

**Black Beauty** – some thoughts on *The Dark Monarch* at Tate St Ives  
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Drawing on a body of theory (Meyer & Pel, 2003 ) in which magic is placed as a counterpoint to modernity, the curators have cleverly sited and juxtaposed an incredible body of work in the 'Dark Monarch' show. I had anticipated some poignant 'dialogues' between art works, but could not have guessed at the sheer volume of work on show, and multitude of multiplicity! This is certainly as the curators say a 'journey' [through] a 'restless territory of knowledge', with 'cross-generational' and 'thematic clusters' (Clark, M., Bracewell M., Rowlands A., (eds), 2009)

As in many contemporary shows the old and new are 'collapsed' together. There is no attempt (thankfully!) to chronologically or educationally take us on a tour, to try and uniformly mould their subject. Instead there are a multitude of perspectives that play with the meeting points of both art, and the occult as transformative, as obscure hermetic practice, as a search for truth, and escaping logic and reason. And so attempts to bring order, categorization and meaning, are in many ways overpowered by fanciful drifts, with the curators focusing on the 'cumulative impossibility of the potent conjunction' (" "). What is magic is the marriage of post-modernity with arcane sensibility.

There is a huge array of works that one could focus on individually, that explore 'mysterious, potent and essential forces', (" "), but it is not only the conceptual conjunctions that are interesting, it is an eye for detail and almost overwhelming aesthetic of the show. There is a haunting, and sometimes sublime beauty about the way in which work is placed, and gallery space is utilized. The first room is probably the most schematic, with a firm subject area, 'Rocks & Stones'. Colour, tone, and spatial arrangement of a strong juxtaposition of work, attune our 'sensibilities' to an alchemical magic of combining and conjoining opposites. The words mysterious, threatening, brooding, and foreboding, are used to describe abstracted landscapes interspersed with sculptures. Juxtaposed in this room you have post-war apocalyptic landscape scenes, work featuring Cornish sacred stones, Weschke's *Pillar of Smoke*, and a Sven Berlin cabinet featuring his book *Dark Monarch*. None of it seems out of place in our entry into a metamorphosing world that plays with 'established knowledge'.

The very first image in the left hand corner is *The Combat*, a pencil and ink wash drawing by Paul Nash. Described by the artist as...'black abyss, where gaunt hills brooded dark and evil....A dread place seen only in dreams', it shows a timeless battle between angel and devil but fought between two figures both half-bird and half human. There is no simple 'good' and 'evil'. Both are hybrid. Placed next to Henry Moore's *Three Points* (1939-40), this image emphasizes a delicate tension, and frisson between belief systems in a secularized society that has no longer has truck with 'truth'.

It prepares the way for what follows. As you leave the first room via the stairs, you may be left wondering how John Latham's burnt books fit into theoretical

premise, but it is so beautifully striking, you no longer care! The juxtaposition of *Mars Ascends* (1956), by Bryan Winter, and Latham's *Little Red Mountain*, enhances both works. This is a show that recalls aesthetic experience, and vast contrast. This is art as sensibility and transcendence, and firmly within the realm of the imagination. The curators take us on a magical, mystery tour, that no matter how chance, and diverse, is beautiful.

In the main gallery space, (Lower Gallery 2), Eva Rothchild's work dominates the space, with *Stairway* (2005), an arrangement of triangles cascading downwards, with its implications of secret life and second sight, which is placed next to mask-like *High Life* (2004). I choose to ignore Mark Tichner's *Zone of Protection* (2009). Metaphorically and physically you have to squeeze around it, because although it references archaic symbols and belief systems, it seems to suck us back into the very meaninglessness of contemporary culture that I thought we were circumventing with imaginative play (this may well be his point?) It reminded me of a current culture where 'meaning is never closed' (Derrida in Lyas, 1997). Avoiding the black hole of simultaneously meaning everything and nothing, there was plenty else to invite 'inner vision', and subjective, imaginative response.

