



# Dark Swan

CONTEMPORARY TALES OF THE GOTHIC ANTIPODES



"The very winds whispered in  
soothing accents  
and maternal Nature bade  
me weep no more...."

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley  
Frankenstein (The Modern  
Prometheus) 1818



## KELSEY ASHE GIAMBAZI

Engaging with Neo Gothic Romanticism for 'Dark Swan' has allowed a space for narration of my connection with landscape and the constant quest to reach for the boundless sublime. I identify with the sense of heightened feeling and emotion the Romanticists accessed to make their great works, by channelling intuition and intellect in equal measure, to go beyond perception. I am not concerned here with politicking or critiquing the worlds many issues. Rather I seek a seduction of the senses, a transcendence of the rational and speculation on the unknown – the tropes of Romanticism of centuries ago, re-imagined for a contemporary audience.

WA has always been an un-homely home to me. Arriving as a young adult after living in Tasmania and New Zealand, the sand, wind and heat assaulted me, I missed the awe of the mountains, valleys and green pastures of home terribly, but there was no going back. And besides, the WA landscape has its own uniqueness; a kind of terrible beauty, that is parched and spiky, charcoaled and dusty. The bush here has its own spiritual voice, that you can perceive when you listen.

In this way, I identify with the sensations that the early colonists may have experienced. The immense yearning to be in two places at once, missing home, missing family left behind over water.

My work 'The Swan Promise' therefore depicts a me and also an-other me or other-person, a lass of the early Swan Colony, perhaps a school teacher or maid. What did she dream of? When she travelled through the scrubby bush around Fremantle was it fear she felt or a sense of beauty? I imagine her as a free spirit with her own thoughts. Did her heart go out to those poor nameless souls in the chain gangs up upon the hill at the Convict Establishment? As she paused to collect the strange wild flowers of this new land, did she stop to watch them, hundreds of them, shackled together sledging stone for the new asylum? And that handsome one that stared at her, the one with the light still shining fiercely in his eyes... what did he dream of?



*'Something is happening in Australian Art today. We are witnessing the resurgence of ideas that took root centuries ago – a return to passion in art; a return to atmosphere and awe. Historians called it Romanticism; a disposition for melancholic yearning, for communion with nature, for the sublime. Australian artists, in countless numbers, are engaging with these themes again today....'*

*Simon Gregg, 2011, 'The New Romantics, Darkness and Light in Australian Art.'*



*Panorama of the Swan River Settlement*

Jane Eliza Currie (1794-1876), watercolour, Fremantle, 1830-32. State Library of New South Wales.

## **DARK SWAN, CONTEMPORARY TALES OF THE GOTHIC ANTIPODES**

In my mind's eye I have travelled the journey from England via ship, heading to the land Captain James Stirling<sup>1</sup> declared was a fertile land brimming with promise for a new life in the western

Antipodes. I have read and imagined the recorded stories of the early Swan Colony from 1829 onwards, studying the photos and artistic impressions of those years prior to the gold rush and pearling era that bought prosperity and a sense of cohesion to the township of Fremantle in the last decades of the 19th century. My study has taken me to contemplating the original topography of the area, imagining a place without buildings, without bridges, a place peacefully inhabited by the Nyoongar people.

In 1829, Nyoongar families had lived in the area for tens of thousands of years, a length of time so unfathomably vast when compared to the mere 200 years of white settlement in Western Australia. The Nyoongar people called the area Walyalup, part of Booyembara, the coastal limestone belt through which the river, Derbal Yaragan flows. It was a grassy, scrubby area, where dense swathes of Rottneest Cypress gave way to sand dunes stippled with Paperbarks and Sheoaks, interlinked by established pathways between freshwater springs and significant dwelling and meeting places.

The early years were difficult. It is a dismal and contested history. The Nyoongar people suffered immeasurably, their lands appropriated, and food sources stripped, the polymorphism of Western Australia had begun. My research tells

<sup>1</sup>In 1827 James Stirling reported to the British Government that a land 'As beautiful as anything of the kind I had ever witnessed' lay waiting to be colonised, a land of rich soil, majestic trees and blue mountain summits (Tout-Smith, 1998:9).

me of the new settlers' pursuits in vain, of failed crops, desperation for food and basic supplies, of Aboriginal traditions mis-understood, a clash of cultures that resulted in murder, and larceny becoming part of the fabric of that early society. I imagine the sense of bewilderment and desperation the early colonists must have encountered in this new land.

I've read of mothers nursing their young, landing on a sandy and seemingly barren shore, where the trees blew sideways from growing with the steady westerly winds battering them into submission. Stories of pianos stranded on the beach at the mouth of the river, I found particularly poignant, as the colonists left behind ideals of setting up a new home, to think instead about pitching tents and finding fresh water.

