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23 May 2019 to 23 June 2019



Angela Casey: The Enquiring Light

30 May 2019 | **Melissa Pesa**

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As a literary genre, the Gothic is characterised by ominous settings and macabre environments exploring themes of fear, death and gloom with elements of intimacy and the picturesque; often dictating a particular time and historical period. Central to Tasmania's cultural landscape, and presented in a new art form, the Gothic anchors the work of Launceston-born multi-media artist, Angela Casey, who depicts the melancholic shadow cast by socio-cultural histories and archive trends in witty yet confronting still life compositions; embracing the spiritualism, religion and science of the Victorian era.



Angela Casey, *The Expedition*, 2017, pigment on paper. Courtesy the artist and Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Victoria

Casey's oeuvre, cast over 25 years, is informed by the original 19th-century artefacts housed within Tasmania's public and private collections. Enthralled by the potent displays of historical objects and dioramas at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG) in her youth, she has since explored their hidden histories, shining an enquiring light on their narratives. 'I recall a wondrous menagerie of curiosities, dinosaurs and portrait paintings that would somehow hold the keys to solving the mysteries of my world,' says the artist. 'Gould's birds in a glass case led to my favourite place, a room filled with taxidermy animals, bugs and spiders. My assessment of that space as a young child gathering experiences was undoubtedly abstract at the time, and now also romanticised by my nostalgic reconstructions as an adult. I have returned to that place repeatedly..., with the belief that there are mysteries of the world still there for me to investigate.' By interrogating and transforming their initial states through restaged scenarios with contemporary supplements – such as garbage bags, neon signs, yellow and black barricade tape, silver wine cask bladders, jewelled purses and bedazzled, half-eaten fruit – Casey offers an alternative storyline, re-imagined for modern audiences.

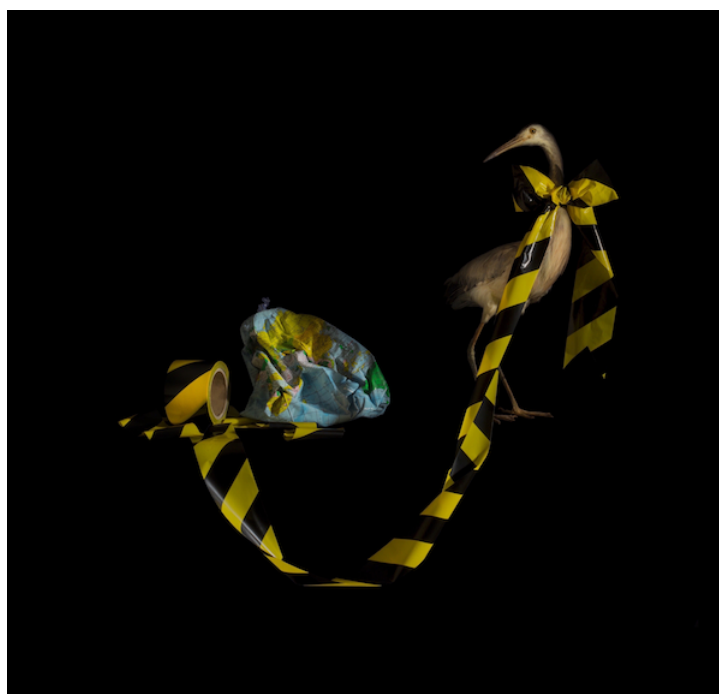
In an exhibition titled 'The Enquiring Light', original 19th-century artefacts, mainly taxidermy native birds and animals housed within the collections of Queen Victoria Museum, Port Arthur, and Launceston Grammar School, are displayed on plinths and within Victorian-era vitrines throughout QVMAG's gallery space at Royal Park; while Casey's modified photographs, taken from 2012 to 2019 hang on the surrounding walls.



Angela Casey, *The Surgeon*, 2015, C-type print, edition of 5 prints. 86 x 63.24cm. Courtesy the artist and Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Victoria

In her works, objects are positioned against a velvety black background, in sharp contrast to their light accentuated form. The vast emptiness allowing the subject to hover; free from restraints or distraction, it demands our complete attention. For Casey, black is 'the colour of silence, providing a quiet envelope for the contemplation of the narrative within a world of noise.' Her play with light and dark mirror the Chiaroscuro techniques of 16th and 17th-century Dutch and Flemish painters, as well as Italian. In her Caravaggesque arrangements, Casey has managed to turn the spotlight on her subjects, allowing them to emerge from the shadows of the past, and give them new life.

In *The Surgeon* (2015), a White Faced Heron uses an antique, wooden stand as his perch. Within his new habitat, we find a white-laced mourning shroud, a symbol of loss and sorrow. A rodent skull extends the concept of death while the inclusion of citrus fruit – an orange, typically depicted in still life paintings – offers hope of resurrection and eternal life. This thought is continued in the reparation of the veil as our protagonist, with needle and thread, mends the gap of despair, however, the fruit has been peeled. 'We can be mended, repaired and medicated, thus having our lives extended, but the ultimate outcome is inevitable, we all will pass. Will we cycle into another life? If not then longevity becomes even more valuable,' says Casey. 'The surgeon as a White Faced Heron, has been preserved apparently permanently, as a signal to human triumph over ultimate fate, however, although the bird's body is immortalised beauty, the spirit has passed on.'



Angela Casey, *Cautionary Tales*, 2017, pigment print on paper. Courtesy the artist and Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Victoria

Other photographs, but not all, focus on that which precedes death: life and lingering misfortunes. We are confronted with a paradox of hedonism in *Hedonism Has Run Out of Credit* (2016), choreographed in the style of Vanitas paintings as a skull rests on a book, string confetti expels from its mouth; illustrative of mortality and the worthlessness of worldly goods and pleasures. The work appropriates the Apple computer's notorious 'Spinning Wheel of Death', signaling an unrecoverable crash; most likely a user error. Faults of desire and temptation are seen in *The Fall* (2019) as two snake specimens lie on either side of a bedazzled apple, twice bitten. *Whatever Is Important To You* (2018) shares Casey's environmental concerns, and *Cautionary Tales* (2017) forewarns a dystopian world, while *The Melody Lingers On* (2016) is a connection to place and memory. Here, Casey recalls the familiar sounds of magpies, summer mornings at the family home and her mother's Glomesh purse while a paper piano roll hums the melancholy of nostalgia.

Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery (<https://www.qvmag.tas.gov.au/Home>)

Until 22 September, 2019

Tasmania

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Angela Casey depicts the melancholic shadow cast by socio-cultural histories and archive trends in witty yet confronting still life compositions.

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