

Song of sirens

Song of sirens is an exhibition that takes us close to the imaginative workings of six artists from three generations. Certain artists lead us to encounter risk and discovery: in accepting the artists' invitation to experience their work, we may venture along unfamiliar pathways. This type of encounter is not just at the centre of the work in this exhibition, it is essential to contemporary art.

In *Song of sirens*, the experiences, methods, emotions and motifs that lead these artists coalesce in a 'strange harmony of contrasts' across the exhibition, together offering an experience something like being immersed in a deep pool. The exhibition presents material and cultural spaces and an abstract language of sense and sensation, where attention is directed towards wholeness and depth. These artists' energies move forward and behind and around us as temporal as much as physical or spatial phenomena.

Song of sirens also recognizes a need to pique our contemporary obsession with positive outcomes, what social commentator Hugh Mackay calls 'utopian madness' and 'the culture of control' that keeps submerged evidence of the messiness, the contrasts and richness of life, 'the full spectrum of human emotions and responses'.

Gunter Christmann's career as a painter spans nearly fifty years. Included in *Song of sirens* are six of his 'water tank' or 'float tank' paintings, each conceived and undertaken independently, but dated in the mid-1970s or 2008. The actual subject for each painting—what Christmann describes as 'cosmic dis/order', 'chance', 'whatever one calls it'—is revealed to him in an array of objects floating freely on the surface of a small container set up on his studio table. Each composition is settled once these objects finally come to rest on the water's surface. Over the decades Christmann's floating objects—sticks, leaves and coloured plastic bits, bottletops and straws—have changed occasionally but the effect of the water remains constant: 'always different, always similar'.

Gunter Christmann's enduring interest lies in a style and look of painting that is 'from edge to edge a whole completeness' that mirrors nature exactly. He comments: 'Amazing, the cosmos in the studio. A complete world readily available in my workshop'.

For two decades, **Stephen Bram** has applied the idea of using two and sometimes three vanishing points as the sole constructive premise for making artworks. Bram's work in painting, architecture, installation or film is always grounded in this principle of perspective. He selects his vanishing points in relation to the actual physical work (say, across to its left and right) but randomly too, as affects in the world, and in relation to his own position.

Bram states that, 'all of the possible thought, feeling and value of the meanings evacuated from the work by its renunciation of specific references [outside his chosen abstract points] can then be directed to the phenomena of meaning, and the process of its attribution.'

For *Song of sirens* Stephen Bram has constructed a new architectural form inside the museum—a room inside a room—based on these ideas. While clearly interested in the possibilities of architecture on many levels, Bram's primary focus is nonetheless a more abstract temporal structure.

By recreating his empirical experiments (each time via small, shifting, testing movements) in new and different environments, Bram gains traction anew on the order of language and the world around us.

Kate Murphy literally calls upon mystical forces in the making of her video self-portrait *Cry me a future (Dublin)*. The work's premise is the recording of an Irish psychic reading Murphy's future and the unnerving emotional effect this has upon her.

This is a work that draws on ideas about inheritance and fate and suggests an irrational compulsion of a sort that moves beyond the normal boundaries of debate.

As she silently listens to the reading of her life, Murphy faces the audience, and seeks our complicity. *Cry me a future* or cry in the dark, Kate Murphy's video is a study in portraiture and a test of resolution.

Paul Ogier is a photographer who has developed customised printmaking and photographic methods to record utopian images of the Australian bush. Using new and vintage lenses and large-format film cameras along with digital formatting technologies and printing with multiple layers of carbon-based pigments, Ogier builds idiosyncratic visions of the country.

Song of sirens includes six large images focussing on two sites: the remnants of Valerio Ricetti's terraced garden and 'hermit caves' of the 1930s and '40s on a ridge-top outside Griffith in central NSW, and a barren pine maze in parkland at Yarralumla, ACT.

Ogier is interested in the sense of ambition and idealism that is imprinted upon the earth and believes that Australia has many of these affects embedded in its hillsides and plains. Conceived in private meditation upon a living landscape, Ogier's images are intoxicated with what is vanishing—remnants of plans and designs, people long gone, totemic geographies, mistakes, histories and nature.

Ms & Mr are married and collaborate together as artists. The couple extend their lives together by manipulating and recreating records—drawing, painting, photography and film—of their separate childhoods and inserting themselves into each other's history and memories. In their art they come together mysteriously, often surrounded by elements taken from science fiction and imagined dreamscapes, giving interpretation to a new lifelong shared experience. Ms & Mr's videos create an account of romantic togetherness that never was, as the pair arrange to meet each other intimately and experience the world around them as their youthful selves, or across generations, in what they describe as 'retroactive collaboration'.

Each of the three works in *Song of sirens* uses animation techniques to loop and layer a landscape in which the couple explore the conditions of their relationship. *Videodromes for the alone: Teleplasmic mass* (1987/2007) for example, depicts Ms in her late twenties inserted into early family footage of Mr as a young boy sleeping in his bed, almost as if she might be his mother, but this is not explicit.