

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

review

MARCH 21-22 2015

Golden age

The precious
art of China's
Forbidden City



HARBOUR VIEW
AIDA SET TO
TAKE SYDNEY
BY STORM
REVIEW

DESTINATION AFLOAT
SAIL AWAY
TO EXOTIC
LOCALES
TRAVEL & INDULGENCE

CONCRETE PALACE
COLLECTORS'
BRAVE HOME
RENOVATION
LIFE

THE conviction that somehow humans continue to live on after death is not only an immemorially ancient one, but almost inherent to humanity: anthropologists consider signs of burial practices, including the painting of bones in red ochres, as evidence that our most primitive ancestors had made the transition from the unreflecting life of animals to a new kind of consciousness.

It is impossible to know what was in the minds of these earliest humanoid ancestors, who may not even have had the power of speech, and certainly would not have been capable of articulating thoughts of any kind. It is only in the last few thousand years that civilisations and languages developed to a degree that permitted theoretical or analytical reasoning.

In the earliest stages, intuitions about the nature of the world were perhaps collectively formed in tribal practices; later they were expressed in the pre-rational form of narrations or myths. But what they had in mind may be glimpsed, for example, in the extraordinary underground burial chamber in Malta known as the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum.

Here, more than 5000 years ago, the original and long-vanished inhabitants of the island excavated a deep system of limestone caves for the inhumation of the dead. Burials do not seem to have been individually identified, and one can infer a belief that the deceased had to be returned to the mother earth in order for her to continue to produce new generations.

The idea of personal survival in the next world may have arisen around the same time or shortly afterwards in Egypt (which is, indirectly, the subject of Matthew Barney's work at MONA). The obsession with the next world, the promise of blessedness and the difficulty of overcoming the many obstacles the soul would face after death define the character of Egyptian civilisation.

The Mycenaean Greeks were influenced by the Egyptians in their view of the life to come, but in the earliest literary evidence we have — Homer's extensive account of Odysseus's visit to the Underworld in Book XI of *The Odyssey* — it is a grim and gloomy place. The souls of the dead live on, but wander as largely unconscious ghosts until they drink the blood of Odysseus's sacrifice: so deep was the Greek instinct that life in any real sense was inseparable from the physical vitality of this world.

There was already an incipient sense that the especially wicked might merit some appropriate punishment, and a few of the good, or those beloved of the gods, such as Menelaus, might enjoy life in the Islands of the Blessed. But it was over the next few centuries that the idea of the afterlife evolved, both to include more systematic rewards and punishments, and to reflect the promises of mystery cults that their initiates would live on in a state of eternal bliss.

Judaism had little thought of an afterlife, and thus when Christianity arose as a Jewish sect, the Christians inherited little in the way of a relevant doctrine. Whatever Christ originally meant when he spoke of the Kingdom of Heav-



PLEASURE AND PAIN

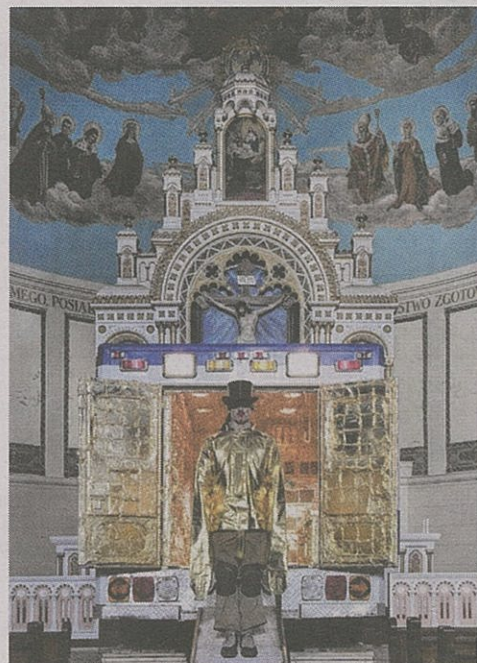
Christopher Allen

Matthew Barney: River of Fundament
Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart.
Until April 13.

en, the early Christians were able to borrow from the pagans a far more elaborate vision of life after death than any in the Jewish tradition.

Even today, we have inherited the assumption that belief in an afterlife is a fundamental sign of piety or spirituality. Some believe the soul will go to heaven or hell, others that it will return in some form, others again that it will somehow return to the matrix of nature; and perhaps there is some truth in a belief that has been so pervasive since the beginning of humankind, and for which even Socrates argued.

But the question is how we are to imagine



that afterlife: clearly not with a body, and without a body there are no physical appetites, ailments or pleasures. Clearly, too, the soul will not have to get a job, climb a career ladder or plan for retirement, so the corporeal drives to wealth, power and status all vanish. Even 700 years ago it was clear to Dante that all the souls in heaven would be occupied with the timeless contemplation of the divine essence. Their own happiness, in other words, would be directly proportional to their transcendence of all the limitations of the individual ego.

