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Siopis's tracts of fluid formlessness give grief a face

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By Lucinda Jolly



SPATTERS: Late and Soon dominates this show in scale and presence. The exhibition is an evocation of the mourning process.

STILL AND MOVING. An exhibition of paintings and a video by Penny Siopis at the Stevenson gallery until August 29. **LUCINDA JOLLY** reviews.

PENNY SIOPIS'S current exhibition comes on the not quite cool heels of her first extensive retrospective *Time and Again* at the Iziko National Gallery at the beginning of this year, which was dedicated to the artist's late husband Colin Richards. The retrospective show

included work up to 2012, but it contained no work of hers since her husband's passing. There is however a photograph in that catalogue of Siopis working on a painting. She presents as a sinewy figure dressed in black in a sea of newspapers in front of a large canvas showing a ruptured colour field of red, Carmine to be specific.

Not the dark carmine associated with dried blood, but one with a slightly more orange bias that is Siopis's trademark. A pigment that suggests both birth and death. Trajectories of words cut from newspapers spiral and curl just under the surface like unfurling, effervescent fiddlehead ferns heading upwards from the baseline of the painting to its top. In a walkabout, Siopis explained that after her husband's death, often her only connection with the outside world was through the purchase of the newspaper from a local vendor, so the words and their graphic shapes became a tentative holding. Titled *Late and Soon*, it dominates this show in scale and presence. Its carmine spatters remind us of the passion that is inherent in grief. Whereas the retrospective *Time and Again* was broadly based, although thematically structured, this exhibition is an evocation of grief and the mourning process.

It incorporates both the exclusivity of the personal, as well as a wider inclusivity. The artist writes that "grief has no face" which may talk of one of her influences, the 20th century philosopher George Bataille and his notion of formlessness.

Bataille advocated the abandonment of lofty ideals in favour of "get(ting) down and dirty". But it is through these very tracts of fluid formlessness that the artist has given grief a face, making the unquantifiable quantifiable through her preoccupation with matter or materiality.

In keeping with Bataille's premise, Siopis draws our attention to the substance itself from which the paintings are made, primarily ink and cold glue, making it as important as the subject matter itself, instead of just the support act. Loss may have unmoored the artist, but her modus operandi remains constant. The evidence of chance and risk, possibility intrinsic to process, are again present in the bloom and purl of ink bonded and sealed within the milky glaucomic opaqueness of cold glue in the paintings. And it's the evocation of the state of mourning as opposed to the narrative that becomes the main sense of this exhibition and reflective of the way the artist works. The presence of polarities are very much part of this exhibition. They begin with *Still and Moving*; those opposite states found at the extreme ends of a continuum and are visible throughout this exhibition.

They include the personal and the collective, form and formlessness, mourning and melancholia, holding back and letting go, process and completion, a fascination with the contradictions of a waterfall of stone from the Greek myth of Niobe (the symbol of grief in western literature and philosophy) and birth and death. Siopis's very process of working blind suggests the process of mourning around which much is written and for which there is no manual. In many ways these works are like a brightly pigmented shroud that the artists is weaving to clothe grief. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope, the wife of the Ithacan king Odysseus, meaning 'weaver' in Greek is Siopis' namesake.

She is sometimes seen as "a symbol of connubial fidelity" and is also the weaver of a shroud for her wandering husband which is never complete, for she undoes it periodically to keep the predatory suitors at bay. But unlike her namesake, Siopis's husband will not return. The exhibition is conceived as three versions of grief. Two are rooms containing large-scale paintings and a series of smaller works titled *Notes*, which were made alongside her triptych

Late and Soon and a room containing a video, *Lay Bare Beside. Notes*, can be read as intimate visual journals. These beautiful jewel-like evocations of bright, but enigmatic presences, so unlike the larger spills, were made around dreams or splashes of emotion that were later worked into. In *Lay Bare Beside* Siopis works in her usual way of knitting random fragments of film bought from markets and charity shops together with text and sound to create a new narrative.

It concerns the burial of two human skulls. *Lay Bare Beside* has two sources – Siopis's commission to make a film on the enquiry into the return of human remains from German museums and her late husband's concern around the ethical burial of two human skulls owned by him from when he was a medical illustrator. At a walkabout, she spoke about the split between making something that expressed her feelings but that didn't meet her expectations. Yet I would have liked to have seen the *Salon de Refuses* pieces, those discarded by the artist for being too personal and not appropriate in the context of a galleries public face.

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