



# LISA ADAMS

## AND HER MYSTERIOUS MUSE



LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW discusses the intangible atmosphere generated by the subjects and settings of hair-sharp canvases.

Spending time with images created by Lisa Adams sees me reaching for a book. While, as viewers we attempt to unravel the mystery within these personal, metaphorical and imaginative scenes realistically portrayed but unreal in their resonance, she opens a door to an imaginary world in which we recognise our own dreams.

But there is also a significant structure, hierarchy and tradition in their construction similar to the way that words become sentences then paragraphs, then books, in an author's journey that interfaces with our own. These detailed paintings of human and natural endeavour evoke the structure in religion, institutional power and the minutiae in our environment and, within the exact organisation of the images, the power of the self is also significant. The artist's story is vested in the paintings. They are a thoughtful memoir probing her role as an artist and the artist's place in a world that is not the world.

Anna Funder writes in her novel *All That I Am*: "The problem with life is that you can only live blindly, in one direction. Memory has its own ideas; it snatches elements of story from whenever, tries to put them together. It comes back at you from all angles, with all that you later knew, and it gives you the news."

Lisa Adams paintings give us news — about art and its pressures, the fragile natural world and potential danger. She is an unusual artist — a self-taught, realist painter for over twenty-five years, who has had only three commercial shows as a result of her slow rate of production. Despite painting daily, she may produce only three or four paintings in a year, five during her most prolific years. In 2009, she began to suffer "a bad bout of RSI", a product of painting with "fingers pinched around a paintbrush" every day for twenty years. But some three years later, after making modifications to her brushes and her chair and learning to have short breaks, she is back to painting six hours a day, "even more excited and determined than before — with a renewed passion for making work".

There was a sense that Adams arrived fully formed as an artist, as her style and approach has been consistent, albeit with changing subject matter, since her work emerged when she was in her early twenties. Now forty-three, she attributes the tension in each of her tableaux to a interest in subtext, aware that what lies beneath a surface may be something else entirely. She





Opposite:

Top: Lisa Adams, **Appaloosa**, 2005, oil on canvas, 49 x 55.2cm. Courtesy Lisa Adams.

Bottom: Lisa Adams, **Avalanche**, 2010, oil on canvas, 59.3 x 80.2cm. Courtesy Lisa Adams.

This page:

Left: Lisa Adams, **Vivisection**, 2005, oil on canvas, 41.2 x 54.2cm. Courtesy Lisa Adams.

Centre: Lisa Adams, **Dig**, 2011, oil on canvas, 68 x 100.5cm. Courtesy Lisa Adams.

Bottom: Lisa Adams, **Maze**, 1998, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 77.5cm. Courtesy Lisa Adams.

also notes, "I've always lived a simple life, free of clutter. My whole life has been about image-making. I've needed space and time to think and little outside distraction."

*Vivisection* (2005) shows a sunflower in an operating theatre being divided by a full surgical crew. While the flower refers to Van Gogh, the image is an acidic description of the interest in dissection of artists' lives, rather than the works themselves. Purchased by Jeffrey Archer for his London collection, this powerful painting was seen only once in Australia.

*Dig* (2011) is, for Adams, a large work at one metre in length. Adams's slight figure is shown, working within a dusty archaeological dig, paintbrush in hand, touching another paintbrush, held by a skeleton. It communicates the necessity of art to express emotion and ideas over the centuries, and its connection with the truths of history. Adams, receiving the baton, is also digging down within her physical reserves to make this painting.

*Sparrow* (2010) also shows Adams, who is standing in an idyllic green landscape with a hooded sparrow on her gloved hand. Her expression is ambivalent as she farewells the bird, acknowledging the tenuous nature of being an artist and her connection with this tiny bird within a vast landscape.

The dogged nature of the necessity for repetitive work as an artist is also alluded to in *On the scent* (2011). A dog swims alone, going hard in wild seas under a stormy sky. There is no land in sight — yet still the dog swims.

Adams herself, released after a period of uncertainty as she recovered from RSI, into her artistic territory of process and image, suggests: "I love what I do and the way I do it. It's just me." □

Lisa Adams is represented by Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane.

