

# Escape into Chris Millar's wondrous fantasy world at AGA

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Chris Millar's studio brimming with paint and paraphernalia used to create his fantastical paintings and sculptures.

EDMONTON - There is a titillating buzz surrounding [Chris Millar's](#) exhibition, *The Untimely Transmogrification of the Problem*, opening at the [Art Gallery of Alberta](#) on Saturday. When I confided to guest-curator Nancy Tousley "that I had never quite seen anything like it," she concurred.

"There is no one else that I know of who makes work like his," says Tousley, a Calgary art critic and arts journalist. "Chris's inventiveness is just extraordinary. It is always a surprise to see what he will do next."

Since earning his bachelor of fine arts from the Alberta College of Art and Design in 2000, the 34-year-old artist has been attracting attention. His work

was included in two Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art exhibitions (2005, 2010), and the National Gallery of Canada purchased *Bejeweled Doubled Festooned Plus Skull for Girls* featured in the 2010 show. Represented by TrepanierBaer in Calgary, Millar's work has travelled across Canada and to Australia, the United States, Spain and Germany.



Chris Millar uses acrylic paint skins as a building material to add appendages in “The Magic Mortar”, 2007. Photograph by: John Dean,

“It’s been amazing to me that he has developed as an artist so quickly,” says Tousley. “He is enormously focused and very dedicated to the work.”

The *Untimely Transmogrification of the Problem* is a mini-retrospective of Millar’s paintings and sculptures from 2004 to 2011. Working in miniature, his highly refined skills create meticulous, wildly imaginative works of art. The building material for his sculptures is acrylic paint skins, which are cut, twisted, bent and stretched.

The work is extremely labour intensive — it took seven months to complete the 190-centimetre-tall architectural masterpiece, 370H55V.

But don’t let Millar’s carnival colours give the impression this show is merely

fun and games. These phantasmagorical narrative works are dense, dark yet humorous, and richly layered with references to what Tousley calls “high and low culture.”

Millar combines the elaborate fantasy of 15th-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch and the jewel-coloured, playful absurdity of Willie Wonka’s Chocolate Factory with his off-the-charts imagination to build alternative worlds. He also created Gutterballs, a limited edition record album/sculpture available in the art shop.



“Dave and Becca’s Sunday”, 2008, Chris Millar’s first free-standing sculpture.

The Journal had a chance to chat with Millar from his home studio in Calgary:

**Ryan:** Does your work and your life have similarities?

**Millar:** My living space actually grows into an environment much related to the environment depicted in the sculptures and paintings. There is something about my personality that is attracted to density and is scared of empty space.

**Ryan:** The first time I saw your work, Hieronymus Bosch flashed through my mind.

**Millar:** I think I have always been an escapist. Even when I was a kid I used to

invent pretty elaborate fantasy worlds either through drawing or just playing with toys. I am attracted to him because he is similar in that way. Even the angle of viewing his people and environments is something I'm inspired by, too. It's kind of like God looking at things, God looking at people.

**Ryan:** Do you consider yourself a surrealist?

**Millar:** Not really. I think that these works deal with real-life humanity. Nancy Tousley summed it up years ago when she wrote that the work is about "human folly." A lot of what's depicted is about people trying their hardest to be good people and to succeed and to do what's right but sort of failing. There is an element of the pathetic. They are meant to be satires of society.



"Eddie Got Borsched", 2007, acrylic on canvas by Chris Millar. Photograph by: John Dean

**Ryan:** You intermingle diverse images, yet each inclusion seems deliberate, not random.

**Millar:** That is because all of the images are derived from one linear narrative ... it has to have a reason to be there.

**Ryan:** Comic books, rock music, movies, video games, television and pop culture influence your work. Is this what you were into as a kid?

**Millar:** Yeah, absolutely. Another one that was key to my development as a creative person was being totally obsessed with Dungeons and Dragons. The game is all about inventing characters and then sending them into scenarios for them to react to. I feel the paintings are like a role-playing game but on a super slow timeline.

**Ryan:** Why are you so interested in storytelling?

**Millar:** I think it comes from a fascination with people and what makes us work, and ultimately, who are we and where did we come from.

**Ryan:** When you look at this retrospective, is there anything that surprises you?

**Millar:** I never really thought that I would make sculpture, but the transition from 2-D to 3-D was so gradual and organic that it didn't even really feel like a shift.

**Ryan:** What have learned about humanity along the way?

**Millar:** I think that even as adults we are still figuring out who we are. People continue to grow as people throughout their whole lives. I think the point is, we need to forgive people when they screw up.

CHRIS MILLAR: The Untimely Transmogrification of the Problem

Where: Art Gallery of Alberta, RBC New Works Gallery, 2 Sir Winston Churchill Square

When: Saturday to April 29

More info: 780-422-6223 or [youraga.ca](http://youraga.ca); [postinterestingpainting.com](http://postinterestingpainting.com)

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