

The framing of dreams

Thornton Walker: The stillness in movement

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin.
Closes April 12. Tue-Fri 10am-5pm; Sat-Sun 9am-5pm

Reviewer: **Sasha Grishin**

Back in 1987 in the inaugural Moët and Chandon exhibition, Thornton Walker said, "In my work I try to let go of the known. To let go of that which has been articulated. I approach each work as though it is my first; containing within it unique problems and therefore asking for unique solutions ... An anarchy exists at this moment in which external moral dictates such as continuity and originality, right and wrong become irrelevant. This chaos in working with an infinity of possibilities gives rise to an individual order."

Almost a quarter of a century later, this still seems to be a most apt way of approaching his new series of work, *The stillness in movement*. At first sight they are rather strange un-Thornton Walker-like paintings. Truncated figures, a subdued palette, snowy forest scenes, implied violent action, where the sense of anticipation is immense, where so much could happen, but nothing much does happen. They are like records of incidents which lack a central uniting narrative, like the frozen moments of photographic stills. More strongly than in any earlier series of his work the quality of the "uncanny" prevails, we seem to feel something familiar about these distantly unfamiliar images. It is like seeing shadows of our forgotten ancestors.

He explains some of his thinking about this new work in terms of a series of digressions from photographic sources.

"Stills from early Japanese period films and albums of photographs which my father took in Canada in the 1930s, have been my sources," he says.

"My father never talked about his 10 years in Canada but after he died, when I was in my early 20s, his exploits took on mythic proportions. As well as being a photographer, there were stories that he worked as a lumberjack in the Rockies, was a ski jumper, and, during the prohibition, smuggled rum into the USA.

"Some years ago I had a vivid dream that my father came to get me and took me to his studio in the snow, the walls were hung with huge floor-to-ceiling photos of his snow



scenes, like the one in 'M.A.W.'.

"My fascination with Japanese Cinema and aesthetic probably began when I was a child watching *Shintaro! The Samurai* and later Kurosawa's films. I've been thinking of somehow using these images in my work for a long time, but haven't, until recently found a way to approach it. These images of my father ski jumping, Ninjas running in the snow, crouching figures, trees draped in snow have become linked in my mind in a mysterious narrative."

For me the paintings are fragments, mystical meditations on an endless range of possibilities which lead to an individual order. At a guess I would suggest that the title of the exhibition may draw on a Zen saying by Ts'ai-ken T'an: "Only when there is stillness in movement can the spiritual rhythm appear which pervades heaven and earth."



POSSIBILITIES:
Thornton Walker's *The meeting II*, above, and *Figure running II*, left.

that of mood painting, but one of a very high order. In their contemplative and meditative nature, they allude to the sense of "otherness", with an implied enigma. He introduces strange scribbling of text or arbitrary dribbles of paint which destroy in the painting the properties of a highly finished and polished work. There is frequently the quality of an unfinished dream into which the beholder is invited to enter.

I think that these are some of the best paintings by Thornton Walker to date. The preciousness of this work, as in much of this artist's oeuvre, lies in attaining a state where the paintings assume their own existence, one which denies the mimetic literalness of representation or the controlled arena of the artist with his bag of tricks. The painting seems to have its own independent life, rather than being a physical description of an object's existence in space.

As always with Thornton Walker's paintings we are provided with spiritual clues, an enigma is presented to us which we are invited to contemplate. The paintings are visually attractive, yet have a certain toughness and are imbued with a sense of the enigma. In their formal structure, they are informed by the art of the

post-war Abstract Expressionists and by some of the more recent non-figurative painters. Whereas an artist like Robert Ryman would leave his canvases as fields of white and would experiment with surface textures and tonal gradations, Thornton Walker includes motifs from these photographic stills. His art is ultimately