

Lisa Adams: The Aesthetic Dimension of Melancholy

by Lita Barrie

A series of six new paintings on view at:
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Drowning Out All Birdsong 2013 oil on canvas over panel 65 x 84.5 inches

"One feature that makes melancholy an aesthetic emotion like that of sublimity—is its dual nature. There are negative and positive aspects in it which alternate, creating contrasts and rhythms of pleasure. These aspects combine with the reflectivity that is at the heart of the melancholy and the particular refined feeling of the emotion."

Emily Brady and Arto Haapala (1)

The 18th century, German philosopher, Immanuel Kant insisted that "melancholy characterizes those with a superb sense of the sublime."⁽²⁾ There has been a renewed interest in the sublime in American art discourse since the French philosopher, Francois Lyotard first introduced the concept into art discourse in *Artforum* in 1982 ⁽³⁾ and later expanded his theory of the postmodern sublime in publications on contemporary artists like Sam Francis, in the 1990s ⁽⁴⁾. However, the fascination with melancholy—which has deeper roots in European art, literature and philosophy from Aristotle to the present—is seldom mentioned in American art discourse, even though, it is deeply inter-connected with the sublime.

Melancholy dominated medical-philosophic debates in medieval times—when scholars joined artists to form "melancholy clubs." Robert Burton's *Analogy of Melancholy* (1621) was the first systematic research on the complexity of this emotion from a clinical perspective. In 2005, Jean Clair curated the ground-breaking traveling exhibition, *Melancholy: Genius and Madness in The West*. This all encompassing exhibition, which included 300 works—from Albrecht Dürer to Anselm Kiefer—was highly successful, drawing 300,000 people at the Grand Palais in Paris, before going to Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie where it drew 100,000 visitors in just the first five weeks. Clair described the rationale for the exhibition as an investigation of the question: "why do all the extraordinary men in philosophy, politics, literature and the arts turn out to be melancholics?" It is a question which unfolds like an epic drama in which melancholy is the connective artery in major art from the antiquity to the present—moving from disposition, to iconography, to perspective, to subtle depths in abstraction.

Lisa Adams' recent melancholic paintings do not represent melancholy in obvious themes and iconography, they *exhale* it through enigmas—created by combining different emotions and different painting styles of abstraction and semi-representation. Malevich, in his Suprematist teaching, insisted that the object is not the main element of art—rather, a painting has greater significance when it is dominated by feeling. Yet feeling is seldom discussed in contemporary art discourse even though it would be impossible—even unthinkable—to discuss music or film without analyzing the deep feelings they arouse.

Adams' forlorn landscapes, condense voluminous feeling through imaginative metaphors based on real things she has seen which, paradoxically, convey both hopelessness and hopefulness—the contradictory feelings that create melancholy. In downtown Los Angeles where Adams lives—and under-developed foreign countries she has visited—she discovers “things worth looking at amidst tragedy and pollution.” As Adams explains, “I like distressed, forgotten places and then see amidst the bereft scenario a field of flowers.” It is these “moments of joy” that spark her imagination and allow Adams to “reconstruct the world in my own terms.” This imaginative transformation of actual things and places she has seen in the real world, allows Adams to visualize melancholy, rather like Giorgio de Chirico—to make incomprehensible feelings, tangible.

In the international Journal *Contemporary Aesthetics* in 2003, philosopher Emily Brady and Arto Haapala take their impetus from the renewed interest in Kantian aesthetic philosophy, argued that the dual nature of melancholy makes it an “aesthetic emotion” like the sublime—with complex negative and positive elements that involve deeper reflection than a simple emotion. (5)

Unlike sensationalism and sentimentality which dominate American culture—and have made their way into American art and art discourse—Adams' work has a more European contemplative, intellectual sophistication. Sensationalism and sentimentality are not really emotions in themselves—but, instead, ways of presenting faked emotions which are simplistic, inauthentic and immature. They are favorites for advertisers—and many pop artists—because they are manipulative and do not offer a place for viewers to reflect for themselves. Adams' work, on the other hand, is demanding and requires thoughtful engagement because she allows space for the viewer to make their own sense of her imaginary worlds. She recognizes that an antidote to the numbing effects of the mass media spectacle, lies in revitalizing the experience of imaginatively transforming the fleeting moments of discovering things we love in daily realities—which make melancholy bearable. These surprising discoveries from real life take center stage in her melancholic landscapes and become catalysts for flights of the imagination—a form of emotional and aesthetic survival which renders an otherwise unbearable world, bearable.

