

# LISA ADAMS: OUTSIDE IN

SELF-TAUGHT PAINTER LISA ADAMS SITS FIRMLY OUTSIDE THE ART ESTABLISHMENT. HIDDEN AWAY IN HER REMOTE HINTERLAND STUDIO, SHE USES HER DISTANCE TO PRODUCE WITTY AND OFTEN SURPRISING TAKES ON MODERN DAY DILEMMAS WRITES **INGRID PERIZ**. PORTRAIT BY **MICK RICHARDS**.

In Lisa Adams's work *Drift* (2008), an anchor floats adrift over a swelling sea. The surprise – the weighted object held buoyant by the waves – comes quickly, we stay longer over the bigger trick Adams has performed. On her meticulously worked surface, oil paint can make the impossible real. In her forthcoming self-titled exhibition at Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane, Adams continues these arresting, occasionally improbable images: a hunter in plus fours takes aim at a flight of ducks, arranged overhead in a question mark; a buck stands transfixed in a woodland setting, its antlers morphed into rifles with telescopic sights; a woman strides over the desert, divining.

The self-taught Adams lives remotely on a bush property in the hinterland of Queensland's Sunshine Coast. She is in her downstairs studio by eight in the morning and works solidly for six hours, six days a week. She produces slowly; a painting typically takes several months to complete and she will overpaint an image two or three times to get it right. For Adams, whose painting technique developed out of detailed drawing skills over a 20 year period, her lack of formal training has proved no disadvantage. As she explains, "I think it taught me self-reliance and to cope with the isolation and discipline required to be a painter."

Adams admits she loves the painting process, saying: "It is this large amount of time spent layering and refining detail which I feel can imbue a painting with a magical quality." Her painstaking approach begins well before she starts painting, with a very clear mental image. "I see the painting clearly in my mind and it's this image that I try to represent." She works from detailed photographic references, preferring her own photos. Occasionally this involves a studio setting where Adams becomes the chief character, shot by her photographer husband **Kim Guthrie**. She adds: "When it proves difficult or impossible for me to access and photograph a subject, I hunt out references. I spend days trawling through electronic media archives, libraries and bookshops. I never paint from just one





Above: Lisa Adams, *Secrets*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 54 x 78cm.

Opposite: Lisa Adams, *Twister*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 62 x 80cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE





## REX BUTLER ART CRITIC

Rex Butler was an early critical appraiser of Lisa Adams's work, even as he questioned the continued cultural authority of representational painting. Writing on her 2000 *Paintings* exhibition at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art, he wondered: "Why seek to be faithful to the look of things when there is no longer any point in doing so?"

By way of answer he considered the paintings in the show and found "a small miracle" occurred. Writing about *Ladder* (1990-91) he explained: "Of course, the work has something to do with Snakes and Ladders, that childhood game of chance that, through its highs and lows, is said to be a metaphor for life itself. But can it not also be seen as a metaphor for figurative painting, which precisely turns a mass of confused squiggles into the ordered lines of mimetic resemblance?"

While representational painting may have lost what Butler called its "symbolic ... justification for wanting to resemble the world," in Adams's hands it could still reveal something about itself. Reconsidering her work recently, he had this to say: "There is a strange focus or intensity about the figures as they grimly go about their tasks in Lisa Adams's paintings. They rarely, if at all, acknowledge their audience. This gives Adams's work a lack of self-consciousness that is undoubtedly one of its strengths ... For those figures carrying out these meaningless tasks are, of course, stand-ins for the painter herself, and the bizarre transformations that occur in her works are all ultimately metaphors for what happens to the paint itself."

Ingrid Periz

## PHILIP BACON

DIRECTOR, PHILIP BACON GALLERIES

Gallerist and dealer Philip Bacon is a 35 year veteran of the Brisbane art scene. When he first encountered Lisa Adams's work a decade ago he was struck by what he calls her "fascinating and unique style." Several solo shows later, he adds "The painstaking and detailed paint quality is unlike any other artist I represent, but even more important for me is her quirky and witty interpretations of modern life. The vignettes in which she herself is often the protagonist reflect so many of the dilemmas we all - but more especially women - face today. The response from the viewer is first of all astonishment at the skill of the painter, then amusement and joy when the veiled joke becomes obvious."

Bacon appreciates Adams's singularity as well as her remove from the art world. "The fact she is self-taught and owes nothing to the art establishment is a plus for someone of Lisa's temperament I believe. Her work is contemplative and inward-looking and living in the comparative isolation of the Queensland hinterland gives her somewhat delicate persona the space it needs. I am reminded a little of Ian Fairweather's self-imposed exile on Bribie Island." In terms of the gallery, Bacon says, "Lisa is a valuable addition to the artists I represent. Many of my clients are interested in everything she does, and I have a list of 'must contact' whenever a new work arrives which, due to her highly detailed and meticulous style, is all too rarely."

Ingrid Periz

photograph; it sometimes takes hundreds of separate sources."

Critics have used words like "surrealist" or "magic realist" to describe her work but neither term sits well with Adams. "I can see how both might be applied to my work," she says diplomatically, "but am not particularly comfortable with either." However her gently disquieting pictures might be described, it's clear they can hold a range of audiences. Brisbane's ultra contemporary Institute of Modern Art hosted *Paintings*, a solo show in 2000; in 2004 Adams's one-person show cemented a five-year relationship with Philip Bacon Galleries. In 2008 she was included in the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art's *Optimism* exhibition, with GoMA acquiring her work *Rose Garden* (2008) for its collection. That same year Adams's *Cold Wind* (2006) won the Tattersall's Landscape Art Prize.

When Adams first began exhibiting, she admits she was "surprised and a little disappointed that people were so preoccupied with the technical aspect of my work. Though I love the painting process I have always been motivated primarily by the idea." Mostly, "the work is about my feelings and experience of the world. All my works are individual instalments of a self portrait." The women featured in works

like *Ladder* (1990-91), where a single female climbs a ladder skywards to escape a roiling nest of vipers, or *Track* (1999), where another woman crouches over tools, dwarfed in the landscape, or *Divining*, where a female water diviner wields her dowsing rod, are all stand-ins for the artist. They suggest the difficulties and determination of Adams's approach as a resolutely representational painter in a world often inimical to the enterprise. She expands, "I don't consider my work to be about the condition of representational painting itself but it is at times about the process and its challenge. Painting comes with its problems, but for me they are personal problems. My paintings never come easily. My style is painstaking and after years of painting all day every day I've come to realise the endurance required to keep going. Most people wouldn't be aware of the physical pain that come with sitting [with a] triple zero brush in hand for years on end, or the single-minded determination to endure the isolation." In spite of this, she adds, "I only feel excited by the possibilities painting offers." n

Lisa Adams's next exhibition is with Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane from 23 June to 18 July 2009.



"All my works are individual instalments of a self-portrait."

From far left:

Lisa Adams, *Lovers*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 60 x 100cm.

Lisa Adams, *Drift*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 62 x 80cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE