



LISA ADAMS

STORY **LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW**

Meeting Lisa Adams at her hilly idyll in the mountains behind Queensland's Sunshine Coast is like entering another magical world of her making. Her painstaking oil paintings of compellingly realist dreamscapes sees her produce only one or two works every year.

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THERE'S A PSYCHOLOGICAL TAUTNESS THAT SITS AT the heart of your work, both in its subject matter and execution. Is this the only way for you?

The work is what it is because of how I work and who I am. I have to go with it and be comfortable with my process.

Where do these dreamscapes come from?

I don't know. The ideas gestate for a long time and when they appear, it is often something that almost takes me by surprise. I want something revealed to me in the painting and it can't be something that I already know. My slow production rate is not through lack of work. I paint every moment I have. I want every work to be my best: if I die I want something good on the easel, the best I can do at that time. I show exclusively with Philip Bacon and have exhibitions only every four to five years.

What are the ramifications of expressing yourself in this way?

I have learnt over time to pace myself. I used to keep pushing and pushing and you can't do that forever. Now I do a certain amount each day, I stop and make sure I exercise. I want to be painting when I am eighty.

Does the work express your state of mind?

In a way. *Inquisition* (2018), for example, came to me after an earlier painting called *Vivisection* (2005), an operation on a sunflower. I was playing with revisiting that idea and I also was interested in angels, which





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are a strong theme in art history. Then [partner] Kim [Guthrie] got sick and we were around hospitals a lot. Driving home from visiting him one day I had the idea for an operation on an angel – although it is not about Kim. The operation is, in my mind, an investigation into what makes the angel pure, what goodness looks like. It was painted during Kim's year in and out of hospital, and it was like a meditation, painting the drapery kept me focused.

How did you become an artist?

It is something that I knew I always wanted to do. I never played with dolls, I was just drawing, always amusing myself on my own. I have had an unusual life, an unusual series of circumstances. As a result, I didn't go to art school but I still educated myself.

Has that unusual life become part of your journey, and your determination?

It is hard to talk about because I got thrown out of home at seventeen and didn't have the support to make those decisions for my future, but I always felt that I would paint myself a better future. That was the thing I had that I could use.

What are the challenges of your work?

The challenge is just the time that it takes to make it. If I forget everything else, there is no challenge, it is a joy to paint. I am just chipping away until I get that idea finished. The difficult part is [financial] survival, like most artists. Also, I have a little bit of



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- 01 *Sparrow*, 2009, oil on canvas, 65 x 75 cm, UQ Art Museum collection, Brisbane
- 02 *Sharpshooter*, 2013, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 66.5 cm, private collection, Tasmania
- 03 *The beekeepers*, 2017, oil on canvas, 70.5 x 97 cm
- 04 *Slow*, 2013, oil on canvas, 66.5 x 81 cm, private collection, Brisbane





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exposure and by the time I can get enough work together for another show the audience may have forgotten.

What is important about doing this work?

It is something I have always felt. I am driven to make the work, and committed to each image. I have to be to sit there for three, four months. I really believe in every idea I choose to spend time on. For me, there is nothing else. It makes sense of life.

The 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 'Divided Worlds', included ten of your paintings, and national recognition.

Curator Erica Green selected ten paintings that are my favourites of the last fifteen years. It was like seeing my life pass before my eyes.

It included *Ghost Train* (2004). What does it say back to you after some fourteen years?

To me this painting is about memory, how it dissipates as though it was never there at all.

You create landscapes that are, now that I have seen it, the environment in which you live, but with a quality that speaks to so many Australian places.

Place seeps in, but I am not representing where I live. It becomes a backdrop for the idea. For example, *Secret* (2009) is a painting of one of our trees, but also about the destructive nature of secrets, about how explosive they may become.

There is a strong autobiography to your work, and a sense of experience that you recount.

The Lovers (2007), shown in Adelaide, is one of my all time favourites. It is about that spark when you are just meeting someone.

***Beekeepers* (2017) also features a local landscape – and passion.**

Yes but the idea is the driver, then it's about finding a way of making that image. It was posed like Magritte's *The Lovers* (1948). The alchemy of bees making honey is akin to making art. Kim and I were in the suits, together but with a barrier between us, isolated, frustrated.

In *Sparrow* (2010) the 'Lisa' figure stands alone in the landscape, wearing a glove that would be required for a hawk but holding a little sparrow.

It represents my tiny detailed paintings sent out to the world. I hope they might bring something back to me.

The 'Lisa' protagonist also features in *Dig* (2011), which speaks to the age-old nature of painting and the search for knowledge.

Taking painstaking care is shared between archaeology and art, and the need to uncover what might exist at the surface. The brushes of the artist and the skeleton meet, giving a sense of the transference of experience and ideas through art and the history of art. It is also about digging down within yourself to connect to your authentic self.

***Icebreaker* (2014) is a patently unfamiliar landscape, with a swan pushing through ice.**

The swan is gentle, yet bulldozing solid ice. It has determination. Like me it is calm on the surface with a lot of paddling going on underneath.

What do you think gives artistic longevity?

Being authentic and true to yourself. If you start following trends you end up chasing your own tail.

Your latest work is an ostensibly simple landscape which requires close observation.

Storm Damage (2018) refers to a Japanese process called kintsugi, a transformative repair. It highlights the damage to a tree in the centre of the landscape with the repair strengthening and adding unnatural beauty. On a deeper layer, it is about psychological destruction and being put back together again. ■

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05 *Secret*, 2009, oil on canvas, 81 x 62 cm, private collection, Melbourne

06 Lisa Adams, 2018, photograph Kim Guthrie

Courtesy the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane