

STATION

Adam Lee

O Restless Earth

Adam Lee is the type of person who thinks deeply about the world. His artistic process is anchored in a persistent search for meaning. Or perhaps it is more apt to say that he processes his existential curiosity through his art. Lee's multilayered works draw on far-reaching and varied sources, from discoveries while traveling, environmental shifts with the seasons, biblical narratives, historical events, personal moments and memories, music he is listening to and books he has read. His works reflect upon the world around him, both physical and metaphysical. The works in this exhibition are no different.

Throughout this past year, Lee has struggled with insomnia, a restlessness and inability to sleep. The word 'restless' is associated with both a physical and emotional state, and is a suitable way to describe the way many people have been feeling at the current moment, a time of heightened emotion, stress and anxiety. The title of this exhibition, '*O Restless Earth*', is a phrase that Lee jotted down in a notebook years ago – he is in the habit of recording words and phrases when they come to mind. Rediscovering the phrase recently, it seemed fitting for the way he was feeling; the way the world was feeling. Lee says that this exhibition alludes to 'all that the earth holds beneath and around us: secrets of the past, the buried dead, layers of history and meaning which we are searching to understand'ⁱ.

In a cultural sense, the word underground is used to refer to something that is hidden and largely unknown, not mainstream, perhaps a bit subversive. Does this usage provide a clue to our feelings about what lies beneath the surface of the earth? Like Adam, I am interested in language, and what it tells us about ourselves. In the process of researching the secrets of the earth beneath us, Lee was inspired by *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, a book by Robert Macfarlane that explores the spaces under the earth and what they can teach us about humanity. Macfarlane writes, 'Into the underland we have long placed that which we fear and wish to lose, and that which we love and wish to save.'ⁱⁱ One of the stories in the book resonated so deeply with the artist that he kept an enlarged photocopy of the page on a wall in his studio while creating these works:

Around 27,000 years ago, on a limestone hillside overlooking what is now the Austrian Danube, two babies, dead at birth, were placed side by side in a freshly dug round hole. Their remains were wrapped in animal hide, and the space around them was packed with red ochre, into which were mixed yellow beads of ivory. A shelter was then constructed to protect them from the crushing embrace of the earth: a scapula from a woolly mammoth, propped up as a bone shroud on pieces of tusk.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Totenpass is inspired by this story. In rusty oranges and browns, Lee has depicted the final resting place of these two babies, encased by the protective scapula bone. This painting was a starting point for Lee's investigation into spaces beneath the earth. 'Totenpass' is a German word for the inscribed tablets traditionally placed at burial sites, with inscriptions to instruct the deceased on how to navigate the afterlife. The practice of burying the dead is recognised as an early form of spiritual practice, revealing a concern with what happens to us after death. Ancient burial sites provide material evidence from which we can study the beliefs, values and traditions of those who came before us.

The significance of time spent under the earth has roots in the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament states, 'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'^{iv} The story of Jonah and the whale tells of Jonah, who was called upon by God to be a prophet to teach the word of God. But Jonah did not want to be a prophet, so he abandoned his calling and embarked on a sea voyage. In anger, God created a storm that threatened the ship. The sailors, realising that Jonah was the target of the storm, threw him overboard in order to save the ship. He was saved from drowning by a whale, which swallowed him whole, and he lived for three days and three nights inside the whale's belly. The whale then spat Jonah

out onto land and, so thankful was he to be saved, he took up his mission as a prophet. This is a moral story about someone who endures a traumatic event, experiences a period of isolation and reflection, and emerges transformed. Lee began painting scenes in which a human figure is encased in a dark cavernous space – the belly of a whale, a tomb, a cave – such as *Three Days, Three Nights*. I wonder if these are a self-portrait of the artist in lockdown.

During this period, Lee kept returning to the chrysalis as an image of metamorphosis. In the animal world, many creatures go through a period of hibernation and transformation. Metamorphosis – a Greek word meaning transformation – refers to a life cycle often associated with butterflies. As the children’s storybook teaches, an egg hatches and a tiny caterpillar emerges. Its purpose is to eat as much as it can until it reaches adulthood, wherein the exterior of its body hardens into a chrysalis to protect itself during its period of transformation. Although appearing to the outside world to be dormant, big changes are taking place inside. A blackened or darkened chrysalis can mean that the butterfly is ready to emerge, or alternatively, that the creature inside has died. *Chrysalis Dark* is a long slim painting, almost a third of which depicts a dark cavernous space. From some perspectives it may appear as a large gaping hole, but I prefer to look at it as a space of potential.

Over the past couple of years Lee has employed the motif of portals and doorways as thresholds that symbolise a passing from one state to another. To be on the threshold suggests the beginning of something, a point of entry, on the verge of as yet unrealised potential. To the artist, these are metaphors for the spaces within us, and our ability to reach new ways of thinking and understanding, a personal transformation or renewal. This is most evident in *Blētisian*, which takes its title from an old English term for ‘blessing’. The largest painting in the exhibition, most of the canvas is dark and appears to be a portal you could step through. But the darkness is framed by light, friendly forms, organic shifting shapes with kind, smiling faces. If you look closely you will detect birds nestled amongst them. During the dark winter days of the lockdown, Lee and his daughter (whom he was homeschooling) began to notice birds visiting at their window, and these birds felt like small blessings. With the dedication of a bird watcher recording the discovery of a new species, Lee has detailed each of these birds around the edges of the painting; visions of hope through the darkness.

In Lee’s world there is often a tension between opposites: light and dark, day and night, interior and exterior, life and death, hope and fear. His works have always depicted scenes that are both physical or exterior, and abstract or interior. But I have noticed a shift in recent years away from literal landscapes towards spaces that are increasingly abstracted, spaces of the mind and the unconscious. The paintings in this exhibition began prior to the pandemic and were completed during Australia’s first lockdown. Over this time, the themes Lee was exploring became increasingly relevant as many people globally entered a period of enforced isolation. In many ways, Lee has managed to articulate the experience of the pandemic – the space of reflection and contemplation we have been subject to, and the potential for transformation. He says of the works, ‘I see these paintings as touching on how the darkness or the night might lead us to transformative visions of the world and ourselves, like the image of the chrysalis as a hidden, dark space which allows for metamorphosis.’^v These works might appear dark, but they are also hopeful.

Laura Couttie, September 2020

ⁱ Email from the artist, June 2020.

ⁱⁱ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, London: Penguin Books, 2019, p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

^{iv} Matthew 12:40.

^v Email from the artist, June 2020.