



Animal magnetism

ASHLEY CRAWFORD IS DRAWN TO THE WAY MARISE MAAS'S PRIMAL ANIMAL RENDERINGS FLOAT LIKE THE SPIRIT ICONS OF PRE-CONTACT ART. PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIRSTIN GOLLINGS.





Marise Maas's studio is a crowded, confined space, barely enough room for her easel and stacked canvases. But space doesn't feel like an issue here – there is so much spatiality exuding from her simple, graphically tight canvases that the sensation, rather than being claustrophobic, is one of wandering into vast, unexplored psychic dimensions. It seems like a world before the complexities of civilisation and technology took over, a time of some form of spiritual freedom, a time of contemplation and the acknowledgment of the natural ebbs and flows of energy and real feelings of melancholy and celebration.

Maas's canvases explode with simple – although not simplistic – renderings of goats, stags, horses and crows, rendered with primal urgency. Her animals cavort and stampede against vast planes of gentle minimalist colouration: deep greys and pastels; vast plains of cloud-like surface. Her menagerie float like the animal-spirit icons of pre-contact art in the traditions of the Australian Aboriginals, American Indians or Tibetan Buddhists.

There is nothing literally religious about Maas's art, but there is no denying the inherent sense of spirituality in the way she paints: it is meditative, but not without a somewhat contradictory urgency; her pictures zoom in and out of Zen-like contemplation through to manic gestural mark-making.

That these works are deeply personal is beyond dispute. Talking in the studio one balmy afternoon, it quickly becomes apparent that the reason the works have such a strangely profound effect is the fact that at their core are literally issues of life and death: the first the birth of her first child; the second the tragic suicide of her sister, who had suffered from bi-polar disorder.

But despite this, rather strangely these are not paintings of either celebration or mourning; they transcend the more literal readings, floating in a zone that feels more like a stripping away of the obvious reflections of motherhood or bereavement into a realm that hovers above.

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Marise Maas was born in 1969 in Utrecht, The Netherlands and emigrated to Australia with her parents in 1982. In 1991 she secured her Bachelor of Fine Art at the Tasmanian School of Art, having specialised in printmaking. Over the next few years several elements would influence the direction of the young artist. The first was travel. In 1992 she made the obligatory pilgrimage to New York for the first time and then in 1993 she moved to Holland to study printmaking at Grafisch Atelier in Haarlem before settling for a time in Amsterdam. The second element was poverty. "I was very poor and couldn't get enough money together to continue printmaking, so I took up painting," she says. But even that was a struggle; seeking surfaces to paint on she ended up dismantling the ceiling where she lived to salvage boards to paint on. "I'm a very impatient person," she admits. "I just had to start making things."

But arguably it was her 1992 trip to New York that had lasting impact. It was in Gotham that she discovered the work of **Susan Rothenberg**.

Rothenberg first gained attention in the mid-1970s when art was dominated by abstraction. In 1973 Rothenberg sketched the silhouette of a horse divided by a vertical line, introducing this simple, outlined image of a horse on a large-scale canvas. These large paintings were thickly painted in tempera or acrylic and usually dominated by a single color. The combination of recognisable subject matter and abstract form produced a sense of immediacy that brought her considerable acclaim. Between 1973 and 1979 she made a number of such paintings, including the famous IXI, based on the motif of the silhouetted horse.

The way that Rothenberg's images resemble prehistoric drawings found on the walls of caves clearly impacted on the younger Maas, an influence seen to this day.

"When I first saw her work in New York I was breathless," says Maas. "I was just so jealous."

Informed by her experiences abroad, Maas returned to Melbourne in 1996 and has shown every year since, starting at Roar Studios Gallery in Fitzroy in 1997, three shows at Jackman Gallery and a further three at Flinders Lane Gallery. Her work has been snapped up by numerous private and public collections including the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

The depiction of animals in art is as long as the history of art itself. But, despite having a book of *Gray's Anatomy* – that famous guidebook to literal form – on her desk, Maas doesn't aspire to realism *per se*. Her earlier depictions of the horse are simple, highly graphic affairs with straight legs and simple lines; "No knees," she notes. In her more recent work, her



Marise Maas, *Bright Light of Day*, 2003. Oil on Canvas, 185 x 185cm. COURTESY FUNDERS/LANE GALLERY

menagerie has evolved, although there is still a conscious avoidance of realism. Living in Tasmania, she says she was a "horsey girl," the type who loved horses, but wasn't terribly practical when it came to looking after them. "I did ride my horse. But at the age of 16 lost interest in exercising horses due to my love of boys taking over."

