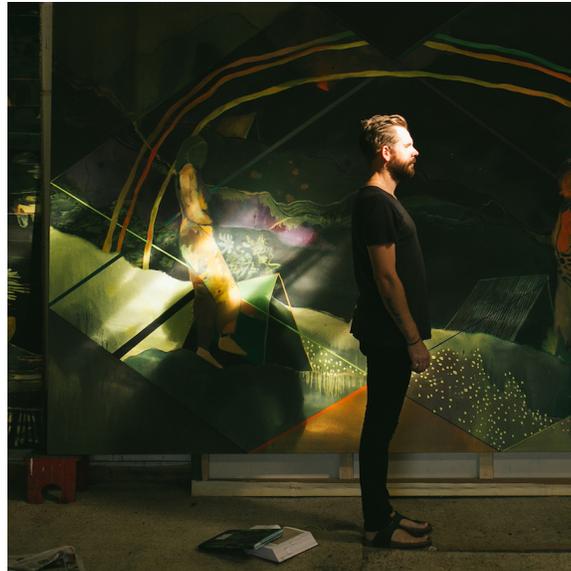




Adam Lee: Far From Everywhere

May 8, 2016



A land of mystery and enchanted realms stand before you with a question mark over where on earth they were discovered?

Well they are of course from deep within the visionary mind of Australian artist Adam Lee. We catch up with him before his forth-coming Solo Show in June at Angell Gallery in Toronto to find out more about what drives him and what we can expect from this new body of work.

So, it would be interesting to hear a little about your process of application as you seem to achieve a very unique style, and to discover what thinking you work through before putting paint to canvas?

For me, each painting seems to take on a different process and form than expected or planned. There is a certain level of planning which goes into most of the work I make, but most of this is research based, in terms of image and concept research. I read a lot, explore a very wide range of artists, collect thousands of images from the net or old books, and all of this feeds into whatever I am thinking about at any given time with a painting. I rarely make studies as such or even a lot of drawings for most paintings, unless there is some compositional problem I am trying to solve. Instead I try to leave each painting open to a certain amount of experimentation, both in terms of how the composition is formed and in regards to how paint is applied. This allows

for the paintings to be almost more like drawings, moveable and moldable to a certain extent, until things begin to emerge and lock themselves into fixed forms.

Almost every painting I make is about something quite specific, even if this is not made clear to the viewer. More and more there are paintings I work on for weeks or months without really knowing what they are and what they are about until the process eventually allows for some kind of a revelation of what it is that I am touching on. I am also very interested in the connections between watercolour and oil paint, and over the last few years I have explored ways of layering very thin applications of oil paint like watercolour, so that the surfaces remain very thin but are built up overtime in diluted washes. I make a lot of watercolours, many of which are as large as the oil paintings, and more and more I'm letting these two mediums cross over at points in terms of how they relate to surface.



Being that we're talking all things paint related here, why do you as an artist of today think painting is a medium that always garners such interest, and what strengths do you think it has over any other medium?

I think there is more interest today in almost all art forms than there's ever been, not just painting. Art is more accessible today than at any time in history. But perhaps painting remains one of those art forms which connects us in some way with a very fundamental or even primitive experience - generally it remains limited to a very small group of materials (pigment, medium and surface) and I often wonder if in the midst of the culture we have created, underpinned by ever advancing technology which intertwines itself into our daily lives more and more every day, painting asks us to slow down, to stop and quietly consider something static and without sound or movement. I think that speaks very loudly to something in us that we might feel we're lacking these days, like an altar or a cathedral once slowed people into a space of

contemplation that connected them with a much larger dimension. That is painting's greatest quality and strength.

Delving a little deeper into your approach; what subject matter do you hone in on for reference? What are the core messages your work follows and why do you develop each particular vision in largely abstract form rather than more literal or realist ways? Does this approach allow for visual metaphors or more poetic narratives, or is this element an entirely coincidental result?

Almost everything in each painting is there for a reason, even if this isn't something I divulge. So certain things exist in the works because they are symbols of other things, metaphors for some experience, or references to something outside of the paintings. I tend to be attracted to a really wide range of imagery in developing compositions for the works. It might be very early photography, natural history, personal images and family slides, portions of other artist's works, stills from films, all sorts of stuff. This attraction is not usually at all to do with the source image itself or what it is about in its original context. It is simply something used to establish a starting point for a painting, from which any number of other things can eventually emerge through the painting process.

This "imagery" can often also come from reading and the ideas that books inevitably conjure in your mind. I'm not necessarily interested in conveying any particular "messages" in the work but more an ongoing narrative or thread which is hopefully added to gradually overtime. This is ultimately about trying to understand what it is to be human in this world. For me, much of this is to do with the internalised world as much as the wider outer world around us, and the ways these ideas might be linked with unseen dimensions relative to our experience. The relationship between the figurative and abstracted areas in the works is one way of trying to visually touch on these ideas. It also becomes a really interesting area of investigation for a painter, to use abstractions of the figure and the landscape to explore these internal/external connections.



