Dark Heart: Adelaide Biennial

There are many people who may find this year’s Adelaide Biennial, with its title Dark Heart, foreboding. This is, however, in line with the Art Gallery of South Australia director Nick Mitzevich’s belief that the “underbelly of contemporary culture” needs to be explored.

By Jonathan Thomson

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delaine, the beautiful capital of South Australia, is ringed with parklands and blessed with a Mediterranean climate and a delightful hinterland of rolling hills, tranquil woodlands, extensive vineyards, and superb beaches. It is renowned for the range and quality of its wines and fresh produce, which in turn support excellent restaurants and a wealth of niche gourmet food producers. One of its main boulevards, North Terrace, is possibly the finest stretch of civic architecture anywhere in the world. The noted art historian Lord Kenneth Clark (1903–1983) once justifiably called it “the nicest small city in the world.” However, another commentator, who as a resident might have a more perceptive insight, describes it just as eloquently as “the sick fuck capital of the world” because of its seemingly very high numbers of deviant sex crimes, child disappearances, and grisly murders. The most notorious example in recent years was the series of murders that resulted in bodies being deposited in barrels in a disused bank vault in the nearby small town of Snowtown.

This bleak background has informed the theme of the current Adelaide Biennial exhibition (March 1 – May 11, 2014), curated by the Art Gallery of South Australia director Nick Mitzevich. This is the first time that a director of the gallery has taken on the role of curator of the Adelaide Biennial. Mitzevich has titled his exhibition Dark Heart; he is on record as saying that he wanted to “explore the underbelly of contemporary culture.”

The result is a darkly gothic exhibition. Gothic is a term that evokes images of death, destruction, and decay. It implies something that is dark, macabre, morbid, menacing, and monstrous. Ironically, it is its negative connotations that have made it such a popular symbol of rebellion for youth subcultures. The word itself derives from the Latin Gothicus, which means of or pertaining to the Goths, being the nomadic warrior tribes inhabiting the forests of northern Europe in the 3rd century. The Romans regarded the Germanic tribes such as the Goths and Vandals as barbarians and this image was definitively established when the Visigoths sacked Rome. Henceforth the Goths became notorious for being wild and dangerous and carrying death and destruction before them. Artists and architects, who preferred the architectural forms of classical antiquity from Greece and Rome to that of the immediately preceding centuries, picked up the term again during the Italian Renaissance. Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) was the first to label this architecture “Gothic,” to suggest that it was barbaric.

Just as the barbarian Goths were the dark “other” of classical civilization, in the 17th century Age of Enlightenment that was also known as the Age of Reason, the entire medieval period was retrospectively envisioned as the “Dark Ages” and characterized by religious fanaticism and superstition in which an irrational fear of witchcraft, sorcery, and Satanism ran rampant. Gothic literature of terror including such classics as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Bram Stoker’s Dracula are characterized by gloomy settings such as ruined castles, mysterious violent and supernatural events, and a general atmosphere of degeneration and decay.

Death is central to the gothic imagination but the gothic vision of death is profoundly ambiguous. In her room for Dark Heart, Victorian artist Julia de Ville has created an extraordinary vision of a child’s nursery. Her black-and-white-striped bedroom is full of stuffed toys, but unlike the commercial soft toy animals that occupy every other child’s room, de Ville uses real taxidermied animals dressed in an array of exotic costumes. The display includes an alpaca rocking horse, a number of tiny piglets on pedestals with beaded skins and lace wings, a cat posed in an eerily human-like manner and dressed in black Victorian finery, and a porcelain doll dressed in a christening gown. A mobile made with a blackbird on a twig and bejeweled animal hearts and birds eggs rotates slowly above them.

Outside the entrance to the gallery a burning suburban home appears to have fallen from the sky to become embedded in the footpath. Modeled by artist Ian Strange on his own childhood home in Perth, it offers passers-by a taste of the theater that awaits them inside the gallery. A lamp on the porch is left on night and day as if to deter burglars, or to suggest that, despite appearances, somebody is at home.