Imaginative reflection is a state of mind associated with *solitude*—which is intimately connected to melancholy. Adams is uncompromising in her pursuit of the solitude necessary for making authentic paintings. By turning away from distractions she carves out a personal space where her own imagination can flow without interruption. It is this commitment to the solitary life of an artist that informs her paintings and imbues them with an unmistakable emotional force. This compelling quality pulls in the viewer's attention, almost like cinematography—making her melancholic paintings a space in which the viewer can to escape into their own dream-like state of reflection. Interestingly, European film makers like Werner Herzog and Andrei Tarkovsky are the strongest influence on Adams' approach to painting and led to her rejection of the usual imposed didactic. Just as these filmmakers refused to impose a dominant narrative and used the visual poetry of cinematic images to allow the viewer freedom to discover their own meanings, Adams' paintings have an indefinability which allows the viewer to use their own imagination.



Portentous Rhapsody 2013 oil on panel 40 x 48 inches

Drowning Out All Birdsong began as an abstract painting and as such, Adams insists, could be viewed “more as an object than a picture.” Into this abstract host, she introduces fireworks, to create an unnatural atmosphere. In sharp contrast to this melancholic background she further introduces a representational object—based on a handmade bird feeder near her window. By perching the bird feeder on a pole she makes it appear bigger and imbues the humble object with a monumental quality. The pole becomes a further abstract element which segues into the mysterious ambient abstract background. The further addition of eucalyptus becomes a signifier of hope that beautifies her imaginary world—according to the dual nature of melancholy which, like the sublime, provides a feeling of elevation. Reflection is a state of mind, which provides a sense of control over a range of uncontrollable contradictory feelings, and is hence what Brady calls an “aesthetic emotion” analogous to the sublime.

In *Portentous Rhapsody*, the representational element is based on a photograph Adams discovered on the internet of a humble, crudely constructed hotel in Kyrgyzstan. Again, the real component is a catalyst for re-constructing her own more beautiful imaginary world into which she can bring things that are more known to her and comforting—like the yellow flowers. Within this desolate landscape of polluted red water and grey smoke she reconstructs a melancholic paradise, in which something captivating can be discovered—which Adams insists “feels more real” to her “than the real world.” Her courage to turn to these impoverished situations for inspiration—further informed by her extensive travel—is based in her conviction that humans use their imagination more “when they have limited means.”

Adams pushes herself to expand her imaginative limits by confronting uncomfortable scenes of poverty in downtown Los Angeles and elsewhere, where she is forced to search for unexpected moments of beauty in uncomfortable situations—which would otherwise be intolerable. This commitment situates Adams in the confraternity of melancholic artists in the history of melancholic art from Albrecht Dürer to Anselm Kiefer—who even used the melancholic polyhedron in Dürer’s famous engraving, *Melencolia I* (1514) on the right wing of a large fighter plane made of lead (1989) alluding to a mode of melancholic vision bombing civilization.

Since the advent of modern abstract painting we no longer contemplate paintings for the sake of what they portray—but for the pleasure of losing ourselves inside them. Yet, even in the 20th and 21st century a melancholic vision (which originated in antiquity and dominated medieval times and the Renaissance) re-appears in artistic motifs—in paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Edward Hopper and Salvador Dali—in the secret yearnings of abstract painters who penetrate the inner core of melancholy—Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt—and in the intellectualism of the “new melancholics”—Sigmar Polke and Jörg Immendorff.

For Adams the *raison d’être* to paint is a way to enter a solitary space in which she must work harder to create her own moments of joy within melancholy. This emotionally divorces her from the all-pervasive American media fantasy of commodified happiness and the social requirement for peppy optimism and cheerfulness at all times. Such courageous individualism makes her work demanding—a quality which is admired by other serious Los Angeles artists—but not easily contextualized as part of any obvious Los Angeles art movement.

In two paintings—*The Magic Hand* and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control (EM)*—Adams uses silhouettes for the first time, as stand-ins for objects, creating three generations of representation: the textured abstraction, the semi-representational image and the black silhouette. In this way she deliberately baffles the viewer with different ways of entering the paintings. Adams is



The Magic Hand 2013 oil on canvas over panel 24 x 20 inches

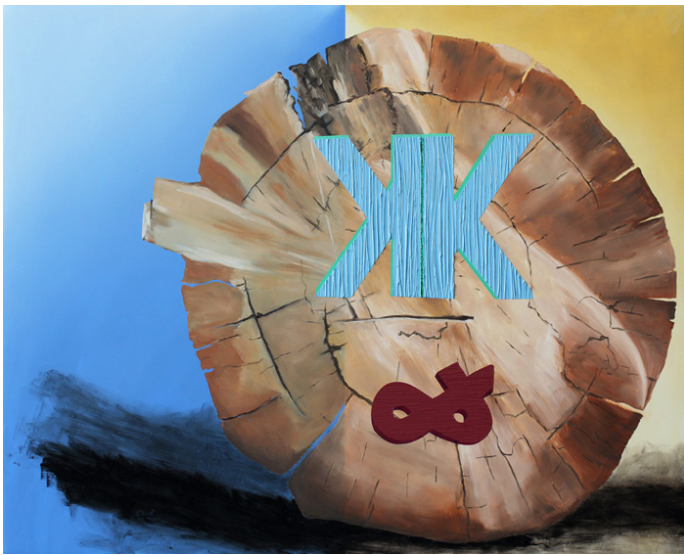


Fast, Cheap and Out of Control (EM) 2013 oil and spray paint on canvas over panel 48 x 40 inches

