

# VIE DES ARTS ARTS

## Of a Great and Mighty Shadow

09 juillet, 2016

*In Genesis, according to Hebrew texts, God contracted his infinite luminescence to create the conceptual space for our primordial tenure. The anomaly of simultaneous Divine withdrawal and presence acted to conceal the spiritual realm from us. Our goal became to reunite with God.*

By Ashley Johnson

The Tabernacle was a tent-like structure, originating with Moses, that hosted the Ark, a box representing the symbolic covenant with divinity. Various objects in the Tabernacle mediate in linear time between humans and God, like the altar upon which animals are slaughtered so that blood can be sprinkled on the cover of the Ark. This methodology allows humans to nullify their sin and approach divinity.

The Romantic Sublime, Edmund Burke's 18th Century philosophical treatise, associated awe and terror with nature, visualized in paintings by Casper David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord Turner. Adam Lee is a contemporary Australian artist who makes a conscious affirmation that a mysterious spirituality underlies our temporal experience. He uses landscape and his own life experience to express this metaphorically.

Zim Zum (Three Tabernacles) is a large work that sets out the immensity of a natural setting, partitioned by quadrants that hint at underlying mathematical structures, like Pythagoras's harmony of the celestial spheres. The three figures represent the artist, his wife and daughter. A rainbow arches overall, symbolizing hope and Divine mercy after the storm. Zim Zum refers to the Divine process of contraction, constriction and condensation in order to create the world.

The painting re-imagines that original conception, linking the existentially isolated humans. Lee lives in the Macedon Ranges, a mountainous rural setting just outside Melbourne. Mountains permeate his paintings along with blazing night skies. His method is very intuitive, so although a shape might be indicated, it is not elaborated into recognizable form but undergoes a process of interpretation. He adapts traditional rabbit-skin glue techniques, used to seal fibers from the acidic action of oils, adding thin washes of orange or pink acrylic before working in oils. White is absent from his palette, as muted tones inhabit the mid to dark range. Forms and lines have autonomy, or divine purpose, to unfold at will, while Lee connects the dots. The perception that "reality" may be an illusion is reinforced through their "onion-ring" layering.

Of a Great and Mighty Shadow proffers God as a presence unseen, inhabiting a shadow that is nevertheless protective of humankind. The painting depicts a funeral scene with a central, embalmed body surrounded by figures that seem to mourn but are self-absorbed. The

embalmed figure merges with the plant and atmospheric energies. Lee often uses orange as a mystical colour of strength or transfiguration, reminiscent of Matthias Grünewald's Christ in the Isenheim Altarpiece where a golden glow suffuses the scene and accentuates the power of the shadows.

The figures and plants seem immanent and their shadows take active form. Patterned borders flirt with space, echoing larger shapes and invading the costumes of the sitters, who occupy simplified geometric forms, like a triangular Buddhist seated cross-legged. Potted plants seem to reach toward the wilderness of incandescent orange flame illuminating the dusk. The viewer predicates a sense of depth, yet this perception is denied by forms that "burn through the fabric" from the top to flatten the image. The space is very ambiguous, offering glimpses through smoky veils while the contraction and expansion of the picture plane breathes air in and out.

Several works explore the concept of portraits and transfiguration. The Namesake buries the figural within the primordial forces of nature. The name "Adam", which he shares with his grandfather, means earth or red. Two faces are joined in one patterned "blanket" that flattens the form and yet also situates it in the landscape. It hangs above "nothingness" in a tentative hold upon identity. Its significance is that it defines a trajectory in painting; a line that leads towards creation, or the realization of identity in relation to nature. Transfigured Self is a self-portrait but not in the physical sense of resemblance. Rather, it tracks the energies that marks might carry. Dots cover the face as if loaded with the potential to expand identity. A Transfiguration is a very clear articulation of his *modus operandi*. Figures are intuited but also subsumed into the larger landscape. The dichotomy between flatness and imagined depth adds a tension to the work, as if prefiguring an event about to take place or in process.

Adam Lee uses all the elements of painting to try and communicate beyond. He is quite unique in this and reminiscent of Anselm Kiefer who also draws upon arcane and biblical resources. I think he is a profoundly interesting artist who challenges the viewer to interpret and find new meaning. This is a magically enigmatic and inspiring exhibition.

Vie des arts, n° 243, summer 2016, pp 78-79