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World Sick Hermit

- Pippa Mott

In *World Sick Hermit*, Adam Lee presents a suite of new paintings that reframe concepts of interpersonal and intergenerational connectedness whilst interrogating the hierarchy of outer and inner worlds. The body of work draws its title from a phrase coined by Lee's daughter, who once announced a feeling of homesickness for the wider world. In the present climate, the idea gained new significance, encapsulating the experience of being simultaneously 'world sick': longing to escape the home and the local, and also 'sick of the world,' at a time when it seems so overtly threatening and unstable. Despite allusions to our contemporary reality, Lee's world is, as always, situated within a historico-mythical plane; a liminal space within which gods, ghouls, mortals, and the elements co-exist and coalesce.

With a technical approach that embraces chance, the paintings embody a simultaneous sense of growth, decay and mutation. Lee describes "the need to keep the works open enough that all sorts of unplanned things can seep in, even when I'm trying to make a painting about something quite specific." Grounds, washes and details are built up over time, evolving to feature landscapes and a cast of figures whose materiality and bearing blur the lines between the physical and psychological, mortal and immortal, benevolent and malicious. The teeming surfaces seem born of a psychedelic trip, or the unchecked bacterial colonies of a petri dish. Feverish as they may be, there is something of a baroque splendour to the complexity and extravagance of Lee's compositions.

Frequently tending towards the geomorphological, works such as *Devotional Doubt*, *Isthmus* and *Trunkie* convey shifting sands, silt deposits, glacial flow, lava, and limestone. Within these paintings, figures and landscapes become indistinguishable; their boundaries rendered obsolete. In a kind of reverse pareidolia, we detect inanimate, elemental matter contained within humanoid faces. As such, the series contemplates deep time and the sublime, whilst countering the prevalent anthropomorphic world view. Continuing in this vein, *SENOBYRD (Years of Plague)* situates past cultures as bound within the earth, approaching the archaeology of a necropolis with stoicism. Composed from images of bubonic plague grave sites, the painting alludes to the cyclic inevitability of the rise and fall of civilizations, calling into question the oft-repeated phrase 'unparalleled times.' Lee's skeletons counter the notion of 'born alone, die alone,' intimating a sense of community and solidarity in death.

The largest painting of the series, *Name of Names*, references the human action and impulse to name – to create order and typologies, and thus manufacture a sense of control over the unknown. Yet, the painting suggests an act of surrender: a mother and daughter stand dwarfed by a sprawling grotto that swells with the ghostly presence of past generations. The painting drew inspiration from the artist's collection of images of Neolithic cave sites and paintings. These hermetic spaces exist frozen in time as powerful repositories of human stories and belief.

I Come Home From the Soaring (Rilke) and *We Were Radiance* take their cue from a Rainer Maria Rilke poem. Lee describes the poem, *Ich komme aus meinen Schwingen heim (I return home from the soaring)*, as "an exploration of someone who has experienced the heights of a divine encounter, and the wondrous glow they carry back to the ordinariness of daily living." *We Were Radiance* introduces allegorical undertones as a woman cloaked in cobalt blue melts into the corner of a room. Walls and windows form a thin veil that scarcely separates the domestic interior from an infinite abyss. But - illuminated by an orange glow that emanates from within, she exists in another dimension, wholly unthreatened by the hostile forces around her. In *I Come Home From the Soaring* (Rilke) a vaporous obsidian mass swells in a wintry forest – imbued with other-worldly allure.

The emotional range of the series is unequivocal. *World Sick Hermit* depicts a hooded sage with a drawn face and bright but circumspect eyes. The figure appears weary and seems to capture a self-preservational 'what next?' mentality. *Mr Jabs* is a tragi-comic figure; bruised but buoyant, he bears a Band-Aid as a badge of honour. The suggestion of a rolled-up sleeve becomes a sleeping cap. Notions of mortality are combated with humour and resignation in *Ghost of M. E*, a portrait of the artist as spectre, who materialises to haunt future generations as a cartoonish and wholly unthreatening apparition.

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Optimism and pessimism are two sides of a coin, reflecting left and right brain dispositions that are in constant flux. There is an evolutionary mechanism at play here; whilst pessimism ensures the mitigation of risk and the ability to learn from prior experience, optimism ensures a life worth living, promoting healthy behaviours and relationships. *World Sick Hermit* emulates the highs and lows of a crisis, where feelings of devastation, fear, loneliness and uncertainty can give way to moments of profound connection and transfiguration. Hope and humour become a powerful antidote to doom. But adjacent to this binary emotional model is an entirely separate avenue of experience and sensation that Lee explores to full effect – that of the spiritual realm.