Unlike Eastern Australia, (whose first white 'citizens' were convicts held at gunpoint), the Swan Colony was initially settled by free immigrants, many of them wealthy or aspiring to be, some from aristocratic backgrounds, or looking to build themselves a new empire in the Antipodes, by receiving free land from the Surveyor-General. But for many years, the reality was that of living under canvas, dealing with heat, fleas, mosquitos and illness. Ships were irregular and often arrived with the wrong supplies or rotten ones. Infamously, some sank offshore, arriving only to become stranded and damaged

on shallow reefs off the coast. Despite the conditions, both women and men clung to ideologies of societal rank through dress that defined the era, going to extraordinary lengths to communicate wealth and status through appearance and personal grooming. Early artistic impressions and letters reveal women walking the sandy streets of the colony in their corsets and crinolines, silk stockings and bonnets, the men in their thick woollen waist coats and tailed jackets.

The England the colonists left behind, was replaced with an unknown and sometimes hostile landscape, devoid of comfort, it was a surreal and sharp juxtaposition. Colonists came from the cities and from rural areas of England; Governors, soldiers, architects, maids, reverends, mid-wives, merchants, ship builders, seamstresses and school teachers; they all made the voyage with high hopes in their heart and bought their Eurocentric world view with them.

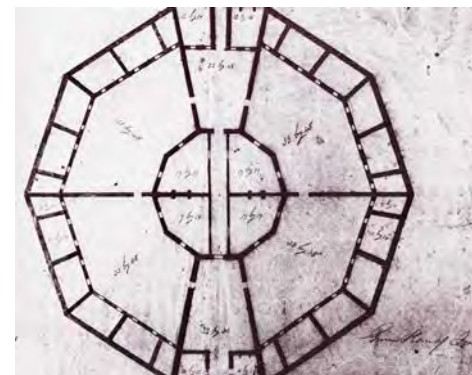
For example, prior to expatriating, early Swan Colony pioneer Henry Willey



**My House and Garden in Western Australia**  
Henry Reveley (1788-1875), watercolour on parchment,  
Perth, 1833. National Library of Australia

Reveley, architect of the Round House in Fremantle (built in 1830), was raised for some time in England as a sibling of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* (1818) in an environment of the most significant philosophers, poets and intellectual liberalism of the Romantic Period (Oldham, 1967). Reveley was intimate with such extraordinary figures as Shelley's father (the political philosopher William Godwin), and mother, (philosopher and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft), Shelley's husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and friend Lord Byron who were two of the most influential philosophical and poetic figures of the Romantic movement. These surprising facts remind us of the extraordinary influences and ideas that were prevalent in Europe at the time and that were most certainly circulating in the minds of the earliest colonists of Western Australia.

In 2018, on the 200th anniversary of *Frankenstein* (1818), interest in the Romantic Gothic is piqued as Bi-



**Ground Plan of the Round House**  
Henry Reveley (1788-1875), 1830. Image courtesy Battye  
Library

centennial celebrations worldwide draw from the seminal novel of grotesque and Gothic Romanticism, focusing upon the multiple themes that have arisen from the work, such as life and consciousness, appearance, sacrifice, passion, secrecy, fate and free will. Both the fictional and nonfictional tales that surround the Shelley-Bysshe families are themselves rich with romantic and bizarre tellings that have resulted in the spawning of many influential literature and popular culture productions, including this present exhibition, *Dark Swan; Contemporary Tales of the Gothic Antipodes*.

One of the earliest European encounters, recorded with much fascination was that marvelous creature, the Black Swan, the graceful name sake of this exhibition. The title is both a referent to the Swan River Colony and the elegant nature and subtle beauty of the States emblematic waterbird. The duality of the title reinforces and hints at the exhibitions aims of exploring not only the darker realms of the Gothic subconscious and the early Victorian era in which modern Western Australia emerged, but the stylised imaginary beauty promulgated by a contemporary high art aesthetic, imagined through the artists in this exhibition.