Animals seem to be remarkably virulent in contemporary Australian art, most especially amongst Maas's contemporaries. Artists such as Louise Weaver, Kate Rohde, Jennifer Mills, Linde Ivimey, Adam Cullen, Emily Floyd, Kathy Temin, Sharon Goodwin, Lisa Roet, David Noonan and Irene Hanenbergh have all tackled animals as subject matter. Perhaps the closest to Maas, however, would be Jenny Watson, who also seems to have embraced aspects of the deliberately naive depiction seen in the work of Susan Rothenberg.

Maas's aesthetic was developing just post the international art world explosion dubbed the Transavantgarde by curator and critic Achille Bonito Oliva. This embraced such Italian artists as Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi, whose work shares Maas's tendency towards simple, graphic form (indeed, there are books on both artists in her studio). But where Clemente and Cucchi seem self-conscious to a point of dubious fashionability, Maas, like Rothenberg, seems more interested in finding a degree of Zen-like simplicity devoid of pretension. She is also more free in her articulation of line, alluding to the influence of such artists as Cy Twombly, Jean Dubuffet and Paul Klee.

Maas's deliberately crude, meditative approach to mark-making also recalls the approach of many painters who have been dubbed "outsider artists" and Maas quickly admits to a fascination with the psychological when it comes to art. But she also embraces what she describes as the "My Niece Can Paint" school of art, where the crude depiction of hamburgers or chickens appear on the façade of fast food shop windows often painted by a relative as opposed to a professional. The term was inspired by the Melbourne cartoonist Leunig, who used the term "Nephew Art" in one of his cartoons. "It struck a chord because I had always been fascinated





by the artwork done by friends and family members on walls and windows of shops." Maas finds these rough and ready images beguiling.

Her earlier works were obsessive renderings of things she would find in her immediate environment, whether they were lampshades, insects, fruit, instruments, cars or objects from domestic scenes.

Being an artist, she readily admits, is a self-indulgent affair, but two events have seen her work shift dramatically.

Having had a child, her son Tom, she suddenly had responsibilities she hadn't so much as contemplated beforehand.

"It's really about that moment of freedom when you lose yourself," she says of painting now. It is the only time, she says, that now as a mother, she can ever "get in my own head, when you can forget yourself a little bit."

But it is not, of course, that simple. There has been another alongside her in the studio the whole time she has produced this body of work. Maas has a photograph of her sister Tjaarke

Left: Marise Maas, *Seeing More* c. 2005. Oil on canvas, 55 x 110cm.

Right: Marise Maas, *Trif & Snif*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 55 x 110cm.

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Marise Maas, *Rugs*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 130 x 130cm. COURTESY FLINDERS LANE GALLERY

Maas works on up to 10 canvases at a time. She likes to start by applying paint without thought or plan.

pinned to the wall. She is a stunningly beautiful young lady, but one who in life was tortured with the demon condition of bi-polar disorder.

In 2004, Tjaarke disappeared in Italy. Maas said that she "knew" something was wrong. It transpired that she had leapt from a cliff, arms akimbo, "like a bird," Maas says.

Tjaarke was also a painter, and had a fascination for pigeons – usually dead – as a subject for drawing. The problem was, Maas says, that she was rather tardy in throwing them out when she was finished and decomposing pigeons tended to be a feature in her somewhat eccentric sister's studio.

Tjaarke hadn't lived in Australia since she was 17 and the last six years of her life she lived in Fiesole just outside Florence. "She jumped in Assisi by the way, bloody St. Francis ... It always felt unfair that she was bipolar. But she was of course so much more than that. She was definitely a much better painter than I'll ever be..."

"I think when I was painting at that time I often felt like I was doing it all for her."

Maas's own bird pictures are darkly gothic affairs. Rather than pigeons she paints the shadowy forms of crows. More so than most of her work they are deeply brooding iconographic affairs.

Maas works on up to 10 canvases at a time. She likes to start by applying paint without thought or plan. "Naturally there are a lot of mistakes doing it this way," she admits. "But I usually end up the happiest with the mistakes. I could finish an entire painting and then spot the accident and have to rebuild the painting around the mistake." ■

New works by Marise Maas will be exhibited at Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne from 4 to 29 April 2006.

