

Art does not lie down on the bed that was made for it; it runs away as soon as one says its name.....Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called.
-Jean Dubuffet

It is our imagination that persists in clothing things; but the things themselves are divinely naked.

Margaret Yourcenar

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Micheline Lee's early life sounds, in some ways, like the stuff of a magic realist novel: three out of five children in wheelchairs, struck down by a mysterious disease, thought originally to be the result of a Chinese curse; her parents conversion from Buddhism to charismatic Catholicism and the new belief that the disease must be the work of the devil; then as western medicine intervened, the new diagnosis that miraculously doubled their expected lifespan, now seen as a sign from God; a sign for all the world to see as the three are displayed in the harsh glow of the spotlight on the stage of the Dallas Brooks Hall at a faith healing revival meeting. Surely the seeds of a great story !

Micheline says her favourite mode of communication is story telling so can her paintings be seen as stories, each one a clue to a larger narrative that can be read or unravelled? Certainly not in any rational sense. This body of work does not form a coherent, readable narrative. There are elusive presences, portentous signs and ambiguous perspectives driven by an internal, symbolic logic more akin to the irrational landscape of dreams or nightmares than the linear reason of the waking world.

Micheline's paintings in *In the Face of the Fall* span a three-year time frame and vary stylistically from the loose and gestural to the linear, child-like and flat. This painting does not fit strictly into the category of naive art, yet it shares many characteristics with this genre. Naive art generally refers to the work of self taught artists, whose overtly personal style and child-like, often obsessive detail is valued more highly than technical proficiency or an interest in contemporary concerns. What Micheline's work shares with naive painting is its raw expressive power and primal honesty. Like much naive art, Micheline's paintings are personal, symbolic and idiosyncratic in style. They display a minimum of artifice, a directness of expression, and a lack of stylistic cohesion as the artist taps directly into a deep well of personal mythology. (In some works she has also drawn upon her different cultural traditions, including the popular Chinese/Malaysian love of family gatherings, rituals concerning food and the use of lurid, clashing colours and patterns.

Micheline's paintings call up images from childhood memories, sexual fantasies, dreams and fairy stories. And, just as many fairy stories have a sting in the tail, these paintings have their own dark edge. Some themes recur throughout this work: there is the man in the white coat, the observer, the voyeur, the doctor who watches; there is the prone figure, literally and psychologically paralysed against the onslaught of the beast - the all-consuming fire of fear; there are the symbiotic wheels that propel the children,

almost a part of their bodies, as they navigate a family gathering or the slopes of some internal landscape; there is the presence of water, often a sign of the unconscious mind and its depths, in which the mermaid/siren is at home in a way that she can never be on land; and there is the dance of death.

If death is “an undiscovered country”, it is one that Micheline has explored more thoroughly than most. Micheline’s life experiences and early “life sentence” have brought her to understand, in a way that few of us have had to, the closeness of death to life; that the two are entwined from our inception, and as John Donne states, this knowledge is “hidden in the deepest secrets of our organs, as life and death go forward at the same pace”. This ever present seed of our own degeneration has been writ large and unavoidable for Micheline and her grappling with this knowledge and the fear it unleashes provides the sting in the tail of this show. Her painting lies on the edge of naive rawness and revelatory transcendence. She is dealing with the big issues of life and death and how we come to terms with our own mortality. However, the over all message is one of hope, courage and perseverance that can best be summed up in the words of the bard....ultimately we find ourselves....“and thus in one continued strife, twixt fear of death and love of life”¹.

Cath Bowdler, 1997

1. R Dagley, *Death's Doings*