The exhibition brings together several genres and reminds us that art movements are always born, but rarely do they die. Romanticism, with its emphasis

on feeling and impulse, introspection and self-discovery, the attraction to the mysterious, the spiritual, obscure and unknown is a dominant sub-theme to many of the works. Romanticism recognised nature as a dynamic and self-transforming force where the individual was grossly inadequate in the face of the endless sublime. This drove the Romanticists into 'Byronic' states of dramatic passion and yearning for enlightenment (Watson, 2005). Wild nature, flecked with human intervention could represent for the Romanticists a sense of the anarchic or benevolent force of an unknown landscape, by depicting that immensity of mystery and inferring that its contemplation could ultimately illuminate one's own self-understanding. Gothic Romanticism, which began as a literary sub-genre of Romanticism, draws further into anthropomorphized symbols of nature, deeming landscapes and gothic architecture with seemingly human emotional traits, blurring quasi-religious themes, Victoriana, violent or erotic occurrences and strange and unsettling discourses, whilst never quite losing the sweeping beauty of classicism inherent to the Romanticist mode.

The Australian Gothic is a well-established genre in literary and artistic imagination, perhaps because Australia, as a convict prison for Britain, was seen in the European mind as quite literally 'gothic par excellence, the dungeon of the world' (Turcotte, 1998). The colonies



**Moon over Indian Ocean**  
Kelsey Ashe Giambazi, Mixed Media, 2018. Image courtesy of the Artist.

were a ghastly 'Frankenstein' made up of degenerate parts that could only possibly make a terrible monster once whole. Western Australia, with its brutal history of convict era penal colony (from the 1850s onwards) and pioneering era of survival against all odds, has its own unique set of Gothic/Romantic tales, bizarre characters and ghost stories to unearth. Indeed, it is here that the ancient saying that presumed black swans did not exist, was proof for all at home that Terra Nullius was indeed a place of darkest terror and foreboding. The fact that colonisation in Australia began in the 18th and 19th Centuries at the height of the sensationalist and influential form of the gothic sensibility in Europe also contributed to its early popularity as a genre on Australian soil.<sup>2</sup>

I have asked each artist to speak about their work in turn, to allow the audience of Dark Swan to perceive the nuances of approach through a personal artistic statement. The familiar transposed into unfamiliar space is a common theme

of exploration by artists in Dark Swan. Any kind of migration is a dis-location of sorts that produces a condition of uncertainty and dis-orientation. The colonial experience was characterised by this sense of what Freud identified as the uncanny<sup>3</sup>; where the home is unhomey — where the *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich* — and yet remains sufficiently familiar to disorient and disempower. Other themes explored include the Australian sublime, the sense of spiritual awe and mystery that emanates from this ancient land mass, notions of the grotesque, of the Void, of disquiet and darkness captured in dramatic moods of dark and light.



**Moodyne's Wife (The Locket) Detail**  
Kelsey Ashe Giambazi, Mixed Media, 2018. Image courtesy of the Artist.

Many of the Dark Swan artists have responded to the theme through

consideration of the Colonial Gothic architecture built by convict hand in Fremantle, in particular the Fremantle Lunatic Asylum (now the Fremantle Arts Centre) built in the 1860s and the Convict Establishment (now the Fremantle Prison) built in the 1850s. During the 1840s although some conditions had improved, and a prison had been built (the Fremantle Roundhouse), the colony was still plagued with malaise, drunkenness and despair, further exacerbated by a nationwide depression. Immigration had almost ceased, many were starving.

In 1849 the general despondency of the society had the colonies' Governors arranging for convicts to be sent from Britain when the rest of Australia had morally put an end to the barbaric pursuit. 6,198 convicts, both male and female came to Western Australia. There is little to no pictorial evidence of their lives, only numbers on a page and of course their legacy, the magnificent buildings that remain sentinel standing facing time in silent witness to all that has been within those walls.

<sup>2</sup> Popular Australian Gothic works include *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967 novel, movie Adaption 1975), *For the Term of his Natural Life* (Novel 1874, movie Adaption 1983), *Van Diemens Land* (2009 movie) In 2011, Tasmanian art collector David Walsh opened the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, the Southern Hemisphere's largest privately owned museum. A specific genre of Tasmanian Gothic has emerged in Tasmania in response to the many instances of the Gothic Colonial built by convict labour. The popularity of MONA—with its theme of 'sex and death'—and the wider Tasmanian Gothic movement, has led Tasmanian tourism operators to promote the state's 'dark, eerie, cold and bracing history and climate'.

Fitzgibbon, Rebecca (29 August 2012). "Time to embrace our dark side", *The Mercury*. Retrieved 4 December 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919)*: (London: Hogarth, 1919), pp. 217-256 (p.219).

Dark Swan; Contemporary Tales of the Gothic Antipodes illustrates the ongoing fascination we hold for the founding years of our society and in many ways acknowledges the hardships, torment and resilience of those that came before us. Whether considered as Neo-Romanticism, as Australian Gothic, Australian Sublime or simply Australian Art, I believe the contemporary artists in this exhibition provoke a sense of reflectivity on localised tales of Western Australia through these considered works.

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