


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

GALLERIES

Visions of the World in Pieces

by [Hrag Vartanian](#) on October 25, 2013 0 



A view of "How to Disappear Completely" (2012) in the front room of Andrew Edlin Gallery (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

Rarely have I spent so much time looking in amazement at the skill of an artist to transform paper as I did with Brian Adam Douglas's excellent *How to Disappear Completely* at Andrew Edlin Gallery. For his exhibition, Douglas uses collage to say something thoroughly contemporary, probing what it means to be flawed and human today.



Detail of Brian Adam Douglas's "A Sort of Homecoming" (2011)

robbed of the romance of a [Casper David Friedrich](#) painting, where mistakes accumulate in a remote location, perhaps our imagination.

Best known for [his street art](#), which he normally creates under the moniker of Elbowtoe, Douglas in the last few years has shifted gears to focus on collage, creating complicated visions informed by psychoanalysis and art history — though he occasionally still [hits the streets](#). His work is heavily influenced by German Expressionism, with its fixation on humanizing marginal figures, its weird artistic anxiety about society and its discontents, its interest in the psychological state of things, and its faceted visions of a world that feels both unfriendly and very familiar.

The title piece of this show, "How to Disappear Completely" (2012), is a large arctic landscape filled with capsizing ships, narwhals poking through the frozen terrain, two men with car doors, and a severed bear's head atop a destroyed totem pole, all under the beautiful canopy of the Northern Lights. It's a nightmarish vision of a world



Detail of Brian Adam Douglas's "Wasteland" (2013)

Much of Douglas's work has a theatrical feel, like a carefully arranged world captured under a strong piercing light, yet there are no clear narratives and an eerie silence permeates each work. In "Wasteland" (2013), which might be the most powerful piece in the show, a father and child look at a ferris wheel stranded in the middle of a large body of a water — the obvious allusion is to the [Jet Star Roller Coaster](#) that was pushed off to sea by Hurricane Sandy. The figures in the foreground reminded me instantly of the anonymous but clearly articulated figures in paintings by 18th-century Venetian artist Canaletto, where the people may not be identifiable but they animate the scene like a "slice of life" snapshot you'd capture on a trip. What appear to be a father and child look off at the stranded ferris wheel stranded as a tumultuous sky twists and turns above. A dog seems to walk away from the pair at the bottom edge, bringing a normalcy to the unusual scene. There's a constant battle in Douglas's work between the complexity of his visions and the attention to detail, but that tension eases up in "Wasteland" to reveal an almost painterly skill with paper that, from a distance, makes it hard to believe these are collage.



A detail of Brian Adam Douglas's "Wasteland" (2013), left, and Canaletto's "The Grand Canal in Venice from Palazzo Flangini to Campo San Marcuola" (c. 1738), right, which is in the collection of the Getty Museum (Canaletto image via [Getty](#))

Another work, "The Center Cannot Hold" (2011), portrays a world with shades of Hurricane Katrina, where things have broken down almost completely. A road sign is covered with indecipherable language, which echoes how the viewer fumbles to understand any clear meaning in the images themselves.



Brian Adam Douglas, "The Center Cannot Hold" (2011)

The world pictured in Douglas's collages is in flux, but the actors appear unconcerned and unengaged with the viewer, which gives them a dream-like quality. Douglas has [spoken elsewhere](#) about his experience and affinity for Jungian analysis, and here archetypes huddle together into a surreal bonfire that you can unpack forever. Unlike his street work, which is reduced to its bare essence to communicate quickly, these pieces seem purposefully baroque in an attempt to overload the senses.

The back gallery of Andrew Edlin is devoted to four large works that occupy one wall a piece. Standing in the midst of these brightly colored scenes, you sense a flash of energy sparked by a disconnect between the electric colors and dark moods.

In "The Memory of You Is Never Lost Upon Me" (2011), detail after detail is layered atop and adjacent to one another in an almost dizzying paper jigsaw puzzle that's on the verge of collapse. Each of these panels takes the artist months to complete, and as a result (and perhaps because of those long hours of labor, which he does without the help of assistants), each work has the meditative quality of an altarpiece and its many dependent and interconnected parts.



A part of Douglas's "The Memory of You Is Never Lost Upon Me" (2011) shows the level of detail in each collage.

Douglas used to use the monochrome pages of *Artforum* magazines for his collage work, since their heavy stock and bright colors were perfectly suited for the purpose. He's since moved on to create his own paper in an effort to satisfy the sheer volume of material he needs to work, but I think that initial choice says a lot about the place these works are coming from. Cobbled together from the pages of an art magazine that has traditionally been associated with affluent mainstream success in the art world, Douglas's scenes are patchworks of the hopes, fears, anxieties, and ambitions of the artist himself. I don't believe that any of these works can be fully read in a traditional way, and any attempt to do so would be thwarted by a symbol that doesn't fit or something else similarly incongruous, but they are reflections that make us uncomfortable. These aren't mirrors, but pools of water that reflect and refract our perspective while hiding secrets underneath, which occasionally surface or poke through.



Detail of Douglas's "The Memory of You Is Never Lost Upon Me" (2011)

Where the discomfort springs from, my guess, is in Jungian ideals. The Swiss psychologist famously said, when talking about marriage, that "there is no coming to consciousness without pain," and here the awakening of an artist in a world of turmoil is palpable. In each of these compositions, Douglas has captured the images that probably lurk in the dark crevices of his imagination, but what has resulted is a kaleidoscope of a world that even in absurdist turmoil has a quiet optimism permeating it all.

Brian Adam Douglas's [How to Disappear Completely](#) continues at the Andrew Edlin Gallery (134 Tenth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) until October 26.