



EXHIBITION DATES 10 FEBRUARY - 16 MARCH 2012

- 1 Nelson, J.L. (2007), 'The Dark Ages' (p.p. 191-201), *History Workshop Journal*, 63(1), p.p. 193-194.
- 2 Bynum, C. W. (1997). 'Wonder' (p.1-26), *The American Historical Review*, 102(1). University of Chicago press. p. 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 4 William of Newburgh (circa 1198), *History of English Affairs*, Chapter 28, Book 1. Fordham University, New York.
- 5 Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 20. See also Munkler, M. (2002). 'Experiencing Strangeness: Monstrous Peoples on the Edge of the Earth as Depicted on Medieval Mappae Mundi' (p.p. 195-222), *The Medieval History Journal*, 2002:5. p 220.
- 6 Bynum, *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 7 Bynum, *ibid.*, p. 20.
- 8 See Ellis, M. (2000), *The History of Gothic Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, p.p. 22-3 and Botting, M. (1996), *Gothic*, Routledge, Oxon, England, p. 47.
- 9 Aristotle, (350 BC/1998), *The Metaphysics* 1:2, Penguin, London, England, p. 8.
- 10 Camus, A. (1942/1991), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Random House, New York, p. 2.
- 11 Descartes (1649/1970), 'The Passions of the Soul' in *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, London, England, p. 53.
- 12 Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 13 William of Newburgh, *op. cit.*
- 14 Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 16 Collins, P. (2011), 'True Blood: The Real Vampire Slayers', *New Scientist*, 209(2797).

All artists currently work in the School of Art and Design, Curtin University.

Thea Costantino received a grant from the Department of Culture and the Arts for this exhibition and is represented by Galerie Dusseldorf, Perth.



Cover: Thea Costantino, *Portrait I* 2012, graphite and gesso on marine ply, 59 x 59 cm

Leaf: Anna Nazzari, *Fateless never Faithless* 2012, pyrography on rock maple, 44 x 30 cm

Inside Right: Pia Bennett and Joshua Fitzpatrick, *Apothecary Rose* (Detail) 2011, silk cut linoleum, gesso, ink and oil on board, 210 x 540 cm

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**A
MAGNIFICENT
WORLD**

PIA BENNETT
THEA COSTANTINO
JOSHUA FITZPATRICK
ANNA NAZZARI

THE USE VALUE OF MEDIEVAL WONDERMENT

Situated between Classical Antiquity and the ‘rebirth’ of Western culture in the Renaissance, the millennia-long ‘Middle Ages’ (running roughly from the 5th to the 15th centuries) saw Western philosophy dominated by Christian theology, rather than rationalist epistemology. The derogatory Renaissance moniker ‘The Dark Ages’ was coined by Petrarch, whose withering appraisal of the centuries preceding his own would be championed by his fellow Italian Humanists, and later, the British Empiricists. ¹ These philosophers established a common understanding of the period as an embarrassing misstep in Western culture’s evolution toward Enlightenment: an age devoid of cogency and in which (as the Roman Empire underwent its extended fall) violence and chaos dominated more civilised pursuits, and wonderment was an everyday experience.

Bynum has acknowledged “the characterisation of medieval Europe as ‘awash in wonders’”, ² noting that “the period...saw a great increase in stories of marvels, monsters, miracles, and ghosts”. ³ Medieval historian William of Newburgh, for example, documented ominous portents, numerous ‘revenants’ (the wandering dead), the infamous ‘Green Children of Woolpit’ and other such phenomena in his *History of English Affairs*. ⁴ Similarly we can note the peasants fearfully shrinking from Halley’s comet on the Bayeux Tapestry, ecclesiastical collections of ‘miraculous’ relics, accounts of mass possessions and ‘dancing mania’, and travellers’ tales and *mappae mundi* recounting the “fabulous places...monsters, mermaids and fairies” to be encountered beyond European shores.⁵ Medieval wonderment was directed not only toward what we now consider to be fantastic, but also more pedestrian encounters, as the world opened up to European explorers: Gervais of Tilbury afforded amazement to “not only stories of ghosts and vampires but also details of the migration of quail and the flight of squirrels” ⁶, while Marco Polo provided rapturous descriptions of the various peacocks, ostriches, giraffes, crocodiles and chickens he encountered outside of Europe. ⁷

