

## PARALLEL Catalogue Essay

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The everyday world is not what it seems

*Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.*

Paul Klee

I am nineteen and I'm in a tent, camped on a remote beach on the coast of New South Wales. It's night and I'm lying awake because I can't sleep. All of a sudden I'm completely paralysed, unable to breathe or move a single part of my body. There is a huge, hairy, beast-like form on my chest, weighing itself down onto my body with its knees. I can't see its face, which is indistinct in the dark, high part of the tent roof, but the creature is very real. It has tremendous weight and solidity, and yet it is also curiously transparent, like a ghost. I try desperately to call out for help, but the paralysis has taken complete hold. After what seems like minutes, but is probably only seconds, the creature vanishes and I gasp for air and regain control of my body.

The experience I had is depicted with extraordinary similarity in the 1781 painting by Fuseli called *The Nightmare*. It shows a woman collapsed on a bed in a dramatic swoon with an incubus crouching on her chest. While the incubus that appeared on my chest was much larger, with huge thighs and a looming body that was at least twice the size of my own, I recognized its form immediately when I first saw the painting. The other difference is that I was frozen with terror – the woman in Fuseli's painting is limp and languid, suggesting she has been overcome by an almost erotic stupor.

Science explains my experience as the result of a type of paralysis that occurs with REM sleep: the brain is awake but the body is unable to move. Apparently this state can be accompanied by frightening hallucinations, hence the incubus.<sup>i</sup> However, I am unconvinced by the scientific explanation because *I know that what I saw was real*. And so I find myself much more interested in the fact that what happened to me in the tent on the remote beach so many years ago, has been recorded in the folklore of many different cultures with remarkable similarity. For example, in Turkish culture, the creature is referred to as 'karabasan', the dark assailer, who presses on the chest and steals one's breath. In Icelandic folk culture it is called 'Mara', and again refers to an evil spirit that tries to suffocate its victim by sitting on their chest. The Chinese refer to the experience as the body pressured by a ghost; the Hmong as the crushing demon and in Ireland it is known as 'the hag'.<sup>ii</sup> If the creature is supposed to be an hallucination, why do so many cultures describe virtually the same experience?

While my question about the incubus remains unanswered, the experience I had confirmed for me that the world is indeed a much more mysterious place than I had ever imagined. Science may offer logical explanations for bizarre or unusual experiences, but

those explanations may not necessarily fit easily with the actuality of the subjective experience for the individual concerned. The incubus has, thankfully, never revisited me, but it has made me consider the world and my experience of it with a very open mind - I am open to the possibility of other worlds and other states of being that may well exist in parallel to the one that I normally experience.

The idea for this exhibition, *Parallel*, was born from the nagging remains of my strange visitation. I wanted to bring together a range of works that suggest an engagement with something that may exist beyond the everyday, objective, rational experience of life. I selected ten artists whose work does not offer a typical, postmodern critique of contemporary culture, but rather, reflects a desire to make manifest aspects of the unknown, the unreachable and the unseen. The artists selected for *Parallel* use video, sound, photography, sculpture and installation to convey ideas that encompass near death experiences, contact with UFOs, lost memories and sounds, untold histories, encounters with ghosts, and symbolic references to the power of myth and time.

Two of the artists evoke the idea of parallel worlds by creating silent spaces for contemplative thinking that are linked to existing religious or mythological beliefs or evidence gathered from spiritual journeying.

Lorraine Jenyns has created an elaborate, jewel-like altar to the end of time. Dominated by an intense blue, which is associated with spiritual awakening, it is constructed from collected artefacts and Jenyns own mixed media works. This striking installation immediately evokes the experience of worship before an altar in a gothic cathedral. But rather than being underpinned by the Christian religion, it references a mythical solar and galactic alignment that culminates in the opening of a cosmic portal will supposedly occur in 2012. Standing before Jenyns's altar offers the potential of casting aside our everyday experience of reality. Here, we are presented with the possibility of transcending the bounds of time.

Anne Ooms also creates spaces for contemplation, influenced by her pilgrimages to significant sites around the world, including Scotland, the Middle East and Sri Lanka. Her work for *Parallel* offers a cosy arrangement of a chair, a side table, a lamp and a book, inviting viewers to settle down and immerse themselves in the act of reading. The book, *A Compendium of Ilks*, features weird and wonderful images of unknown botanical specimens – or could they be creatures? - accompanied by text that has a range of magical and mythical associations. Ooms installation brings to mind the solitary but rapturous experience of reading as a child – the seemingly endless moments of gazing at a single image, waiting for something unexpected to emerge from the page.

Other artists in *Parallel* attempt to capture and make manifest sounds, voices, and imagery that have been lost in the deep recesses of space, history or memory.

Matt Warren creates hypnotic sound and video installations that often reference popular images and ideas about the supernatural. He makes a saucer spin endlessly on its rim, or captures angel-like patterns of dancing light, inviting the viewer to question rational

belief systems about the laws that govern the physical world. For *Parallel*, he has created *Portal Lux Aeterna (after Ligeti)*, a work inspired by Gyorgy Ligeti's composition for unaccompanied voice *Lux Aeterna* (Eternal Light) and Guglielmo Marconi's proposition that all the sounds that have ever been made in the world still exist - we just can't hear them any more because they have faded beyond our normal hearing range. Warren has attempted to recapture some of these lost sounds and present them back to us. Accompanied by a projection of mysterious spots of light that hover in a dark void, we seem to be witnessing the souls of the faded sounds themselves.

