

## ***Was and Is Not and Is to Come***

### **A site-specific mural by**

### **Darren Waterston**

#### ***Apocalypse Now***

With a healthy mix of classical and contemporary music, a cadre of dedicated and talented painting volunteers, and a steady stream of onlookers, Darren Waterston spent the first two weeks of November 2006 creating his most monumental mural project to date, *Was and Is Not and Is To Come*, on the walls of the ICA's gallery. Internationally recognized for his unique blend of abstraction and precise attention to representational detail, Waterston draws inspiration for his work from a wide range of sources – a fascination with the natural sciences, an appreciation for a variety of religious and philosophical beliefs (both Eastern and Western), and a long-standing interest in the genre of landscape painting.

The lush surfaces and masterfully rendered detail of Waterston's early paintings often depicted highly idealized representations of the actual environments in which he worked. His palette included vibrant oranges and reds, acidic greens, bright pinks and yellows. In recent years, the colors have become more muted and the work has explored more fantastic landscapes, leaving the natural world behind in order to create abstract, other worldly spaces populated by non-representational forms.

In his current canvases, Waterston combines the acute detail of his earlier work with the abstraction of his later paintings to illustrate nebulous landscapes populated with subtly mutated geological, botanical and mineral characteristics that, upon closer viewing, do not depict specific natural phenomena. In addition to evoking a sense of place without geographic specificity, Waterston introduces the use of narrative in *Was and Is Not and Is To Come*. The immersive mural installation depicts a continuous and cinematographic interpretation of an apocalypse.

A visual or literary apocalyptic narrative is traditionally a poetic and symbolic account of a fearful, often violent vision that reveals events about the past, the present and the future. The messenger relays a narrative of worldly cataclysm, the regeneration of the earth, and the creation of a terrestrial paradise. Perhaps the best known literary apocalyptic narrative is the "Book of Revelation" from the New Testament. Waterston's title, *Was and Is Not and Is To Come*, is taken from the "Book of Revelation," which is also referred to as the "Apocalypse of John." In Chapter One, the author greets his readers by writing "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come..." (1.4) In the fourth chapter, while describing the famous imagery of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, John writes, "And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come." (4.8) In Chapter 17, John writes, "The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come." (17.8)

The "Book of Revelation" was written in the late first century (c. 96 CE) in Asia Minor and the author is believed to have been a Christian from the coastal city of Ephesus, then a part of the Roman Empire. The book was written at a time when Christians in this region were suffering serious oppression for their religious beliefs and perhaps

refers specifically to events leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The author endured exile on the island of Patmos because of his Christian faith and he reports that the visions depicted in the “Book of Revelation” took place on that island. “I, John, your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” (1.9) John’s apocalyptic vision reveals a battle over sovereignty, where the Roman emperor competes with God and Christ in a contest for the allegiance of the faithful. The book urges believers to “hold fast to the faith of Jesus” and to share in the paradoxical victory of his death.

Throughout the centuries, there have been innumerable interpretations of the “Book of Revelation” from literal readings of the book as prophecy to readings that recognize in its utopian language the promise of hope in the midst of contemporary situations of suffering and oppression. The symbolic numbers and colors, animals, and angelic and demonic beings were familiar images to the audience for which “The Book of Revelation” was written. The dualistic language was drawn from the apocalyptic literary genre of the ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, Greece and Rome. However, while the precise historical circumstances of Revelation pertained to the Roman world at the end of the first century, it nonetheless has a universal and timeless message for all generations. Beliefs and narratives about the end of the world have fascinated people throughout history. In nearly every culture, sacred narratives have related vivid visions of the consummation of God’s plan of judgment and salvation.

*Was and Is Not and Is To Come* is a gesture to the literary and visual history of the apocalypse. Waterston draws on numerous interpretations of the horrific destruction of the world, most notably Albrecht Dürer’s illustrations of the events of the “Book of Revelation,” which include 15 woodblock prints published in 1498. The publication came to be considered as authoritative as the words of John in the “Book of Revelation” and the prints became the standard artistic models for the depiction of the apocalypse.