The use of black is of course de...
rigueur in an exhibition of this type. Sally Smart uses it as a room-size chalkboard where various jottings seem to identify the linkages between the cut collages, photographs, and prints that comprise her installation exploring the body. Tony Garifalakis uses it to partially obliterate the faces of 85 world leaders, transforming some of the most visible power brokers on the planet into a cadre of faceless men. Dale Frank uses it to add a dramatic element to his abstract paintings made up of swirls and eddies of varnish. Perhaps the most effective and novel use of black is by Caroline Rothwell who makes large format “paper-cuts” out of sheets on heavy-duty PVC. Unlike traditional paper-cuts, Rothwell does not remove the excess material entirely, but leaves it dangling in a series of concentric tendrils that drape the surface of the work and accumulate in piles on the floor beneath it. In what might be a reference to the environment, they suggest simultaneously the possibility and the impossibility of returning this material to its original state.

A similar sentiment is conveyed by Brook Andrew who appropriates images of Aboriginal people made by a 19th-century naturalist and represents them as large-format silkscreen prints printed in black on a glittering gold background. The intention is perhaps to give these works the same sense of majesty as religious icons. Traditional Aboriginal work is represented by the Kulata Tiuta Project, which presents an array of hand-carved spears made by men from the Amata community. These works are suspended from the ceiling and dare visitors to walk beneath their densely packed points.

The Adelaide Biennial, established in 1990, is staged by the Art Gallery of South Australia to coincide with the biennial Adelaide Festival of Arts. It is dedicated solely to presenting contemporary Australian art. Adelaide’s dark past is one strand of the Australian psyche that is probed in this thoughtful and engaging exhibition but there are other dark aspects of it that are examined in less overtly Gothic ways.

Alex Seton is a virtuoso sculptor who makes exquisitely carved marble objects. He flaunts the supremely difficult qualities of his chosen material with insouciant ease. He is a realist sculptor who transforms everyday objects into the monumental through marble. His Someone died trying to have a life like mine references an incident in 2013 when 28 life jackets were found washed up on a beach of the Cocos and Keeling islands off of the coast of North Western Australia. No boats were ever reported missing and no distress calls were ever made and so no search was ever undertaken but it was thought by some concern groups that these must have come from a stricken vessel carrying illegal asylum seekers. The truth will never be known, but when Seton crafted his 28 utterly life-like lifejackets in solid marble with nylon webbing straps, his use of metaphor could not have been clearer. The issue of asylum seekers has galvanized public...
opinion in Australia in recent decades. Both major political parties share similar views about the expulsion of boat arrivals but it remains a contentious issue with many seeing it as indicative of a society that has hardened its heart to the plight of others. The recent loss of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 gives this work a more universal poignancy while the extensive efforts of Australia in supporting the search for the ill-fated plane shows that in cases of genuine loss Australians do in fact care deeply.

One of Mitzevich’s first acts on becoming director in 2010 was to re-hang parts of the collection to introduce contemporary work into the period galleries. The intention was to juxtapose objects from different periods and cultures in order to help reveal past/present links. Art history need not always been seen as linear and instead Mitzevich and his team have adopted a number of different themes, including Memento Mori, Present Realities; Seduced; The New Classical; and The Human Condition. The result sparked a flurry of outraged letters to the local daily newspaper The Advertiser, but it does emphasize the strengths of the gallery’s collections and encourages audiences to look at it in new ways.

A more successful pairing was of work by contemporary artist eX de Medici with a group of Persian works from the gallery’s collection. In this case there was a real dialogue between the old and the new. Her work The Law was inspired by the artist’s recent visits to Iran and comprises a group of three intricate watercolor-and-gouache paintings that combine symbols of surveillance and military power and logos of Western multinationals with a foliate background reminiscent of ceramic tiles or hand-knotted rugs. The installation also includes a large floor work called The Law (Automatic) that comprises a rendering of an Australian flag combined with the stripes of the American flag, made out of tens of thousands of brass and plastic spent cartridges from a variety of weapons including 12-gauge shotguns and military ordinance.

Dark painted walls and dramatic spotlighting serve to give the whole exhibition a sense of spectacle. The most dramatic room is a cabinet of curiosities by Fiona Hall who will represent Australia at next year’s Venice Biennale. Her installation titled Out of my tree, which is an Australian colloquialism suggesting madness, features an array of skulls, cuckoo clocks, burnt books, and other things which are all objects of vanitas: reminding us that life is short and ultimately we all must die.

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