

level



CAMILLE SERISIER

You Just Keep Me Hanging On

You just keep me hanging on: Camille Serisier connects cultural heritage and the natural environment

One day during art class my third grade teacher instructed each of my classmates and I to get out our colouring pencils and draw a landscape, which we did with heads bent low in concentration. After comparing our sketches he ushered us to the window and pointed to the horizon. "Where does the sky end?" It was a moment of revelation: the sky wasn't a thin blue ceiling propped up by an empty white space separating it from the ground. Looking beyond the learnt system of representation that informed how the landscape existed in my mind's eye, I saw that the sky ended where the ground began.


I am returned to this moment when viewing Camille Serisier's latest solo exhibition, *You Just Keep Me Hanging On*. These watercolour paintings on paper prompt a similar, albeit more sophisticated, consideration of the distance that exists in cultural consciousness between what is imagined and what is actual in relation to the natural environment. Somewhat akin to the way my third grade class represented the sky as a blue line, trees as cartoonish green bubbles and the sun as a smiling yellow circle with surprising consistency, these works take up features of a visual language used repeatedly throughout history to represent and narrativise nature. Serisier's practice to date has utilised a variety of mediums to investigate how this kind of inherited cultural material often escapes rigorous intellectual and social critique, gesturing absurdly to the ways in which it continues to exert power over contemporary attitudes. In particular, her works expose the dominant history of the natural world as an inherently patriarchal account, drawing connections between the imperative to comprehend and control the environment – weather patterns, climate, life cycles – and prevailing attitudes regarding women's bodies, moral status, and social expectations.





In these paintings, the artist brings together scenes from religious texts, mythological figures, cultural icons, childhood fairytales, and weather symbols, employing these familiar signifiers to playfully subversive ends: in one painting Adam and Eve flee a gun-toting cowboy standing between the enormous spread legs of a naked woman; in another a modern supermum rides a clam adorned with banners reading "SAVE THE DOLPHINS"; elsewhere a masked man and woman wearing strap-on shark fins face off, holding oversized sets of snarling fake teeth. Bringing together different aspects of the artist's practice, these works mirror and make overt the process of cultural inheritance through which nature is culturally constructed via Serisier's methodological approach of referencing her previous work. The source material that these paintings draw and extend upon is her recently exhibited body of work *I'm Glad I Spent It With You*, photographs of large, elaborate tableau vivants that combine living actors with sets and costumes cut from paper. In their reinterpretation for this exhibition, Serisier deliberately includes the obvious signs of construction displayed in these photographs, such as seams where the paper met in these cut-out props. The inspiration for these works similarly came from the earlier collaborative project *A Perfect Day*, which involved Serisier and fellow artist, Stephanie Hicks, corresponding via small scale images posted one after the other on the internet, which Serisier then used as idea drawings from which to construct her tableaux¹.

Rather than seeing *You Just Keep Me Hanging On* as the final product of this evolution, Serisier clarifies that each body of work functions akin to "Chinese whispers" transforming the original image with each visual re-telling². The titles selected for these connected shows draws attention to this process of reinterpretation through a pop cultural reference, using lyrics from the Lou Reed song *A Perfect Day*. As the artist explains, not only does this piece of cultural heritage assign an emotional narrative and metaphorical power to the natural world through lyrics referencing the weather; it relates to this sequence of projects because 'the works are about a moment or



record of a moment that is worth documenting'³. Serisier's practice puts into action the idea that any narrative or historical record maintains its cultural stronghold by silencing an infinite number of other possible viewpoints; in making these works Serisier has made a choice about which images become the 'official' version of events. However, the incongruence that exists between these versions of the same event, which is highlighted by their simultaneous exhibition in different Brisbane venues, undermines any one work or body of work's claim to authority⁴.

Acknowledging artifice as a powerful part of human understanding and experience of the natural world, rather than setting up a binary between the artificial and the natural, these works use humour as an entry point to complex contemporary issues. Serisier's practice both reverses inherited cultural narratives that demonise nature and the feminine, while creating new cultural material with which to think about our environment. Ultimately, her works suggest possibilities for new ways of seeing the world around us; new ways of drawing the sky.

by Nicola Scott

¹ For documentation of this collaboration see <http://hickserisier.blogspot.com.au/>

² Email correspondence with the artist 2013

³ Ibid.

⁴ Coinciding with this exhibition, photographs featured in *I'm Glad I spent it with you* are currently on show as part of *Field* at The Hold Artspace, Brisbane.

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You Just Keep Me Hanging On

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Level Project Space - Studio 3.12 109 Edward Street Brisbane

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