

Catalogue Essay

By Loni Jeffs

'The best short fiction writers place their pens down and leave with a haunting: a deep shifting of self, precipitated by impossibly few words.'

Maxine Beneba Clarke

For this exhibition Lisa Swards draws inspiration from contemporary Australian short stories.

Difficult to characterise, many define the short story in its contrasts to the novel. Emphatically, it is shorter and capable of being read in a single sitting. Characters, narrative, plot, time are all important, though they are concentrated versions of what a reader finds in the novel.

This does not make it the lesser form. A short story writer uses an impressively small number of words to create a distinct tonal and emotional response in the reader. They insert an image, or idea into the reader's mind and leave it there to distress, delight, or intrigue.

SHORT STORIES formalises what is a noticeable similarity between Swards' practice, and common traits of the short story.

Storytelling is embedded in Swards' art practice. Her works on paper and canvas explore recurring motifs and themes: parachutes, birds, objects from WWII, history, journeys, grief, loss, strength and hope. Her artworks suspend time; they create doorways and windows to larger narratives, be they personal to the artist or global.

In this exhibition subjects framed by

the square or circular boundaries of a print give a similar surrealness to the characters contained within the pages of short stories. Both artforms can be quickly consumed, but their imagery, meaning and contexts run deep. The stories Swards selects are united in shared themes of strength, hope and escape. Capturing multiple journeys, Swards finds a way to interlace these singular, seemingly unconnected works into a single, expansive world. She entwines personal history, the present and potential futures.

Where *SHORT STORIES* culminates in its responses to three particular story collections: 'A Constant Hum' (Alice Bishop, 2019); 'The Flight of Birds: A Novel in Twelve Stories' (Joshua Lobb, 2018) and; 'Nova' (Laurie Steed, raw manuscript).

'The Flight of Birds: A novel in twelve stories' meditates on care we owe to birds. More broadly it's about personal and planetary grief, our emotional connection to a planet suffering a climate crisis. Swards regularly explores birds as symbols of strength, freedom and as animals worthy of our adoration. In connecting with this collection of stories, she also highlights their growing endangerment at the hands of humanity - their fragility.

'A Constant Hum' grapples with the aftermath of the Black Saturday Bushfires, telling stories of devastating grief, alongside others of survival, empathy and hope. It is from this text the pivotal work of *SHORT STORIES* emerges.

Pyrocumulonimbus, a charcoal sky, (2020) encapsulates the broader themes of the exhibition - of destruction, grief, movement but also of journeying and rejuvenation.

This ominous cloud formation is taken from a photograph the artist took on Black Saturday, before knowing exactly what was happening in other parts of Victoria. That the author's and the artist's vastly different experiences of a particular day more than a decade ago, converge with this piece of art, is a strong reminder of the way personal and global histories are enmeshed.

'Nova' (not yet published) was the

catalyst for this exhibition's research and concept. This manuscript tells stories of the universe, of personal grief and journeying. In an approach adopted by the artist, this text meditates on the larger world in its smallest moments.

Each work in *SHORT STORIES* gathers the most impactful symbols, words, objects and themes from dozens of unique pieces of writing. Sowards has captured and visually recreated the emotional tonality of her source materials - of the short stories.

Combined, these artworks encompass the viewer with surreal perspectives of worlds past, current and those which are forming.

Loni Jeffs is an arts writer and editor based in Naarm/Melbourne.

lonijeffs.com