What becomes of the soul after death was the subject of Norman Mailer's novel *Ancient Evenings* (1983), which was in turn the basis for Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*, of which the current exhibition at MONA is a kind of spin-off.

Mailer's novel is extremely long, at 700 pages, and not known for its readability. There are copies of the book open throughout the exhibition, and they reveal a prose that is striking, yet also turgid and self-conscious; it often teeters on the brink of bathos. Among the mixed reviews the book received on its first publication, there is a brilliant account by Harold Bloom in the *New York Review of Books*, available online under the title *Norman in Egypt*.

Bloom's review provides one of the most intelligible outlines of the complicated underlying story, set in Ancient Egypt of the 20th dynasty. The protagonist, the author's alter ego, lives in the reign of Ramses IX and looks back to events in that of Ramses II, including the Battle of Kadesh in 1274BC — shortly before the Trojan War — when the Pharaoh overcame the Indo-European Hittite invaders.

The real point of the story seems to be about the protagonist's successive reincarnations as well as his relationship to the pharaoh, whom Bloom sees as a symbol of Mailer's precursor and model Hemingway, and who marks this quasi-paternal connection by bugging the

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM) wishes to appoint an Artistic Director who can provide exceptional leadership to Australia's pre-eminent music performance training institution.

The Artistic Director will be responsible for the artistic and pedagogical leadership of the organisation, including:

- Appointment and direction of the teaching faculty and guest artists;
- Development and delivery of training programs, including performance and creative projects;
- Oversight of students' musical development;
- Representing ANAM's vision to a national and international community.

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC

The Board is open to applications from candidates with both full-time or part-time availability.

Initial inquiries may be directed in confidence to Mr Ian McRae (Chairman of ANAM) on 03 9645 7911. Applications close 15 June 2015, and interviews will take place in July.

Further information including a position description may be obtained from anam.com.au



ANAM
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC

public works

Kerrie Lester, Try a Little Song (1996). Maitland Regional Art Gallery, NSW. On display until April 26.

Bronwyn Watson

WHEN Kerrie Lester was an art student, two of her works were purchased for the National Gallery of Australia. In her final year at the National Art School, in 1974, she was chosen to exhibit at one of Sydney's most prestigious art galleries run by Kym Bonython.

Since that auspicious start, Lester has had 31 solo shows and exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, at the Australian embassy in Paris and in the Biennale of Sydney.



Woodcut on paper, 76.3cm x 56.5cm; printed by Ros Atkins and Richard Harding

Throughout her career Lester has produced distinctive stitched-canvas paintings, ceramic sculptures, collages and prints on a wide range of subjects. But she is possibly best known for her portraits, notably those for the Archibald Prize and the Portia Geach award, and those in Canberra's National Portrait Gallery.

For nearly 30 years she has painted pictures

Boat of Ra (2014), far left, from *River of Fundament*, which uses religious iconography, left, and nature, right, to tackle issues of life and rebirth

protagonist at a certain point. The novel is marked by fear, darkness, recurrent violence and rape and pervasive pain, all inseparable from the striving to keep on being reborn.

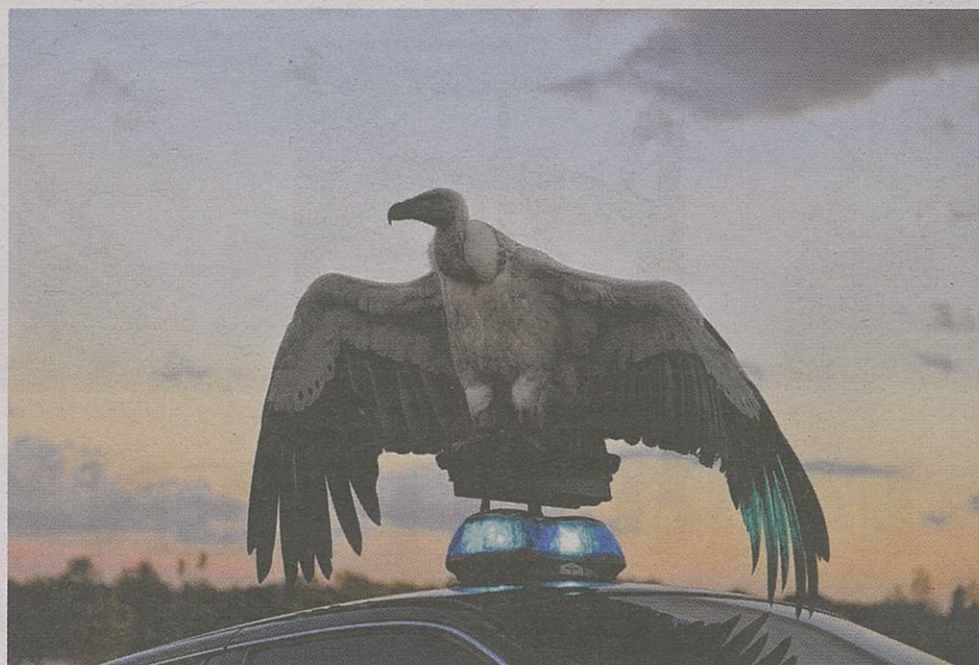
The opening lines of Mailer's novel give some idea of the style as well as explaining the title of Barney's filmic adaptation: "Crude thoughts and fierce forces are my state. I do not know who I am. I cannot hear a sound. Pain is near that will be like no pain felt before. Is this the fear that holds the universe? Is pain the fundament? All the rivers veins of pain? The ocean my mind awash?"

