

There is always something of an irony when an artist who has been quietly fermenting a specific style suddenly finds themselves as part of a broader 'movement.' After years of painting essentially unfashionable imagery the world suddenly twists and the artist finds they are part of an international zeitgeist. The strange and compelling case of Heidi Yardley certainly fits this eerie pattern.

Melbourne artists have long held true to a distinctly dark aesthetic, from Albert Tucker to Peter Booth to Louise Hearman. But that aesthetic, what has been recently dubbed 'neo goth' has spread like a fecund virus around the globe. A recent book produced in London, *Hell Bound: New Gothic Art*, features artists from around the world who are delving into darkness (including Australia's Ricky Swallow and David Noonan) and curator Alison Kubler captured the spirit in her massive exhibition *neo goth: back in black* at the at The University of Queensland Art Museum last year.

Heidi Yardley was included in *neo goth*, thus placing her work firmly in a curatorial context. But, of course, the problem with such contexts is that they are inevitably simplifications of an individual artists' project. To be sure Yardley's work has all of the hallmarks of the 'gothic' - the dark palette, the vampiric figures, the air of melancholy. But there is also a tenderness to these works, a heavy whiff of nostalgia and a heady nod to popular culture. Indeed, given the titles and subject matter of much of Yardley's work it's not hard to work out what she plays in her studio as she works - Nick Cave, naturally, The Swans, Roland S. Howard, Anita Lane and Einstuerzende Neubauten all leap to mind.

Although cautious of being labeled, Yardley says the term Gothic doesn't perturb her, but she is quick to define her broader interests. "Idealism gone wrong," she says. "The contradictions of science and spirituality, occult and ritual practices, neo-paganism, the torment of nostalgia and the unreliability of memory, duality, doppelgangers, the supernatural and uncanny... I could go on and on."

"I don't actually see my work as specifically Gothic," Yardley says. "There are plenty of things I like about the Gothic in art and literature, but to use it as a definitive description of my work would be unnecessary pigeon-holing. I think Gothic can mean different things to different people, so it would only create confusion, especially due to the aesthetics associated with the subculture."

Perhaps inevitably Yardley's work is often compared to that of another Melbourne artist delving in the dark, Louise Hearman. Yardley readily admits to Hearman as something of an influence. "I would say yes, definitely. I think she is a very strong and unique artist and her ability with oil paint is really inspiring. My work has always been very tonal and the figure has been my main focus along with darker subject matter, so a comparison I think is inevitable, but still very flattering for me."

In broader terms it is artists such as Munch, Balthus and Edward Hopper that had a major impact on Yardley. "I'm also inspired by many contemporary painters including Luc Tuymans, Rosson Crowe, Kaye Donachie and Victor Man," she says. But, as with many artists of her generation, filmmakers such as David Lynch and Alfred Hitchcock have also influenced the way she sees the world, leading to a distinctly cinematic air to her work resulting in images that could almost be film stills from some imaginary film.

"I think that would be a good description as there is no real 'before' or 'after' with the paintings," she says. "They can seem like a still shot where you don't know what's in the next frame and I'm interested in this ambiguity or disjunctive narrative."

And then of course there would be the soundtrack. The impact of punk and new wave and their attendant aesthetics is inestimable for Yardley's generation. Bands and musicians such as The Stooges, The Pixies, Joy Division and Nick Drake are staples in studios around the world. With such titles as *Autoluminescent*, *Song of the Damned*, *Your Messed Up World* and *Stranger Than Kindness*, Yardley's influences in this arena are explicit. "I constantly listen to music in the studio and it has a significant effect on how I see the work," she says. "Listening to certain music while looking at paintings can give the images incredible intensity. For the past eight years I have used song titles or lyrics as titles for my paintings."

Tying these disparate influences together is Yardley's aesthetic of nostalgia and the meaning of the word (Nostos 'returning home' and Algos 'pain') and it's associations with illness and homesickness. Regardless of how contemporaneous her imagery may be, it is inevitably filtered through a veil of yearning and melancholia.

"Consistent with most of my work has been a sense of longing, and sometimes loneliness which is really just an aesthetic that appeals to me," she says. "I'm interested in the idea of longing for something that isn't possible, yearning for another time and place. Painting for me is a way of dealing with

fear and the darker aspects of the psyche. Sometimes the work is melancholic and other times it's more sinister."

An inherent tool in this approach is her appropriation of imagery from aged copies of such magazines as *Playboy* and *House and Garden*. The soft porn (at least by today's standards) and quaint interiors recall Sigmund Freud's attempt to define the Uncanny. Freud utilised the German term *unheimlich* - the opposite of *heimlich* (homely): "the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar." By bringing the *heimlich* - the 'homely' - back from its death in the 1960s and '70s, Yardley acts as an aesthetic Resurrectionist. Like a zombie resurrection, the images are brought back to a shadowy half-life.

"Quite a few years ago I bought a few *OUI* magazines from a second-hand shop and became really interested in the photography and the print quality of these journals from the 1970s," she says. "I later worked for a business that sold vintage magazines and newspapers and was given a number of *House and Garden* magazines from the 1960s which have an otherworldliness about them. I'm a hoarder of visual resources and have a variety of publications for reference. Many of the images have an unintentionally sinister look because of the printing methods and inks used at the time and this really appeals to me. I'm extremely selective about the imagery I choose to work with - I like to take the images from their original context and create new interpretations. The images can be transformed through scale or cropping or manipulating on the computer and new meanings arise when placed next to other images. Magazine content is meant to be ephemeral so taking an image and painting it leads to longer contemplation of a singular moment; it's like pulling something out of a time capsule."

One of the most *unheimlich* features of Yardley's work is, rather oddly, hair. Her sweeping and lustrous locks often obscure her subject, acting as an emotional mask, and often lead to melancholic self-portraiture. "I've always been interested in the figure and have painted a lot of faces," she says. "Although the faces were not meant to be portraits, I found people would constantly ask 'who' was in the picture, which I found really annoying as they seemed to miss the point. So I began to paint the back of people's heads, to obscure the identity of the figure and create the sense of something secret going on and a voyeuristic position for the viewer. This led me to paint hair and I became really interested in women's hair and the way it sort of behaves like liquid and has endless possibilities with light and shadow and shape.

"Whether we like it or not there are sexual connotations to long blonde hair for example and it is quite powerful on its own. I bought wigs so that I could use myself as a reference and create different identities. The blonde wig I bought seemed to have its own identity, which led me to paint it just on its own."

Artists have, of course, dealt with the dark for time immemorial. Hieronymus Bosch and Goya were hardly the stuff of lightweight entertainment. But for Heidi Yardley's generation the 'gothic' seems to be *de rigueur*, clearly capturing a strange zeitgeist.

"I think artists have always dealt with heavy or dark content," Yardley says. "Perhaps it has to do with dealing with the world and making sense of it. I remember when I was 19 my grandmother offered me \$100 to 'paint something nice'. She didn't want to see the dark imagery I was into and I suppose this was because she had been through the war and knew suffering first-hand. I could have put it down to teenage angst, but I'm still doing it. So, I think for me it's an individual thing rather than collective, although it could still be a condition of our generation."

- Ashley Crawford