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# LOUISE HEARMAN

with essays by Anna Davis  
and John McDonald

# Louise Hearman

# Anna Davis

In Louise Hearman’s paintings and drawings, things are not always as they seem. It is up to us to imagine what is glimmering in the half-light or lurking deep in the shadows, as the artist offers no written or verbal clues to the evocative content of her works, which are nearly always left untitled. An underlying sense of disquiet permeates many of her images. Like the fragmented memories of dreams or nightmares, they carry the emotional traces of everyday events but cannot easily be explained in words. Their logic does not belong to the daylight hours even though their content may sometimes appear quite ordinary.

Hearman’s single-minded attentiveness to light and its almost magical power to transform our perception of the world, as well as her technical ability to render its effects in paint, are central to the mysterious images she creates. Working predominantly at a small scale in oil on masonite, she produces figurative compositions made up of realistic depictions of everyday forms. Plants, animals and children feature prominently, often in surreal juxtapositions and conveying that elusive quality known as the uncanny, which only arises when the familiar becomes strange.

Contemplative and obsessive in her approach, Hearman returns repeatedly to a number of motifs in her work – a child’s radiant face, the back of someone’s head, a glowing orb, a deserted road, an aeroplane gliding through a liquid sky, a phosphorescent sunset, a melancholic cloud, dogs, flowers, birds, cats and, perhaps most bizarrely, rows of shining teeth smiling at us. The luminous subjects of her portraits tend to float in a sea of blackness or abstract fields of colour, while her landscapes are often set at the edges of bush and suburbia, captured at twilight or dawn, their uncertain

light spawning otherworldly forms and imbuing them with a supernatural quality.

Born in Croydon in the outer suburbs of Melbourne in 1963, Hearman ‘has been drawing for as long as she can remember’<sup>1</sup> and has been exhibiting her work since she finished art school at the Victorian College of the Arts in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Over her career she has had her work compared to that of celebrated Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746–1828).<sup>3</sup> She has also been written about in relation to the art historical movements of Romanticism, Symbolism and Surrealism, and, in terms of her subject matter, to the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49).<sup>4</sup> Despite these historical comparisons, her art is very much of today. Her personal vision echoes the charged atmospheres and anxieties of contemporary life, capturing its frequent schisms and aberrations as well as its moments of repose and sublime beauty. The dark and mysterious quality of her pictures could be seen to align with the gothic and supernatural genres having a resurgence in popular culture, yet, as author Simon Gregg has argued, she is an artist who ‘fathoms a universe that is entirely her own’.<sup>5</sup>

Hearman collects imagery for her paintings by closely observing and photographing her experiences. She then merges these photographs with other recalled and imagined images in her mind and works in her studio to create unsettling compositions that blend and transform the commonplace into something extraordinary.<sup>6</sup> Many of her works incorporate a kind of layering that allows incongruous elements to come together on the same image plane. This layering could be compared to superimposed images in photography or cinematic special effects that

1. *Hello Darkness, The Art of Louise Hearman*, exh. cat., Glen Eira City Council, Victoria, 2008, p.6.

2. *ibid.*

3. A number of art critics and writers have compared Hearman’s work to Goya, including Simon Gregg, John McDonald and Benjamin Genocchio.

4. Edward Colless, ‘Untitled: On Louise Hearman, untitled’, *Art & Australia*, vol. 46, no. 1, Spring 2008, pp.126–131.

5. Simon Gregg, *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, Victoria, 2011, p.51.

6. Hearman does not use Photoshop to create her compositions, but performs the merging and layering of images in her mind. She has recently begun to use computer programs to create new works on paper, which can be seen in the two large orb works from 2016 in this exhibition.

seamlessly blend different images. Its mechanisms are imperceptible, as if the pictures are pre-mixed in the artist's head and rendered as a single thought in oil paint with no traces of an unintended brush stroke. With great technical skill, she focuses on capturing precise qualities of light in her subjects, conveying moments of intense radiance and darkness. The light in her paintings is beautiful but it can also disfigure, producing undefined spaces and monstrous forms. These disconcerting images are reminiscent of fleeting sensory impressions, like something glimpsed but not quite seen, caught at the moment before conscious apprehension. In one of her most memorable paintings, *Untitled #450* (1996), a strange amalgam of human and dog stares at us through a misty light. It could just be a dog, one whose countenance takes on human form as we glimpse it in the half-light. But maybe it's something else entirely. This uncertain creature is like a spectre, something unnamed living at the dark periphery of our consciousness. Its body glows with a cool luminescence, its face partially obscured by darkness, surrounded by a shimmering blue light.

