

Room Notes: Araby Steen, New Work

If there is something new in Araby Steen's 'New Work' it's the everyday, the banal, the old, and even the dead. If this idea seems contradictory, it is because those ordinary things that we take for granted — that might even make us feel literally sick, so often have we looked upon them — are these very *things* offered up here *new*. A pair of Dunlop volleys, laces tied together and flung over a power-line, float ghost-like on an old signboard, rotted and torn. The 'red poles' of Redfern Park sing softly from a different landscape, dislocated from their usual site they are here re-imagined on raw linen, which still bears a stamp/stencil rendered during its previous incarnation from a textile workshop.

Gyro is a vision of solitude — a personal view of the BMX rider — moving through the Autumn leaves that litter a pavement. Indeed, it's the little things that fascinate Steen; a boy at a wedding, striking in his youthful magnificence. Like da Vinci's famous portrait of Lisa, his is a penetrating, disquieting stare. His half-smile almost mocks us — is he really smiling or in fact smirking at us in a kind of self-assured smugness? Steen takes this possibility to its extreme in *Vampire Boy*. Here the boy is re-imagined as something much more sinister and yet just as lovely — equally beguiling. In *Dead Baby Ibis* we see, perhaps for the first time, youth immortalised in death. The seemingly omnipresent ibis — the scavenging scourge of each would be picnic-maker of every park in Sydney — is seen here in a form we never actually see. This baby — *dead*, flattened against the grass, its wings spread as if in motion — is the vulnerable one that did not quite 'make it' yet it still embodies the grace and poise associated with its adult form.

These are images of solitude; they are a glimpse into the intimate, they speak of intimacy — or more precisely *extimacy*¹ — they are the expression of the intimate unconscious that is actually external to us. Put simply, this is the *thing* that stirs us, that is part of us yet that which is actually our exteriority. By no means, however, are Steen's oil paintings a deliberate expression of symbolic or personal nostalgia; they are expressions in which we can all *share*.

Steen renders her objects/subjects with a poetic economy, which helps us to *notice* the small things we often neglect to value. In *Jeremy Pissing*, a triptych in which the subject becomes progressively proximate to us with each scene, we see a young man 'captured' in the *freedom* of pissing where he will — and in this case, in nature. Against the serenity of this particular light-dappled landscape — where a towel hangs casually on a make-shift clothes-line — the looseness of the subject is understood as 'natural', indeed it speaks to the familiar liberty we seek when we 'occupy' nature.

Nature also figures highly in the self-portrait of the artist, *Sunset Studies*. As its title suggests, there is something to be *learned* from the particular light of that time of day. It is then that we see things so differently. Here the landscape of long grass alongside the disused train tracks at Belongil Beach in Byron is literally set aglow. Steen stands here astride, like some super-hero/super-spider playfully trapped within its own gossamer gown. *Sunset Studies* conjures feelings of the last day of holidays— that moment spent trying to capture *that very moment* while all at once expelling all the energy we have left to waste away like hopeless spendthrifts.

In *Sunday Morning* the ubiquitous, ornate ceiling-rose faces us standing, as we are, yet just the same as it would if we were lying under it, staring up from the strange angle of a bed. The single light-bulb hanging — but actually standing here half-erect — reflects a bluish early light also caught in the intricate folds of plaster leaves. Steen presents us again with the almost too familiar, banal object of intimacy. And here, just as in all the other works in this room, we are stunned by the painful shock of everyday beauty.

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¹ This term was coined by Jacques Lacan to explain the "intimate exteriority" — the *thing* that is so close, it is actually within us, part of us.