KATE BERGIN
Tabletop Variations
30 May – 15 June 2019
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The virtuosic paintings of artist Kate Bergin take the viewer on a playful expedition through the absurd and the profound. Strange gatherings of animals and objects are configured in impossible scenarios on the brink of collapse atop tables draped with white cloth, alluding to the conventions of seventeenth century Dutch and Flemish still life painting. Yet Bergin’s compositions are far from ‘still’. They pulsate with movement as animals prepare to leap from the canvas and birds take flight, and yet these moments are frozen in time like mimetic dioramas. It is in this dialogue between stasis and motion, stability and precariousness, that the artist seeks to find, in her own words, ‘balance and imbalance, contemplation within the chaotic and playfulness with a touch of menace – just like any good fairy-tale.’

‘Tabletop Variations’ continues Bergin’s focus on the symbolic currency of the ‘un-still life’. The title of the exhibition alludes to Bach’s *The Goldberg Variations* – a frequent accompaniment in the artist’s studio. ‘The series of diverse melodies unified by a single bass line and chordal structure reflects my own approach to composition’, explains Bergin. ‘These tabletop variations transpose the musical form onto the visual plane, the tabletop providing the ‘bass line’ and the birds, animals and various objects becoming the ‘variations’.

The paintings visualise the artist’s passionate fascination with animals of all kinds. Displaced from their usual habitats, various species from different continents coexist peacefully in each tabletop tableau; a poignant image of acceptance and harmony in a world pivoted on segregation. Telephones, teaspoons and spectacles function as visual metonyms for ‘civilised’ society, perhaps signalling the frontier that humans have constructed to elevate ourselves above the animal kingdom. Bergin’s animals chisel a chink in this armature of civilisation, evoking the wilderness that dwells beneath. There is the sense of the absurd à la *Alice in Wonderland* as regal flamingos stand proud, seagulls dance around lions, koalas cling to giraffes and teaspoons dangle from paws and plumage. In many of the works, the black film noir telephone dial reads ‘In case of emergency dial 170’, acting as a reminder that not all is as it appears. Bergin tacitly tells us that this could be a cautionary tale, one that reveals the proximity of danger to desire, savagery to civilisation.

While the artist’s earlier works were painted from museological taxidermy, this series was created by observing creatures from life, as Bergin honed her understanding of their movements and identities. During a recent trip to Singapore, she spent days in front of a flamboyance of Caribbean flamingos before making a few trips to the
Maleny Aviary in the Noosa Hinterland to observe different species of birds. In *Gossip*, a flamingo converses with a red kangaroo, conflating the native and the exotic in a way that situates context as a compass of the familiar and strange. Some of the paintings, such as *The Shimmering Space*, incorporate images of the sky from Bergin’s Hinterland backyard, where she recently located. The brighter light of this sweeping hilltop setting has inspired the artist to create new spaces that speak of a living world beyond the domestic tabletop; a new ‘variation’.

Bergin builds each painting around a central character, the tabletop acting as a stage upon which she moves creatures around to create a believable space with convincing relationships. Working from her own photographs as well as from life, she ensures that each animal retains its own identity without becoming too anthropomorphised. The motif of the peeled apple – often used in early still lifes as a sign of artistic virtuosity – signifies Bergin’s drive to challenge herself as the apple must be painted in one sitting before it begins to decay. It can also be read as a classic memento mori – a reminder that all things, living and dead, decompose.

Together, the works in ‘Tabletop Variations’ represent a voyage through art history. In *Visiting the Palace of Amsterdam*, Bergin incorporates a painting by seventeenth century Dutch animalier Melchior d’Hondecoeter whilst also referencing the *Bird Concert* paintings of Frans Snyders from the same period. Here she self-reflexively employs metapainting (a painting within a painting) as a mode of disrupting borders between outside and inside, reality and fiction, still life and landscape. In their quest for equilibrium, many of the works draw from the shimmering harmony of Giorgio Morandi’s modernist still lifes. Bergin buttresses this balance with the concept of the ‘un-still life’ inspired by the works of John Brack, as well as the imbalance and fragility of the Vanitas. ‘This is the joy of art history and our connection to it as painters today,’ reflects Bergin, ‘the circles within circles, the threads that lead you in and out and around, dizzying in all its contrary symbolism.’ She continues:

I like to think that my paintings are finding their way through this maze. This has been a journey, a hunt for meaning, through the squawking and rummaging and all the distraction of our daily existence. Revelling in the precarious and the unexpected, I hope the viewer finds these paintings quivering with movement and life – in all its variations.