Adam Lee, *Babel*, 2015

It is interesting to hear you reference your practice as a part of 'art' rather than painting specifically; Given the art-world's conflicting opinions over whether Contemporary Art is in fact too reliant on ideas over technical application, is it more important for you to focus on the theory behind your work or the subjective 'success' of the final works?

I don't really think about distinctions between "artists" and "painters". To me those terms are a way of referring to artist's whose work is multi-disciplinary as opposed to focused on a primary medium. But it's all art. I think you just hope that what you're doing is adding something of substance to the wider dialogue of art. My hope has always been that my work will be something people both inside and outside of that art world dialogue can connect with. Although there is a layering of very extensive research into philosophy, art history, religion, etc. in my work, I don't want it to be closed off to people who know nothing about these areas.

Art should be able to stand-alone without any of the theory attached to it. I do think there is a lot of work that is highly reliant on theory or concept above technical ability, but the same is also true of the opposite as well. The most memorable and impacting artworks I have encountered are works that somehow tap into a language that ultimately transcends all of those distinctions and connects you with something larger in scope than isms and theories.



Inspiration seems to hit artists from a wide variety of places, who or what do you sight as being your main influences and are there particular artists you always look to for inspiration?

There are always a very specific group of artists I'm looking at at any given time with each body of work developed, and these artists change continually depending on what I'm interested in exploring in the work. Of course there are those I've always found particularly interesting, like Casper David Friedrich, Baselitz and Beckmann, Brueghel, Chris Ofili, Mamma Andersson - quite a range of historical and contemporary painters.

Recently with the new work I've been making for my upcoming show I have revisited Kitaj and Hurvin Anderson, who I think are just brilliant. There are a range of Australian artists whose work I love, like Brent Harris, Jon Cattapan, my friend Laith McGregor. Funnily enough Peter Doig and Daniel Richter seem to be the ones a lot of people suggest my work reminds them of, and they are certainly people I have looked a great deal at in previous years, even travelling from Australia to see the TATE retrospective of Doig some years back. I doubt you could be making figurative or landscape type painting and not be influenced by those guys in some way, but I must admit they're not artists I look at a great deal these days. I wonder if some people simply see some landscape imagery and drippy paint and make the easiest connection that it must be like a Doig or a Richter, when in actual fact what I'm interested in looking at and the way the surfaces are constructed couldn't really be more different than what those guys are exploring.

What I do find interesting about people often making those connections is the issue of how we actually read artworks in the current climate of things like Instagram and internet based imagery of artworks. People seem to me to now be very quick to judge an artwork, often from a 3 second phone scroll of a 3x3cm image or a quick look at a gallery show on line, without much thought to how artworks operate within a space and in connection with the human gaze. And they are very quick to read them through the very shallow lens of comparison with other artists, as though we've lost the ability to read something purely on it's own merit. The irony is that something like painting, which encourages one to slow down and quieten, to contemplate, and to also interact with the painted surface, is possibly read more today via the immediate and quickly passing mediums of technology. These mediums are great for connecting artist's work with people who wouldn't necessarily otherwise see it, but I wonder if it has also created a context where we now consume images like fast food, summing up artist's work without much consideration of what it is really saying or trying to achieve.

There seems to be an affinity between the aesthetic assumed and your geographical location, what value do you put on the surroundings with which you choose to live, or do you think you'd work this way no matter where you worked?

I happen to have made the decision with my family to live in a rural location surrounded by some very beautiful country and this certainly has an affect on my approach to my work - not so much in terms of the imagery or palette I employ, but

the slowness of the pace of life we live and the simplification of our daily activities. My studio is located on my parent's property, surrounded by about 250 acres of bush land, only a few minutes drive from where I live. So it's not only the landscape around me but also the connectedness with my family that is an aspect embedded in almost every part of my daily practice including my studio time.



Adam Lee, *Zim Zum (Three Tabernacles)*, 2016

So we are catching you in the lead up to your Solo exhibition 'Of A Great and Mighty Shadow' opening at Angell Gallery in Toronto, June 3rd. What can we expect to find in the latest body of work and what excites you about it in particular?

There's a lot that excites me about the upcoming show. It's my first solo presentation with Angell in Toronto, so that's a very cool experience to be preparing for. The body of work is also one of the largest in scope that I've ever made, not only in terms of the physical scale of some of the paintings but also the ideas they are attempting to touch upon. There is this overarching idea of a divine shadow cast over the histories and lives of people, and much of the imagery draws from my own personal family history. The works are touching upon linkages between our past and present, and an undercurrent a kind of prophetic imagery which might point to future events and times as well. The paintings are also much more experimental and complex in their makeup than previous work I've made. So it will certainly be exciting to see it all come together.