



GLORIOUS CATASTROPHE

Gillian Iles

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Glorious Catastrophe builds on two previous exhibitions by Gillian Iles, *the one eyed man is king* and *Not Like The Other*, extending her inquiry into how structures of power, perception, and belonging are constructed and undone. In those earlier projects, Iles framed “the other,” or more precisely the act of othering, not as an inherent condition but as a collective agreement: a fiction sustained only so long as enough people consent to uphold it. As with authority, hierarchy, or normativity, the nature of othering—treating a person or group as fundamentally different or less than oneself or one’s own group—persists through systems of belief and repetition: once that belief falters, the category collapses.

In *Glorious Catastrophe*, Iles expands this logic to interrogate cultural investments in permanence, stability, and control. These too are contingent constructs, appearing solid while concealing the inevitability of collapse and transformation. The exhibition asks viewers to inhabit this tension, recognizing that what seems secure is always on the brink of alteration. Catastrophe here is not merely disaster but revelation: the moment when the scaffolding of belief and opinion gives way.

This inquiry extends to the gallery space itself. Often reduced to a neutral container or functional backdrop, it’s a space that is subtly “othered,” rendered overly knowable and instrumental. Iles rejects this utilitarian framing by using the gallery space as an active terrain rather than a passive vessel. By using multiple mediums and carefully considering the physical movements of the viewer, she unsettles habitual modes of viewing, creating a space that invites exploration and discovery. The gallery does not simply hold the work, it participates in it.

At the exhibition’s conceptual core is the metaphor of the hunting blind. Designed to blend into its environment, the blind conceals both structure and occupant, a double concealment: the camouflaging of the shelter and the invisibility of the hunter within. Only one feature betrays its presence, the narrow, eyelid-like slit, through which the hunter observes and aims, the outline of which serve as frames within the frames of her paintings.

The hunting blind represents not only the role of the artist but also functions as a model for how the viewer engages with art. The relationship between hunter and landscape mirrors that of artist and subject. Both demand acute

observation, patience, discipline, and technical skill, as well as intimate knowledge of context. Both require a balance between decisiveness and restraint, the capacity to act at the precise moment or to withhold action. Ethical judgment shadows each encounter: what does it mean to “capture” something, and at what is the cost?

This metaphor also implicates the viewer. In encountering Iles's work, we assume the hunter's position, scanning the gallery space, seeking meaning, attempting to grasp what we see. The exhibition asks us to reflect on this impulse: are we extracting significance or entering into relation? Dominating the artwork or acknowledging its autonomy? We are confronted by complex oppositions: control and care, capture and encounter, domination and acknowledgement, extraction and reciprocity.

Glorious Catastrophe is an exhibition that is very much about the act of looking, an act that is here reframed with the weight of responsibility. To engage seriously with art—to read and interpret with attentiveness—is to accept the ethical implications of observation. The “good hunter” becomes less predator than witness. Looking is not neutral; it shapes what is seen while reminding us that encounters with art are also shaped by the viewer's presence. Ultimately, It calls upon us as viewers to consider whether our spectatorship is purposeful, intentional, patient, and self-aware.

Within this intricate metaphorical structure lies a powerful oscillation between the inspiring and the unsettling. Iles's paintings are alluring, their subjects drawn from the ordinary and liminal yet rendered with technical skill that elevates them beyond mere depiction. An undercurrent of unease permeates the work, particularly in her use of commercial building materials



transformed to suggest wear, decay, or fragility. Something seems to linger in the exhibition space, an encroaching presence that might engulf or collapse upon us.

Here the exhibition engages the sublime in its historical sense: not as grandeur alone but as the convergence of beauty and terror. The sublime destabilizes, inspiring awe while intimating danger. In Iles's work, particularly her paintings, the familiar becomes estranged, the everyday tinged with foreboding. We are drawn in to examine what lies on the surface only to confront the precariousness that lies beneath.

The title *Glorious Catastrophe* encapsulates the paradox of the sublime: glory and collapse, radiance and ruin are inseparable. Catastrophe becomes a transformative turning point, a revelation of what was always latent. In invoking this tension, Iles challenges our attachment to stability and mastery. What if breakdown is not failure but exposure? What if the collapse of our certainties opens the possibility of a more ethical way of seeing the other, be it a work of art or another human being?

By transforming the gallery into a site of concealment and disclosure, Iles creates a space of heightened awareness in which artist, subject, and viewer are entangled in a dynamic exchange of looking and being looked at. *Glorious Catastrophe* ultimately proposes that observation is never innocent, permanence never guaranteed, and beauty never without risk. In acknowledging these conditions we enter a more complex and accountable encounter, one in which catastrophe may also be glorious in what it reveals.

Rui Pimenta





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Glorious Catastrophe builds on two previous exhibitions by Gillian Iles examining how structures of power, perception, and belonging are constructed and undone. Central to these projects is the idea of "the other" not as an inherent condition but as a collective fiction sustained through belief and repetition. The divisive and hierarchical nature of othering persists only so long as belief upholds it; once that belief falters, the category collapses.

In *Glorious Catastrophe*, Iles extends this logic to question cultural investments in permanence, stability, and control. These too are contingent constructs that appear solid while concealing the inevitability of transformation. Catastrophe emerges here not simply as disaster but as revelation—the moment when the scaffolding of belief gives way.

This inquiry also looks at the gallery space itself which is often othered by being reduced to no more than a functional backdrop. Iles resists this framing by positioning the gallery as an active terrain. Through multiple mediums and attention to the viewer's movement, she unsettles habitual modes of viewing, creating a space of exploration in which the gallery participates in the artwork.

