

ALL CREATIVE ART IS MAGIC, IS EVOCAATION OF THE UNSEEN IN FORMS PERSUASIVE, ENLIGHTENING, FAMILIAR AND SURPRISING...¹ Joseph Conrad

1. In 1905, Joseph Conrad (December 3, 1857–August 3, 1924) wrote the essay “Henry James: An Appreciation,” which included this quote. The essay was included in Conrad’s collection *Notes on Life and Letters*. The essay was also printed in *The North American Review* Vol. 203, No. 725 (April 1916), pp. 586

2. The notion of ‘invisible realities’ is part of David Sequeira’s ongoing research which began with the performance work *Invisible Realities* in 2008. The way in which we experience our experiences is our invisible reality.

In its capacity to take viewers into the realm of possibility whilst remaining firmly grounded in the present, every work of art can be considered an evocation. In this sense, the reading of a work is not confined to what is seen and extends to what is experienced. As such, through art, imagery and objects can be understood as a mediation between an earthly physical state and a spiritual dimension. It is not the suggestion of this exhibition that the selected artists are experts in or even practice any specific spiritual modalities, but rather to point to readings of their works that are associated with the presence of invisible realities associated with transcendence, transformation, manifestation and dissolution.²

In the context of this exhibition, understandings of the work of Liam Benson, Nicholas Folland, Lonnie Hutchinson, Hellen Shelley, Nick Tsiavos & Deborah Kayser and Kellie Wells can be located in the blurry zone between history and memory, experience and language, physical and spiritual. These understandings are likely to emerge through more than the use of motifs – connections with the idea of evocation are manifested through each artists’ specific application of motifs.

Much of Kellie Wells’ work addresses the experience of awakening through enlightenment. More specifically, Wells’ interests lie in the process of

enlightenment that takes place through a connection with non-physical, or spiritual realms. Curious about the possibilities of receiving information through extra sensory perception and the paranormal, Wells creates works that seem to lull the viewer into the process of transcending the ordinary. In *Conversation Table* (2020), a standard timber top café table is meticulously engraved with words and glyphs drawn from personal experiences and her studies in western magic. Set with two chairs, the intention of the work is clear – an invitation to sit with another and contemplate the deeply coded language of the occult. As if substituting tarot for tea and mysticism for muffins, Wells’ transforms the table into a site for purposeful contemplation that whilst anchored in the physical implores a connection with the metaphysical. As with others in the rich lineage of spiritual/ occultist practitioners and artists, Wells signals the encounter between these two realms with intermittent bursts of light – a bonding of the terrestrial and the celestial in an ‘aha’ moment of clarity.

The notions of archetype and ritual lie at the heart of Liam Benson’s three photographic self-portraits, *The Terrorist* (2015), *The Executioner* (2015) and *The Crusader* (2015). In these images, each archetype is symbolically represented by a hood placed over the artists’ head. Unlike stereotypical hoods, Benson’s are highly feminised. Like a matrimonial

veil, each is constructed from sheer gauze and lace and embellished with beads. Collectively the suite highlights the complexities of identity – the bearded bride, Benson is at once terrorist, executioner and crusader and each facet of identity (including gender) is evoked through his adornment. For Benson, self-portraiture, the act of revealing oneself, can be understood as an intense fusion of the externalised (what is seen) and the internalised (what is experienced).

Combining old school craft practices with traditional Maori patterns, the rich symbolism of the veil has been a constant source of fascination for Lonnie Hutchinson. Her screens made through repetitive processes of cutting and concertina folding suggest the transition from childhood to adulthood – from classroom to gallery. Collapsing the boundaries between the ancient (Maori symbolism) and the contemporary (modernist gallery context), Hutchinson’s paper curtains can be understood as a threshold that transitions one realm into the next. At first glance the contrast between the blackness of the builders’ paper and the stark white gallery wall is striking. Closer inspection reveals a deeper sensitive subtlety to the work – ideas around what remains hidden and what is revealed are implicit in Hutchinson’s lace-like screens. Activated by gallery lights, the works reveal an interest in the relationship

between object and shadow, tangible and intangible, known and unknown, concrete and abstract.

