

NGUNUNGGULA

Retford Park
Southern Highlands
Regional Gallery

Tamara Dean: Venus rising

A figure emerges from a ruby camellia, caresses a hot pink azalea and becomes a scarlet rhododendron. Venus rises in this new body of work by artist Tamara Dean and we are reminded that Venus was long associated with gardens and horticulture before she became the paeon of love and beauty. Made in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales for the inaugural exhibition at the region's first gallery, Ngununggula, Dean's new fleet of large-scale photographs performs the act of placing oneself in nature. Dean's environments flourish with predominantly exotic plants, with nature introduced – wisteria, hydrangea, conifers. Within these largely constructed landscapes, the artist's own alabaster flesh, luminous and sculptural, shapes sensuous arabesques in imitation of classical statuary.

Dean is her own model in this new body of work. Nature, however, remains her muse. She uses a device whereby the subject is granted the virtues and characteristics of nature in a type of reverse anthropomorphism. Rather than attributing human attributes to the non-human, Dean becomes nature. This way of thinking and making, of placing oneself in and as nature, has a history – one with local nuances and contemporary consequences.

Based in Kangaroo Valley, Dean knows too well the call of the 'exotic' garden that has led to the relentless thrum of Sydneysiders to the Southern Highlands for approximately 200 years. Today's pilgrimages are a continuation of the nineteenth-century colonial encounters in which Sydney's gentry would retreat to the Highlands to redesign ancient Gundungurra Country, in a climate that provided respite from Sydney's humidity and heat. These acts of escaping and landscaping were, and arguably still are, hinged less on the idea of putting oneself in nature as an act of immersion and more about controlling nature in order to make it anew. This colonial *mise-en-scène* looks a lot like the antipodean remaking of Thomas Gainsborough's bucolic portrait Mr and Mrs Andrews – sans rifle, with any luck.

In a scene reminiscent of Tim Burton's movie *Edward Scissorhands*, one work features disembodied frenetic gardeners controlling an impressive conifer hedge. *Snapping shears comically contour nature in this act of burlesque photography. Dean insists that she 'makes' rather than 'takes' photographs, and in the true spirit of the burlesque she humours her audience, knowing that comedy is at its best when employed to smooth over discomfort, to mask unease and to mock oneself – after all, it is Dean's own limbs that lurch from the hedge. Dean's photographs speak to our fraught sense of belonging, to the sense of the uncanny that lies deep within the belly of our colonial experience – of being both in and out of place. This double concept was brought into modern thinking by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny'. A century on, Dean watched as her own backyard*

burnt and she and her family were evacuated several times – the familiar became unfamiliar and the home became unhomely.

In other images, Dean returns us (home) to nature. In a large diptych she swings from a eucalypt branch. Water springs from her body as she careers across the night sky. Dean states,

Turning my camera on myself, or putting myself in front of my camera, has been a surprising experience ... So the figure you see moving through the landscape in these works is the woman I would like to see and to be. She who can fly through the air, tumble through the treetops, shoot an arrow, climb trees and clap clouds of thunder. She who is also vulnerable and curious, introverted and gentle.

Dean's desire to be in and of nature chimes with art historical movements – specifically with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who in the middle of the nineteenth century saw a return to nature as a salve for an increasingly industrialised world. Like Dean, they too plunged their subjects, and sometimes themselves, into the woods, wind and water. Dean's audacious acts of self-representation embrace ambivalence and vulnerability. They also resist the sentimental utopianism of the Pre-Raphaelites. They return us to nature but also ask what we have done to it and where do we belong.

Ngununggula means 'belonging' in the Gundungurra language. Dean's body of work was made for Ngununggula. It was made for belonging. Ngununggula is situated on Retford Park, one of the earliest 'country estates' in the Highlands – granted to Edward Riley by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1821, acquired by Samuel Hordern in the 1880s and purchased by James Fairfax AC in 1964 before being gifted in 2016 to the National Trust of Australia. Ngununggula, once a dairy, now a gallery, has been an agent in this act of becoming, belonging and ascending. More than Venus is rising.

Dr Lisa Slade