

THE STRANGE CASE OF

Angela



Casey

*The*  
ENQUIRING  
LIGHT

## Written by Ashley Crawford



As a teenager I was told the 1880 painting by Swiss-born symbolist Arnold Böcklin, the darkly portentous *Isle of the Dead*, was in fact a depiction of one aspect of an approach to what was once known as Van Diemen's Land (I was also told this was a deliberate misspelling for what should have been Van Demon's Land). This came as little surprise to my teenage

mind. My mother had been born on the north-west coast of Tasmania and fled as a young lady. When her parents' farm crashed, they moved to Melbourne. They were dark, miserly folk of few words, both chronic alcoholics and chain smokers, taciturn and mean; I dreaded visiting them to endure lunches of fatty mutton and Brussels sprouts cooked grey and watch them cough up globules of black phlegm.



**I first heard the term 'Tasmanian Gothic' in the very early 1980s and even though for many it has become a cliché of feral proportions, for multi-media artist Angela Casey it became a touchstone for investigations of a bizarre spectrum of subjects that embrace the history of spiritualism, religion and science of the Victorian era.**

Tasmania, for me, became lodged as a dark realm of my imagination, a place of shadows and massacres and, if the huge success of *Dark Mofo* is any indication, I was far from alone in these bizarre, gothic mis-readings.

I first heard the term 'Tasmanian Gothic' in the very early 1980s and even though for many it has become a cliché of feral proportions, for multi-media artist Angela Casey it became a touchstone for investigations of a bizarre spectrum of subjects that embrace the history of spiritualism, religion and science of the Victorian era.

Casey's rather surreal *modus operandi* is more painterly than it is photographic. She arranges

her subjects with the delicacy of a mortician. Take *The Surgeon* as a case in point. She has arranged her taxidermied subject atop a Victorian plinth adorned with a funeral shroud and carefully added items in vials from her personal apocraphia: a rodent's skull and, oddly, a partially peeled orange. Upon this cluttered operating table, the Surgeon sutures the white shawl with electronic-blue thread. Against the Stygian black of the background the blue and the orange create a ghastly clash of colours. The result is, to quote Lautreamont, 'as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.'



“ **B**lack is the colour of silence, providing a quiet envelope for the contemplation of the narrative within a world of noise. ”

For Casey, Black is ‘the colour of silence, providing a quiet envelope for the contemplation of the narrative within a world of noise.’ Casey’s blacks suggest a darkness that can reflect no light whatsoever, coal-black, velvet-black, the black of the Tasmanian wilderness on a moonless night.

But into this Stygian blackness, Casey brings light. Native and endemic birds of Tasmania feature in her works, along with the occasional marsupial, and act as surrogates for the human presence in unsettling

visual narratives. ‘Although silenced by time, the preserved performers on my lush still life stages have distinct voices whether it be the morning call of the magpie or the chatter of a forest raven’, Casey has written.

Writing on a previous show, critic Anna Halipili noted that: ‘This glimpse into Casey’s imagination not only inspires us to reflect on times past, but also evokes critical thought for Tasmania’s future. Angela Casey offers an important reminder of the wonder of the natural world and its vital influence in shaping our identity.’





In *The Future of Light* a long legged native ibis stares enraptured by a glowing green Exit light as though contemplating its own end through the mist of mortality. Shadow and light are a recurring theme in Casey's world; thus it is perhaps unsurprising that in her meticulous research she would discover the work of Sir William Crookes (1832-1919). Crookes was a British chemist and physicist who attended the Royal College of Chemistry in London and specialised in the then newfangled realm of spectroscopy. He was a pioneer of vacuum tubes, inventing the Crookes tube which was realised in 1875. His work with lenses and fumes became renowned (he created the first sunglasses amongst other things.)

For *The Enquiring Light* in February 2019, Casey fired up a Crookes tube to photograph. 'The beautiful lime green colours of the radioactive vapours created within the glass will compliment some of the other works such as *The Future of Light* with the glowing green exit sign', Casey noted. But there was a great deal more of interest to Casey than Crookes' scientific endeavours. In 1867 Crooke's brother died of yellow fever. Relinquishing his cynicism, he soon attended a séance to speak to his brother. Crookes became infatuated with the after-life, spiritualism and spirit photography, joining the Theosophical Society and becoming initiated to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.





