

James Aldridge



chapter



Introduction

The End (detail) (2005)
Installation detail,
Chisenhale Gallery.

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The dreamscapes of James Aldridge



Moonshine (2005)

Imagine James Aldridge wandering around in the middle of nowhere in the countryside in Sweden, clinging to his mobile phone while he excitedly chatters away to some critic about the ideas that underpin his work. Surrounding him there is a vast, cavernous landscape replete with trees and mountains, each one populated by myriad forms of wildlife. A scene such as this is quite different to the ones evoked in his paintings, which are quite unreal. They are more like dreamscapes.

One of Aldridge's most engaging dreamscapes is presented in the aptly titled **Paradise** (2001/02). Much can be gleaned from a comparative analysis between this painting and James Rosenquist's **F-III** (1965). For in the same way that Rosenquist's **F-III** can be interpreted as a response to the condition of his quotidian environment, so Aldridge's **Paradise** is too. Formally speaking, these multi-paneled mural-like paintings seem to have much in common, especially in terms of their candy-like colour and attempt to envelop the viewer within a vertiginous mirage: and since they are multi-paneled both paintings can also be installed in a number of different ways - along one long wall or in the round. Rosenquist's painting has dream-like, almost surrealistic, elements too: in one

section the head of a baby floats over a rocket that disappears into a bowl of spaghetti. At this point the similarities end though. For the images Rosenquist dreams in derive from a very particular part of the visual culture of his time: many of which are cut from sources with their finger on the pulse of 'hot' culture: newspapers, TV, magazines and the like. Rosenquist's painting thus confronts his culture head-on by re-presenting it with its own mass-produced images of itself.

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And, while Aldridge also uses thoroughly crass commercial images, they are much 'cooler'. Many of these images are sampled from scenic wallpaper patterns and field guides. The former were once common fair, assuming much the same function as traditional landscape painting - opening up interior spaces - but tended to lend themselves towards the decorative on account of how they were simpler and flatter than traditional landscape painting. Field guides are still used by nature enthusiasts to help identify and categorise wildlife;

often they are filled with drawings that emphasise crisp outline in favour of detailing. Depending on how you enter it, **Paradise** starts with an image of humming birds hovering around a cobwebbed, berry-clad tree that is set off against a highly modulated electric blue sky. In the next panel along, night has fallen and against the now inky-blue sky an owl perches on a branch and is silhouetted against the full moon. A clear and crisp

monochrome mountain is made fuzzy by its reflection in a lake in the next panel. And in the final one the sun rises and throws its stinging rays across a landscape populated by vines and a tree. Each of the images conjures a sense of leisure rather than the newsworthy. Not only is there a marked difference between **Paradise** and **F-III** in terms of imagery, there is an even more striking one found in the way both artists actually deal with these images. Aldridge seems to personalise his



Egret (2005)

painting. Linking these animals together as a canny compositional device is a series of dark spindly branches and brightly coloured leaves. A Nordic landscape, consisting of mountains, trees and sky, creates the backdrop to the scene, eloquently setting the entire thing off.

Black River Valley (2004), another single panel painting, introduces more troubling elements into Aldridge's usually serene dreamscapes. The iconography is darker, the overall effect more brooding. Crows forebodingly circle in the air and come home to roost on the branches of a tree that takes up the centre of the work. The composition is far more tightly packed than in previous paintings, lending *Black River Valley* an air of claustrophobia. Gone are the bright colours and in their place the deeper end of the palette has been plummeted: sober grays

images since he renders them through a highly intuitive process-based method. By contrast, Rosenquist's painting is conceived of in advance through drawing and the final works are executed by painting-by-numbers. Even though Aldridge's imagery is often crass in tone, the way he gradually injects texture into it through the labour-intensive process of fabrication means that his paintings do more than just reflect a culture back on itself. They speak of a painter's attempt to re-familiarise himself with highly coded images that have a very particular resonance within his psyche. Hence, while Rosenquist responds to hot culture with cool execution, Aldridge heats cool culture up with his warm handling of it. In the final analysis, then, where Rosenquist's painting is shot through with a scathing sense of irony, Aldridge's

is underscored by a genuine sincerity: *Paradise* is both post-critical and post-ironic, if that is possible. **Northern** (2004), uses the attractive appurtenances of *Paradise* but contains them within a singular panel painting. Rather than a narrative unfolding like so many still scenes, there is instead the sense of a complete scenario presented all at once in a singular image. Calligraphic-like cobwebs gently

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skate across the foreground while four silhouetted creatures' – two herons to the left, a deer centre-right, and a crow at the extreme right – anchor the

tinged with purple are set next to inky blacks. Only a pearly white river with white doves circling it – pushed out to the right of the painting – promises a

The End (detail)
(2005)



different future; but it is only a promise and so may not be delivered. While *Black River Valley* is just as decorative as Aldridge's earlier paintings it seems less so because of the more menacing subject matter. This in turn says much about our preconceptions concerning the notion of the decorative because too often we refer to the decorative in the pejorative sense and associate it with bland whimsy. In *Black River Valley* it is as if Aldridge attempts to challenge our somewhat conservative conception of the decorative – and so surely with it his own earlier work – by fashioning a troubling dreamscape with decorative means.

