

# STATION

## New Adam

‘And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him’  
I Kings 19:9

These are paintings that seem to demand formal, detailed exegesis. They often contain human figures, not only singular, emotion- or identity-expressive symbolic portraits, but multiple figures - figures in dialogue, in groups, in action - figures that imply some kind of narrative represented in or by the image. These are paintings that seem to anticipate close reading, decoding, clarification.

The artist readily acknowledges – both in his precisely-formed titles and in professional conversation – that the works have specific inspirations or foundations: an 8th century BCE Babylonian map of the world, say, or a daughter’s current ornithological obsession, or Jacopo Pontormo’s Deposition in the church of Santa Maria Annunziata, Florence. But origin is only ever part of the story; the developed, finished paintings actually defy precise art-historical, iconographical analysis. Finding definitive meaning in these canvases and watercolours is like wrestling smoke. Rather, their pictorial syntax is more that of poetry; image and idea, time and place, experience and response move in and out of focus, leaping or more subtly segueing from one voice or register to another, and of course shifting from one reader-viewer to the next, leaving behind not tight-focus sense but the softer atmosphere of feeling.

The poetic allure of Adam Lee’s art begins in his colourscapes, in a refined instinct for subtle and expressive chromatic and tonal variation and proximity. Lee’s surfaces – whether rubbed back into the ground of the canvas, like rainbow suede, or liquidly jewelled in watercolour puddles – invite us to make a closer inspection, and in turn to venture closer engagement with the puzzle of each picture. Working within a loose framework of landscape, of naturalism, of single-point perspective, he underlays or overlays pure, flat pattern: a harlequin lozenge motley, ultimately derived from a blanket that once belonged to his wife’s great-aunt; the velvet symmetries of moth or butterfly wings, the boiling clouds of polished agate, or malachite, or figured marble.

The artist’s particular and unusual predilection for the colour orange recalls the entropic rust and mould of Anselm Kiefer; Pippa Mott references ‘the unchecked bacterial colonies of a Petri dish.’ For this writer, the hue also calls to mind the lichen in John Ruskin’s watercolour Study of a Block of Gneiss (Fragment of the Alps), or the spectacular Hymeneliaceae that stain the granite boulders of coastal Tasmania and Kangaroo Island. Perhaps the colour simply comes from the orange peel fungus found in the box-ironwood forest of the Macedon Ranges, where the artist lives and walks. But irrespective of particular pigment or inspiration, each finger or leaf or stone or dam or paddock of painted colour in these paintings is rich and pure and autonomous. Each is held within a twiggy border, just as the sun behind a cloud glisters its edge, highlighting the profile.

This formally, technically critical device of the profile brings us to the Arthur Rackham-Edmund Dulac gnomish silhouettes of Two Hermits, and to the curious fact of Lee’s anachronistic figural compositions.

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When I was a small child, the bathroom in our family home had floor tiles in a grey-green-white faux marble: an inchoate, liquid-gaseous tonal pattern flowing across or within a chequerboard grid. I made those vague shapes into a cast of characters, whose adventures entertained me every day. I particularly remember one large-headed, long-bodied figure I identified as the king, and a nearby dark, stumpy homunculus who was his cartoon sidekick or little brother (as was I): a fool or helper. These two were the main protagonists, but there were other creatures, too – including the inevitable, numerous baddies and enemies - all acting within swirling, abstract-mythic Chinese landscapes of mountains, rivers and seas.

This pareidolia, this primal need to find meaning and story in abstract or random forms - clouds or trees or water or rock (or vinyl) - is an essential component of Adam Lee's aesthetic. Granted two eye circles and occasionally an oral straight line, godling-goblin heads beverage-bubble or river-tumble around the edges of his compositions, or pile up as cairns in their centres. With two dots, a Helen Frankenthaler colour puddle or a Mark Rothko shadow is transformed into a startled wild animal or a Gandalf-hooded seer.

In the artist's perception and presentation of, and in the viewer's identification of the 'not-there' in the 'there', the 'not-it' in the 'it' (and vice versa) an instinctive, pre-rational, prehistoric need is being enacted.

