

## WHO STRAINED MY CREDULITY?

Artists: Trent Parke—*The Black Rose*—Art Gallery of South Australia, March 13<sup>th</sup>—May 31<sup>st</sup> and Bill Viola—*Bill Viola: Selected Works*—Art Gallery of South Australia, February 27<sup>th</sup>—March 29<sup>th</sup>; Simon Pericich—*tERROR*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, February 20<sup>th</sup>—March 21<sup>st</sup>

by Ken Bolton

## TOO MANY TIMES, TOO MANY TIMES

The Trent Parke exhibition, *The Black Rose*, at AGSA was interesting: 700 items—of film, light-box images and, mostly, photography. Some works were clearly sequences, probably edited but reading as succeeding shots. Their casualness proposes them as ‘ordinary life’ and their intimacy, novelty and telling detail suggest curiosity, attentiveness, openness on the part of the artist. Engagement and casually-come-upon surprise were a large part of what was delivered, along with a sense of practiced watchfulness. The watchfulness might be backed up by both an expectant, calibrating mind, non-committally alert to significances, but also prepared to register existence’s uneventful, parsimonious moments. Stretches of boredom register nowadays as part of the rhetoric of stoically received realism. (Or ‘the real’ stoically received.) ‘Received’, there, is the crucial term: the rhetoric would have it that way, though it is projected of course—an aesthetics of unarguable finality. Sadistic, masochistic, existential? Christian? In Trent Parke’s case it is mostly existential and only sentimentally and romantically sadistic or masochistic. Trent Parke can hardly be blamed for it, it is part of our culture, we are part of it, party to it. It is a default mode for the post-Christian West, and there is a range to it though its exemplars might (well, of course) resemble each other: from various kinds of easy corn to more dry-eyed and intelligent proposition: Gothic through to Warhol, and Jeff Wall, and the Germans—Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Bernd and Hilla Becher? *Et al.*

A small show of terrific or memorable pictures would have been possible. I thought the strike rate in *Black Rose* very low. But as well as exercises in temporal sequences (consecutive shots in a reel) one

of Parke's themes is the wonder of myriadness. So, *numbers* of photos of 'things numerous'—swarming birds, insects, thorn branches, trees on plains, moths around streetlights—as well as the more doleful 'badlands' sequences: road movie shots of a journey across barely inflected bits of Australia, and the fuzzy, late-at-night or just late dusk photos ... of a rabbit trekking with the photographer through dunes and spinifex and grass: homely, poignant, atmospheric, amusing ... tense. But generally there was a preference for the numerous and for numerous shots.

Many of the seven hundred photos will have been no one's favourite—even for a moment—or will have barely pulled viewer attention. Their effect—the 'tactic'—was the cumulative. Variety, numerousness, would seem to stand for, argue for the wonder of life. Capitalized, intoned in fact by, say, an editor from *Readers Digest* or, indeed, *Life*. Part of what makes Trent Parke a 'humanistic photographer', a Magnum photographer even. Parke is one of the latter and was awarded "the prestigious W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography". I guess at this point one might hold one's tongue. It was a big cheque, I hope.

Which works was I struck by? '*Arriving home, Victoria*', 2009; a picture called '*Spoiled negative of a tree*'; '*West Beach, Adelaide*' 2010, which showed sand under shallow water in large, horizontal format—like the 'spoiled negative' it was fairly abstract; a '*Rabbit*', 2010, '*The Fox, Adelaide*' both 2010. '*Arriving home, Victoria*', 2009—a terrific portrait—probably unposed—showed a young teenage girl, in school uniform, coming into a room and perhaps a little tentative but youthfully resolute in some indefinable way or in relation to some (to the viewer) unknowable situation, tensely alert. A '*Paper plane, Adelaide*', 2010, the plane photographed head on and high within the vertical picture format: its shadow formed a simple, diagrammatic dress-pattern shape beneath it, so that the plane seemed at first to be the slightly winged collar of the garment. I liked a '*Fin, West Beach, Adelaide*' 2010 and '*The Nullabor, South Australia*' (2011) which had an almost pattern-like regularity to the occurrence of snaggly, wind-blown, wisp-like trees that covered it, with some of the same effects as a Fred Williams (though delicately graphic, black and white).

The '*Ants on a Jatz cracker*' and '*Butterfly Springs, Savannah Way, Northern Territory*' were of the 'curious-patterns-in-nature' sort that always seemed a good case prior to the 70s for keeping photography *out* of art galleries: boring. Of course, now all that stuff is in via the retrospective legislation that has been worked by the gallery and museum system, photography being art. To me it is still boring, and bad: but then so is a lot of other art.

