

!Metro Arts

Front cover

Choreography of War Reportage detail

185 x 174 cm 2002

oil on clay primed polyester

[1]

Logic Block

115 x 90 cm 2003

oil on clay primed polyester

[2]

The transformation of the Tree

115 x 90 cm 2003

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[3]

Sparky the Culture Hero

115 x 90 cm 2003

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[4]

Illogical Box

90 x 115 cm 2003

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This catalogue has been published on the occasion of the exhibition Fossilphilia, Metro Arts, Brisbane, 5 – 21 March 2003.

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Madeleine Kelly would like to thank Chris Sharp, Sue Benner, Josh Milani, Pat HOFFIE, Stuart Ellis and her family.

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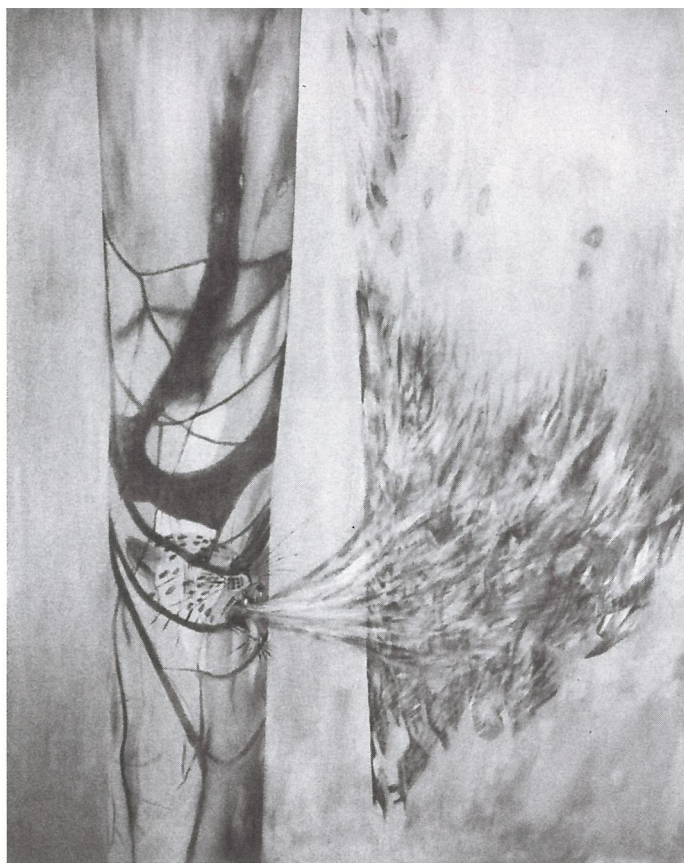


Madeleine Kelly



Fossilphilia
(Filaments from Iraq)

5 march – 21 march 2003



On the transformation of oil

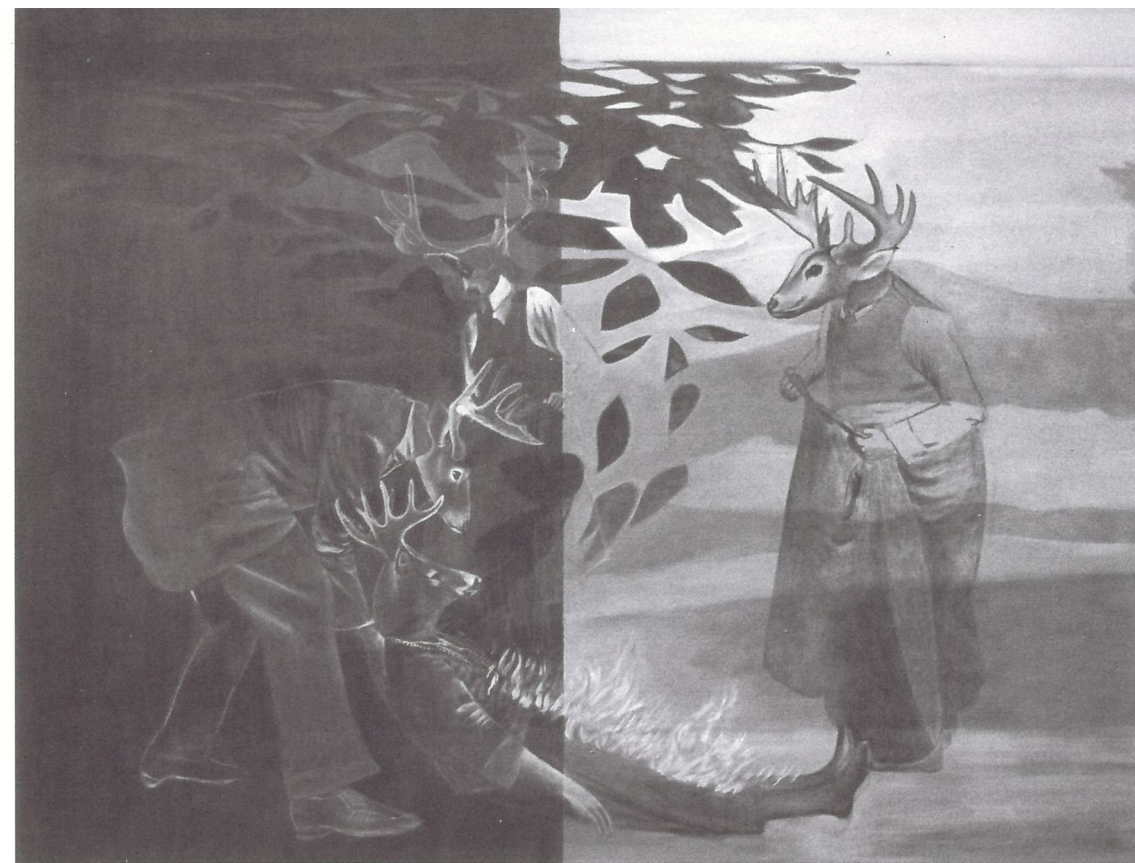
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In recent times there have been psychiatric and behavioural studies on what has been termed the 'energy dependence syndrome'.¹ This is a condition predominant in western culture that views the availability of energy not only as central to quotidian life, but as the basis of a potentially detrimental addiction. Technological advancement, it is held, is dependant on the ubiquitous availability of energy to fuel our toasters, our televisions, our phones, our computers, our cars, our hair-dryers; or in short, our lives. It is a condition, therefore, that exists as an effect of the progression of western economies that acutely affects and informs most aspects of daily life. The more we progress, the more dependent we become. But at what cost?

