

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

THE DARK ARTS

19 JULY - 10 AUGUST 2013

SHERRY MCLANE ALEJOS

FABRICE BIGOT + JANE BURTON

GEORGIA METAXAS

SIMON PERICICH

KATE ROBERTSON

SASKIA PANDJI SAKTI

MIA SALSJO

VIVIAN COOPER SMITH

TERRY TAYLOR

In Melbourne, black is a definite: from swathes of black clad city workers on a wintry Melbourne day, to a sea of hipsters in black at a gig, to the black silhouettes in the crowd at an exhibition opening.

The colour black is reliable and flexible. To me, it signifies my love of all things occult, it adheres to my romantic notions of melancholy and I like to think it reflects my inherently anarchistic spirit. In addition to this, it makes these attributes socially acceptable, even elegant. I can hide in the colour, and at the same time, feel empowered by it.

We wrap ourselves in black and toy with its cultural nuances. In *The Dark Arts*, the second exhibition at new contemporary gallery Strange Neighbour, Melbourne based artists whose practice incorporates the colour black have been brought together. For an audience that so often gravitates towards stylised darkness, this exhibition both unravels and further mystifies Melbourne's affinity with the colour.

Georgia Metaxas' *Untitled 28* from the series *The Mourners* is a portrait of an elderly woman dressed entirely in black. As a symbol of perpetual mourning she will repeat this ritual every day until her death. Not simply a signifier of mourning, or cultural custom, this ritual is the embodiment of unselfish love - a love that cannot be returned. The sitter, enveloped in black, becomes a 'vessel for mourning'.

Kate Robertson's *Dust Landscape # 10* from the series with the same name documents a different cultural tradition ConFest; one of the first open healing communities in Australia. Kate created the work from collected dust particles taken from the festival site that had been stirred up by, and clung to participants as they performed a series of community rituals. She describes these dust particles as 'artifacts of celestial experience'. The work aims to document what festivalgoers experienced as the 'spiritual collective consciousness', and the associated transformative and liberating qualities.

Mia Salsjo's *Augustus Gloop* also depicts transformation and energizing qualities. Based upon a teenage boy who loses himself to gluttony, he dies, but in death is transformed to a powerful, larger than life, Knight. Surrounded by black and concealed by armour, he is free but protected, ready for a new beginning. Mia's ritualistic creative process is apparent; burnt spears support the fabric that she has delicately unstitched by hand

to reveal the words 'let the birds out'.

Vivian Cooper Smith explores process and the materiality of his chosen medium, much like Mia. His sumptuous photographs of the celestial - a full moon and starry night sky against a heavy black backdrop, are 'interrupted' by an intensity of creases and folds, destroying the pristine surface of the paper they are printed on. This disturbance causes a stoppage in the flow of associations naturally connected with outer space and its mysteries. How do the limits of our knowledge and our origins impact on the understanding of ourselves?

Saskia Pandji Sakti's work from the series *I Hear Voices* depicts portraits of women in a state of possession, acting as mediums for the dead to contact the living and vice versa. Through a series of secret rituals these 'spirit mediums' are worked into a trance-like state that enables their transition to 'the other side'. For the mediums and their 'clients' a belief in the occult must transpire, a spirituality that extends beyond pure reason and the physical sciences. This is concealed knowledge.

Fabrice Bigot and Jane Burton's collaborative video piece *Là-Bas (Down There)* continues to explore the topics of possession and the occult. Set in a steamy, black tiled underground bathroom, a woman crouches naked, appearing ill and vulnerable. A moment later she is inside the shower, protected and veiled under the flow of water. A ghostly masculine figure fringes the outline of her body and flying birds shadows are hauntingly projected, seeming to symbolise transition to an otherworldly state. The eerie soundtrack laced with paranormal sounds and the seductive use of black reinforces the impression that an incubus is surrounding her.

The subject of absence and polarisation is expressed through process and ritual in Sherry McLane Alejos' occult work *SANS PRINCIPLE*. This slickly designed sculpture projects a repetitive text and video piece that instructs through affirmation and graphic formations. The text intersperses a series of analytical words with a series of illogical words. Illustrative configurations appear like runes, astrological outlines, a wind vane, compass points, a secret chart or a map.

The consistent subject of Terry Taylor's exquisitely rich, dark yet detailed oil paintings is that of skulls in various dress and settings. Terry sees these as 'portraits, just with the skin and gizzards stripped away'. While redundant attributes of physical identity are removed they remain individuals in death, their life's secrets buried in the details. They are imperfect and wear battle scars with pride. Like Mia Salsjo's *Augustus Gloop*, these characters are transformed after death, are empowered by it. Religious, tribal, medieval and historical references are found in the work, embracing hints of sorcery and voodoo. The fine details of pattern making in Terry's ritualistic painting process is a tradition passed down from her grandmother and great grandmother who were seamstresses. Both the strengthening quality of ritual and the sheer fragility of life resonate within these paintings.

Simon Pericich's black bunting installation, *Protest Celebration Sale* resembles a futuristic, pirate ship adornment or end-of-the-world, carnivalesque commemoration. Here repetition is employed across the black plastic triangles like an attention grabbing, gothic car yard advertisement. Unexpectedly blacking out the usual rainbow array of garden-variety bunting doesn't revoke the festive potential. Just as blackness symbolically spans across tradition and anarchy, the protective and the apocalyptic, here the suggestive potential of black is exploited in all its complexity.

Gothic, mournful, secretive, magic, powerful, elegant, protective, heavy, sophisticated, rebellious, romantic, transformative, mysterious, absorber of negative energy, seductive, concealing, intimidating, otherworldly, melancholy, evil, sorrowful, chic, violent, absent, outer space, individual, social, apocalyptic.

In *The Dark Arts*, black is shown to be all that it is.

Linsey Gosper, 2013