

Darkness Visible

'Interview with the Vampyre'

Dr Kierian Cashell in conversation with Breda Lynch.

1. Could you tell me a little about the inspiration for grouping these artists together?

Xmas 2006, Ann and I expressed an interest in putting together an exhibition with a strong drawing focus. Also at that time we both had our own research concerns that we were investigating in our individual art practice, for Ann, ornament and beauty, for me, the Gothic. After much discussion this selection of artists was finalized and a working title 'Filigree and Shadow' was decided upon, 'Darkness Visible' came later. These artists explored the line in a particular way and drew upon motifs or themes, which have been deemed Gothic.

2. Was there an intertextual allusion to William Styron's novel in the aesthetic of the show?

No allusion to William Styron's novel/memoir. The reference to 'Darkness Visible' is actually from an earlier source – Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. He uses it to describe the panorama of Hell that faces Satan upon his fall. It's usage in the poem is as an oxymoron: 'No light, but rather Darkness Visible'.

3. The Gothic subculture in its perverse presence has shifted from margins to centre becoming, as you have claimed, a cultural Zeitgeist – expand.

Since the early 00's there has been a Gothic revival going on, which also seems to have come into existence since 9/11 and the chaos created by that event there after. I think the Gothic has been seen in the past to occupy the subculture or non mainstream but I think it is fair to say that it has become more main stream – to the centre.

In Ann B. Tracy's instructive appendix in 'The English Gothic', 1790 – 1830 she indexes the various motifs that have defined the Gothic, such as abduction, blood, cave, dreams (prophetic and erotic), masking, twins, weddings – forced, aborted, clandestine, etc.. mad scientist, demonic child. One would also list monsters, incest, suicide, haunting, death – as represented by skulls, the demise of the patriarchal family etc. Again and again these and other related motifs reoccur in contemporary art and culture.

Edgar Allen Poe explored and further defined Gothic themes in his literary work *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which charts the demise of the family, similar themes, are echoed in Paul McCartney's kinetic sculpture of a father teaching his son to copulate with a goat. Just when fiction seemed bizarre we are confronted with headline news in the media of the Fritzl case in Germany. Where Mr Fritzl resides in a small town with his wife and family and his 'other' family in a purpose made dungeon.

Another theme associated with the Gothic is abduction. This theme comes up again and again in film's such as the very sinister 'The Vanishing' and are explored in Willie Doherty's video works which deal with the 'disappeared', people who went missing during the troubles in Northern Ireland, again a criss crossing between fact

and fiction. Recently the Irish media have been reinvestigating the Jo Jo Dollard, Fiona Pender and other 'missing' women in the Leinster area story. The 'missing' woman, her whereabouts unknown, disappeared into the unknown.

4. Is it a style particularly open to hybridisation?

It is also a style open to hybridisation, it is no longer simply Gothic but (according to Ann Williams – 'Art of Darkness') Romantic Gothic, Victorian Gothic, Oriental Gothic, Irish Gothic, American Gothic, Southern Gothic, Female Gothic, Hollywood Gothic, even Christmas Gothic!

It is also a flexible form that is applied across many areas of popular culture. Mark Edmondson in his book 'Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism and the Culture of the Gothic' 1997, talks about evidence of the Gothic in afternoon talk shows such as Oprah where her guests are in Gothic terms 'haunted', that is where they are victims of oppression or addicted to drugs, sex, shopping, abuse etc.. And he makes reference to the Gothic hero-villain that is O.J. Simpson and how the fixated TV viewers of the trial were 'transfixed by a Gothic slasher production.'

5. How do you consider the Gothic to operate in visual culture?

The most recent example of the Gothic operating in visual culture – contemporary art was the exhibition shown in The White Cube – Hoxton Square, London, titled 'I'll Dig the Tunnel, You Hide the Soil', which was a sort of homage/tribute to Edgar Allen Poe. The exhibition showed some of the typical prophets of doom that we have come to know in the Y.B.A. movement over the years i.e. Damien Hirst, The Chapman Brothers, Abigail Lane, Angus Fairhurst (who had just committed suicide before the opening of the exhibition) and others.

Interestingly the YBA movement would be a much poorer in content was it not for the use of Gothic themes and motifs. The exhibition 'I'll Dig the Tunnel, You Hide the Soil', continued in the basement of Shoreditch Town Hall where the claustrophobic, cavern type atmosphere became a type of theatrical set resembling a Hammer House Horror, which of course were famous for parodying the Gothic.

6. How is the Gothic understood in the context of Darkness Visible?

In the context of 'Darkness Visible', you have again some of the reoccurring motifs of the Gothic. The skeleton/skull makes an appearance in both the work of George Bolster and Katie Street. Bolster punctuates his image of the skeleton with humour, casting death with a skateboard in hand and the text, more commonly known from advertising slogans – 'Christ is for life not just for Xmas'. Street detailed drawings of plants, reminiscent of botanical drawings, with skulls protruding from the petals. They seem to make reference to a type of freakish beauty.

Also Streets 3d renderings of hands coming out of the wall of the gallery are reminiscent of the disembodied hand or limb that we associate with horror films such as 'Flesh for Frankenstein' or the more main stream 'The Adams Family'.

Also the 'Bridehead Drawings', which make reference to Daphne Du Maurier's 'Rebecca', the story of a haunted relationship.

Whereas all of the artists featured in 'Darkness Visible' have different concerns in their day to day practice, here for this show work has been selected for their use of

line in both 2D and 3D forms and for recurrent motifs that I would associate with the Gothic.

You had earlier inquired ‘the theme of darkness, defined as something, indeed not quite visible is relevant here, a darkness that is all the more potent because repressed by the rigorous form?’ – These issues of hidden motifs and mysterious designs, latent codes behind the innocent, value – neutral manifest design brings us to the theme of the gothic’.

I would certainly see that reading as being pertinent to the work of Andy Harper and his densely rendered globe and the dark drawings of Alice Maher also my own ‘Bridehead’ drawings. No matter how one has been intensely absorbed in the strict execution of the work there still surfaces a darkness, something hidden.

7. Is it related more to the Goth style, for instance, than the tradition of the Gothic in popular literature and film?

I would say both as some works could be said to make reference to the tradition of the Gothic in popular literature and film as well as Goth style. Certainly Katie Street’s winged skull drawings would remind any visitor to the space of heavy/black metal or Goth insignia.

8. Guerrero-Straha associates the mood of melancholy with the identifiably Gothic – would you agree?

I would certainly agree, when one looks at the Victorians they had a particular relationship with melancholia and mourning what with Victoria spending so many years in mourning and out of the public eye. The colours of mourning for the Victorians were black, grey and mauve, colours subsequently associated with contemporary Goth dressing.

The many artists of the Victorian period also favoured the theme of the drowning women, suicidal women or the fallen woman as an outcast heading to an early grave. Also when you consider the description given to vampires in the many novels given over to them, references are made to their paleness, their languid demeanour. Or references to a melancholic, sickly, deathly or addiction addled posture.

Certainly the vampire Carmilla in Sheridan le Fanu’s short novel characterizes her as beautiful but pale, sickly, languid and she appears to suck in the energy around her. So melancholy is a mood I would associate with the Gothic however I’d like to think that this show lifts the mood and gives a certain pleasure in understanding the Gothic. After all Goth is the new black!