

# PAINTINGS

*Lisa Adams*

INSTITUTE of MODERN ART 27 JULY – 2 SEPT 2000



**For a number of years, there was a cartoonist** at *The Bulletin* magazine who used to produce a literal illustration of a common catchphrase or expression each week.

Thus, a man holding the two halves of a smashed heart-shaped sculpture was 'broken hearted', a schoolboy busily snipping the edges off a map was 'cutting corners', a housewife washing her baby near an open window was about to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'.

Of course, without realising it, this lowly jokesmith was the distant inheritor of those great Northern European masters Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Bruegel.

In pre-literate oral societies just beginning to be revolutionised by the book, their works were vast compendia of soon-to-disappear folk sayings, mnemonics designed to store information in cultures based on memory.

Their striking and seemingly arbitrary visual forms were given shape as much by the requirements of language as by any formal sense. They were motivated not by aesthetics or the desire for self-expression but by the fact they had to be decodable.

There is an almost Freudian 'condensation' of meaning in the figure of the small trunkless man in Bosch's *The Temptation of St Anthony*, into which scholars have found crammed no fewer than seven popular proverbs of the time, ranging from 'Poor people eat on their knees' to 'He is short before the head', that is, bad tempered.

Bruegel's famous collection *The Schilder-Boeck* is similar, although the images there are already less complex, less over-determined than the dense ciphers of Bosch's phantasmagoria as people begin to lose their visual memories.

We might say that with the end of this pre-verbal culture and its emblems—not so far after all from the religious symbolism of the Italian Renaissance—painting loses part of its *raison d'être*.

Although for the next three centuries stories will continue to be told, meaning progressively becomes unmoored or untethered from images. There is no longer any way of strictly 'translating' or perhaps even describing what we see. The whole classical doctrine of 'ut pictura poesis' on which art was based becomes impossible to maintain.

Painting begins its long march into abstraction and autonomy.

The young Sunshine Coast artist Lisa Adams is a figurative painter who comes at the end of this long and involved history.

She continues to produce representational painting at a time when it no longer carries the weight it once did—when it has lost its symbolic and even scientific justification for wanting to resemble the world. Its status as repository of wisdom and cultural memory has been replaced by books, its duty as recorder and witness of appearances has been superseded by photography and film.

Why then continue to practise in this difficult and demanding medium? Why seek to be faithful to the look of things when there is no longer any point in doing so?

We are not sure whether Adams' work definitively answers these questions, but it might be seen to be responding to them.

Consider the paintings in this show. A young girl climbs towards the sky on a ladder that turns into snakes beneath her. Identical twins (apparently self-portraits of Adams herself) row in opposite directions in the same small boat in the middle of the ocean. A fire-spotting tower fails to notice the flames licking brightly at its own base. A female archaeologist (again, Adams herself) chips out her own preserved footsteps in rock.

A toppled lighthouse illuminates a boat that sits atop the rocks where it should be. And, finally, a lighthouse's beam turns the water where it shines into a raging storm when all is calm around it.

Are these examples of a by now exhausted form of Surrealism? Perhaps.

Are they indebted to Magritte? How could they not be.

But look closer and a kind of small miracle occurs.

Take the young girl climbing up a ladder that turns into a mass of writhing snakes behind her (*Ladder*, 1990-91).

Of course, the work has something to do with 'Snakes and Ladders', that childhood game of chance that through its highs and lows is said to be a metaphor for life itself.

But can it not also be seen as a metaphor for figurative painting, which precisely turns a mass of confused squiggles into the ordered lines of mimetic resemblance?

Or to put this another way, might it not even be seen as an allegory for the allegorical nature of the painting itself, the way the actual material of the work is left behind as it climbs towards its intended meaning?

That is, by the time we finally decipher the image, it may as well be a cartoon. The physical experience of the work disappears like the proverbial ladder that is drawn up after one ascends it.

And yet this realisation did in fact take some time. There was a moment, however brief, when we were not quite sure what we were looking at or what it meant.

This, we might say, is the very time of the painting itself. Impossibly perhaps, we would want to make an equivalence between the time we take to decipher the image and the time Adams took to paint it—they are the same time.

And to return once more to the painting, can it not be seen to be speaking of just this passage from the abstract to the figurative, the image to the word, the way what it says is inseparable from how it looks, no matter how unstable and precarious a support it forms? (For there is a strange excess of detail that marks Adams' images well beyond any requirements of their allegory.)

In other words—and this is in part the strange circularity that characterises it—at the same time as we are taken away from the materiality of the work by its allegorisation, we are returned to it allegorically.

We are held suspended in its paradoxical duration, at once over almost as soon as we look at it and an enigma that, insofar as it is folded over on and refers to itself, can never be definitively resolved.

And in all of Adams' work we have an image—although can this word be used any more in the singular?—of the image splitting apart, straining against itself, attempting to speak of itself from somewhere outside while having only its own means to do so.

No wonder the young girl remains poised halfway up the ladder forever, the two rowers pull furiously at their oars without getting anywhere, the fire-spotting tower burns brightly without ever collapsing, the lighthouse causes the very storm it is meant to protect us against...

**LISA ADAMS** Born 1969, Adelaide. Lives and works in Cooroy, Qld

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Paintings: Lisa Adams*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane  
1998 *Fantastical Realism and the Big Questions—Paintings by Lisa Adams*,  
Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld  
1994 *Lisa Adams*, Noosa Fine Art Gallery, Qld

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 *Conrad Jupiters Art Prize*, Gold Coast City Gallery, Qld  
*Luscious*, Cooloola Shire Public Gallery, Qld  
1996 *Direct Sun*, Noosa Art Gallery, Qld  
1994 *Breton's Beach*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld  
1991 *One*, Niagra Galleries, Melbourne  
*10th Anniversary*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld  
*The Surreal Mind*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld  
1989 *Selected Survey*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld

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*Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, 1997*

Oil on linen, 24.5 x 30 cm. Collection of Ruby Smith.  
Photograph Mark Oss-Emer



ABOVE:

**Ladder, 1990-91**

Oil on linen, 84.5 x 72.5 cm. Collection of  
Beautree Pty Ltd. Photograph Mark Oss-Emer

FRONT COVER:

**Track (detail), 1999**

Oil on linen, 64 x 75.5 cm. Private collection.  
Courtesy of Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane.  
Photograph David McCarthy