At the exhibition's conceptual core lies the metaphor of the hunting blind, a camouflaged structure that conceals both shelter and hunter and serves as a model for both artistic practice and the viewer's encounter with art. Like the hunter, the artist must balance observation, patience, discipline, and restraint while remaining attentive to context and ethical responsibility. This metaphor also implicates the viewer. In encountering the work, we assume the hunter's position—scanning the space in search of meaning. The exhibition asks whether interpretation is an act of extraction or relation, domination or reciprocity. In this way, *Glorious Catastrophe* reframes the act of looking as a more complex and accountable encounter, one in which catastrophe may also be glorious in what it reveals.

—Rui Pimenta

"Conflict, divisive rhetoric and ideology and the pervasive sense of tearing or the brink are omnipresent. *Glorious Catastrophe* is a composite reality of order, disorder and division, and the paradoxical confluence of words: deviation, glory, devastation, power and precarity."

Glorious catastrophe is a doctory, representing two sides of a whole—regulation and attraction, threat and bloom, order and chaos, within/without, the familiar and the other. It is the sublime flanking the division, the paradoxical and liminal in-between—a suspending moment—become/act to be determined—the opportunity for something different or better to occur."

—Gillian Iles



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Glorious Catastrophe constructs a composite reality of order, disorder and division, and the paradoxical confluence of wonder, dereliction, glory, devastation, power and precarity.

Conflict, divisive rhetoric and ideology, and the pervasive sense of teetering on the brink are omnipresent. Climactic, social and political events hint at unavoidable and catastrophic outcomes, but also demonstrate that every system has an innate predilection for change. Within fear lies hope. Catastrophe has potential—the opportunity for something different or better to occur.

The phrase glorious catastrophe is a dichotomy, representing two sides of a whole—repulsion and attraction, threat and allure, order and chaos, within/without, the familiar and the unknown.

The Other—disassociation, unfamiliarity and the related qualities of distrust and fear—but also the allure of intersections, potentials, and the mysteries they contain.

Glorious Catastrophe presents the sublime duality flanking the division, the paradoxical and liminal in-between—a suspended moment—outcome yet to be determined. Permanence and dominance are unachievable on either side.

Division requires a line to be made, a whole to be split. It is a fabrication, a determination of difference coexisting with the precarity of its own invention.

Likewise, social orders, ideologies, power structures and systems of belief are ephemeral, they are manufactured—a constructed veneer, belying fragility and precarity.

Precarity is relevant at all stages in the installation—within idea, material choices and methods of presentation. Sections are suggestively insecure, akin to a peeling façade that is being barely kept intact and in place. Temporary supports are used to prop up the imagery to prevent it collapsing and suggest reinforcement of the gallery space itself. Related found objects are incorporated in contradictory ways—tenuously in their idealized state or devalued and repurposed as the support structures. A frail and temporary existence, and inevitability of deconstruction occurs alongside illusory order, integrity and moments of enduring glory.

Glorious Catastrophe has three parts, ***All and Nothing, the one-eyed man is king*** and ***Not like the other***. Imagery, objects and sounds although literal are chosen for metaphoric and sensory purposes. Some are real and recent events, others personally witnessed and some extrapolations of experiences.



the one-eyed man is king and ***Not like the other*** are companion pieces that explore ideas of us and them, the act of targeting and notions of the other. At the core is the symbol of the hunting blind. A hunting blind immediately takes an intact moment and splits it into inside and outside, defining the nature of the moment, determining hunter and quarry. The intention of the blind is to blend in while simultaneously remaining separate. The camouflaged exterior is at odds with the rigidly geometric and void-like windows. These windows gaze outward, selectively framing content and suggesting targets. A person is required to choose to be inside or outside, a moment of determination.

In ***the one-eyed man is king*** and ***Not like the other***, the viewer's perception is manipulated. *the one-eyed man is king* places the viewer outside the blind, akin to the role of target. Contradictory content coexists between foreground and background. Through positioning and proximity the viewer is given a role and an involuntarily relationship to content.

Not like the other brings the viewer into the blind, looking out at images framed by the geometric shapes of the windows. Detached from "the other" outside, the viewer is confronted with selected targets—the outcome of an active participant.





All and nothing represents the duality of a moment. Juxtaposing content that superficially appears as contradictory in nature, each contains the potential to be either catastrophic, glorious or simultaneously both.

Throughout *Glorious Catastrophe*, the viewer is implicated. Fueled by geo political events, the work references individual experience. Presentation relies on challenging expectation and shifting perception. Manipulated real space and illusory space intermingle, intentionally blurring certainty. Bias variables like point of view, scale, clarity of definition, proximity and content relativity, as well as the use of obstructions and positioning demands the viewer interact in particular ways with the work, influencing perception, inspiring objective inconsistency, highlighting the malleability of response, ease of bias and absence of infallibility.

Gillian Iles





Photo: Max Power

Since 1997 Gillian Iles has exhibited in public institutions, artist-run centres and commercial galleries in Europe, the United States, South America and Canada. Gillian's ideas draw from current events and their relationship to individual experience. She finds commentary within power dynamics, social constructs and systems of belief related to colonial Western culture; particularly their manufactured existence, illusory value, tenuous persistence and questionable motives.

Gillian's practice spans painting, sculpture, constructions, sound & video. Installations merge real and illusory space into a composite of realities and points of view. Often large-scale, her installations respond to the opportunities of a space and ways to implicate the viewer. She is a founding member of two artist collective galleries in Toronto—Propeller and Loop, and has been with Red Head collective since 2012. She teaches at OCADU and Sheridan College in Canada.

Exhibition Credits

Artist, Gillian Iles

Exhibition technicians: Brett Despotovich and Nina Ankisetty

Koffler Arts

General Director, Matthew Jocelyn

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Rui Pimenta

Matthew Schofield

Photography, Jeremie Warshafsky



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