

Extract from "The Rapture of Death" by Prue Gibson

Published by Boccalatte - Sydney

...Ghosts and spectres

'Sad, that memory is the form death takes in life; that the body is in memory as the spirit is in death.' John Hughes Remnants 2010

Ghosts stories are a compelling tradition in literature and art. They are the link between life and death: the cross-over between this world and another. Ghost experiences are a symptom of how little we know and of how uncertain we are of our collective human purpose. They are the source of deep fear, potential madness, and conversely, of catharsis.

Poltergeists, spectres and apparitions are phenomena that recur within the arts over centuries, in strikingly similar ways. Delving into the tradition of ghosts and spirits involves exploring emotion over reason, investigating the depths of psychological torments and uncomfortable images lurking in the shadows.

British writer Sarah Waters said in an interview about her 2009 novel *The Little Stranger* that 19<sup>th</sup> century ghost stories and the Gothic tradition allowed her to 'explore anxieties and fears.'

As a long-time fan of the ghost story tradition, I find it easy to suspend disbelief for the purposes of a good scaring. Ghost stories (as opposed to any real experience of ghosts) are effective because of they can be enjoyed from a safe vantage point. They are also therapeutic because they provide an opportunity to explore apprehension and unease. In fact, this entire investigation into deathly matter is exactly that kind of self-soothing psychology.

The uncanny, the freaky, the preternatural and the unexplained - these are aspects of life many sceptics prefer to explain away with facts, figures, hard evidence and so-called common sense. During the 19th century there was a strong emphasis on two diametrically opposed subjects - science and the afterlife. Educated men (mostly) were investigating a variety of scientific evidence. Charles Darwin was writing *Origin of the Species* and the medical profession, physiologists, neurologists and biologists were making startling leaps

forward. And yet, meanwhile, seances, mesmerism, illusionism and tarot readings were also reaching epic proportions in Britain. Ironically these two opposing areas of inquiry relied on each other to survive and find groundswell.

In a 1919 paper, Sigmund Freud discusses the psychological impact of delving into frightening and exotic sciences. He wrote that, 'the uncanny...belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general.' (1) He later adds that the uncanny relates to 'all the inventions with which the unbounded narcissism of that period of development sought to defend itself against the unmistakable sanctions of reality.' Explorations of the uncanny, even though they might cause manifestations of insanity and epileptic fits, are still necessary because they characterize a need to evade reality.

Of course not everyone is enamoured of Freud's interpretation of the mind's inner workings. Vladimir Nabokov, in his memoir *Invitation of a Memory*, wrote, 'I have ransacked my oldest dreams for keys and clues - and let

me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols...and its bitter little embryos, spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents.' (2)

On the other hand, in Wilkie Collins' *The Haunted House*, Freud's 'realm of the frightening' is well explored. The evil Countess Narona is painted as a woman of emotion: pale, dark-eyed and likely to faint at any moment. Francis and Henry Westwick are created as sensible men, who endure the fanciful passions of crazed women with patience and wisdom.

Likewise Sarah Waters' main character in *The Little Stranger*, the family doctor, is a thoroughly decent chap with a strong sense of duty. (3) He represents scientific order and common sense, reason and empirical evidence - and he is a difficult character to like. He is unable to accept there might be hyper spiritual forces at work within the Hundreds household. And of course he comes undone.

In art, as in literature, an interest in ghostly matters reflects the human psyche. A contemporary Melbourne artist with a long history of interest in the

uncanny and who responds to the mystery of other-worldliness, is photographer, printer and painter Andrew Browne. Browne understands the wealth of Gothic imagery in literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and infuses his works with the allure of the spirit world. His early work comes 'from a nineteenth century interest in Romantic and psychological relationships to the land.' He says, 'Even in my early work, I have been interested in ghostly lights at night, a sense of illumination. I am attracted to ambiguity.' Browne's photogravures, a type of light sensitive etching process, are called Seven apparitions. They are 'spooky illuminated scenes, suggestive of natural forms.' (4)

There is a strong undertone of alarm or panic just below the surface in Browne's work. To have an artist creating mystery and the uncanny (with backdrops of rural and urban settings) is particularly interesting, especially considering the history of Gothic literature in Australia. It seems we are not yet finished or even properly started with the alien and spiritual elements of the Australian bush. Now, more than ever, curators, writers, painters and poets are grappling with the

constructs, ambiguities and contrivances of the frightening Australian landscape.

Browne feels that this interest in the mystery and uncanny allure of the land is part of white Australians' need to 'create stories - there are things to be teased out.' Nineteenth century painting did not reflect the interest in Gothic traditions to such a degree as literature. Part of the explanation for this is that artists were in thrall to bucolic green scenes reminiscent of Europe.

In the early 2000s, the main period this book mulls over, artists are returning to the Australian bush; trying to make sense of our relationship with this mysterious place. They are endeavouring to create new ideologies and personal doctrines about the bush. And yet the rules are different. The anxiety and fears are about the future as well as the afterlife. How long will we live? How long will earth sustain us?

It is plausible that young artists are drawn to this imagery - ghosts, spectres, spirits - because they feel disconnected. There are no longer the old established working properties and the migratory farm

work that went with them. There are fewer reasons to leave the city and exist in a natural environment, except as an outsider or fleeting visitor. All that many artists have is the memory of that kind of experience: an ephemeral, elusive memory.

Andrew Browne's recent exhibition Visitation is a group of works suggesting omens, an augury of what might occur in the future. Six paintings in this exhibition are described by Browne as 'contrived', not in its negative connotation of hackneyed, but rather as a form of careful manipulation, much like the plot of a good ghost story. Browne says, 'But look again and perhaps the visage of something sinister emerges - ghostly and spectral. Each of these pictures treads a line between describing found, seemingly banal forms and an ambiguous anthropomorphic identity.' He goes on to explain several definitions and synonyms that are important to him: 'Apparition - an act or instance of appearing...a ghostly figure, spectre...a sudden, startling or unusual sight ...something existing in perception only...illusion...chimera...'

On the outskirts of the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture park at Langwarrin in Victoria, new land has been recently acquired. Browne explains (5) that the land

is ex-farm land, degraded and full of all kinds of detritus. There he discovered a small shrine, made by local kids, of glass on an indentation in a tree stump. He has made what he describes as 'a strange little painting' about this altar. Although not natural, manipulated by human hand, the scene emerges from the bush as half-real, half-imagined. These are the kinds of coincidences necessary for the ambiguity in the painting of ghostly presences.

Likewise his work Time is an apocalyptic image of a twisted tortured tree with human muscle sinews and the contortions of madness. Like a 17th century Grotesque engraving, it is vaguely repellent. The horror or disquiet is intended by the artist: 'I have sought to insert an uneasy and ambiguous presence into these works - one that conjures up highly suggestive forms derived from both direct observation and more fanciful manipulation - that ostensibly represent tangles of foliage and detritus. But look again and perhaps the visage of something sinister emerges - ghostly and spectral. Each of these pictures treads a line between describing found, seemingly banal forms and an ambiguous anthropomorphic identity.' (6)

