

## KALIMANRAWLINS

### **Adam Lee**

#### *The World Travailing*

Adam Lee's vast landscapes aren't really landscapes, just as his portraits aren't really portraits. It might seem a trite proposition, but it's one worth making. Describing Lee's paintings purely in terms of representation – either straight or stylised – is missing the point. At once lithe and laboured, these lush, dense and fluid scenes, vistas, orbs and figures belong to a wider, more allegorical and atmospheric kind. They are memories and imaginings, ancient and enveloping.

From the one vantage, this isn't anything new for Lee. His 2011 exhibition *And They Built For Themselves Kingdoms* used the symbology of the pyramid – an image inspired by early American oil wells – and the arcane bearded figure to explore humankind's interface with the natural world. The paintings weren't without grounding; rather, they were awash with Lee's loose reappropriation of historical photographs, textual and Biblical references. But the meaning, orientation and references are buried a little deeper in the detail here.

His increasingly lush palette is of key importance. *The World Travailing* is a kind of super nature – deep, dark and green – unhindered by the chainsaw or the engineer. It sweats with pools of moisture and blooms with beautiful foliage, mould and fungi; it speaks of age and the accrual of time. The figures – the owl people, bearded men and cloaked women – seem both archaic and slightly absurd. They don't so much wander this damp world, but are ensconced and camouflaged within it.

One of the key images, *The Pregnant World (Lacuna)*, eschews the figure entirely, replacing it with a violent river rushing and splaying its course down a valley bordered by towering alpine ranges. A womb-like orb frames the vast scene, the detritus of underpainting left to fester around the perimeter. Elements of process reveal themselves; tests and false-starts peek and peer from the edges of the canvas. It is as if we view the scene via a portal.

Lee's titles find their grounding in the Book of Romans from the New Testament. The notion of the world's "pregnant condition" resonates. While somewhat removed from our own literality, these paintings are loaded with a very real tension.

There's a personal currency to these images too, and this is perhaps their greatest strength. In the exhibition's title work, a woman and man can be made out perched on a bank of lake, the scene encircled by soaring snow-capped peaks. They blend into the landscape as if apparitions.

The couple are in fact Lee's late grandparents, who died before he was born. The painting is in fact an ode. It whispers of the frailty of human life as much as the importance and resilience of memory, be it recalled or conjured. For memories are figments of our imagination as much as they are imprints of experience.

– *Dan Rule*