

Shoulder me under

*A radial spitting up of water. Like a splash from a small rock
dropped into a puddle, sans the rock.*

*An onscreen death noise. Fractal liquid terror. Concrete dust
in a pool liner.*

Echo, Shadow brings together paintings by Natsumi de Dianous, based in Japan; new paintings by Fiona Harman and Jacob Kotzee, both working from Western Australia; and an installation by German artist Effrosyni Kontogeorgou (approximated in the italicised phrases above). Curated by Kotzee, this is the first time that the disused elevator shaft at Light Works has been incorporated so cohesively into an exhibition. Or more accurately, this exhibition is, in a way, conceptually attuned to the non-site of the elevator. Kotzee has dug through substrate for hours, built walls, and excavated the carcass of the old Dianetics Testing Centre for the ‘Church’ of Scientology. The resultant hollowness is deceptive; neat and seamless.

I am not exaggerating when I say that as an eight year old, upon learning that scientology existed I had a mild existential crisis. Two decades later I’d probably say that rattling on religion is largely uncool, but my honest takeaway back then was that if ‘you can just make it up’ then all religions must be total bullshit. Any remaining god-given pre-ordained baptised faith I had had was obliterated in knowing that some man wrote a book about literal aliens in the 1960s that had now become a denomination on par with Christianity or Islam or Buddhism. My grandparents denouncing scientologists as heathens when Tom Cruise was on the news didn’t shake the unease. My categorisation of the world order had been fundamentally corrupted. This exhibition does little to repair said perceptual hierarchies - which is testament to its success.

‘Dianetics’ sounds at once officious and malevolent: *dia* meaning “through” and *nous* meaning “mind” or “soul”. That the etymology is shared with one of the artist’s surnames is but one of many coincidences that has made itself apparent in the course of writing. Another: the website for Perth’s chapter of L. Ron Hubbard’s pseudoscientific cultscam tells me that the City of Perth motto is “Floreat”; Latin for “flourish”. In a decade of living here, this fact was unknown to me. Floral motifs, favoured genre of art, are a kind of *roman a clef* that unite *Echo, Shadow*: not its subject, but the fictional stand in for the ‘real’ concepts of agency and distance that are explored in the frozen blossoming surfaces.

Kotzee has united an arguably unexpected selection of works, but not arbitrarily. The relational affinities at play here run deeper: Harman was Kotzee’s painting tutor at university. He saw the works of Dianous at Pig Melon in 2022, and requested loans from their owners’ (private collectors) to include those *specific* paintings. Kotzee ‘imported’ Kontogeorgou’s work, in that he was once floored by it in Bremen and has worked with the artist virtually to realise this site-specific iteration. (Including his mother acting as art courier, meeting Effi recently whilst in Germany and transporting a piece of the work back with her).

Within this constellation, the artists’ shared nucleus is a core where individual capacity for decision-making, material synthesis and our cultural image (and image-making) registers ricochet, activating one another. Naturally, we are agitated by the soulful, almost manic drawings of Dianous; Kotzee’s gloomy bright paintings; Harman’s landscapes, fragile and teeming with suburban dread; and Kontogeorgou’s deep upset, an uncanny other-worldly communion.

The after-affects of this selection are coolly at rest, somehow offset by, or ensnared within the even-more-so unsettling equilibrium and dark history of the site.

I think that calling this mode of mark-making ‘brushstrokes’ bequeaths it with a debatable kind of sentimentality— one that clumps of horsehair (or in 2024, probably more likely some post-recycled-nylon-acrylic-blend) do not necessarily possess for staining or transmuting wet gloops of pigment and cold oil onto a canvas or bit of wood. The artists of course may feel differently.

Perhaps most noticeably, Dianous paints to a point that imbues the works with, or reveals, some sort of essence. Like the paintings have commenced within some knotty substrate of the wood; like a layer of haze or fog is smeared between them and their immediate haptic physical surface. To me, these are less tender strokes, and more brushflicks and drags, smears and stains and scuffs. Dianous’s marks do not hide the process of how they came to be on or in their surfaces, but they do obfuscate the exact paths they took to get there. Layering and receding into murkier or translucent patches, recalling an ashen wick crumbling into melting wax. Some of these gestures are recognisable (petals, stamens) and some are decorative flourishes that abscond indifferently into the hazy middle distance. Could a paintbrush’s distance on canvas reverse engineer its land speed?