These recent paintings by Madeleine Kelly take this ethical quandary as a starting point for their enquiry into the socio-political tenor of our times. Their focal point can perhaps be found in the exhibition's title **Fossilphilia** which translates roughly as 'a love of fossil fuels'. In a world currently poised in extreme tension over the reserves of oil in the Middle-East, the relevance of these concerns would be difficult to refute.

On a personal level, the ambition to absorb these issues into her artwork pushes Kelly's practice into new territory by revealing a desire to engage critically with contemporary political issues through painting. Kelly navigates this difficult terrain by remaining at the level of the metaphorical and in doing so, she refrains from mere didacticism. What we have instead are complex visual equations based on a conjunction of symbols drawn from mythological and contemporary imagery which she stages in ephemeral environments. This conflation of imagery, which at times verges on the surreal, becomes the theatre in which her human drama is played out.

Logic Block 2003 is illustrative of this style of image making. In this painting we see seven striking eucalyptus rengans trunks ascend the vertical picture plane. At their top is cast the vaporous shadows of another tree whose absence is manifested by these immaterial traces. Beneath we see two figures – one, a break-dancer, the other an Afghani cripple – whose disparity culturally, economically and physically could hardly be more patent. Galloping into the picture plane from the left is a pair of headless horses taken from a 1920's tourist



[3]

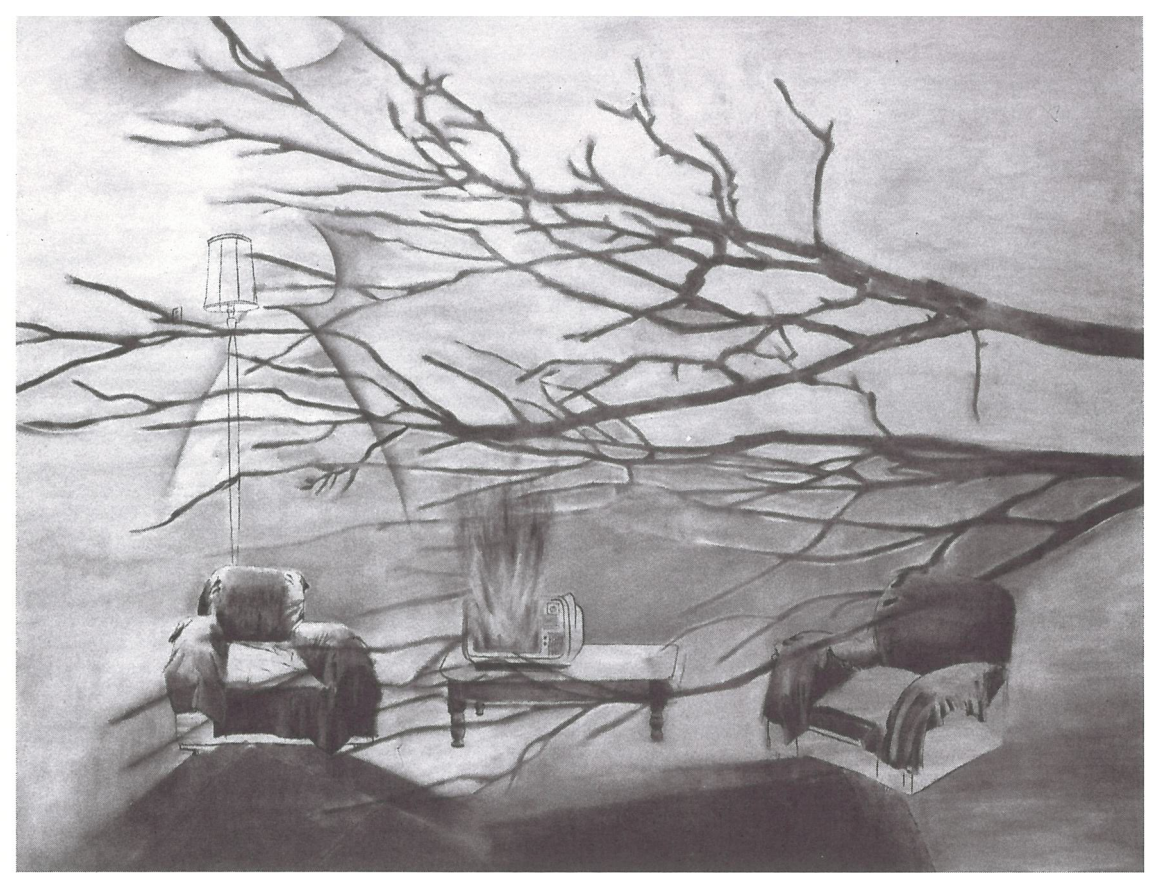
brochure promoting the Australian wilderness in Britain. These figures can perhaps be read as the force of western colonialism; a force that has lost its autonomy, one that is presented as pure momentum.