The pictures of foxes and rabbits were great for the sense they conveyed of the animal actually alive, fiercely alert as a matter of life-and-death, but also curious as to the specific relation to human presence

that was ongoing during the moment that the photographs captured. The pictures seem quick and fortuitous because the situation would have been so temporary and fragile, timing and opportunity so impossible to gauge. There is a sense of wind, of temperature even, of wildness: these were photographs taken in dunes and along bush or only semi-urban tracks, late at night in difficult light. They seem to mark a truce or detente between the animal and the human.

There was—as an exit from the show—a white final room, the walls lit from behind, and in front of the walls hung exposed strips of negative: this seemed to testify to ‘hard yakka’, the long journey of the working photographer, dedication etcetera. Corn. Irrelevant, anyway—but also slightly objectionable as a leaning on the viewer for acknowledgement of the artist rather than the art. Maybe I make too many objections.

The hard-to-avoid wall texts insist on the photos as testifying to an *attitude*: hard-won, hard-bitten, grimly or doggedly ‘open’, and curious—as *regularly disappointed* but up-for-it; as *sensitive* though ‘no-bullshit’). And, the attitude approved of, acknowledged by the viewer, the texts seemed intended to add *value* thereby to the photos, or to protect them from criticism, ease their reception.

So, was it ‘Love my photographs, love me’?

**Black Rose**—photos mostly from 2008 to 2012 it seemed to me whenever I checked on the photos I liked—was the product, we were told, of the death when he was twelve of the artist’s mother. (And the circumstances described make the loss shocking. Parke was home alone with her, his brother asleep, his father out. His mother died before him in an asthma attack.) But *are* we to believe that this was ‘the catalyst’ for this (fairly current) project? (Trent Parke was born in 1971.) Did the photographs, anyway, require this oppressive gravitas supplement? Seven hundred of them. Maybe they did.

(A tumbling to the mysteries of mortality and the ubiquity of life and death? We are to be awed by the artist’s generosity, his casual yet very full humanity, and awed by what he is awed by too: this great guy is bowled over by these flying birds! I, too, sense their beauty. Parke’s projected innocence before the birds—or tragically sensitized innocence—can be ours too. I am projecting—and parodying what I project. True. But what else can one take from the manner in which the exhibition is brokered, via the medium of the photographer’s persona?)

Maybe flocks of birds just ‘are’ beautiful. I always find them so. Most people agree. Are they objectively so? May be. There must be a great many bad photos testifying to our finding them so and Trent Parke’s, of course, are ‘good’. I nearly always find the fascination with myriad organisms’ looking manufactured, mechanical, symmetrical in their patterned distribution—mostly un-fascinating and

unaesthetic: Nature and the Machine Aesthetic! And there were some of these in this exhibition. Though kindred to them were photos of regularly spaced trees dotting Australian desert, or of sand under shallows in ribbed or ribboning patterns, as I have already mentioned, and these I liked. *Though they are not far from the same thing I have been objecting to.* Perhaps it was partly their resemblance to abstract painting of certain kinds (rather than to Bauhaus photography or Op Art for example, as with the machine aesthetic subjects). (I mean, I realize my judgement is fallible and is personal.)

A small selection might have given some encounters with interesting and striking images but **Black Rose** gave a tsunami of images and to some extent an encounter with a simulated persona, the photographer.

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## **(AS THE DENTIST SAYS) THIS IS GOING TO HURT—A LITTLE BIT**

About Bill Viola's work I am almost ambivalent. It is often striking and sometimes beautiful and would be memorable if one could tie the image to an issue, a problem, an ongoing crisis, some truth. Most often I can't. (I mean, it proposes them: sure. But I don't automatically agree to the proposition.) The Viola works resemble *Art*—which, in the sixties, would have indicated that they weren't, or were maybe suspect. I always think of Viola as coming out of the sixties. If he did he has left them way behind. "(F)ire, water, mirages and vast landscapes" (to quote the AGSA promotional material), "atmospheric purity and haunting beauty". If we forget "mirages" the rest are immutables—decorative, reified absolutes, finalities, wisdoms. I think they are pointless and empty—opportunities to once again tap the sublime and source the authority of size, extension, inexorability and tedious (or 'neat') symmetry. Ponderous and emptily portentous. It is *not* a step up from *Once Upon A Time In The West*.

This return to archetypes, the 'poignancy' of classic oppositions, the resort to elementals (to religious hokum and mythic authority), is reactionary non-thinking.