Not all of Hearman's works contain eerie light or surreal imagery. Her landscapes are often exhilarating representations of the natural and built environment. Yet even these more unassuming views tend to have a creeping uneasiness, like images of a crime scene where the physical reminders of trauma have long been removed but a psychic disturbance remains. Her portraits are similarly enigmatic. Often featuring young children or teenage subjects – a group she has called 'her secret people', who she says can be real or imaginary but always possess 'a particular kind of look'<sup>7</sup> – pictured staring unflinchingly towards us,

or with their eyes closed. It is in her portraits that the most potent moments of beauty arise, often captured in a child's face that pierces us with its inner brightness and serenity. In other works, people are depicted with their faces turned away, light transforming air around their hair and skin into globes, auras and halos. The backs of people's heads endlessly fascinate the artist, and her works draw our attention to these evocative shapes with their unknowable expressions and infinite potential.

Hearman's paintings come from a private realm but they also speak to a shared domain of human experience. This is in part because she depicts everyday subjects, but it is also because many of her pictures have the quality of optical illusions, memories, thoughts and daydreams. In other words, her ambiguous images, while unique to her inner world, are familiar to us all. For example, most people will have had the experience of seeing something out of the corner of their eye that turns out to be nothing, or noticed the outline of a strange face in a tree or cloud. The peculiar sensation of knowing that these transitory moments of perceptual ambiguity and fantasy exist alongside our more widely accepted version of reality is a vital part of her work, constantly reminding us of this parallel universe of experience.<sup>8</sup>

Hearman is an artist who is fascinated by the world around her, not so much by politics and news stories but by the direct sensations of her everyday environment as it reveals itself to her through intense awareness and curious observation. When not working in her studio, she spends a lot of time outdoors, walking her dog,<sup>9</sup> running for exercise and gathering imagery for her paintings. As she so beautifully articulated in

- John McDonald, 'Mistress of epiphanies', *Australian Financial Review Magazine*, March 2004, p. 16.
- Distortions in scale are also common in Hearman's works. Objects, humans and other forms are shrunk to a minute size or blown up to an enormous proportion, blocking and distorting our view. This altered perspective can remind us of what it was like to be a child viewing the world, when people loomed over us like giants and insects seemed the size of elephants.
- Hearman has a strong affinity with animals; birds, cats and particularly dogs make frequent appearances in her work, a menagerie of strong-willed creatures that seem to know something we don't and that exist at the edges of our understanding. Hearman does not discriminate, depicting dogs of all shapes, sizes and breeds. It is perhaps no accident that she so often portrays these canine creatures that cannot speak our language yet communicate with us so well. Some of her most touching works are drawings of her cherished dog, Pig, curled up asleep at her feet.

a recent interview, her creative process depends on her being highly attuned to qualities of light, expression, ambiance and other everyday wonders on her daily excursions:

On a typical day I will be walking the dog in the morning and on the right day, if the light is right, I will see dozens of pictures to make. Objects on the footpath lit like stars, worms glistening, buds pointing, tree trunks like elephant legs, flower heads turned to the light, sending messages, clouds forming significant shapes, the sniff of a look on someone's face, a statue-like figure waiting at the lights. Cars sparkling, people's legs and feet meeting the ground. Pets sniffing the air and looking at me, their shiny eyes on the surface of something? Blowflies sparkling on leaves. Movement of objects forming the shape of wind ... hair glistening ... remarkable hair like fire around the surface of a planet. All of this hopefully works its way into my pictures. Painting so far seems to be the best way for me to capture these sensations.<sup>10</sup>

The inspiration for Hearman's works nearly always comes from being outside, yet her practice is based firmly in the studio, where she prefers to work alone with the right lighting and conditions. Nevertheless, traces of the external world follow her inside. In her studio – alongside shelves of partially finished paintings, palettes covered in miniature oil paint mountains, paintings in the process of being painted over and racks stacked to the ceiling with boxes of finished works – there are collections of tiny objects: sticks, stones, seedpods and twisted pieces of wire,

displayed on walls and tables, tokens of interesting shapes and textures she has brought back with her. Also, numerous small sketches and photographs are pinned onto boards around the room, creating a mood-scape to be drawn upon later.

