

Art review Sasha Grishin

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Meditations on the uncanny

Thornton Walker: New works on paper. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until August 9.

Thornton Walker creates deliberate tensions in his art practice. His paintings and prints in this cameo exhibition imply a narrative, yet there are insufficient clues provided to uncover a storyline. They are strongly figurative works, they are beautifully painted, but at the same time they have been strongly abstracted.

If we examine the drawing, *Runner #4*, a dark silhouetted figure approaches us, possibly running, as suggested by the title. The figure is truncated at the shoulders, so no form of identification is possible. It seems to be a bleak snowy landscape within which there is this singular road on which appears this lonely runner. It is Walker's strategy to strip his image of all identifiable characteristics, yet to leave a trail of tantalising clues to provoke in the viewer a process of questioning and interrogation. The masterful use of pastel and the strange double shadow add this slightly unnerving sensation, hinting at something sinister and unsettling. Many of his images are drawn



Thornton Walker, *Runner #4* in *Thornton Walker: New works on paper* at Beaver Galleries and, right, *Composition I*.



from what could be termed a "dream journal", one with surreal themes that collectively enter into the realm of the uncanny. This is in the Freudian sense of the word, where something can be simultaneously familiar, yet alien, and the viewer can be both attracted and disturbed by the image at the same time. These dream phantasies are frequently realised in a dark, almost a monochromatic palette, quite often conveying a fragment of a figure shown running in a forest, which is shrouded with snow or a truncated horse rider apparently turning while in full gallop or ravens in the snow.

In Walker's recent art, the 20th-

century concept of the uncanny is brought together with a meditation 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." In a sense this becomes a meditation on the uncanny.

A number of his other works in this exhibition return to Thornton Walker's favourite theme of a Chinese bowl, some of which he collected while he was in Malacca and Penang in the 1990s. These are now juxtaposed with fruit and paint-spattered tablecloths. His meticulousness in the technique gives the still life objects in his work a sense of corporeality, yet he undermines the mimetic seductiveness of

the composition by introducing strange scribbles of text or arbitrary dribbles of paint. To destroy the verisimilitude of the photographic image, he devised a technique of applying oil paint in thin washes using alkyd resins, it is very thin, runny paint, lacking in viscosity, freed of brushstrokes and applied in transparent layers which settle on the surface like pools of watercolour. In these paintings there is frequently the quality of an waking dream into which the beholder is invited to enter and dissolve.

This is an impressive exhibition of an artist presenting a series of meditations on realities which are observed, felt and imagined.