Indeed, as with Casey's own work, spiritualism meets science. When she fired up a Crookes tube, the rear of the machine was imprinted with the symbol of the Knights Templar, often associated with the Illuminati (not the Maltese Cross with which it is often confused, rather bizarrely, because the two have distinctly different designs and histories).

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, spiritualism and superstition had developed hardy roots in the

soil of Tasmania. With its isolation and bleak history of Aboriginal slaughter and oft inhuman treatment of convicts and the travails of the colonists in an un-kind land, a dark mulch was created for the growth of ghost stories, aided and abetted by the oral traditions of the Chinese and Irish and their belief of spirits of all stripes. From the 1800s onwards, this was indeed the 'strangeness' handed through the generations to Angela Casey.



Casey's works that respond to the theme of Victorian era spiritualism are boldly apparent, from the funeral lily of *When This You See* to the hallucinogenic hooker of *Sweet Oil of Vitriol* to the glowing eyes of the twinned memento mori of *Second Sight* and the gothic bouquet of *William Crookes' Dilemma*.

Casey's Victorian Parlour contains a potpourri of influences and sources. Residencies during 2017 at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Port Arthur Historic Site allowed access to myriad items which were subsumed into her dark aesthetic. Her bower-bird instincts allowed Casey to not only embrace the ideas of scientist/

spiritualist Sir William Crookes, but the *Chiaroscuro* approach of 16th and 17th century Dutch painters like Adriaen van Utrecht and Edwaert Collier, the Tasmanian Gothic imbued in Melbourne playwright Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age* and the exotic notions explored in the Greek author Lafcadio Hearn's *Exotics and Retrospectives*. Biology, superstition, philosophy, melancholia, exotica and romanticism and the surreal all swirl through her parlour, all witnessed by *The Observers*, a macabre tableau of dark imagination; a bizarre and somehow nightmarish group 'portrait' or vanitas that is not just gothic, but decidedly *Tasmanian Gothic*.







## Artist's statement

Like many people within the Launceston community, I have fond and nostalgic memories from my childhood of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery at Royal Park. I recall a wondrous menagerie of curiosities, dinosaurs and portrait paintings that would somehow hold the keys to solving the mysteries of my world. 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 as an adult, with the belief that there are mysteries of the world still there for me to investigate. Since 1998 a large portion of my artwork has been in response to both the Natural Sciences and Visual Art and Design collections items, and also to the architecture of both QVMAG sites.

*The Enquiring Light* strives to make sense of our world in a philosophical way, using those keys of my childhood. Some birds I have recalled

and featured in this show have been in the collection since the Museum opened in 1891.

One of the wonderful things about a community centre such as a museum and gallery is the collective experience. We may recognise the same exhibits we saw as children, but develop unique and nostalgic memories as adults that we can share and appreciate; thus extending the opportunities for meaningful engagement with nature and art as a part of our life.

The results from the artist residencies at QVMAG and Clarendon Estate, Launceston Church Grammar and Port Arthur Historic Site from 2017 - 2019 have been described by Ashleigh Whatling and Michael Smith (curator at PAHS) as a reinvigoration of the collections. Most cultural heritage items featured are located in the 19th century and are interfaced with contemporary counterparts and current technological references and media. They are transported into current history as contemporary art with a context that is relatable to today's experiences. The installation of the specimens and objects, old and new, featured in the photographs are also present in the show, housed in QVMAG's Victorian era display cabinets, creating a new and reimagined experience for visitors.



# Angela Casey

## The Enquiring Light

20 April 2019 - 22 September 2019

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Front: Angela Casey, *The Conversation*, 2018,  
Pigment print on Canson Platine cotton rag paper.

Back: Angela Casey, *Digital Nocturne*, 2018,  
Pigment print on Canson Platine cotton rag paper.

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