Kotzee takes an opposite approach, painting the firm backgrounds of scenes; the inoffensive parts of photographs that would otherwise be boring filler one’s eyes graze or glaze over in searching for the *punctum*. Clouded and bruised bits of a flowerbed, not necessarily in focus, but not so blurred as to be unrecognisable. Droops and gashes and daubs of red make the thing come alive, or shake us alive to it - we smell blood. Light bends and warps hallucinogenically into soft, hesitant forms. It is not boring to look at in the same way a photo of a flowerbed would be. It is not boring to look at, at all, having flung itself stubbornly loose somehow, away from the bland tension of the camera’s original photo.

*Show me the order of the world,
the hard-edge light of this-is-so
prior to all experience
and common to both world and thought,
no model, but the truth itself.*

from “*Thought is surrounded by a halo*” (1973) Gwen Harwood, Australian poet.

The tenuity in Harman’s works is immediately graspable in their limited palettes and obliterated backgrounds. Her anywhere-and-nowhere expanses: isolated flora, the top of water. A flower could at a glance be burning paper. The former are indifferent to our default decisions of sea, lake or river. Why not a well, a stream, or an underground pipe gurgling undisturbed? The deep-sea teal and glittering light protests; insisting on ocean. Lavender from the garden, a relic left from a previous neighbour for the artist to revive: a gift or a burden?

The suburban gothic is here and loaded into Kotzee’s work. Something sombre and frail. Something ascending and transverse to certainty. There is language, the world, your body, your self and painting. There is entropy, entirely unperturbed, and its stubborn opposite: stroke colour onto canvas. As Gilles Deleuze argued, each process of actualisation is surrounded by a constantly thickening fog of virtual possibilities. “Now, is life very solid, or very shifting?” asked Virginia Woolf verbatim

in her diaries.¹ She also unpicked this edge-of-the-worldness, this line between tacit and haptic in her novels, stories and essays, and in her lesser-known art criticism. I can't help but wonder macabrely if she had settled on one or the other when she loaded her pockets full of rocks and sank to her death in 1941. Woolf defined life as many things, once "a luminous halo"² — an idea Harwood's poem coincidentally mirrors, written three decades later and a world away from upper middle-class England's neat and manicured gardens.

To be both unfixed and clear. It is what Harwood's poem asks for and what Woolf tried to do with writing: get to the truth. Like a fruit that changes name when it dries: plum to prune. At which point is one ceased and the other commenced? Pruning a tree in paint so it looks like an aorta or spidery blood vessel. Registering a colour signal, a garden in a street, in a photo, in a painting, in your eye, in your optic nerve, into your brain matter. Without sentimentality: via your mind, into your soul. How unfair. How delightful.

This uneasy intrusion is what Kontogeorgou does, using truth in physics and sound to unseat comfortability. Things bricked shut are carved open. Doom is put in front of you, literally to *confront*. A siren is both a warning sound and a lure: stay away there's danger, or come closer, be beckoned. The fervid fractal water patterns made by vibrating sound bubble up like cauldron's guttural sleeping potion, yet we emerge somehow refreshed, back into the cursed basement to look at the paintings all-over again.

Another coincidence: in Greek mythology, sirens were thought to be connected to the "flowery" meadowed island of Anthemusa, part of ancient Macedonia. Now immediately interchangeable with mermaids, sirens were first depicted as half-woman, half-birds, and the term was not loaded with connotations of feminine and seductive. As a child, maybe you too would hold up a seashell to your ear — like a mermaid — and it or someone would convince you that you could hear the noise of the sea. Maybe in science class you later learned no, it's your own blood bouncing around in your eardrum. Maybe you already know now, it is in fact the low frequency sounds in the room around you, caught and amplified within the curved shell shape. Rumbling sounds, like the wind, or the fridge.

Like a Phantom: something apparent to sense but with no substantial existence.

Like a Ghost: a red blood cell that has lost its haemoglobin.

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July 2024

¹ See Virginia Woolf. *Oh! To be a painter*. David Zwirner books.

² The full citation: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." Woolf in the essay *Modern Fiction* first published 1919. Deleuze's "thickening fog" is explored in Hans-Ulrich Obrist's *Ways of Curating*.