The End (2005), Aldridge's most recent work, is a multi-paneled cutout, and extends the iconography of *Black River Valley* further. The use of the cut out technique – whereby paper silhouettes are cut out, sprayed black, and then stuck directly onto the wall – flattens the carefully orchestrated spaces arrived at in the earlier paintings. The result is a much starker type of picture making. Since painterly detail has been relinquished there is nothing to detract from the boldness of the iconography except, perhaps, for the way it optically flickers, but in the end this only makes it all the more menacing. Some of this iconography is derived from heavy metal

album covers, returning to heavy metal – which has recently been plummeted for source material and made light of by the fashion world – something of its initial dark tone. The way the earlier paintings goaded the viewer into participation in the given scene has been gradually relinquished too. First Aldridge's landscapes were empty; then there were just a few small birds scattered about them; then some larger animals were introduced; now there is no place for the viewer whatsoever – the landscapes are fully populated already. The doves and crows of *Black River Valley* keep the viewer firmly in their place outside of the space of the painting. The effect is quite unnerving. In fact, it is more like a nightmare than a dreamscape.

Alex Coles is an art critic and an editor. His writing appears regularly in *trieze*, *Art Monthly* and *Contemporary* and he is the author of *DesignArt* recently released through Tate Publishing.

The End (detail)
(2005)



The End (detail)
(2005)



The End (detail)
(2005)



The End (detail)
(2005)







South of Heaven



The following interview took place in the Intrepid Fox, London shortly after his relocation to rural Sweden from London. James was visiting again to frame his work *The End* that was made and shown as part of his residency and solo exhibition at Chapter between November and February 2005.

Gordon Dalton: Hello James, What's it like to be back in London?

James Aldridge: Being in such a different environment in Sweden, it always feels hard to imagine what being somewhere else is like. I don't remember the feeling of being in London.

GD: Is Sweden all you imagined? What is your new place like?

JA: It's really refreshing to discover something new everyday. I love being surrounded by nature so in that way it is perfect. You really feel the weather and seasons there. When I arrived we had two foot of snow and it was really magical. The place we live in is in the middle of the forest and time seems to move at a really different pace. It feels like there's more time to think.

GD: Is it like being in one of your paintings? I guess that's slightly unnerving given that you've said that you painted them with Sweden in mind, somewhere you never lived before?

JA: That's quite relevant because when I think about someone looking at the paintings I imagine them being in that landscape. I hope the viewer can become immersed. I know I feel that, but my engagement is obviously very different. It's also the reason much of the work is on such a large scale. Because of the nature of the imagery it's easier to suspend your disbelief. The information is quite reduced and many motifs reference images, so reality can't really

be like being in the painted landscape. It's a feeling of being really alone but watched. It feels like your private space but there's still something unknown and unnerving.

GD: I kind of hope that it's like your paintings, with all that nature and wildlife...

JA: I think you might be talking about **Northern** in particular. Some of the imagery does draw directly from elements of things I have seen out there but the work references diverse influences. In this case I was thinking

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about tapestries of the landscape you can see hanging in hunting shacks - it's quite a strange idea when you have the real thing outside your window and a representation on the wall. **Northern** is also like a generic image of landscape from northern Europe so it is both generalised and romanticised. In a way, the paintings come to replace certain things in my own mind so when you talk about the place, that image is what appears in my mind. It's like the essence of somewhere but that might be real or not.

GD: The work seems to combine quite complex imagined spaces with very direct imagery? Where do these places and the things that inhabit them spring from?

JA: I often use references that I feel an attachment to in one way or another and sometimes that seems to come from years ago. For example the field guides have quite a direct relationship to my 'learning' to draw. They were always around at home as my Dad is quite a nature enthusiast and I used to spend hours copying the pictures

from them. They are quite strange tools as they make you look at things in a really particular way. If you are out bird watching, for instance, you just end up obsessively looking for these identification marks so you can put a name to what you have seen. It really limits your experience of the environment you are in if you walk around looking in that way. The paintings have an opposite effect to using a field guide in nature as they allow the viewer to impose their own relationships to those characters or

elements. Precisely because of their generality the experience of the image can be more personal.

