

LISA ADAMS



Anguish Pencil drawing, 1988

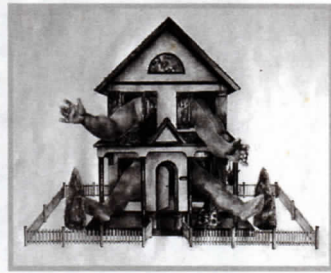
'Fantastical realism and the big questions - paintings by Lisa Adams.'

...the garden is unearthly,/ a holy place.../Ah, but the garden is inviting,/ exquisite in its carved geometry/ of hedges that disclose at the centre/ little of consequence. Nobody stops/ at the orange zinnias. The alcove,/ the marble seat, are always vacant/ and always willing to be occupied.

From 'The Garden' by Sarah Day in *Quickening*, Penguin Books, Ringwood 1997.

In Lisa Adams' painting *Heaven and Hell* 1992-93* a young woman engages in a solo game of leap-frog, prancing through a classical garden, metamorphosing as she goes. Demon and angel, she marks out the circular, central ground in a space somewhere between paradise and hell. To achieve this painting, the

artist posed for each of the stages in the game, and approached all the other elements in the picture with the same fervid commitment to their truthful portrayal. The narrative is personal but not elusive. Trial and error, good and evil, the creative negotiation of all things under heaven - these are the familiar concerns which permeate her work. The artist deals with them in a style which adheres so firmly to the principles of exact representation that we become aware of a consciousness deeply at work, confronting the physicality of experience on a raw level.



Untitled Pencil drawing 1987

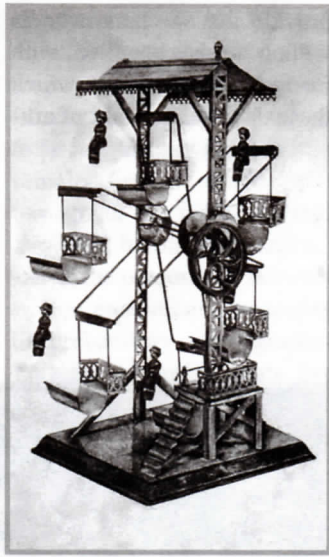
Lisa Adams lives on a property in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, waits tables at night, and paints by day. She is not a 'regional' artist in any sense except geographic - aside from the odd red-bellied black snake, there is no local content in her paintings. Art is her 'real job' and she applies a strict work ethic to the development of her practice - she clocks on in her studio around 9 am and works steadily until mid-afternoon. Over the last few years this routine has produced a small body of work, a dozen or so paintings, intense, disturbing and beautiful. They were worth the wait.

By artworld definitions, Lisa Adams is an 'emerging' artist, about to embark on an officially acknowledged career complete with government grant, critical documentation and a survey exhibition. Her practice may now be run within the boundaries of the prescribed aesthetic systems: the galleries, the dealers, the

alternative spaces, the art periodicals, the art histories, the art bureaucracy. Of course like the overnight sensations of theatre and film, the careers of 'emerging' visual artists are often years in the making and might even involve active or partial resistance to the formal processes of recognition and support offered by the industry.

This is certainly true of Lisa Adams. She has, up until now, painted in deliberate isolation, free from the constraints sometimes imposed by a 'cultural milieu'. I am not talking about any kind of social withdrawal. Lisa is largely self-taught, and she chases each idea into a painting through a dramatic private process of research, preparation, consultation and realisation, a process which involves an almost hieratic regard for the acquisition of detailed knowledge.

Interestingly Lisa Adams', earliest works, the ones with which she cut her artistic teeth, comprise many drawings and a few paintings which graphically depict dolls and playthings; spooky, un-cute creatures and toys that evoke the uncanny world of childhood. The dolls disappeared from the artist's work, but crucial elements remain - an impression of determined naiveté, the intense dedication to mark-making, and an implied interaction between cruelty and innocence.



Untitled Pencil drawing, 1987

Where do they come from, these strange and lovely works? Many viewers will probably make automatic assumptions about their genesis, associating Adams' off-beat realism with the dreamscapes of Surrealism, and her use of environmental imagery with an activist's philosophy. These are connections which the artist rightly rejects. Her intention is to use metaphor in a concrete way, to demonstrate

how subjectivity is contingent upon that which is outside ourselves. In Wendy Steiner's book *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995) the author proposes the notion of 'virtual reality', an elusive concept commonly associated with 3-D computer graphics, to describe the paradoxical nature of art. For Steiner, art is neither identical

to reality nor isolated from it, but a virtual realm tied to the world by acts of interpretation. The clarity of vision required for this pursuit is literally present in Lisa Adams' work from beginning to end. She has an 'idea', visualises it and sets about gathering the materials and information, the visual clues and technical resources which will allow her to capture that 'idea', to animate it in her own life and mind, and then to pin it down on canvas to make it real. This course of production may take months or years to evolve into a finished painting.