Alyssa Simone, whose practice examines experiences that don't readily sit within a Western cultural framework and a belief system based on Empirical science, uses sound and image to recreate unexplained occurrences. For *Parallel*, she has made talking pictures that suggest the possibility of encounters with an afterlife. As we approach her photographs of empty rooms – all sites within Port Arthur where unexplained phenomena have occurred - we are drawn closer by the whispers of distant voices that emanate from the images themselves. But these are not the voices of invented ghosts; rather, Simone has recorded the experiences of those who have had encounters within the depicted rooms.

The desire to communicate with 'the other side' is suggested in Eugenia Raskopoulos' series of untitled photographs. Raskopoulos plays with words and light, creating a language that seems to offer physical evidence of contact with a parallel universe. Her six beautiful Os emerge from a deep, black, velvety space, appearing to spell out a word, a sound, a fragment of thought that can't quite be translated into familiar language. The images seem alive, vibrating with energy from the other side.

Ruth Frost's work is often autobiographical, motivated by a desire to regain her lost personal history. Her video installations attempt to capture lost memories and fragments of the past. In one of her earlier works, we stare into a magic pot where images appear and disappear on the surface of a milky liquid, offering a glimpse into another world. In the work for this exhibition, titled *Bell jar*, we witness a tiny girl in a floral dress twirling endlessly inside her Victorian glass prison, accompanied by the haunting sound of twittering birds. The girl is so small we can't make out her face, and her transparency suggests that she might vanish altogether into the greenery of the garden behind her.

Julie Gough is on a quest to make contact with her Aboriginal heritage through the obsessive collection and manipulation of found objects and natural materials. She makes huge necklaces that evoke a primordial relationship with the past, or paddles on rafts made from cuttlefish, driftwood and rope, trying to navigate back to a place in history she herself acknowledges she can never quite reach. In *The Ranger, version 2*, she creates work based on the life of an elusive Aboriginal woman who lived on King Island in the 1830s and 40s and who collected clothing and other objects from shipwrecks. She was called 'The Ranger' by a sealer who lived on the island and recorded evidence of her furtive movements in his diary. Gough's installation invites us to imagine the lives of individuals otherwise ignored by mainstream history – *The Ranger*, sleeping in her bed of

seaweed and fur, and the sealer, sitting at his desk, writing about the mysterious, solitary Aboriginal woman.

The final group of artists in the show juxtapose opposites to question what lies beneath the everyday. Like the Surrealists, they create work that sits on the edge of the known.

Jordan Baseman combines the objective and subjective to create seemingly simple, yet deeply moving videos that invite us to contemplate the big questions - life, death, immortality. He juxtaposes the personal narratives of everyday people with scientific or found images that suggest the presence of unseen energies and forces. In *More than Religion*, a woman relates her experiences of looking towards the night sky for evidence of extra terrestrials. She tells us that she knows that there is something else out there, something she can't quite put her finger on – and it exists beyond religion. In the extraordinarily moving *1+1=1*, we hear a man relate the story of his near death experience after a heart and lung transplant and the impact this has had on him psychologically and physically. The text is accompanied by haunting images of body scans that make manifest the tunnel of light he never saw when he was technically dead. The third work by Baseman recounts the story of a woman who was in a coma for five weeks and could only remember two things when she regained consciousness – the smell of perfume and dancing alone in a disco. All three works record *real* experiences narrated by *real* people, whose lives have been marked by encounters with the extraordinary.

The bizarre digital imagery of Pat Brassington reflects a strange plane of existence inhabited by people and things that seem completely other worldly - a bowler hat emits a spooky red aura, a flash of light illuminates the eye of a being that seems more extraterrestrial than human, and strange pink, almost testicular globules protrude from between a gloved hand. These are images that live on the edge of reality and test our perception of the limits of rationality.

Finally, there is the work of Sally Rees. Her videos that feature herself sleeping, singing, or dancing dressed as a horse, raise questions about the links between identity, consciousness and the subconscious. In *Nap*, we witness Rees as a silent, sleeping double. Her mirrored self lies on bright yellow rug and, apart from the eyes opening and closing, nothing much really happens – the two figures sleep and wake, sleep and wake, falling in and out of consciousness. The work is oddly mesmerizing despite its deceptive simplicity. It implies a divided self – a splitting of subjective experience, where one aspect of the persona exists independently of the other. I watch and wait for a moment when the consciousness of the two selves will coincide and perhaps even recognize each other – the potential meeting of parallel states of being.

All of the art works in *Parallel* offer clues that suggest our everyday lives are underscored by experiences and events that indicate the possibility of other worlds, other modes of being and other ways of thinking. Using a range of media, the artists invite us to contemplate the links between art, myth, the paranormal, the spiritual, the subconscious and the extra-terrestrial.

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<sup>i</sup> Solomonova, Elizaveta 'Sensed presence as a correlate of sleep paralysis distress, social anxiety and waking state social imagery.' *Consciousness and Cognition: An International Journal*. Vol 17 (1), Mar 2008, Introduction

<sup>ii</sup> Hufford D.J. *The terror that comes in the night: an experience-centered study of supernatural assault traditions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982