Ideas associated with shifting from one state to another lie at the heart of Nicholas Folland’s electrically powered chandelier works. Rigged with refrigerator elements, the works generate a bulbous form of ice on the main stem of the lit chandelier throughout the duration of the exhibition. The continual liquid/ gas/ solid morphing implicit in these works is not the only shift signalled here – Folland’s chandeliers also allude to the transformation from low art into high art and back. The lighting fixtures used in these works were originally installed in suburban Adelaide homes, far from the European palaces with which they can be historically linked. When transposed to a white cube gallery space, the once kitsch illusions of grandeur are presented as fine art. The shifts from one state to another that underscore Folland’s work do not seem linear. The kitsch ancestry of materials is retained in his sculptures suggesting that the states of high and low art exist at the same time within these objects. These works can be symbolically connected with the idea of the supernatural – light and variations in temperature have often been linked with the presence of ghostly spirits. Similarly, the quivering of Folland’s baskets *Wake, wail and jive* (2018) is suggestive of spiritual presence manifested as the trembling of inanimate objects.

3. Helen Shelley, unpublished artist statement 2016

4. Abbess, poet, composer and hymnographer Kassia or Kassiani born Constantinople between 805/810 died Kasos, Greece before 865 Sometime after 843. Kassia founded a monastery on Xerolophos, on the western outskirts of Constantinople. She wrote liturgical and secular verse for her monastery and friends and for use in the Byzantine liturgy.

5. The Fallen Woman (otherwise known as the Hymn of Kassia) a slow sorrowful hymn lasting 10–20 minutes chanted each year on Greek Orthodox Holy Wednesday. The text for the hymn relates to the redemption of a ‘fallen’ woman.

On the night of her father’s death, Helen Shelley had a vision of tiny particles of light emanating from her father’s body. These particles were then subsumed by her own body in an experience that Shelley describes as ‘Magical Particle Transference.’³ Far more than footnoting this deeply personal experience, Shelley’s subsequent paintings can be understood as bringing together a range of concerns including flux, chaos and infinity. The highly reflective surfaces which form an intrinsic aspect of Shelley’s works allow viewers to position themselves within her magical particles (a cosmos composed of tiny flecks of silver glitter paint or a black ground). In this process, the boundaries between viewer and picture plane are dissolved and human experience is part of a bigger picture of universal order. The death of her mother in law also had a profound impact on Shelley. Her textile work *Our Late Loved Ones* (2016) in which shreds of her late father’s clothing are imbedded in her late mother in law’s Kashmiri shawl is suggestive of a fusion of histories, energies and narratives based far more on commonality than difference.

For several decades the performances and recordings of Nick Tsiavos (double bass) & Deborah Kayser (soprano), have focussed on their research into the work of the 9th century Byzantine abbess, Kassia.⁴ The music of Kassia (including hymns which are still sung by men in Greek Orthodox liturgy) was

written not to be performed note by note, but rather to encourage broad interpretation. In this context, ‘interpretation’ is a process of channelling in which the performers actions embody the ‘spirit’ of Kassia. The recording by Tsiavos & Kayser of Kassia’s *The Fallen Woman* (2008) included in this exhibition is the result of intense experimentation in presenting ancient music in contemporary contexts.⁵ In performance, Tsiavos & Kayser can be considered as an open channel through which Kassia’s ‘messages’ can be received and communicated. Transcending the limitations of conventional musical notation, Tsiavos & Kayser’s atmospheric interpretations vary in tempo, pitch, volume, light and shade depending on what, when, where and how they ‘receive’.

A consideration of art as bridging earthly and heavenly concerns points to the possibility of human experience as part of a grander scheme. ‘Studying the universe engages us in something bigger than ourselves... all we can hope for is that our physical descriptions, like a song or a good painting, are a faithful evocation of some ineffable truth!’

Dr David Sequeira
Director Margaret Lawrence Gallery

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