For many post-Enlightenment artists, this awe-inspired sensibility has represented a retort to empiricist and utilitarian approaches to the world that seemed limited in their (intended) ability to facilitate happiness. For the 19th Century Romantics in particular, a nostalgic return to medieval imagery and the recognition of the sublime in nature represented a metaphysical authenticity and communion with the natural world that they felt had been lost via Enlightenment pragmatism and the industrial revolution. ⁸ This legacy provides an obvious point of reference for the works comprising *A Magnificent World*; like their Romantic antecedents, these artists collectively draw upon the iconography of the past to uncanny or sublime effect. Bennett and Fitzpatrick’s works in particular recall the aesthetics of Romantic painting, employing heroic scale to overwhelm their viewer, while Costantino and Nazzari draw upon the gaps, misreadings and superstitions within historical sources, to point to a bygone sense of moral certainty. All of the artists evoke ambiguity, a common source of horror in Gothic fiction, be it physical, as in Bennett, Fitzpatrick and Nazzari’s various hybrid creatures, or moral and/or sexual, in Costantino’s assortment of malevolent drawn, sculpted and written characters.

I would like to suggest, however, that while these artists continue the Romantic legacy of Gothic pastiche, they also engage on a more philosophical level, reflecting an understanding of the implications of wonderment that is in fact closer to its medieval origins. For despite its Humanist, Empiricist and Romantic conflation with naiveté (be it an embarrassingly primitive or archaically ‘pure’ one), wonderment has consistently been theorised as both objective and pragmatic. Aristotle

credited it with the foundations of philosophy itself, stating of “the earliest philosophers” that “it is owing to their wonder that men now begin and at first began to philosophise”. ⁹ Even Camus (whose Absurdism is a particular influence to Nazzari’s works) at his most nihilistic, prefaced his *Myth of Sisyphus* by noting the centrality of philosophical wonder. ¹⁰ From the beginning of the Enlightenment, Descartes defined wonder as “first of all the passions”, ¹¹ as it takes places prior to judgement or comparison. Crucially, it is therefore a purely intellectual passion; love, hate and other such emotional responses can only occur subsequently. Rather than ignorance or novelty therefore, Bynum argues that wonderment represents a distinct and “very sophisticated” approach to knowing:

Medieval theorists...understood wonder (admiratio) as cognitive, non-appropriative, perspectival, and particular...To medieval thinkers, human beings cannot wonder at what is not there; but neither can we wonder at that which we fully understand. ¹²

William of Newburgh echoed these ides, describing supernatural phenomena as “wonderful...not merely on account of their rarity, but because some latent meaning is attached to them”, ¹³ while his medieval contemporary Gervias of Tilbury made the distinction that only facts could induce wonder. ¹⁴ As such, Bynum notes a key distinction between medieval epistemology and that of our own era, in that “medieval philosophers and theologians emphasised wonder as a first step toward knowledge; we, in our postmodern anxiety, tend rather to emphasise how hard it is to know”. ¹⁵ Costantino’s short stories and associated drawings and objects explore this tension, staging confrontations between science (what we know) and the supernatural (what we wonder at): a distinction we are secure in making, but that the medievals did not feel the need for. Similarly, Nazzari’s pyrographic retelling of Vampire lore draws on what was until recently, very much a pragmatic and necessary knowledge: Collins notes the belief in Vampires across Europe as recently as the mid-Eighteenth century. ¹⁶ Bennett and Fitzpatrick’s reinterpretation of historical motifs suggests that there is a knowledge to be had from antiquated aesthetics that runs deeper than mere appropriation, that by approaching such material with a sense of wonderment, new and useful knowledge can be generated.

More than an indulgent enjoyment of the grotesque or fanciful therefore, the works comprising *A Magnificent World* demonstrate an approach to knowing that generations of philosophers and post-structuralists have suggested is ripe with ethical possibility in approaching the unknown. For while confrontations with “marvels, monsters, miracles, and ghosts” seem less likely than they once were, and while the world is not opening up in the same manner it did when Europeans were dazzled by their first confrontations with ostriches and giraffes, the art gallery provides one of few spaces in which contemporary audiences may still find cause to wonder.

Andrew Nicholls, 2011

