

REVIEW

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DESERT DEVILS

Graham Eadie and Frank Thirion

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Australia National Artists Association (ANCA) Gallery

1 Rosevear Place, Dickson (Canberra) Australia

“Held in the frame of light, was not the world, nor its likeness, but a strange equivalence, where what was thought to be known was re-cast, and where what was unknown began to be revealed, and where what could not be known, kept its mystery but lost its terror.”¹

The premise for *Desert Devils*, an exhibition of work by Graham Eadie and Frank Thirion, shown recently at ANCA Gallery in Canberra, was unusually riveting: a revisitation of the events and after-effects concerning the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain in the Australian outback at its most iconic site, Uluru.

Lindy and Michael Chamberlain were holidaying with their two young sons and daughter, nine-week-and-four-day-old Azaria, at the public campground at Uluru (or as it was known then, Ayer's Rock) on the night of 17 August 1980. The baby and one of her brothers were asleep in the tent. Suddenly, cicadas and conversations over a barbecue were interrupted by a cry in the dark; Lindy was startled to see a dingo coming out of the tent. “She checked on her daughter and found her gone. There were dingo prints leading into the cold desert night and blood in the tent ... There was never a question of the events and evidence on the part of the eyewitnesses – none of whom had met the Chamberlains before – or the rangers, trackers, and police first on the scene. It was a natural tragedy that the head Ranger had warned his government of some time earlier. The first Coroner's Inquest confirmed that a dingo had killed Azaria.”² But this controversial case that polarized the nation led to a second coronial inquiry implicating her parents as the prime suspects of their baby's death. Eventually, they were completely exonerated. The remains of Azaria's body were never found.

The exhibition's title is weighted, evocatively descriptive, perfect. Desert: a. uninhabited, desolate; uncultivated, barren. vt. abandon, give up; depart from, leave empty; forsake (person or thing having claims on one.) and Devils, plural of devil: f. LL f. Gk *diabolos* accuser, slanderer (*dia* across, *ballō* to throw).

The work, in the form of paintings on canvas by Eadie and Thirion, carried an array of motifs originating from baby Azaria's abduction by a dingo. Resonating in the white space of the gallery was *Nocturnus*, a unique auditory piece that incorporated a looping track of whirring insects and a dog's panting. Thirion described it as “not

¹ Jeanette Winterson *Art Lies* (St. Ives: Clays Ltd. 1994) 206.

² <http://www.lindychamberlain.com/content/home>

a soundtrack but songs from the void of blackness.” Dissimilar from the TV series, the docu-drama film (*Evil Angels / A Cry in The Dark*) and the opera (*Lindy*), these two artists elevated the subject matter with an approach in visual / sound art that essenced rather than depicted facts. Through respecting the mysterious and instilling intricate emotions, including disquiet and tenderness, into their work they re-framed the context and created a new objectivity.

“There appears to be no single reason that created the spark that started the inferno. But, once it was started, there were many who were happy to see the flames of bigotry and intolerance fanned. Surely there must be a useful lesson in there somewhere.”³

Eadie’s series of 19 paintings centred on three themes: an examination of evidence; the inherent behaviour of dingoes / dogs in the wild; and the effect of miscarried justice and rumours, particularly that of infanticide, on the collective psyche.

Desert Devil V acted as a luring preface to the work that Eadie presented. The painting decoded an article of clothing that belonged to Azaria: her black matinée jacket. Although we can make out its buttons and buttonholes, there is a reliance on the paint to create the knitted texture rather than using variations of thickness of the medium. In this painting, with its overtones of romanticism, Eadie said he “pushed the details down so the work could stand on its own.” The validity of the image is based on Eadie’s own emotional response and his adeptness at taking material – and in this painting it is macabre, delicate, compelling material – out of himself to create a parallel emotional response from his viewers.

Eadie goes on to delve into the dingo-as-wild-dog motif in several works, particularly, *Dog Country I*, where certain points of the composition are arrested to generate a sense of distance in a landscape, evoking ‘dog’ as being an intrinsic part of its natural habit, ‘the land,’ while *Dogs*, with its amorphous atmosphere sharpened by a precise delineation of a number of dogs, infers the wild-card group dynamic of canine, as well as human, ‘pack mentality.’

Via swirling cadmium yellow, *Rumours Planted by Moonlight*, Eadie conveys the beginning of the wild, untrue rumours that were spread, ones that had to do with “sacrifice, murder, dingoes not being capable, and of weird behaviour.”⁴ *Desert Devil III* has a fluidity that shows how *schadenfreude* (*malicious enjoyment of others’ misfortunes*) about supposed evil events can stain the facts like a nightmarish phantasm. It seems that Eadie had a moral purpose to paint the ignobility of hysteria and idle speculation. In *Desert Devil II*, Eadie’s most successful work, a shape laden with what looks like bacterial or fungal fuzziness is superimposed upon an incandescent coral-pink background alluding to femininity, innocence, vulnerability. Compositionally, in this and in other works of Eadie’s, there is a similarity to Rorschach tests in which inkblots are sequentially presented to a patient to make his own associations as to what they suggested. Not unlike those psychological tests, we must participate here and delve into our own psyches, revealing the unknown.

³ Norman H. Young *Innocence Regained: the fight to free Lindy Chamberlain* (Annandale: Federation Press, 1989).

