

A Civil War-rock 'n' roll mashup

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VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

By the time you get to Tony Scherman's enormous portrait *Blue Rain* (2005-06) at Georgia Scherman Projects you'll have a pretty good notion of the exhibition's underpinnings in the American Civil War – as if its title "About 1865" wasn't sufficient enough.

Notion? You might well feel you've lived every bloody day of the "war between the states."

By then you'll have looked at a hanging (*God's Work*, 2004-06), seen the wretched living conditions expressed through a greasy joint of decaying meat (*Army Beef*, 2005), reacted to the sight of a mean junkyard dog scavenging for scraps (*Georgia*, 2004-06) and wondered darkly about *Lincoln's Evil Twin* (2004-06) – looks sort of like Jack Nicholson, right?

You might just as well have marched all the way to Atlanta alongside Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman. And it seems as if the paintings have made the trip along with you, mottled, ravaged and road-worn as each appears to be. Their encaustic surfaces – gooey coloured wax mixed with paint and cornmeal – are often centimetres thick, rutted like a potholed back road. I've seen neater-looking campsites.

But equally important – if not more so – is the other force informing the 20 paintings in the exhibition that initiates the funky new industrial-sized gallery space off of Dupont St. operated by the artist's daughter, Georgia. And that's vintage rock 'n' roll.

Given Scherman's background this should not come as a shock. Paul, his father, was a musician. In his younger days the painter hung out with rockers in London and Toronto. He played blues guitar and was not unacquainted with drugs and big, easy money. But biography aside, the work itself is a giveaway with all of its big, blustery rock 'n' roll moments.

The muscular, lunging strokes Scherman applies to canvas could well come from the Pete Townshend school of guitar playing with its windmill-like arm wheeling. Similarly, the artist's unfettered hero worship – it ranges from Napoleon to Marilyn Monroe, soon to be among the demimonde subjects in Scherman's next suite of work devoted to famous dead junkies – harks back to pop's halcyon days when "the rock god" had the kind of funkiness Scherman brings to Robert E. Lee in *General Bob at Cold Harbour* (2004-06).

The specifics of "About 1885" first began to percolate in the painter's mind after he'd travelled through the American south in the mid-'90s. But a deeper sense of what he wanted to do with it in fact arrived much earlier after he met the Texas blues guitarist Johnny Winter and spent time listening to Duane Allman's tickling slide guitar.

"There was this kind of greasy pain in this music," says Scherman. "White boys play a different kind of blues than the black boys, and there was a different kind of pain in their music. But I

didn't know where this kind of pain was coming from."

Looking further into the Civil War produced answers. "The white trash – the white, non-slaving-owning class of people in the south – who were called up to fight came back to find they were driven down more than they ever were before they left," Scherman says. "They were ground into dust, cultural dust.

"That's where the pain comes from. I located the idea of painting the Civil War through the music. This is the side nobody talks about, to have sympathy for American white trash, to feel their pain. One might ask, 'How could you paint Lincoln's evil twin?' Well, if you're from the south, if you never had slaves and you find yourself at war, someone like Lincoln is your devil."

Melancholy infused images of the Civil War from the first photographs by Mathew Brady and others showing skeletal prisoners taken at the Confederate prison at Andersonville. But Scherman's work romanticizes this melancholy with his rich chiaroscuro of gold, blood red and velvety black that would be perfectly at home in the finest of private clubs. Even their aged quality are part of the works' romanticized nature, as they were in fact pulled out of some closet, worn but evocative still.

But this is also Scherman's rock 'n' roll side coming to the surface.