



**2018
ADELAIDE
BIENNIAL
OF
AUSTRALIAN
ART**

LISA ADAMS

A tree spontaneously bursts into flames due to the pressure of the secrets whispered into its bark (*Secret*, 2009); a plume of smoke is produced by an invisible steam engine (*Ghost Train*, 2004); and an amorous couple caress upon a blackened clearing, as if the heat of their embrace has singed the ground beneath them (*Lovers*, 2007).

Lisa Adams depicts divided worlds and parallel realities. Her hyper-real paintings hover between the realms of science fiction and gothic drama and are characterised by supernatural occurrences, dark fantasy and impossible spectacles. In harnessing the grotesque and alluding to a monstrous threat, she subjects us to her haunting, somewhat dystopian, vision of the world.

The uncanny narratives that unfold in Adams's complex paintings are a means through which the artist grapples with her internal fears or whereby painful memories are processed. Each canvas takes up to three months to complete and is the result of years of research and meticulous planning and staging. A self-taught artist, for three decades Adams has kept a journal in which she writes and sketches daily, alongside her ritual of going for an early morning walk in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast. Only a spare selection from Adams's detailed inventory of ideas are tested out in elaborate photomontages on her computer or in scaled-down dioramas constructed in her studio, in order to mimic the palette, light, shadow and depth of field of her chosen subjects.

The careful harnessing of light to dramatic effect is one of the compelling aspects of Adams's paintings. As with the exploratory surrealist artists before her, the work's success lies in its ability to conjure the perfect illusion. In the same way that René Magritte effortlessly allows us to witness day and night simultaneously in his paradoxical *Empire of Light* paintings, 1953–54, depicting a nocturnal lamp-lit street beneath a luminous cloud-spotted blue sky at high noon,

Adams performs classic *trompe l'oeil*, or tricks of the eye. Her implausible composites are utterly believable fictions.

The level of Adams's preparation is forensic. Only after the artist has tested the composition, photographed it and reconstructed the entire *mise-en-scène* digitally can she approach the blank canvas. The delicate application of oil paint, using the finest of brushes, is akin to the attention to detail and careful exhumation required of an archaeologist. One of her recent works, *Dig*, 2011, comments on the duty of the painter, as well as the necessity for the artist to delve into history and autobiography and metaphorically unearth skeletons. As she says, 'Painting is like digging down into yourself, but also a way of connecting with art history and what has gone before'.¹ An autobiographical excavation, *Dig* is a self-portrait of the artist, and like the archaeologist she is only centimetres away from her subject, alone and utterly absorbed.

Adams's paintings are rich imaginary constructions, full of theatrical devices and props, which are essential to the dramatic finale. For *Inquisition*, 2016, Adams found a dead bird and documented its splayed, feathered wings to later depict, with anatomical precision, the dissection of an angel in a hospital operating theatre. Such scenes are unsettling, yet transporting. Adams's paintings rupture the relationship between the outdoors and indoors, the familiar and the uncanny, and between nature and the supernatural. Hers is a world of reversals which disorient and disempower rational logic.

Leigh Robb

Lisa Adams, born 1969, Adelaide, *Inquisition*, 2016, oil on canvas, 54.0 x 80.0 cm; Courtesy the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane photo: Jon Linkins

¹ Phone interview with the artist, 13 July 2017.