more interested in enticing the viewer with visual dynamics than didactics—which she finds suffocating. Her considerable artistic skill—honed through two decades as an abstract painter until 1996, when she began to introduce semi-representational images from an abstract point of view—have developed in more complex ways in this new series.

In *The Magic Hand*, exquisitely handmade props used in magic acts, which Adams loved as artifacts, are rendered as representations seen in flat silhouette. Seen in this way, the object has two possibilities—but it is the artist's hand which performs the magic and the viewer is challenged to make sense of it through the interconnections.

Similarly, in *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control (EM)*, Adams transforms the face of a cuckoo clock into another black silhouette which becomes an emblem for a clock. The steel weights of the clock are related to her childhood memory of a cuckoo clock she watched, waiting for the weights to drop. The abstract background is based on an abandoned, defiled, boarded-up room in East Los Angeles, into which she projected the cuckoo clock. The orange spray paint provides a more peasant kind of embellishment, while the clock silhouette resembles the crest on a shield—suggested that like a warrior, Adams is transforming an abandoned place with a more aesthetic intervention. The references to time in this painting suggest the urgency of time running out—but are also personal references to where she was in her childhood and where she is now imaginatively transforming these memories.



The Land of Forgotten Dreams 2013 oil on canvas over panel 20 x 24 inches



The Weeping Tree 2013 oil on canvas over panel 24 x 20 inches

The Land of Forgotten Dreams, is another painting marking time. The wood was found in the Angeles National Forest which attracted her because a tree's rings are nature's way of recording time. In her characteristic way, Adams manipulates paint in several different styles of painting—in the host abstract background, semi-representational tree trunk and meticulous double-K letter; taken from the Cyrillic alphabet. This double-K, is the first letter in the Russian word for "woman" and appears as a signifier on ladies restrooms. Whereas the letters are taped off then textured, the splash of black is applied with a rag—and the upturned configuration of "&" is a hanger, left for the viewer to interpret.

The Weeping Tree is based on another discovery in the Angeles National Forest, where Adams photographed a tree, burned in a forest fire, that was peppered from top to bottom with thousands of woodpecker holes. The painting is allegorical, transforming the photographed detail of the tree by squeezing blue paint from a paint bottle into the holes so that it dripped like tears. The tree, which was left for dead, is imbued with a beautiful spirit—like a magical tree in one of Hans Christian Anderson's melancholic fairy tales. This is a very physical painting—meticulously crafted with different painting techniques in a heartfelt way—which is intensely physically engaging. The primatura underpainting has an "Old Masters" resonance, that creates a magenta glow resembling skin.

This new series of paintings, is an extension of her solo exhibition, *Second Life* (at CBI Gallery in April - May, 2013) which marked a major transition in Adams' work—to a more melancholic internal vision, after a life-changing period of lost eye sight from a torn retina. These new paintings show Adams in her full maturity: as an artist who explores the aesthetic dimension of melancholy through the dualities created by combining different painting techniques—abstraction and semi-representation—with different emotions—hopefulness amidst hopelessness—in a deeply moving way.

References

1. Brady, Emily and Haapala, Arto. (2003). Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 1
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3. Lyotard, Jean-Francois. (1982). Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime. *Artforum* 20:8
4. Lyotard, Jean-Francois. (2010). *Sam Francis: Lessons in Darkness*. Leuven University Press.
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Biography

Lita Barrie is a Los Angeles based art critic and theorist with post-graduate degrees in aesthetic philosophy. She is a featured writer and *Art Muse* blogger, for *Artweek.la* and has been made an LA correspondent for *Artforum*. In the 1990s she was the LA correspondent for *Artspace*, a contributing editor for *Artweek* and contributed to *Art Issues*, *Visions* and *Vernacular*. She is from New Zealand where she was the weekly art columnist for *The National Business Review* in the late 1980s and a regular contributor to *The Listener*, *Art New Zealand*, *Antic*, *AGMANZ*, *Sites* and *Landfall*. She is the author of numerous museum and art gallery artist catalogue essays. In New Zealand she was awarded three Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council awards and a Harkness award.

Note:

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