In addition to the “Book of Revelation,” Waterston also draws on a variety of apocalyptic writings including *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch*, *The Apocalypse of Baruch* and Emanuel Swedenborg’s *Apocalypse Revealed*. However, perhaps as famous a depiction of the apocalyptic genre as Dürer’s woodblock illustrations is Danté’s epic poem *Inferno*. Canto I predicts the horrifying nature of the entire poem.

*Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself  
In a dark woods, the right road lost. To tell  
About those woods is hard – so tangled and rough*

*And savage that thinking of it now, I feel  
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.  
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well*

*I’ll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter  
I cannot well say, being so full of sleep  
Whatever moment it was I began to blunder*

*Off the true path. But when I came to stop  
Below a hill that marked one end of the valley  
That had pierced my heart with terror, I looked up*

*Toward the crest and saw its shoulders already  
Manteled in rays of that bright planet that shows  
The road to everyone, whatever our journey.*

*Then I could feel the terror begin to ease  
That churned in my heart’s lake all through the night.  
As one still panting, ashore from dangerous seas,*

*Looks back at the deep he has escaped, my thought  
Returned, still fleeing, to regard that grim defile  
That never left any alive who stayed in it...*

The dense symbolism of these literary and visual apocalyptic depictions, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the Renaissance, situates them on the horizon between representation and abstraction. It is precisely in that realm where Waterston’s painting exists. His nebulously romantic, eerily ominous landscapes, populated by perversely seductive shapes of indeterminate identity perfectly lend themselves to an allegorical interpretation of the

apocalypse. And, it is purely from a symbolic perspective that Waterston has chosen to use the “Book of Revelation” and the apocalyptic vision as inspiration for *Was and Is Not and Is To Come*. In referring to earlier work, Waterston has commented that “the movement of abstract forms within my abstract pictorial spaces has suggested creation myths, cycles of life and decay, sub-molecular structure, or the internal space of psychology or spirituality.”

Loosely following John’s narrative in the “Book of Revelation,” Waterston’s mural begins in a cave with the depiction of a pink-hued primordial mass hanging in the distant sky. From the cave, the viewer moves into a fantastic nocturnal forest, dense, distorted, and filled with variously malformed flora and fauna. The foreboding stillness of the forest is violently disrupted by a beautiful and horrific deluge of detritus. Molten rocks, tree branches, mutated animal forms and shards of metal tumble from the sky. From the chaotic destruction, a mass of blackness, comprised of hundreds of startled birds, takes flight into the open space. The visual narrative culminates in an image of reverent silence. The eerie empty glow of dawn stretches across the last passage of the mural.

It would be easy to interpret Waterston’s interest in depicting the apocalypse in the light of tragic events in our nation’s recent history and the ever-present fear of terrorist attacks throughout the world. However, it is not that simplistic. Waterston employs the apocalyptic narrative in a much larger context, one that transcends our current political, religious, social, and economic situations. *Was and Is Not and Is To Come* embraces the timeless universality of the apocalyptic message. The gruesome and horrific visions prophesized in the “Book of Revelation” and “Inferno” were meant to persuade the faithful to stand firm in their convictions and to resist the overwhelming pressures to yield to accommodation and compromise. Throughout time, the narrative of extraordinary devastation and annihilation has been used to induce people to remain faithful to a particular belief system. The apocalypse of John was motivated by the desire to save souls, convert pagans and terrorize heathens. Thousands of years later, current religious and political rhetoric is built on the same strategy of fear – fear of what was, what is not and what is to come. Whether in religion, politics or nature, we continue to be fascinated with the apocalyptic narrative of birth, death, re-birth, judgment and salvation.

Cathy Kimball  
Executive Director  
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#### ***Post Apocalyptic Acknowledgements***

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