

A shallow calumniated stream death

Justin Clemens 2010

What holds an image together given every image is essentially multiple? Marks, colours, forms, allusions, genres — some images just fall apart, unable to bind the tensions of their seriously unstable situation into something more than a heap of broken elements. Something enigmatic must be at work to gather it all together, eminently visible since an image shows itself absolutely in appearing, yet somehow invisible too because it cannot be identified with any particular part or relation of the image. At once visible and invisible, seductive, sinister, the enigma of *this* image recedes as you advance. Imagine making a single one of these



images: a set of intuitive gestures in colour demands to be modelled; the modelling becomes an injunction to line; the lines transmogrify to a composition; the composition in turn becomes a new experiment with colours from which forms emerge as line is submerged; the forms suggest characters, scenes, narratives which never quite, to quote Paul Valéry, ‘vanish into meaning’; the scenes shift before they settle. For something to come, something has to go; something has to be surrendered in order for something to be embraced. In these little images, the devil loves you and Freud dreams, eyes turn into targets and voids and orifices, surfaces foam and fall like waterfalls of hair that veil spectral bones, a snake writhes in distressed air, downcast mouths are sealed or sewn, while dabs or streaks of colour remain just that, colour, resisting the transition to sense. In a sequence of poems entitled *Tombeaux*, tombs — but also with a nod to falling, *tomber* — the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé celebrated the remains of his dead artist heroes, including Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. The final line of Mallarmé’s sonnet to the poet Paul Verlaine — vagabond, alcoholic and one-time lover of another great French poet Arthur Rimbaud — is the extraordinarily compressed line ‘*Un peu profond ruisseau calomnié la mort,*’ ‘A shallow calumniated stream death.’ For Mallarmé, each work of art is the tomb of another in which the dead live on. It is the little stream death that bubbles through the image, gathering as it divides all its parts.

This text accompanied the exhibition by **Brent Harris**

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