The water piece—part of *'The Crossing'*— was beautiful, yes. The women meeting, finally, in the desert (one of the *'Mirage'* series) was twee, in the end, though possessed "of a beautiful solemnity" along the way. AGSA's copy-writing continues to be lightly amusing though counterproductive: sometimes best met with a simple denial. "*Viola paints with video*". No he doesn't. The work is "*spectacular, intimate, spiritual and profound*"—to which the correct response might be Valley Girl, Moon Unit's: "barf me with a spoon".

Viola's is an aesthetic that might be seen in the future to have characterized our times. Well, it is not just his, it is everywhere. It is going to make us seem terribly boring and unimaginative in our idea of 'reality', and rather null. There'll be so much of it to look at. The standardized, formulaic attempts at 'grandeur' that each age makes are the ballast successive ages have to yawn over and bury in the vaults as 'academic'. Ours, I'm predicting, will include the po-faced long-maintained slow-mo camera shot and plenty of it.

The image (from *'The Crossing'*) of the figure under falling water, it is churlish to deny it, was dramatic and then, towards its end, became rather abstract and very beautiful: skeins of spiralling white and blue, the human figure having disappeared. But it proposed very little. Or it proposed 'everything'—if you are up for letting it accrue any idealism that happened to be in the room. A sentimental operation was required—and many will have made it, involuntarily, the work was so powerful. We recognise the well-meaning cliché. So was it a step forward for us, philosophically? We are no doubt *not* going to deal very well with issues of water supply, of storm and aridity caused by climate change. Is that the message? Thanks. So, a beautiful image attached to a given, a truism (that no-one would argue with—viz “o, water, glorious staple of life!”), and upon which the art made little discernible in the way of inflection or modification. On the reverse of the long, banner-like vertical screen on which the image appeared was a like image of fire.

The *'Mirage'* piece, of two women walking in the desert—one, it turned out, 'older', the other 'young'—seemed to aspire to greatness, or seriousness, or solemnity, or to methodically go about claiming that status. The let-down when the work's formal proposition was made was rather comical. All that beauty: the unremitting dignity and balance of the two tiny, brave, enduring verticals—and the likewise-abiding, heavy horizontal of the desert 'landscape' format, stretched to an extreme in its proportions. During the pleasant longueurs one could think many things as the two female figures grew gradually closer, but the accumulated tension, the accrued high seriousness, were instantly dissipated with the work's resolution. Young met old, life, it turns out, was a journey. Which I feel I've heard before.

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## NINTEY SIX TEARS

Simon Pericich's *tERROR* at the AEAF was particularly popular exhibition, drawing a large audience and many repeat viewings. The demographic was the Festival one which emphasizes the youngish and the slightly elderly: the mature employed (the 'mid-career'?) came in just above their usual numbers, and seemed also to like the work.

**tERROR** had an overall designed look to it. It looked fashionable, or as if it wanted to suggest that it *parodied* the fashionable. The fashion it cited (parodied? pursued?) was the look of a Gothic, black, machined aesthetic: glamorous, heavy, dour, nihilistic or 'down', yet punkish, youthful and nightclubby, a stylish drag. So, much of the exhibition was black, though there was some grey, some charcoal—black paint and moulded plastic, glass diamantes, mantilla-lace veil, ashes. One effect of this was to have the exhibition look a little like an installation, the simulation of a show. And from that one was left to wonder whether the exhibition's attitudes were struck as pose, as sarcasm, as self-parodying masochism, as perverse amusement, as placebo or as, in fact, heartfelt. **tERROR** suggested despair, doom, exasperation, bitterness, despondency, resignation. It enacts these things, it projects them, a little histrionically. It may have instanced these things so as to forgive them—to do so 'on our behalf' even. What drew all this tight-lipped and strained visual expostulation was the overwhelming amalgam of climatic devastation, interminable warfare and violence on so many fronts, and the tedium of so much of modern 'administered life'. Each piece seemed like a statement in the face of, or as it turned away from, one of these problems.

The individual pieces employed clichés or standard representations. To me these suggested that they were (offered as) reflex responses, neurotic, maudlin—a kind of *weltschmerz*— and that they were offered, sampled in dee-jay fashion, and attributed to us the viewers, or that they were enacted for the viewer's endorsement or understanding. Were they offering sympathy—or seeking it?

Some of the items: An eagle-like black bird suspended and spot-lit that read as a bird rising from (the) ashes; as an imperial eagle (cf Roman legions, Czarist Russia, the German Reich, imperial America); as a bird covered in oil slick? (As a logo—like Batman's?)

Nearby was a flattened pile of burned books, under a door-sized pane of glass. Nazi book-burnings being the immediate association. Black, glass, ash. Trashed learning and history.

