



Destiny Manifest - Eden's End

Café Gallery Projects, London

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The term 'Manifest Destiny' was first used in 1845 by John O'Sullivan, an American journalist, to describe his belief in the inevitability of his nation's territorial expansion. One and a half centuries on - and long after 'Manifest Destiny' had been domestically exhausted, institutionalised, and then exported - artists Eric Wright and Cathy Ward set out to explore the legacy of these expansionist ideals for Americans and non-Americans alike.

The result is 'Destiny Manifest - Eden's End', a body of work - including sculpture, video, and a breathtaking thirty-eight foot painting - based on Eric's and Cathy's 7,500 mile journey trailing the Donner Party, a group of around ninety wagon-train migrants who, in 1846, hoped to find the riches of the west but instead found only misery and death, with half of them perishing along the way.

The focal point of 'Destiny Manifest' is a spectacular and highly detailed painting that acts as a panorama, tracing the fate of the Donner Party and graphically juxtaposing their hopes with their eventual fate. While the artists physically trailed the Donner Party, the viewer is invited to follow a visual trail, from its optimistic beginning to its wretched conclusion. This conclusion, vividly illustrated by the artists, involved some of the party eating the remains of those who did not survive. By opting for candour over melancholy, the artists manage to inject realism into a story many historians have disingenuously chosen to embellish, and deal with its consequences - the exploitation, impoverishment and displacement of entire peoples, the pillaging of the land's resources, and the destruction of the environment - head on. In addition to this, 'Destiny Manifest' works well as a critique of what was an institutionalised and globally fought campaign, with the story of the Donner Party acting not only as an example of hubris and greed, but as a parable for the destructive consequences of modern capitalism.

Nevertheless, and although 'Destiny Manifest' reflects the sentiments of those opposed to the current American administration's vision for the world, the work is far from being anti-utopian. Instead, the artists maintain that while the pursuit of utopia based on the values of capitalism is necessarily destructive, the pursuit of utopia beyond them is not necessarily so. Thus, in revitalising romanticism at a time when it has become diluted and distorted, 'Destiny Manifest' does what all truly revolutionary art must: it offers an alternative vision to the one being currently pursued, and a challenge for us to chase it.

Café Gallery Projects, Southwark Park, London, till 7 August 2005