Variations and intensities of mood are a vital component of Hearman's practice. Not only do her paintings convey these insubstantial and notoriously difficult to articulate emotional states; they are also an important part of her creative process. Hearman has described how being in a particular mood can result in a particular kind of painting<sup>11</sup> and how the emotional tenor of the music she is listening to at the time can influence how her work turns out.<sup>12</sup>

An appreciation of mood was also crucial in terms of curating the exhibition and conceiving its structure. The selection of works and their layout within the MCA Galleries was developed through numerous conversations with the artist, focusing on feelings and sensations rather than a chronological or thematic configuration.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition, which includes more than 50 oil paintings and 25 works on paper, is based around a series of atmospheric groupings in the space that emerged from these discussions, each of which is open to countless interpretations and may suggest or trigger any number of psychic states and impressions.<sup>14</sup>

While Hearman's paintings and drawings each have a unique ambiance, when brought together they begin to affect one another and new moods are created. Adding to this phenomenon is the way some works and groupings of works begin to suggest traces of narrative. Her paintings are sometimes described as having a cinematic quality.<sup>15</sup> More precisely, they are like film stills in that they suspend moments of imaginary

10. Jillian Grant, 'Louise Hearman on Influence', *Artist Profile*, Issue 25, 2013-14, p.49.

11. *ibid*, p.50.

12. Music is an important aspect of Hearman's creative process. She rarely works without some kind of sound playing in the background and is aware that its emotional tenor influences how each painting turns out. Her large and varied music collection has become more eclectic over the years and contains everything from Classical to Country, as well as movie soundtracks and experimental sound. (Conversation with the artist, 3 March 2016.)

13. Hearman has produced a vast output over the past 30 years, and it was a challenging project to select from such a large and impressive collection. The final selection was made through a long conversation between Louise and I as we vigorously debated and decided upon what we believe is a selection of her best works available to borrow.

14. The earliest paintings in the exhibition are from 1995 and the most recent, the three of portraits of Bill Henson, two of which won the Moran Portrait Prize, are from 2014. The earliest of all the works in the exhibition is a charcoal drawing from 1990, a curious image of man with ants crawling across and into his oversized ear.

15. Simon Gregg, *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, Victoria, 2011, p.52.

time and are suggestive of a story without need for plot or sequence of events, an impression that is amplified when a group of works is hung in the same room. One of the pleasures of curating the exhibition was noticing the many story fragments that came to mind while placing the works in various orders. The beauty of Hearman's work is that the stories I imagined will be very different to those imagined by someone else. Her works evoke a seemingly endless stream of ideas and possible narratives that she is keen to let flourish unhindered.

Much has been said about Hearman's preference for not talking about her work. Her distrust of words, in particular their ability to fix and limit meaning, is something that often comes to the surface in interviews. While people can get frustrated at her unwillingness to discuss her work's connotations, it comes from a desire not to lock meaning down and to allow viewers the pleasure of imagining what it is they see before them. She enjoys finding out what other people think about her work and takes great pleasure in listening to her audience's interpretations.<sup>16</sup> Of course not everything can be explained in words. As Hearman pointed out when asked to explain the contents of her works:

It's more a feeling of shapes and a mood of the light in the picture. That's the way I think, that's the way I imagine everything, in pictures and shapes rather than in words. It's a type of language.<sup>17</sup>

Because her works are ambiguous and present fragments of things that are not spelled out, viewers play a key part in determining their meaning.

When we look at her pictures, we have to imagine what is going on, a creative process that increases the works' allure. As Hearman argues: 'Once you start making literal translations I think you start to contract the work. What's fantastic about pictures is that they are expansive. If they are good they are open to any number of interpretations.'<sup>18</sup>

The power of Hearman's pictures is in the way they move us emotionally; while we may never comprehend exactly what we are seeing, we can feel their impact in our body and mind. Her works are a product not only of her ideas but of her skilful manipulation of paint and other marks drawn onto surfaces, reminding us of the capacity these traditional media have to affect and stimulate. By combining commonplace imagery with highly personal visions of the unknown and the unknowable, her art hints at the wonders of the universe and the compelling nonverbal nature of our thoughts and imaginings.

#### **Anna Davis**

Curator

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

16. Conversation with the artist 3 March 2016.

17. Paul Flynn, 'Louise Hearman: My imagined world', *Artist Profile*, issue 3, 2008, pg.33.

18. Jillian Grant, 'Louise Hearman on Influence', *Artist Profile*, Issue 25, 2013-14, p.51.