Since our lives are based around food, doesn't the way we acquire this food now change the very core of our lives.

The important element I would like to get across about my work is the laying on a mythical and superstitious outlook on the extremely modern and scientific fast food industry. By examining these themes and looking at them in a mythical way instead of a modern way

I hope to create a new and healthy outlook on the way we live. I hope to be a myth-maker for modern consumerism.



Chris Woods, *The Wrath of the Devourers*, detail

## Artist's Statement (1995)

### *The Wrath of the Devourers: Technical History and Provenance*

Chris Woods

I painted *The Wrath of the Devourers* in November of 1992. This is an important painting in my career as an artist for several reasons. It is the first large scale painting in which I employed the technique of under-painting. Up until then, I used to do the final painting "alla prima" in one coat, over the drawing on the canvas. The under-painting in *Wrath* is done in oil paint. I soon abandoned this method however because the Liquin medium I used to thin the oil paint was solvent based and had a very overpowering odour. I have now graduated into using acrylic paints for doing the under-painting while still retaining oil paint for the final over-painting.

The oil paints I used at the time I painted *Wrath* were primarily Grumbacher and Rowney. I used Titanium White to tint all the colours with the exception of the Rip-L-Chip box being held by the figure in the Freud t-shirt. This was painted with lead based Flake White, also by Grumbacher. I did this because I wanted the box to have a warmer tone than the other whites in the picture. I probably primed the canvasses with about four layers of latex house paint, not proper gesso. The final painting was varnished with two coats of unthinned Daniel Smith UVLS Glossy Varnish.

*Wrath* is also one of the last paintings in which I employed a graph system for doing the initial drawing and layout before painting. I would graph out the photos I use as source material and do the drawing directly onto the canvas using a regular graphite pencil. The method I prefer now is the use of colour slides or the actual photo's negatives to project the image onto the canvas. I then trace the

image out using a pencil. This method results in a cleaner canvas when the drawing is finished and less stress on the canvas itself caused by a lot of drawing, erasing, and re-drawing which is a bi-product of the graph method.

*Wrath* is one of the few paintings I have done in multiple panels; in this case three. The prime reason for constructing this work in multiple panels was so that it could fit through several doorways and staircases to reach the small studio I used to work in at Chilliwack, BC. The studio was only ten feet by ten feet by eight feet high. This studio also dictated the width and height I could make a painting, multi-panels or not. The reason this painting is in three panels instead of two was to prevent a single seam in the middle of the painting from bisecting the primary figures. All of the canvas panels were constructed, stretched and primed by me. If I could have painted this on one single large canvas at the time I would have.

*Wrath* was to have originally contained only four figures but extra people who happened to be hanging around worked their way into the photo shoot.

The exhibition history of this work is actually quite short. The first exhibition it appeared in was my solo show "Freshly Oven Baked" in May of 1993 at the Diane Farris Gallery. Other than regularly rotating display at the Diane Farris Gallery and its inclusion in the "Art Matters" exhibition at the Surrey Art Gallery in the fall of 1994, it has been in no other exhibitions.

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