You get the idea, though you may well shudder at the prospect of reading another 700 pages of portentous prose so richly larded with alliteration, assonance and even rhyme. The style manages to be purple in spite of a monosyllabic rhythm that is a tribute to Hemingway's simplicity, but which, in the event, feels mannered.

But most interesting is the premise of universal pain. What is its cause? It is the pursuit of a personal life after death, through time, into ever new resurrections. The Indians knew rebirth was suffering. This was the heart of Buddha's teaching. Mailer's phantasmagoria of anguished couplings, filth, violence and buggery is a picture of the hell caused by attachment to the ego, or in a word, desire.

This seems clear in the film as well, although the exhibition includes only a trailer; and here we can see how this egoism, while universal, is also, in an aggravated form, deeply American, which perhaps means modern. There are scenes from an imagined version of Mailer's wake, and every one of them evokes the self-conscious sentimentality and even hysteria of the mourners: emotional states that are more about the bereaved than the deceased, because ultimately grounded in a narcissistic conception of the self.

Barney uses the footage of the wake to weave



together films of three large-scale performance events held over the previous years. What became the first section of the film was shot in Los Angeles in 2008, the second in Detroit in 2010 and the third in New York in 2013. A Chrysler Crown Imperial car was violently destroyed in the first of these, standing in as a proxy for Osiris, the Egyptian god of nature and growth, who was torn to pieces and then brought back to life by his sister; he is the most famous of the so-called dying gods of eastern tradition who symbolise the cycle of the seasons.

Osiris's death and resurrection are also the paradigm for the rebirth of mortals, and in Mailer's case for the protagonist who is his alter ego. The reason that a car was used for this role was no doubt as symbol of the American male ego, and the decline of the American car industry reflects a deeper crisis in American culture. The foundries and other industrial plants associated with the manufacture of cars also provide suit-

THERE ARE COPIES OF MAILER'S BOOK OPEN THROUGHOUT THE EXHIBITION



***River of Fundament* draws on Norman Mailer's depictions of filth and violence**

of personalities such as Cathy Freeman, Jimmy Barnes, Fred Hollows and Margaret Whitlam.

She insists she is not a portrait artist but says doing the portraits has allowed her to "meet amazing people and spend time with them". She painted Hollows when the pioneering eye specialist was dying from cancer.

Lester's first entry for the Archibald was in 1988. She painted a friend, songwriter and performer Warren Fahey, and his dog, Astro. Since then she has been a finalist almost every year, more than any other artist. She has been runner-up so many times she was dubbed the Archibald bridesmaid. Her picture *Self-Portrait as a Bridesmaid* won the Packer's Prize in 1998.

There is a comprehensive exhibition of Lester's work, *Facetime*, at Maitland Regional Art Gallery in the NSW Hunter Valley. The show focuses on her talent for painting faces, says curatorial director Joe Eisenberg.

Many of Lester's portraits are on display, such as those of Bronwyn Bishop, Guy Warren, Judy Cassab, Jeffrey Smart and Fahey, and her bridesmaid self-portrait. But it's not only about

familiar faces. There are pictures of people walking their dogs, at the beach, kissing and sleeping. Another of the works in *Facetime* is a woodblock print titled *Try a Little Song*. The gallery bought the print at auction three years ago. It is part of a print portfolio produced to celebrate the Australian Opera's 40th anniversary in 1996.

This opera print project, the idea of artist Alun Leach-Jones, consists of prints by 10 artists including Arthur Boyd, Judy Watson, Colin Lanceley and Lester. Each artist chose an opera and made a print in their style. Lester chose Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

Eisenberg says of the print: "It is a beautiful use of colour, a beautiful use of imagery, and I do like that she includes words."

He adds he loves Lester's faces, such as those in *Try a Little Song*.

"A lot of people look at her work and just see pretty images, flowers, birds, but I actually think she says a lot about politics and society and the nature of life. She just doesn't do it in angry words, which I really appreciate."



NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT PRIZE 2015

MEDIA PARTNER
THE AUSTRALIAN

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Until 8 June 2015

Portrait of Ali 2014 (detail) Hoda Afshar
National Photographic Portrait Prize
2015 Winner