



...And 108 Prayers of Evil
An exhibition with works by
Sedrick Chisom
CLEARING New York
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Three co-conspirators meet, donning wide hats and sneaking out under a devilish wine-drunk sky to install explosive powder charges in an enemy fort. It's wartime, but when is unclear. The men stare forward, caught in the act, and the whole scene is blurry, stuck in the surreality of a dream. This is *Servicemen of the Alrightland Travelled to the Floor of the Valley of the Rocks to Plant TNT Inside of The Enemy's Wooden Water Pipes Which Were Battered by Coal Torpedoes*, one of the monumental new paintings by Sedrick Chisom, and this did happen. Three Civil War soldiers did try to blow up a pipe. But the men are now in Chisom's world, which is a different world entirely.

In *...And 108 Prayers of Evil*, each painting is a piece of a larger universe that Chisom has meticulously built out over the course of his meteoric career. It started with "2200," the artist's stage play that's about, among other things, a future country torn apart amidst catastrophic ecological collapse. Written during Chisom's tenure at Rutgers, the narrative expands on his own mythological proclivities to encompass the history and continued perpetuation of racial violence in the United States. You can see it in *The Citizens of The Capitol Citadel Disregarded its Volcanic Tremors Which Could Be Sighted from Several Nautical Miles Away*, with skulls and other body parts rotting and stinking on metal fence spokes that ward off outsiders from a grand manse on a hill. And in *A Gift of Cows was Offered in Place of the Circassian Beauties that Were Promised to the Sons of the Southern Cross During Its Year of Acorns*, a bucolic scene of despondent cows interrupted by bones that stick out from the soil, remnants of a lost battle. Then there's *Medusa Did Not Spread Gangster Rap Lyrics to The Youth of The Southern Cross, but She Did Not Care to Contradict Her Accuser*, in which Medusa, a key figure in the play, is peering outside of a wooden cabin to witness a terrifying event that washes the landscape in a blinding yellow.

World-building aside, the paintings pack a gut punch even without any context, the unrelenting drips heightening a sense of déjà vu, the faces twisted like the memory of a bad dream, the canvases pummeled and mottled. And despite the sense of dislocation, the works are intensely grounded in the hard truth of physicality, of our world. Many have their origin in found photos from books about the Civil War—in the studio there are boxes of pages ripped out looseleaf—that Chisom tweaks into collages and reimagines on his canvas, in his universe. That war isn't the past for Chisom, it's still here, it's still coming, and there's a kinship that's real. During a recent visit he pulled out a picture of a raffish-looking Abraham Lincoln taken at a photo studio at Tenth and W Broadway in Manhattan, after the speech at Cooper Union that launched his presidential campaign. Chisom would graduate from Cooper a century and a half later. The connection is not lost on him.

Lincoln is not in the show, but someone else is. One of the most striking paintings depicts Robert E. Lee, the son of a patriotic Revolutionary War hero who led the Confederacy against its own country, given a shave by the artist, looking forlorn, forever trapped in a frame like one of Bacon's wailing Popes, stuck in this chasm for eternity.

And while this world is in some ways bleak, fully after the fall, there's a sense of hope, too. Some of the more awe-inspiring moments in Chisom's paintings happen in the background, a few inches from the hollow figures, and these are moments of pure abstract expressionism, color spasms descended from Bowling or Rothko. The amorphous black spot on the cow, or the seared horizon exploded overhead of the soldiers, or the Matisse blues sprinkled across the nighttime falling on severed body parts, a glittering dusk gifted to a world destroyed by greed and decay. Dystopia is not for sissies, but in Chisom's world, complete collapse can look pretty damn gorgeous.

-Nate Freeman