

Grim Purpose

Liss Fenwick

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DVA Gallery

Darwin

The Outsider

In some ways it should come as little surprise that amongst Liss Fenwick's favourite books sits Albert Camus's 1942 existential masterpiece *L'Étranger*, known in English as *The Outsider* or *The Stranger*. In Camus's book the main protagonist is a Frenchman domiciled in North Africa who kills an Arab in Algiers. What ensues is, in part, an investigation into notions of alienation and isolation. The distinct feeling of being terrifyingly alone.

Like Camus's Algiers, there are parts of Australia where alienation for the visitor is a given. Small townships are spread far and wide, separated by swathes of red sand, or grey-green scrub, or cattle-grazing grasslands. 'Town' is often little more than a pub with a petrol pump outside. Stopping for a counter-lunch the visitor feels the grudging hospitality, grudging because while they'll take your money, you're still the Outsider, the Stranger. One may even be reminded of the 1971 Australian-American cult classic *Wake in Fright* in which a hapless citified school teacher becomes stranded in a brutal country town and struggles to escape.

Humpty Doo is a town like that. Situated just south of the Arnhem Highway in the Northern Territory, it resides only 40km from Darwin, yet feels far further. You rarely see the locals, only the scars of their bullet holes in the token 'stop' signs. The singular pub in town serves a fine locally farmed Barramundi, but it is served in resentful silence. You are, after all, a stranger.

Liss Fenwick grew up in this humid outpost. But despite being a ‘local’ she felt like an outsider. Her outlets became books and an old camera, but her youth was spent observing – hyper-aware that she simply didn’t ‘fit in.’ On her website she recounts a chilling episode that is pure Australian noir:

Near my home in Humpty Doo there’s a marsh where locals dump animal carcasses. One evening I found some new bones to photograph and stood on my car to get a higher perspective. Immersed in picture making, it was nearly dark when a battered ute drove through the bush. The window wound down and the driver stared silently, cigarette in mouth.

“You must really like bones” he drawled quietly, eyeballing my large tripod.

His face was dark but I recognised him as a friend's dad from high school. He didn’t recognise me, and drove away. Soon after I heard the crackle of burning spear grass, which in the dry season grows tall and flammable. A fire was spreading down the marsh track, and I wondered whether he set the grass alight on purpose or by mistake.

Humpty Doo makes me paranoid like that.

Eventually Fenwick made uneasy peace with Humpty Doo, but it is tempting to ask which was stranger – the oddly named town or its singular denizen who read books by Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche and photographed bones.

“The differences in perspective between myself and conservative rural Humpty Dooian’s like my family made me question how people’s worldviews are formed, and I realised it wasn’t them, it was that by 21st century ‘standards’ the place is unreasonable and they are just the embodiment of that. The place is broken. It doesn’t know why it exists and the state of existence is at odds with the modern world. It makes people fearful. The stories we live by are in a state of doubt and confusion, and on the decaying ‘frontier’ this manifests as an infusion of daily life with the

chaotic arbitrariness of decaying visions. So it's not unlike the rest of the Western world, just a magnified version due to the nature of the context."

She may have escaped physically, finally enrolling in Melbourne's RMIT to undertake a PhD, but psychically she admits that she remains trapped in the deep oddness of the town of her upbringing and its surrounding landscape. Living between the two places, she is unable, or unwilling, to totally cauterise herself from her Algiers of Australia's North.

And, God knows, it shows in her latest body of work, a part of her practice-based PhD. Her bedroom studio is aswarm with ants, test prints of photographs executed in the bush. Meat Ants and Sugar Ants jostle for stardom here, but it is the Meat Ants, vicious little bastards that they are, that take prominence.

It is possible that, in the worst kind of world, one could read *Meat Tray* (2018) as a form of grotesque pornography. The meat being consumed is the extended labia set against tribally scarred and decorated thighs, the ants a form of feral pubic hair. Fenwick has set her insectoid feast against an inscribed plate of Victorian, rather than tribal, swirls and patterns, suggesting hints of bizarre ritual sacrifice. The genitalia becomes food distended for pleasure. Fenwick captures her ants as performers in ritualised dance, their iridescent blue bodies and blazing red heads creating a shimmering abstraction of colours.

Fenwick's ants form the ultimate metaphor for *us* as the Outsider. Their elaborate nests are alien country towns and their denizens will defend them to the death. Although their populations are dispersed across mainland Australia, they seem more prominent in the North, but then nature itself seems more evident, and more potent in the Territory. Fenwick's mission seems to have developed into an investigation not only of nature, but human impact and reshaping of nature.

In her travels, in 2016 she undertook a series titled *LAND* in which she captures a majestic Boab tree covered by a century of tourist graffiti. One immediately recalls stories of Boab trees being used as harsh prisons for indigenous people. "This particularly Boab tree (on the King

River road as opposed to at Derby) wasn't used as a prison – there had been no record of bars here. Rather, it was a staging post where police and prisoners were camped. I thought it would be disrespectful to photograph the tree that was used as a prison in Derby, so I avoided it. Instead, this tree shows the strangeness of our desires to see a dark history even where there was less of one than we imagine. I did some research into Dark Tourism and this resonated with that. It's almost like people wish for this site to have that level of violence associated with it, and are disappointed when it doesn't."

In another series titled *Wrought*, Fenwick explored an obscure mining town in rural Queensland. Spanning five years, this project presented the dubious rewards of a prosperous mining town alongside portrayals of the devastated nearby environment.

Fenwick describes the aim of her practice as being an exploration of "the allegorical potential of rural Australia throughout cycles of expansion and decay." But while she does not state the fact, Fenwick is clearly also exploring the moral cycles, those of abuse of the land and its indigenous peoples, its momentary physical rewards and its long-term moral and environmental consequences. Her *Ant Works* simply take this further – a decorated solid-silver platter from Colonial times is now simply a dining plate for native ants – such is the folly of man.

But Fenwick is far from a 'chick from the bush' as Aussie parlance would no doubt claim 'out back.' She may have grown up with only a rudimentary education in the township of Humpty Doo, but she has avidly consumed any other literature she could get her hands on. She has simultaneously completed a dual Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Queensland and is now ploughing through a PhD at RMIT. And through her art, with a wisdom and aesthetic that belies her age, she has tackled major questions of Australia's mixed history and dubious future. One can only follow Liss Fenwick's career with a certain degree of awe, and perhaps fear, for her *Ant Works* take no prisoners.

Dr. Ashley Crawford