⁴ <http://www.lindychamberlain.com/content/home>

Eadie's style, described in the exhibition statement as drawing "on the European tradition of nuanced paint surfaces and shifting perspectival devices to create unease" epitomized these two aspects. His painterly technique, more reminiscent of aquatinting than painting, has a spartan thinness of application - what may be called rinsed veils. There is a graininess of texture and scratchy micro-close-ups evident too that catch the eye and demand lingering. Similarities can be found with abstract expressionist painter, Clyfford Still, recalling the jaggedness of his "natural forms and natural phenomena at its most intense and mysterious; ancient stalagmites, caverns, foliage, seen both in darkness and in light"⁵ We are disoriented in Eadie's work, not as in colour field paintings where the viewer is nowhere and everywhere, but 'somewhere' in the asymmetrical compositions. With several of his works we are caught up by Edgar Allen Poe-esque bat wing-forms, spider webs and looming night shadows. Beyond unease, fear and fright are felt; and, against our will, even horrific trepidation. Eadie managed to factor in a volume of hidden emotions that intentionally alarmed and disarmed as well. Moreover, he adroitly rocked us out of both terror and every comfort zone, and held up a mirror.

When this article was being written, the Hubble telescope was in the process of being brought back to Earth from "photographing the very edge of the universe. The beginning of time. Worlds whose light has taken longer to get there than the existence of the Earth itself ... where time, space and dimension cease to exist."⁶ Akin to this, Thirion sets out to document and reveal excerpts of a momentous evening, the last one of Azaria Chamberlain's brief life, from a seemingly irretrievable time-space. In a highly selective collection of nine paintings, made with acrylic and natural pigments, he accomplishes this through recasting the known. Thirion charts a multi-dimensional astro-cartographic map from 20:37 to 20:42, when Lindy Chamberlain noticed her baby was missing (20:42 Nocturnus), until the search was called off at midnight.

A metaphysical gravity infiltrates these paintings as a subtext and emanates from their reductive simplicity. For the viewer, it results in hypnotic immobility with transfixion allowing the gaze to simultaneously travel into the intriguing duality of spatial phenomenon: vastness and intimacy. Each work has that sense of pure space. And, because Thirion is a hierophant engaged with astronomy, certain areas in each work are defined - or 'lit' - by a galaxy of random yet closely proximate dots - signifying starlight - and a quartet of gold dots symbolizing Azaria.

"The immensity of the night sky emphasizes the tiny fragility of the lost baby," Thirion says, and two of the most poignant paintings affirms this: 20:37 Diable de Desert II where four widely spaced gold dots on a black oval are surrounded by hundreds of white and black dots, and 22:09 Lost, also with an oval but in this painting it delineates an imprint where the weight of the baby's body was temporarily put down. The Rorschachian blots in it, echoing a pair of Eadie's works, Desert Devil II and Desert Devil III, may also be considered as the momentous inception when insidious mistruths about this evening began. Like Rover Thomas in his series of paintings, "Killing Times," Thirion presents 'snap-shots' of another past time / space / dimension allowing us to move through it, from one painting to

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clyfford_Still

⁶ Derek Jarman Chroma (London: Vintage 1995) 137.

another, making the arduous journey deceptively calm, yes beautiful, but driving home the reality / the possibilities of what actually happened, in this case, with Azaria.

“... The whole secret of following these incipient paths ... lay in the development of the sense of touch in the feet, which comes with years of night ramblings in little trodden spots. To a walker practised in such places a difference between impact ... is perceptible through the thickest boot or shoe.”⁷

Underlying the apparent serenity of Thirion's minimalism is the proven certainty of the baby's attack, abduction and death by a dingo based on two sources: her mother's eye-witness account and evidence given (but unfortunately ignored) by Nipper Winmati - traditional custodian of Uluru's land and rituals, Pitjantjatjara elder and tracker - who put together a group of “his kinfolk into the sand dunes, and under his direction ... discovered signs of a dingo and of a heavy bundle having been dragged through the low growth of the sandhills.”⁸ Winmati is both referenced and revered in 21:15 Tracker's Story.

23:59 Songs from The Lair has a sublime curve delineating a boundary between two spaces. Taking a cue from the title, it can be seen as the line between the silent star-filled sky on its umber-ochre ground and the imagined calling of a dingo at the entrance / exit of its pitch-black lair.⁹ Notwithstanding interpretations, the blackness of that lower left convex has a traceless finality, a *memento mori*.

Like Thomas, Thirion is audacious in his use of black. He creates “a tightrope of contrary impulses for the viewer. Initially the blackness seems to be inviting an emotional response, even an absorption into the blackness, and yet the unevenness of its application draws attention to itself.”¹⁰ The density of natural pigments in Thirion's work has that grounding effect too so, unlike Eadie's work, we are not at all disoriented. We sense the depth; we maintain our bearings, our equilibrium. Another confluence is made with the late paintings of Ad Reinhardt: in pure blackness we absorb its strength and are solaced with absolute detachment.

Time, space and dimensions exist in particles - desert dust and stardust - in the continuum of presences - the sky, Uluru, the wild, the free, the truth, Azaria - and in this remarkable exhibition by Eadie and Thirion.

7 Elizabeth Jolley Gone Bush, edited by Roger McDonald (Moorbank: Bantam 1990) 9.

8 Thomas Keneally Outback (London: Rainbird 1983) 37.

9 Numerous caves at the red-rock monolith's base act as shelters for dingoes. One cave features prominently in the aboriginal myth of the devil dingo of Kik-in-gura: see Thomas Keneally Outback (London: Rainbird 1983) 24-40.

¹⁰ Louis Nowra “Blackness in the art of Rover Thomas” Art & Australia, Volume 35 Number 1 (North Ryde: Fine Arts Press Pty Ltd. 1997) 94-99.