

Essay

Stories to be told...

Essay on Andrew Pearce by Bronek Kozka

The work of Andrew Pearce is highly constructed and choreographed, but he does not build sets; his tableaux find their stage outdoors in the environment. Through light and lighting, selective focus (to direct the viewer) and digital manipulation, Pearce effectively *re-constructs* the environment we see to achieve his own ends. Pearce does not hide this; what we see is *his* story. The fantastical nature of his images is made obvious: this is a vision from the mind's eye of the artist.

The influence of the landscape, and I would go so far as to say his love for it, is evident in Pearce's work. His attentive study of nature is but one of the influences of Pre-Raphaelite painting that can be seen in the images presented for this exhibition. While Pearce explores a more contemporary, if slightly more ambiguous, world than that captured by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's penchant for medieval revivalism, there is a shared appreciation for nature and the quality of light. In *Solar Solace* (2011), model Brooke Findley is captured as if transfixed by the light. The warm, golden-red rays of the sun contrast with the deep-green leaves of the forest. The angle of her body and the intensity of the light suggest that she is being drawn upward towards the heavens. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Pearce's referencing of Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* (1872) is evident. While Pearce's image relies solely on the setting and streaming light for its otherworldliness, and Rossetti employs more direct symbolism (a bird, a poppy and a sundial), both images use a distant warm light that illuminates their muse and share a colour palette.

In the aptly titled *Cathedral*, Pearce presents another view of the same scene. This time, the subject is firmly planted on the ground and looking at the light in awe, much the way we do when entering a cathedral. However, this is not a man-made construction for the adulation of God; it is nature – leaves, trees and light – and as such it creates an even more spiritual space. The model's gaze is again directed at the heavens, her back turned on the idyllic, but earthly pastures in the background.

With *Cathedral* and *Solar Solace* Pearce establishes a beautiful, still and tranquil 'Garden of Eden'. He then takes us on a journey away from paradise and into a world depicted by the works *A Sinking World*, *The Tumour*, *Sugar Tree* and *Silent Town*.

In *A Sinking World*, an image that uses digital manipulation to simulate a desolate structure on the brink of submersion, we watch as the character of the story takes tentative steps into the still (artificial) water. She looks down for a safe footing, but only her predicament is reflected back to her. Pearce has manipulated this image to good effect, by selectively blurring and sharpening parts of it in ways that seem optically illogical; the result is mysterious and disorientating. The foreground is dark and foreboding; in the background, Pearce has used the windows of the building to frame a peaceful green field bathed in sunlight. Flooding of land is a recurring theme in Pearce's work. (Considering our recent history with such events, this is not surprising.) His digital re-creation of flooding is interesting and fits well with the idea of the constructed scene.

In *The Tumour* we see model Brooke Findley's face for the first time, filled with fear and trepidation as she journeys towards the bright lights of the city; the tumour? Pearce creates an atmospheric image filled with tension and terror. The glowing city in the distance is defiantly not the Emerald City from the *Wizard of Oz*. There is also an obvious referencing of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, though this Eve has no Adam (nor any apparent need for him). Again, here, we see Pearce's love of and concern for the natural environment. The sprawling city is depicted as a tumour spreading into the countryside and devouring the natural environment. Humanity is forced to leave nature behind, banished not by God but by the ravages of environmental degradation, the sinking world.

In *A Silent Town*, the journey is completed and nature has been stripped away. Our muse has been consumed by the mechanics of the city. She sits alienated in a car, one hand tentatively holding the wheel. There is no sense of her being in control; this place is unfamiliar and foreign. The dramatic coloured lights are reminiscent of the scenes of alien abductions in the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

The well-known series *The Architect's Brother*, by Robert and Shana ParkHarrison, serves as a warning about a future in which 'overuse of the land has led to environments spent and abandoned with the exception of one indefatigable spirit', as outlined in the Sheldon Museum of Arts description of their 2007 exhibition of the work. Similarities can be drawn between Pearce's work and that of Robert and Shana ParkHarrison. They share a concern and fear for the environment and man's impact on it. While Robert and Shana ParkHarrison have chosen an absurdist and ironic path, at times humorous, Pearce is less definite, his worlds more ethereal. In both Pearce's *Black Frost* and Robert and Shana ParkHarrison's *Tree Sonata*, 1999, we see a solitary character in the landscape. Pearce's character is toiling away, as if there is still a sense of hope in this sodden landscape; while the ParkHarrisons' character wears a dunce's cap and plays a fiddle, evoking Nero fiddling while Rome burned or the still-playing band on the sinking *Titanic*.

On first impression, *Cotton Cancer* is possibly the least confrontational of all the images in this exhibition. It is soft and light, with even a hint of blue sky, but upon reading the title one's understanding of this image changes dramatically. The dreamy puffs of cloud become poisonous smoke, and the model's pose shifts from a meditative stance to fatalistic self-examination of her thyroid. The model is the embodiment of the land, once fertile but now laid to waste by cotton farming. In *White Blanket*, the ghost – nature's ghost – looks down at what is left: nothing. But in what I see as the final image in this series, *Land of the Fallen Cloud*, all is not totally lost. As with Robert and Shana ParkHarrison's work and Pearce's *Black Frost*, a solitary figure still attempts to right things.

While it is obvious that Pearce has a determined commitment to rural Australia, and a concern for the environment and man's impact on our planet, and he has found his voice through a rich and well-established visual language, it is also important to acknowledge the lighter, more whimsical, fun side to his work. *Sailors of Sunshine*, *Moth (self portrait of the artist)* and *Mango Cove* all share this similar aesthetic. It can also be seen in Pearce's video work; however, the light, bright, almost commercial imagery in his videos belies the much darker and emotional narrative. In *Leave a*

Light On, a young girl, looking detached and distant, goes through the motions of celebrating her birthday. Her somber face breaks into a smile as she sees a young boy. When the scene is repeated, we become aware that the boy is not actually there – that he has died. In the final scene, the girl is reunited with him, after a tragic ending to her birthday.

Not surprisingly, Pearce uses the natural environment as a storytelling device in his video work. Focusing on clouds and light, he works with interesting angles to capture his scenes. Camera movements, depth of field (focus) and editing are all used to good effect, and work well with his narrative. Pearce directs well, coaxing believable emotions from a non-professional cast.

Video art and installations often appear alongside photography. I feel that this exhibition is somewhat different and something that we will see more of in the future. Pearce is an example of the new type of photographer, the photographer who moves seamlessly between still and moving image. While this has happened in the past, it has not been the norm or an expected progression. Artists such as Pearce are not 'making a move' away from shooting stills, nor are they changing direction. These artists have developed their voice using technology and cameras that allow still and motion to be shot at almost the same moment. Their visual language is not limited to one or the other.

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