There was an image of a foreshore that showed identical multi-storey hotels, or housing, running in ranked formation back to the horizon. Over this were some versions of the Diet-Coke slogan: mostly to the effect of 'eat and die' and 'shit life', 'die OK'.

A brooding, garbage bag-hooded sculptural figure—a bust—reminiscent of Juan Davila's personages, and of Mexican Wrestling heroes and villains, troubled Marvel Commix heroes (and maybe the brooding figure in Bocklin and de Chirico)—it stood, head bowed before two handsomely 'black' images (one entitled '*don't cry yet...*'). It seemed a figure of futile perversion and defeated Luciferian rebellion. (The

title: 'I couldn't tell if you were having the time of your life or you were dead'. The titles have a throw-away, flip, pop quality.)

A large plasma-screen TV lay on the gallery floor—black, smoothly glossy etc—a grey boulder sitting on it, its weight cracking the screen progressively over the course of the first day of the exhibition. The blue-ish images beneath showed but the screen was cracked in beautifully 'organic' patterns, the cracks catching the image's projected light. A world-ending comet, human destructiveness?

An old though shiny chromium car grille floats suspended and circling slowly. It seems like space junk, flotsam or jetsam. Its shadow occasionally cast a grinning-mouth image on the gallery floor.

Further in, the word 'tERROR' is painted on the gallery wall in what looked like grey feather-shapes or dabs of pigment (made of grey make-up, opalescent paint and moisturizing lotion); these turn out on inspection to be mostly lip shapes, but also some whole cheeks and ears—made by the artist pressing his ensmeared face against the white wall. The effect is of something like supplicant souls attempting to communicate. 'Pitiable' was probably the response it was seeking.

A unifying and flavouring factor—along with the black stylization—was the exhibition soundtrack, which affected the whole gallery, and which asserted something more about the show's reading once the final room in the gallery was experienced. In that end room, accessed via a very dark and slightly intimidating corridor, was an altar-like cube made of three thick mattresses. The two lower mattresses were hollowed out and housed speakers that pumped out the show's doleful and melancholic soundtrack—Sinead O'Connor at 33 rpm or fewer: giving her voice a masculine register and giving the bass notes and percussion a thunderous, slow boom. *'NOTHING COMPARES 2 U'* is the title.

Viewers could lie on the bed and give themselves to the sound and to the image projected above, on a 12 minute loop, of stars and galaxies (silvery white against the black background). These were glimmers and shiverings that resolved into a figure discernible in the blackness—which now read as liquid, mud-like or somehow thick and viscous—from which the trapped figure struggles to emerge. The figure is male, unclothed mostly, and faces the viewer below, his blackened body answering that of the recumbent viewer. So: claustrophobia, struggle, entrapment, helplessness and suffering. And beauty. The soundtrack—slowed, mournful, but romantic and emotional—could be said to do much of the same work as (Bill Viola's) long-held camera view and slow motion do. One might say it does so no more legitimately: the sound and lyrics are offered with a degree of irony and open-handedness. Less tight-lipped.

In the face of the problems the show identifies and addresses—overcrowding, overproduction, unsatisfying materialism, spiritual aridity, perversion and despair, ecological destruction (a looming end-game around the environment, global warming, water, food production)—the show fingers these lightly, tentatively—what is the art's strategy? No single work is going to save the world—art's effect overall on *anything* is hard to measure and easily doubted. Here the intention might be homeopathic or like an inoculation—that in being forced to acknowledge defeat and hopelessness we might rally. Might even panic and rally. Is this unlikely?

I think it is, though it is all I can imagine as a desired effect. The show offers solace, seems a goad and is perhaps an expression of long-cooled and disappointed anger. Audiences may have just liked the exhibition's strong emotional affect—whatever the efficacy of it politically—and liked it because neither ickily personal nor expressionist, but designer-savvy, handsome, black, glossy, stylish, with some severity, hauteur and muted glamour, its flashes of sullen rhinestone glitter.

In summary, *tERROR*'s themes, slogans, or memes seem offered to the viewer—as a set. Proffered might be the term. The exhibition would seem not to urge them but to offer them for recognition and a degree of token approval: the viewer can acknowledge them as typical responses, as shrugs of responsibility or responsibility disavowed. All of them are fatalist, negative, despondent, glibly cynical, defeatist, defeated. The viewer, I think, can not endorse them so much as understand them as individual emotional responses in the face of large dilemmas.

I thought it was as though the show attributes them to us as viewers and expresses (through the song, the lugubrious tune) its sorrow—and is solicitous, forgiving, as if it stands behind us with a hand on our not very literal shoulder.