Elli Walsh
1. *Tall tales*
   oil on canvas
   206 x 188 cm (framed)
   $72,000
2. *Gossip*

oil on canvas

153 x 133 cm (framed)

$54,000
3. *The shimmering space*

oil on canvas

153 x 223 cm (framed)

$70,000
4. Visiting the Palace of Amsterdam (featuring Melchior de Hondecoeter’s Palace of Amsterdam with Exotic Birds, c. 1660)

oil on canvas

173 x 203 cm (framed)

$78,000
5. *The playroom*

oil on canvas

123 x 143 cm (framed)

$45,000
6. *The curlew’s call*

Oil on canvas

93 x 83 cm (framed)

$22,000
7. The interlopers
oil on canvas
138 x 138 cm (framed)
$48,000
8. *Balancing act*
Oil on canvas
153 x 158 cm (framed)
$58,000
9. Leap of faith
oil on canvas
173 x 263 cm (framed)
$85,000
10. *The toucan’s mobile phone*

oil on canvas

73 x 53 cm (framed)

$16,000
11. *Patience and temptation*

Oil on canvas

93 x 83 cm (framed)

$22,000
12. *The trouble with tigers and spoons*

*oil on canvas*

74 x 54 cm (framed)

$16,000
13. *Into the wild*

oil on canvas

74 x 54 cm (framed)

$16,000
14. *Arabesque*

oil on canvas

153 x 133 cm (framed)

$54,000
15. *Jitterbug*

oil on canvas

54 x 44 cm (framed)

$12,000
16. *Moon River*

oil on canvas

33.5 x 28 cm (framed)

$6,500
17. A complicated arrangement
oil on canvas
93 x 83 cm (framed)
$22,000
18. *Time keepers and temptation seekers*

oil on canvas

73 x 33 cm (framed)

$14,000
19. The unlikely spoon collector
oil on canvas
33 x 43 cm (framed)
$8,500
20. *Shared interests*

Oil on canvas

43 x 33 cm (framed)

$8,500
CV

Born 1968, Melbourne, Australia

EDUCATION

1992   Victorian College of the Arts (BA painting)
1991   VCA Art History Study Tour – Europe

AWARDS, GRANTS & RESIDENCIES

2013   The Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize, SA Museum, Finalist
          Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Finalist
2012   Gold Award, Rockhampton Art Gallery, QLD, Finalist
          R&M McGivern, Maroondah Art Gallery, QLD, Finalist
2011   Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Finalist
          Arthur Guy Memorial Art Prize, Bendigo Art Gallery, VIC, Winner (People’s Choice)
2010   Albany Art Prize, Vancouver Arts Centre, WA, Winner
          Calleen Art Award, Cowra Regional Gallery, NSW, Finalist
2009   Sunshine Coast Art Prize, Caloundra Art Gallery, QLD, Winner (People’s Choice)
          Arthur Guy Memorial Art Prize, Bendigo Art Gallery, VIC, Finalist
          The Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize, SA Museum, Highly Commended
          Eutick Memorial Still Life Award, Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery, NSW, Finalist
2004   Mt Buller Art Prize, VIC, Finalist
          Corangamarah Art Prize, VIC, First Prize
          Flannagan Art Prize, Ballarat, VIC
2002   Fleurieu Peninsula Biennale, Art of Food Award, First Prize
          Shortlisted for Nillumbik Residency Program, VIC