GD: And what about the landscapes they inhabit?

JA: The places are very much linked to the way I approach making work. As clichéd imagery informs them it would be really easy to have a preconceived idea of what the final piece might look like. So, as a way of removing the temptation, I have all these strategies. It's quite mechanical but then I don't have to worry and I seem to get a heightened engagement.

GD: Let's get the music question out of the way so we don't spend all afternoon discussing it. I know it's very important to you and to the work in a non-direct way. Can you expand on some of the ways this works?

JA: It's more in terms of my connection to the imagery of it. Heavy metal album covers, for instance, really fired my imagination when I was younger and I still get that excitement from looking at that imagery. I could become totally immersed in a cover in the same way I do when I make a piece now. This also involves listening to the music whilst looking so I guess I'm after that excitement in my paintings. I'm interested in how something, often seen as laughable and clichéd, can still really inspire me. The ideas on the covers and in the lyrics are often really black and

white, good and evil, that kind of thing yet the music is often about as extreme as it gets. It's full of contradictions and clichés but is also really heartfelt and my work is like that.

GD: Heavy metal has been appropriated by lots of artists and fashion designers in an ironic way, where as when we talk about it, it's always from a very real or honest place. You're actually very obsessive about it and still a fan...

JA: Absolutely and there is certainly no irony in the way I view it. I think it comes from really being into it when I was at an age where it was a way of entering a different world. That's not to say I can't see the absurdity, I'm just genuinely excited by it. It has never been cool in the same way it is for some people to claim they liked punk or something else but that frees it from the constraints and self-consciousness of being fashionable. **GD:** I guess you could apply that to painting as well?

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JA: I don't know about that, painting is always around and in many ways the image and atmosphere is more important in my work rather than any

debate around this or that medium. The process is just a means to an end, a way of reaching a certain level of engagement. I am trying to make images that I find exciting that are not ironic and that can take you to a different place so you could compare the two. The experience of the music is much more immediate than the act of looking at painting but if you invest time into both they can reveal different things on each look or listen. In the music that lack of self consciousness certainly allows it to be become much more creative and interesting which is inspiring and could be compared to the creative process involved in making paintings.

GD: There is escapism in that kind of music and obsessive fan behaviour, which when you're a doom-laden teenager is very appealing. But when you're older that is tempered by day-to-day reality. The paintings offer an escape but to what? It seems that these

places are less of a utopia, more a final resting place... all those crows hovering about don't help?

JA: The imagery is certainly getting

darker. Earlier works like **Paradise** were much more concerned solely with the notion of natural beauty and the work has gradually become more inhabited. The birds, insects and animals come much more from things I see or have seen around. For instance drive through any part of the countryside and you see crows or rooks by the roadside, often alone on a bare tree and it feels timeless in terms of an image. In that way the work is much less concerned with the exotic and more with what I see around me. I also can't escape the way in which people read the images as symbolic.

That really came to my attention when I did the Bart's project. I had to make that piece very much with the context in mind which was very sensitive. (The piece in question being site specific in a specialist breast cancer unit) I got a lot of feedback about birds being bad luck and other comments about the symbolism. I reacted to that and the images grew darker afterwards. **The End** was inhabited by a large number of crows or ravens, which are often seen as bad luck as they gather where there are corpses. I was thinking of this as being the last image you see before death. I don't think of the paintings as escapism though, just a journey to a different place. It is quite theatrical in that the viewer becomes a participant.

GD: On a more practical level, how are the paintings constructed? They

form like time consuming but also quite fun to paint despite the imagery. I know painting isn't always associated with being fun... You mentioned having certain strategies and methods...

JA: One of the most obvious processes is the order in which I construct the image. The background is often painted around the foreground elements right at the end and these elements only get a

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context right at the end of the process. They aren't believable as spaces until the final area is described and the heightened engagement I get from that really makes it feel like I have inhabited the space.

That reverse way of constructing the image and the flatness of the forms make the relationship of the edges really important. I also use contrasts such as positive and negative to play with the reading of the space. It often doesn't make sense in a logical way but it feels right. I also like the way these positive and negative relationships can hint at certain ways to read the image but don't impose any agendas.

Formally there are devices that lead you in and out of the image. Everything relates to each other very specifically and spatially the work isn't really that illusionistic. It relies on scale rather than anything painterly or expressionistic. The expression is left to the image rather than the handling of paint. Anything painterly is usually about language and rather contained, for example

watercolour seems the obvious way to describe water.