In *Ladder* 1990-91 the artist ascends a ladder bound for heaven; its bottom rungs replaced by an incredible mass of snakes (all known Australian species), writhing, inter-twined and ready to strike. The reference which immediately comes to mind is

the childhood board game 'Snakes and Ladders', that harmless past-time which introduces us to the inevitability of life's ups and downs. According to the artist, however, this game was only a marginal source for the painting, a raw interpretation of precariousness, curiosity and struggle. Lisa Adams' intricate methods involve an attention to detail which is practically fetishistic. In this work each painted snake is presented with excruciating accuracy, rendered with the scientific sensibility one might find in a naturalist's manual. Even the parts that are actually hidden from view by the great, snaky mass, are present within the surface of the painting. The artist *knows* they are wholly there, and the viewer *feels* it. Similarly, when she decided to use whaling as a motif in *Ship of Fools* 1994, Adams comprehensively researched the industry, immersing herself, through illustrated texts, in its commercial rituals and

bloody consequences. This is the kind of realism which gives natural objects and forms an eloquence of their own, potentially independent of the overriding aims of the picture-maker.

Lisa's quest for that perfect 'particular' is a factor which resonates in the repeated images of hunting and discord in the natural world (for instance *Startled Deer* 1996, *Foxhunt* 1995, *Ship of Fools* 1994, *Eternal Struggle* 1993). These are not works concerned with ecological righteousness. Rather, the artist takes up such issues from the popular domain, and using her implacably realistic technique, explores the concept of conflict - to subvert its 'naturalness', and to track its conjunction with self-destruction. The whalers will wreck their own boat, the antlers of the deer are human weapons turned against the sky, the hunter becomes the hunted.

Above all, Lisa Adams' paintings are self-revelatory - she declares herself (loudly in the *Self-Portraits*) to be her primary subject. The female figures which pose throughout the work, rowing, climbing, harpooning, sailing, are all the outcome of her own studio enactments, recorded in preparatory photographs. Though the artist treats her life and ideas with enormous seriousness, the paintings are not without whimsy or unpredictability. There she is, pulling against the tide, chasing her own tail, defying gravity as she rows up the lighthouse. The symbology is so readable and yet cannily inverted.

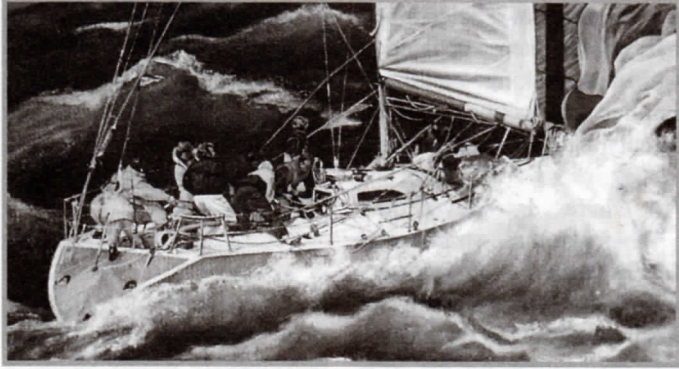
In Lisa Adams' painted worlds lighthouses cast dominating shadows, and shearers can't tell the difference between sheep and wolves. The typical struggles she invokes, against confinement and loneliness, and her ability to balance drama with oddity (*Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* 1997, *Caged Bird* 1989)

provide the spectator who is willing to be beguiled with many of those things which these days we demand of art -

complexity, tolerance and the pleasures of unfettered thought.

Lynne Sear
Senior Researcher
Queensland Art Gallery
January 1998

*This work is not illustrated



Self-Portrait, 1993 (Detail)

LISA ADAMS

Born Adelaide 1969

Self taught artist

Presently residing in Cooroy, Qld.

**SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

1994 Noosa Fine Art Gallery

1998 *Fantastical realism and the big questions - paintings* by Lisa Adams Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1989 *Selected Survey* Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld.

1991 *The Surreal Mind* Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld.

1991 *10th Anniversary* Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld.

1991 *One Niagara Galleries*, Melbourne, Vic.

1994 *Breton's Beach* Noosa Regional Gallery Qld.

1994 *A Womans Collection* La Plage, Noosa Heads, Qld.

1996 *Direct Sun* Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld.

AWARDS AND GRANTS

1993 First Prize, Local Artist Section, Noosa Art Show.

1998 Regional Arts Development Fund Project Grant.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1994 Francis Flynn, "The Life Dreams of Surrealist Painter, Lisa Adams", *Boardwalk Art Magazine*, Summer Edition.

1994 Cover Image, *Boardwalk Art Magazine*, Summer Edition.

1994 Renay Bone, 'Generation X', *Noosa Blue Magazine*, Summer Edition.

1997 Cover Image, *Artworker Magazine*, Queensland Artworkers Alliance, Spring Edition.

COLLECTIONS

Noosa Council.

Beautree Pty. Ltd., Sydney

Private Collections

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Noosa Council, Kevin Wilson - Director of Noosa Regional Gallery, Lindy Johnson - Executive Officer of the Queensland Artworkers Alliance, Lynne Seear - Writer, Mark Oss-Emer - Photographer, David Bromley - Portrait Photograph, Bruce Slater - CEO Vision Repro and Print, and Kim Guthrie for his tireless support.