2001   Australian Artist Magazine Competition, First Prize
1997   Australia Council Overseas Studio Residency, Besozzo, Italy
          Portia Geach Memorial Award, S.H. Erwin Gallery, NSW, Finalist
1995   The Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Finalist
          Keith & Elizabeth Murdoch Travelling Scholarship, VCA Gallery, VIC, 2nd Prize
          Victorian Tapestry Workshop Design for Melbourne Town Hall, VIC, 2nd Prize
1993   Alice Prize, Alice Springs, NT, Finalist
1992   Alice Prize, Alice Springs, NT, Finalist
          Mid Year Award, Victorian College of the Arts, VIC
1991   Theodor Urbach Award, Victorian College of the Arts, VIC
          Regional Arts Development Fund Project Grant, Arts Queensland, Solo Exhibitions

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2017   ‘Tabletop Variations’, Mossgreen Gallery, Australia
2016   ‘Wild Life’, Mossgreen Gallery, Australia
2015   ‘The Company of Unlikely Travellers’, Sydney Contemporary, NSW
2014   ‘Unstill Lives’, Mossgreen Gallery, Australia
2013   ‘Tabletop Performances & Other Balancing Acts’, Mossgreen Gallery, Australia
2012   ‘Strange Relations’, Melbourne Art Fair, VIC
2011   ‘Wild Things’, Mossgreen Gallery, Australia
2010   ‘The Spoon Collectors’, Hill Smith Gallery, SA
          ‘Tabletop Variations’, Mossgreen Gallery, Australia
2009   ‘Hunting & Collecting’, fortyfivedownstairs, VIC
2007   ‘The Collector’, Mahoney’s Galleries, VIC
2001 ‘Clockwise’, Australian Galleries, VIC
1999 ‘The Pursuit of Happiness’, Cairns Regional Gallery, QLD
1996 ‘Still Life in Painting’, Gallery 101, VIC
1995 ‘Square Paintings’, Crawford Gallery, NSW
1994 ‘Recent Paintings’, Crawford Gallery, NSW
1993 ‘Recent Paintings’, Crawford Gallery, NSW

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2017 ‘130 Years of Collecting’, Bendigo Art Gallery, VIC
2015 ‘SNAP’, Rockhampton Art Gallery, QLD
2014 ‘ART in Embassies’, United States Embassy, ACT
2013 ‘Animal Kingdom’, Gippsland Art Gallery, VIC
2012 ‘The Gold Award’, Rockhampton Art Gallery, QLD
2006 ‘Linden Postcard Show’, St Kilda, VIC
2002 ‘Art in Australia’, Works From the Collection, VCA Gallery, VIC
2000 ‘Seventh Australian Contemporary Art Fair’, Australian Galleries, VIC
1999 ‘Fine Painting & Sculpture’, Australian Galleries, VIC
1998 ‘Sixth Australian Contemporary Art Fair’, Gallery 101, VIC
‘End to End – Six Far North Queensland Artists’, Gallery 101, VIC
1997 ‘Fields of Vision’, Doggett Street Studios, QLD
‘Gals Work, Recent Acquisitions by Female Artists’, St Kilda Town Hall, VIC
1996 ‘Artists of North Queensland’, Cairns Regional Gallery, QLD
‘Fifth Australian Contemporary Art Fair’, Crawford Gallery, VIC
1994 ‘Gallery Artists’, Crawford Gallery, NSW
1994 ‘Fourth Australian Contemporary Art Fair’, Crawford Gallery, VIC
1991 ‘Images of Women’, Gryphon Gallery, University of Melbourne, VIC

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Artbank, NSW
Art Gallery of New South Wales, gifted by Margaret Olley AC, NSW
Bendigo Art Gallery, VIC
Brisbane City Hall, QLD
City of Albany, WA
City of Port Phillip, VIC
Colac Area Health, VIC
Department of Education, QLD
Downlands College, QLD
Fleurieu Peninsula Biennale, SA
Genazzano FCJ College, VIC
Hotel Sofitel, VIC
Lowensteins Arts Management, NSW
Mercure Harbourside, NSW
Victorian College of the Arts, VIC