

A Place Beyond Heaven
New work by Anna Higgins
by Jennifer Higgle

The act of looking is rarely precise; it's as malleable as memory. We edit what we see; meaning emerges in glimpses, fragments, bursts of light, elisions; the whole formed of unpredictable parts. Recollections and assumptions mingle with facts, clouding and colouring them: nothing in our field of vision is neutral.

In 2021, Anna did a residency in Athens, where she was a regular visitor to the archaeological institute and the National Observatory. She became entranced by early astronomical photography and Byzantine paintings, both of which depict the so-called 'real world' alongside its more abstract, ephemeral qualities – the air, light, the sky. When I met Anna in her London studio, she told me she's interested in 'psychic landscapes', the 'divine in nature' and 'the spiritual'. I asked her what the word 'spiritual' means to her. She replied: 'It's understanding the world from a "felt" perspective, not just an intellectual one. When you have one foot in something rational, and the other in a sphere that is less easily defined; something that sometimes emerges without warning.

To create her filmic pictures, Anna works intuitively, capturing images of objects, places and hand-drawn marks via a lens. She then prints them on heavy paper and, in some instances, works into the surface with watercolour, fabric dye or ink. The result is a slew of deliriously mysterious imaginings that the artist prefers not to explain. Visions, she feels, should bloom within the logic of their own language.

When I first saw Anna's work, I had the strange sense of knowing what I was looking at without being able to quite identify it. The moody loveliness of *Embers* (all works 2022) – a yellow-and-sepia study of blurred organic forms – could be a shot of treetops, swaying in the wind, taken by someone lying in the grass – or a purely abstract exercise in shape and form. The textural, black-and-white *O, world!* recalls the aftermath of fireworks, when trails of smoke make drawings on the night sky – or it could be a doodle prompted by a daydream. *To be filled with light* depicts a dazzling explosion of sorts: pale lemon light radiating out from an imprecise centre. It looks, initially, like something scientific, perhaps a cell, seen through a microscope. But stay with it and the shimmering lines come into focus: they're rough, hand-drawn, wonky, floating above some kind of cosmic cloud. In many ways, Anna makes drawings that masquerade as photographs.

Many of these images are nocturnal, rich with shadows, in thrall to the visual and metaphorical possibilities of the night – which sometimes comes unexpectedly. The title of one work, *August 11th 1999* – a textured study of smoky, sombre pink-and-black shapes shot through with chalky lines – refers to a solar eclipse. Anna sends me a link to an amateur film of it, shot in Karlsruhe, Germany. People fill the streets, gazing up at the heavens in sunglasses. The sense of anticipation builds; when the moon finally blocks the sun's brightness and the day turns dark, the crowd cheers. Despite our hyper-accelerated, machine-mediated world, the sky and its possibilities still has the power to fill us with wonder.

Some of Anna's titles are quotes from poems by Mary Oliver, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Paul Celan. Whilst very different from one another, each poem focuses on the cosmic potential of nature to animate the everyday. In her poem 'When I Am Among the Trees' (2006), Oliver hears the trees calling to her to 'stay awhile', reminding her she has come 'into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with, and to shine'. It's an invocation to slow down, to look without hurry, to be open to uncommon energies; to push back, perhaps, against too-swift readings of complex situations. In Millay's ecstatic 'God's World' (1917), the poet is overwhelmed with the beauty of her environment: 'O world, I cannot hold thee close enough! / Thy winds, thy wide grey skies! / Thy mists, that roll and rise!' Knowing

that the poem was penned as World War I was blowing up an entire generation lends the writer's delight in the physical realm an extra poignancy. Celan's 'Sprinkle Ochre into my Eyes', by contrast, is a cryptic lament replete with bone-sharp images: 'at the / great / road fork tell / yourself to the ochre / three times/ nine times.' Words here function like small missiles: their meaning oblique, their subjective power, profound. A Jewish/German poet whose parents were murdered in the Holocaust, Celan was intent on forging a new poetic language for a new era – one that acknowledged dislocation and rupture.

Anna tells me she listens to music constantly as she makes her pictures: for this series, a lot of Kate Bush, Alice Coltrane, Scott Walker and Brian Wilson, musicians she loves for their evocation of an 'indescribable mood'. Their songs, she says, are like 'contemporary prayers' – the 'ineffable bit is what it's really about'. I send Anna a Molly Drake song, 'I Remember' that somehow seems relevant. Sung in Drake's sweet, high, fragile voice, it's about the realisation that love has gone when a couple recall the same situation differently: 'I remember firelight, and you remember smoke ... I remember oranges and you remember dust.' Anna tells me how much she enjoyed it, and especially the 'tinny recording', which she feels 'really adds to the atmosphere'. I think about the title of Anna's show, *A Place Beyond Heaven*. It begs the question: what might such a place look like? What might it feel like? We can't possibly know – after all, we don't even know if heaven itself exists – even though we can, somehow, imagine it, feel it.

Anna Higgins' expanded image-based practice incorporates found archival and contemporary material and photography, abstracted and re-contextualized through collage, painting, drawing, and film photography to form new perspectives and poetic interpretations.

Anna completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne (2013) and will graduate from the Royal Academy Schools, London, post-graduate program in 2023. Selected solo exhibitions include *Omens*, ReadingRoom, Melbourne (2021); *Faraway Beach*, Mackintosh Lane, London (2019); *The Sick Rose*, David, Melbourne (2019); *International Waters*, Centre of Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2016); *Double Negative*, Substation, Melbourne (2015); *Ma, 3331 Chiyoda*, Tokyo (2014); *Super Panavision*, West Space, Melbourne (2014) and *Higgs Boson*, TCB Art Inc, Melbourne (2013). Anna was the 2021 artist in residence at the Australian Archaeological Institute, Athens, and is co-director of Mackintosh Lane, London.

In memory of Damiano Bertoli

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