The transformation of the tree 2003, which perhaps begins this cycle of paintings, links the unifying theme of energy dependence to what is often noted as a key moment in the evolution of western civilization: the origin of fire, whose mythological figure (the jaguar) Kelly quotes. For Kelly, fire represents the burning of fossil fuels that drive contemporary western society. Yet we remain detached from this process by the transformation of fossil fuels into readily available energy manifested by the flick of a light switch. The image of the jaguar roaring flames onto a tree is balanced by the repeated motif of the tree shadows bearing testament to the vulnerability of things.

These shadows are cast again in that painting's counterpoint *Sparky the Culture Hero* 2003. This haunting image shows four deer/humans about to extinguish a flame that is burning one

of their kin. Brazilian mythology holds the deer – a herbaceous creature (and therefore benign) – as the symbol of water. Posed in illustration of a first aid procedure, there is a hesitancy and fear in their stances. And though they are approaching their patient, the flames are still burning. We are left to contemplate this moment of tension.

Illogical box 2003 takes these issues into a domestic space which is perhaps the true theatre of Kelly's unfolding drama. The burning television amidst the homely comfort of a lounge room setting invokes the question of complicity both by our domestic daily acts as well as via the media. Due to media coverage, our proximity to war will be acute, yet in terms of physical distance we could hardly be further away from those events. Read next to *Choreography of war reportage* 2002 this issue of complicity becomes expanded. With this painting, Kelly posits a fragmented flock of birds next to an instrument of war. What we are presented with, finally, is an advanced machine born of human technology that has mimicked the form of the bird to produce an aeronautical device for destruction.



[4]

Together with the smaller pictures in the exhibition, these five paintings are complimented by Kelly's wall painting/ installation *The paradox of ascent* 2003. This paradox is one that returns us directly to the quandary at the heart of this exhibition: the further western civilisation progresses, the more dependent on energy we become. Hence, the more pressure there is on western civilisation to control the world's resources.

Beyond these allegorical elements in Kelly's paintings, what binds them is the manner in which they are executed. The colours she uses are soft and gentle. Her brushwork is supple and delicate. Applying the paint in thin, membranous layers of paint, she describes a world that is ultimately fragile and invites us to contemplate this vulnerability. This quality goes to the specificity of her medium - oil paint - which perhaps echoes the resource at the core of current tensions. Whereas one (crude oil) is transformed for the production of energy, hers is transformed for the production of culture, thus exemplifying through both medium and content what is in the end a humanitarian position.

Claude Levi-Strauss once commented that if we were to excise ten or twenty years of human history, the struggles and dilemmas of human kind would remain roughly the same. What we would be missing, however, is the culture produced in that period. Whatever happens in the middle-east in the ensuing months and years, these paintings by Madeleine Kelly will continue to offer comment on themes that have been held in tension for centuries; themes which will become more pressing as populations multiply and resources become scarcer. They do so without assaulting the viewer with pseudo-propaganda. Instead, they seduce us into this dialogue with their evocative conjunctions of imagery and the importance they place on painting itself.

Josh Milani 2003



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