The antiquity of this instinct is illustrated by the so-called 'Makapansgat cobble,' a red jasperite pebble fortuitously eroded in such a way as to suggest a human face. The artefact was excavated from a South African cave, in a sediment layer adjacent to an Australopithecus skeleton dated to two to three million years BP. The nearest source of jasperite is thirty-two kilometres from the find site, suggesting that one of these early protohominids, as entranced as we are by the magic of two eyes and a mouth, picked up the face-stone and took it home. The persistence, the currency, the immediacy of this instinct in modern humans (with an upper case 'M') can be seen in Pablo Picasso's button-eyed geometries of 1913, or Joan Miró's deconstructed heads of the late 1920s. Simple face-imagining persists even in the image chaos of postmodern culture, in the Kodama, the three-dot-faced, head-shaking tree spirits in Hayao Miyazaki's 1997 anime, Princess Mononoke, as well as in internet memes galore.

For Lee, however, the apparition of the human face is much more than an emoji. In its literal personification of the universal moral expectations and obligations of humanity, the face is a kind of epiphany. A look makes us feel. But in these works a person is not a miracle, or at least not a sufficient one. Lee's practice is one which arises from and attempts to communicate thresholds of wider wonder, moments of richer revelation. Often such descriptions of encounter with the Other, the numinous, the transcendent, come from intimate, familial life. As often they are grown from or expressed in the language of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the religious culture in which the artist grew up, and whose stories, imagery and moral codes were formative of his world view. Equally, Christianity is a crucial factor in the history of the western artistic tradition, particularly painting, and offers a broad, fecund biblical concordance of actions and meanings.

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For instance, in Luke 19:40, having been challenged by the Pharisees over his disciples' noisy welcome into Jerusalem, Jesus 'answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.' The image of the crying stones, the 'Jerusalem cobbles', has entered Lee's imagination and has in recent years become a central emblem in his idiosyncratic personal symbology.

From original faith and literal illustration, Lee also abstracts and makes visible deeper, more traumatic notions of lamentation, of illumination, of transfiguration. There is an unembarrassed, tough-minded, unsentimental devotional or sacramental dimension in these works, as there is in the music and lyrics of Nick Cave. For all its acute contemporary consciousness – of the recent plague, of the current climate emergency, of the complexities of popular culture – this is Fra Angelico, painting as prayer.

There is something else going on here, too. Something more than the paintings' sumptuous weave of colour, more even than their immemorial human narratives. There is inherent in these paintings a subtle but powerful tension, an electromagnetic balance between sense perception and intellection, and an equivalent balance between the vertical and horizontal, as coded in the elevation and the plan, the vista and the map.

The artist's keen awareness of what we might call 'pictorial physics' was well demonstrated in a recent project for the Kyneton Contemporary Art Triennial, *Holding the Circle* (March 2022), in which he showed five new paintings, each one accompanied by a 'prayer blanket' (commissioned from a local artisan or crafter) on the floor before it. The installation was conceived as a site of spiritual contemplation, its handful of shrines making it, in Lee's words, 'akin to what we might call a "sacred" space.' Visitors were required to remove their shoes.

This pressure of perpendicularity is also demonstrated in the recent painting *God Ghost*, a work which has a double genesis: in the experience of looking at Pontormo's *Deposition*, but also in Alesso Baldovinetti's *Annunciation*. In the latter work, the encounter between the Virgin and the Archangel takes place in a cloister paved with what looks like Cosmati work marble inlay, but the strong foreshortening of the ground plane is such that the polychrome geometry appears only as a flowing organic river of colour. In Lee's painting, we see this floor manifest on the vertical plane, as a dripping curtain of orange, lavender, indigo and lemon on the work's left margin.

In his isolated Macedon fastness, Lee has constructed for himself a quasi-religious altar alter ego as an aesthetic ascetic, a recluse, his art the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The first Christian saint to dedicate himself to solitary worship was the 3rd Egyptian Paul the Hermit, who spent his life in a cave in the desert. 200 years later, in Syria, St Simeon Stylites lived for 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo. In his recent painting, Adam Lee manages to combine both these eremitic perspectives. These expansive works give us both the view from the mouth of a cave and that from the top of a column, both looking out and looking down.

David Hansen, July 2023