

Review: Thornton Walker has found a spiritual pathway through the intrusion of lockdown

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Thornton Walker, Black pot with objects on a table

Thornton Walker: *The heron and the cat in the bath*, Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes October 29, Tuesday - Saturday 10am-5pm. beavergalleries.com.au.

Over the past couple of years many artists have had cause to pause and re-examine their relationship with the surrounding world. COVID and the enforced isolation put the brakes on many normal socialising activities, and it also forced people into a more introspective frame of mind.

Once some of the certainties of everyday life had been removed, a heightened sense of vulnerability has arisen as the future appeared far less predictable and plans for even travel or holidays that once seemed almost mundane now became problematic. Climate change and the insanity of political structures that have been known to all for decades suddenly came into sharp focus and intruded into our lives in a very personal manner.



Thornton Walker, Covid diary # VI

Thornton Walker, over several decades, has been an artist who has combined a general Zen meditative practice with an exquisite technique through which well-loved objects were imbued with a sense of magic. The COVID lockdown has forced him to heighten a more inward focus in his art, the scale of many of his paintings has become more modest and instead of pursuing the grand vista that we witnessed in his last exhibition at this gallery a couple of years ago, things are now more inward looking.

Walker notes about the intimacy of the subject matter in his new exhibition, "Hiccup, my cat, drinking from the bath spout, my partner in front of the mirror, the heron below my deck, the cove and headland I visit on my morning walks". Together with this change of focus, there is something of a nervous energy in the work - the end to certainty.

"Flight" (2022) is a small acrylic painting on linen (51 x 66.5cm) that depicts a heron observed by the artist from the deck of his house. It is a study in greys with touches of white and black - it is restrained and melancholy. No extraneous details are allowed into the composition, yet the bird appears somewhat vulnerable and forlorn. The abstract patterning of the background and the abstracted rock-like formation in the foreground are employed like a foil against which the bird appears picked out with considerable precision.



Thornton Walker, Flight

Although the painting may have its origins in an everyday reality encountered by the artist, it also may be seen to serve as a broader metaphor for a certain bleakness encountered in our reality.

"Hiccup in the bath" (2022), an oil painting of slightly smaller dimensions, depicts the artist's cat positioned within the bath apparently drinking from the dribbling bath spout. Compositionally this is a fairly complex arrangement with an aerial view of the cat, the plumbing arrangement and the play of shadows.

Invariably the image carries something of a comic aspect, but it is also an image of entrapment with the creature improvising its existence within the confines of a bathtub. The palette is again subdued and the shadows seem to offer a commentary on the predicament of the cornered cat who is forced to make do within conditions of lockdown.



Thornton Walker, Hiccup in the bath

In the exhibition, there is also a moving COVID diary, such as "Covid diary # VI" (2020), where a Japanese woodcut has been collaged onto the paper and on this a commentary in watercolour has been superimposed. Collectively the series reads like a flight of fantasy from confinement, almost like prisoner art, where the physical constraints open the avenue for the imagination to take flight.

As a whole, Walker's exhibition explores some of the spiritual states that have arisen from the physical constraints imposed by the new reality.