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ARTISTS TO WATCH

And Death Shall Have No Dominion

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The visual content in Marc Séguin's extraordinary paintings is saturated with provocative irony that deals primarily with life and death. But he also explores the ironies of destruction and rebirth, faith and fiction, murder and mayhem, safety and danger, injustice and poetic justice, coupled with the idiosyncratic complexities of being human. These subjects are a challenge to tackle, and perhaps an even bigger dilemma both ethically and financially for an art dealer committed to placing the work. Death always has been a mysterious subject for artists to explore, which did not always result in an acceptable image to show or to market. The celebration of the death of Christ, which is illustrated in all things Christian, from stained glass windows to Gothic ceilings pointing heavenward, gave birth to a continual visual examination of the subject by artists that has never stopped.

In fact, curiously enough, scenes of death, destruction and even electrocution continue to gain attention by occasionally surfacing in auction houses. Andy Warhol's images of horrific subject matter, including *Electric Chair*, one of his most unforgettable and haunting pieces, continue to command record prices. Perhaps one of the most memorable works in art history that depicts death as a central issue is a painting by Rembrandt titled, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). Depicting a physician's examination table occupied by the naked remains of an executed criminal, it was a courageous and controversial painting at the time. Others, like Edvard Munch, toyed with life in *The Kiss of Death*, an etching where the image of a rejected skeleton suggests the victory of love over death. Salvador Dali's famous collaborative still life photograph (*In Voluptas Mors*, with Philippe Halsman, 1951) of maidens that form a death's head has become an iconic signature work. In 1959, Joseph Beuys pushed the theme of death in exploring issues surrounding the Holocaust, which opened the doors for other artists to do the same, such as Andres Serrano, who recently produced a series of morgue portraits that investigate the macabre emotional presence of refrigerated cadavers. Damien Hirst has cornered the market on works with death as a subject, such as *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted skull, or his most famous career work, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, which is the sobering title of his infamous tiger shark floating in formaldehyde. So, uncomfortable images of no longer living subjects have allowed us to become somewhat accustomed and more open to reconsider provocative images by artists who investigate this spirited territory.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, Oil on canvas, 66 1/4 x 82 1/4 in. (169.5 x 216.5 cm), Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Marc Séguin also has been fascinated with the symbolism inherent in a painterly recreation of historic images that expose intentional human destruction, such as bombed out ancient churches during a world war where overwhelming cruelty and irony overruled any sacred safety zone for its contents and its occupants. Séguin's commanding white skull on an exposed cathedral's deteriorated wall (*3-D Real Death*, 2011, at left) becomes mesmerizing as it seems to stare back at the viewer. In this work, the artist has attached hundreds of duck feathers, which were harvested from his own dream-infested bedroom pillow and appear magnetically drawn to the canvas to form the skull's white outline. In other works, Séguin sticks to his "guns" where subject matter is concerned: Death in muddy trenches, Hitler's smirking lieutenants, Lee Harvey Oswald "vandalized" portraits, aerial views of bombed-out cities complete with painted cross hairs. There is an added dimension to Séguin's work that comes with the intentional sharp edge of presenting uncomfortable vintage newsreel-like memories of unfortunate fate. That extra layer that recurs in much of the artist's work offers a kind of unusual vibrating visual twist that heightens the viewer's exposure to provoking a reaction considerably beyond just appreciating the composition's documentary, aesthetic qualities. Reached in his



Marc Séguin, *Ruins, with cross*, 2010, Oil, charcoal and ash on canvas, 72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 121.9 cm), Courtesy Mike Weiss Gallery, New York. +1 212 691 6899

studio in Quebec, Canada, Séguin volunteered that he is color blind and can only see in shades of gray. This challenging condition supports, consolidates and amplifies the artist's intentions of separating the decorative and subjective by utilizing a natural pre-existing limitation that enhances his unique monochromatic palette.

Séguin expresses a moral responsibility to assist as a witness through his artwork, particularly to expose injustice, as with Picasso's infamous portrayal of the bombing of a Spanish town or George Grosz's cartoonish depictions of Nazi Germany. In his recent series of works he has shown that there are no spiritual protections anywhere to illustrate, particularly within the remaining architecture of a fallen church that originally was built to represent the impenetrable body of God as a physical presence. Further, he implies that their faith failed to protect those who embraced its safe haven, rudely reminded of the historic and continued dangers of the church both inside and out. Smoke detectors, alarm systems, hidden cameras, deadbolt locks and windstorm insurance seem to become the expensive modern substitute for divine protection. Séguin speaks of horrible massacres and burned out congregations and mosques, modern day assassinations on "holy" steps, crumbling social institutions, disintegrating religious authority, and vanished tranquility by the church's own hand. His realization and recreations also include the stark and undeniable fact that the church's doctrine has failed in its attempts to prevent premeditated modern day massacres—in a hotel in Mumbai, a train in Britain, the Twin Towers, a youth camp in Norway—or the repetitive rapes of children on church property and of nuns in central America. History already has shown us that there simply are no protections from evil, and for that matter, from the wrath of Mother Nature—earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes and tsunamis—other than fighting back with whatever means available. However, the end is not near, as many predict, as scientists have promised that we have a few billion years yet to go.

So, Marc Séguin is an artist to watch as he watches and documents continually the painful ironies of life, both historically and in present day circumstances. Serendipity has played a role in the artist's confrontation with deadly evidence: quite by chance, a close friend offered his deceased mother's ashes; she had been an artist and did not wish to be kept in an urn for eternity. He later mixed the human ashes with a fine powdered pigment and added water and gel so that it would adhere to the canvas. The artist now continues to utilize these unusual materials, often mixed with charcoal, as it opened yet another unexpected metaphorical doorway with strong symbolism, changing death and its often despicable circumstances back into life with this adaptive reuse. Throughout history, artists have explored unorthodox, unpopular and uncomfortable imagery, whether it be desperate figures by Hieronymus Bosch, the head of Chairman Mao or a lifeless shark, but often these controversial works have become valuable. Marc Séguin is no exception. The artist's exhibit during PULSE art fair in New York and his recent show at the Mike Weiss Gallery in Manhattan continue to explore a bizarre, private world of unsettling altered landscapes and the often electrifying power behind such ominous portrayals of his subjects. (Mike Weiss Gallery, +1 212.691.6899) —BH



Marc Séguin, 3-D Real Death, 2011

Oil, charcoal, ash and feathers on canvas, 108 x 156 in. (274.3 x 396 cm), Courtesy Mike Weiss Gallery, New York. +1 212 691 6899