I was disappointed that after calling this section *the mantic stain*, inspired by Ithell Colquhoun's writing, they had only a collection of her small sketches and watercolours here, and only one painting *Abstract Vegetation* (1944), in the Upper Gallery display case. Displaying her library of occult books, nearly but not quite, made up for this. Beautiful yet bizarre this display takes you from Nash's romanticism, Ithell, Austin Osman Spare, fantasy and the pop 70s new age spirituality, and 'feminism' with Penny Slinger. Bit surprised they didn't manage Aleister Crowley, but I suppose you can't get everything in no matter how you try!

In the apse, Derek Jarman's *Sulphur* from the Art of Mirrors series (1975), magic returns as his super-8 film features figures playing with mirrors, and fire in a grainy multi-layered fantasy. The everyday is transformed through layers of image and meaning. The overlapping imagery shows a dice thrown reminds us of the surreal beauty of chance, and chance encounter. Adam Chodsko's seemingly incidental *Secretors*, (1993) made from lead crystal and 'manifestation juice', are placed out of the usual line of vision. They are intended as spectres to be glimpsed and haunt us from the corners of our eyes. These made for an unexpected encounters, in a show that already has plenty (so look out for them)!

My chance encounter was with *Black Square* (2008), by Gillian Carnegie, in Gallery 3. Déjà vu! I had already seen this and loved it in a London show over the summer. In wonderful thick, black paint a tree emerges. This is painting in 3-D, and with its wonderful texture, it invites you to walk around, almost to see if you can peer behind the apparition. Claire Wood's *Daddy Witch* (2008) is equally beautiful in enamel. I like Cerith Wyn Evan's ideas about human figures mutating into beautiful and sinister fantastical forms in his photographs of trees, and though beautifully lit by neon quote, *later on they are in a garden* (2007), I wonder... is it magical or merely garish?

You leave dark scenes to enter *path through a wood* in gallery 4. This is a séance of curation, and a dizzying creative act as you gaze at a strange collection, from a portrait of a plump white patience playing girl, by Meredith Frampton (1937), above the door, and hikers (J.W. Tucker, 1936) to paintings that return to original themes of foreboding, and magic by Michael Ayrton (*Skull Vision*, 1943 and *Orpheus* 1941). This room is either light entertainment (I loved Steven Claydon's contemporary sculptures with their hessian presentation values, and random objects) or hell (the walls are painted red).

The final room is white and filled with light. Seemingly we have a resolution to the first image of the show *The Combat*, As curator Alun Rowlands reminds us when writing of Jarman's film, on a basic level there is the eternal battle between light and dark, and the 'pleasure of seeing language put through the magic lantern' (Clark, M., Bracewell M., Rowlands A., (eds), 2009, p.xxiv). The journey is one of imagination, one that you must make your own. In this last room seems to be intended as the resolution or at least redemption as Fay Pomerances's 1967 *Sphere of Redemption*, is illuminated with the light and colour from John Russell's 2009, *Untitled/Abstraction of Labour Time/Eternal Recurrence/Monad*. It is the end of dialogue between extremes. Even Cecil Collin's pieces show resolution as the titles show: *Angel Image and Negative Spectres in Conflict* (1933), pen and ink and then *Hymn*, (1953) and *Angel of the Flowing Light*, (1968). The latter are heavenly.

There is something for everyone in this exhibition. The Tate team hold your hand for a short time only before leaving you in the *path through the wood*. Audiences are invited to make their own journey, with their own internal landscapes. For just as art practice involves 'moving between a number of different points of view, like the moving camera in a film' (p172, Lyas, 1997), this exhibition roves around, and leaves us to our individual responses. So ignore mine and do go!

The 'magic' may not work for everyone, or for everything in the show, but I defy all but the most hardy Dantesque contemporary artists and artlover-goers to deny there is something here. Not just a *rétourne*, a journey to the past, or a search for meaning in a meaningless art world, but a reminder to us all that art can be aesthetic, sublime – 'magic'!

#### References:

Clark, M., Bracewell M., Rowlands A., (eds) (2009), *The Dark Monarch, Magic and Modernity in British art*, Tate Publishing

Herwitz, (2008), *Aesthetics*, Continuum:London

Lyas C., (1997), *Aesthetics*, Routledge:London

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