GD: You also make paper works out of the motifs you paint round. They look a real pain to do...

JA: The cut outs are made in a way that corresponds to the painting process in that the negative space is removed by cutting away pieces allowing the positive image to emerge. I do really enjoy the process especially at the point where the image begins to come into focus. The process is quite obsessive but to engage with the image it's really necessary.

GD: There is a very decorative element in a positive sense. How do you balance

that with the quite melancholic content – especially as in the new piece, **The End**, when you have stripped out all the background, or was that foreground?

JA: A lot of the influences are decorative. I look at a lot of fabric prints and wallpapers, things you see around all the time and also I really like 18th century French scenic wallpaper which also relates to some of the 360 degree pieces. Decorative representations of things surround us, so I just absorb them and spit the appropriate ones out into the work. They are more like memories of those representations that become transformed in my mind and come out. I also use repetition a lot which is partly due to the mechanical nature of the process that strangely allows a build up of the same motif to transform into a believable representation of something. For example a single flower really doesn't do much but hundreds of them read like a bush that can optically occupy a very definite space in the image. There is a fine line between the images being too decorative as opposed to believable and I get around that by using the processes I described before. The image is never allowed to be 'designed' because of them. Also we are so used to reading that decorative kind of language that it isn't too hard to convince yourself that what you are looking at is a tree or a flower. Hopefully each element can be seen as what it is

describing and it's how these elements occupy the space that sets up the sense of a place.

GD: We talked about thinking about other places in relation to the paintings, so, will being in Sweden make the work be about its surroundings. How's your relationship to nature? Wonderment? Scared?

JA: Things tend to sink into memory at different rates so it is hard to tell. I hope the work will continue to change otherwise the process wouldn't be doing its job. But as far as being in a different place it feels like there will just be more information to draw from. Of course the surroundings have significance but they have to go through this internal filter like everything else and I can't tell when they are going to appear. The places in the images are much more like a psychological place so it will be interesting to see how that situation is affected.

When you spend a long time in an urban environment I think the tendency to be scared of natural things is there simply because they are the unknown and you have no control over them but being in that situation can also feel quite liberating. I think in general my relationship to nature is one of wonderment though. The work of course touches on my personal relationship to nature but I'm not sure it's that important to how the work is read. I get

a buzz from seeing a hawk moth or a black woodpecker and the environment seems to visibly change daily so there is always something new to fascinate me. I probably romanticise nature a bit but I think I do that with most things, it does feel magical to me.

Curriculum Vitae

Biography	1993-95	MA (Painting), Royal College of Art
	1990-93	BA (Hons) Fine Art, Manchester School of Art
Solo Exhibitions	2005	Seasons in the Abyss, Chapter, Cardiff, UK
	2004	Black River Valley, David Risley Gallery, London, UK
	2002	Paradise, Zwemmer Gallery, London, UK
	1999	Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, USA
Group Exhibitions	2004	Site-specific painting, Saint Bartholomew's Hospital, London, England Le Petit Paysage, Gostin's Building, Liverpool and Comme Ca Gallery, Manchester, England
	2003	Arrangement, Rhodes & Mann, London, England Good Bad Taste, Keith Talent Gallery, London, England Bad Touch, Keith Talent Gallery, London, England
	2002	Love, 14 Wharf Road, London, England Giardino, Commune di Sassuolo, Sassuolo, Italy Giardino, Galleria Del Tasso, Bergamo, Italy Giardino, Studio d'Arte Raffaelli, Trento, Italy
	2001	In the Waddington Style, Zwemmer Gallery, London, England
	2000	Sporadinate, Mamma Roma, London.
	1999	The British School at Rome, Italy Aldridge, Bjerger, Joffe, Equilibri Precari, Rome, Italy GROTTESCHE, BHA/Empiria, Rome, Italy
	1998	JOHN MOORES 20, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England
	1997	Paton Gallery, London, England
	1996	Ida Branson Bequest, Millhield School, England

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Chapter

Market Road, Cardiff CF5 1QE, UK

Tel +44 (0)29 2031 1050

Fax +44 (0)29 2031 1059

Email visual.arts@chapter.org

Web www.chapter.org

Gallery opening hours:

Monday 11am-5pm

Tuesday - Sunday 11am-8pm

David Risley Gallery

45 Vyner Street, London E2 9DQ

Tel +44 (0)20 8980 2202

Email davidrisley@btconnect.com

Web www.artnet.com/davidrisley.html

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Gallery staff

Curator: Hannah Firth

Exhibitions Manager: Dean Woolford

Visual Arts Assistant: Karla Williams

Invigilators: Jacky White and

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