



above: xxxx, dims cm (2)
cover: *Underworld* (detail)

All works acrylic and resin on board

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sullivan+strumpf
FINE ART

KATE SHAW
REDUX

Opening
15 April, 6–8pm

15 APRIL – 4 MAY 2008



Terra Nullis

There’s a slight problem when looking back on the writings of the visionary British author J.G. Ballard. Way back in 1990, well before the term ‘global warming’ was coined, he was describing it in riveting detail. His novel *Hello America* describes a continent gone awry, a depopulated New York that is buried in dry sand and a Los Angeles that is covered in fecund tropical growth: “A desert sea had flowed through Manhattan and congealed around these huge towers. The ravages of a century’s hostile climate had split the Appalachians and sprung this ransom from their hidden lodes.”

This could well be the world that Kate Shaw has decided to paint, a world where ice caps float down the Hudson and tropical vines infest downtown LA. While these paintings are stunningly beautiful fictions, one cannot help but be reminded of the very real rate of environmental degradation we are currently witnessing.

Shaw’s landscapes are an intoxicating, candy-coloured phantasmagoria of nature gone mad. Only Shaw would impose an alpine wilderness over the desert that hosts LA or the towering city-scape of Manhattan melting into a toxic lake.

Shaw seems to be delving into notions of the sublime via catastrophe. While she has

immersed herself in landscape in Australia as well, it seems that being based in the environmentally-recalcitrant US of A has inspired a new sense of Apocalyptic urgency to her work. These paintings may be beautiful, but they are also ominous. Her vibrant colouration, whilst enticing, also carries an off-kilter saturation, in much the same way that there is an eerie beauty to an unnatural chemical reaction.

Shaw remains obsessed by the notion of the city in ruin, the land reclaiming the city. “Disaster scenarios kind of,” she says. “But only a disaster for humanity...”

There is a powerful psychological aspect to Shaw’s work. The colours vibrate with

unnatural energy and the ‘skyline’ is reminiscent of the pulsing of sound waves. In describing the impetus behind the work Shaw quotes Colin Greenland on the Surrealist notion to “destroy the manifest form of the external world and release the deep desires latent within it... whatever the exact nature of the catastrophe, it has disrupted the continuity of history and left a world of arbitrary fragments from which the survivors must piece together their own realities.”

To lovers of nature and beauty, Shaw’s vision is a strangely reassuring one. It has long been a sci-fi conceit to imagine the world without its swarming masses of

homo-sapiens, a world where a seed drifts into a tiny crack in the asphalt, only to start the process of the city reverting, finally, to a jungle. In Shaw’s world this has already occurred. The power of nature has crushed the artifices of mankind; massive ice-caps have reformed and the wanton destruction of natural environs has been repaired. Shaw’s world is *terra nullis*, and all the better for it.

Ashley Crawford

above right: *Underworld* 76 x 101 cm (2)
above left: *Continental Drift*, 91 x 91cm (3)
left: *Sleeper*, 61 x 51cm