

## A CRY IN THE DARK

### We of the Silent Dreaming

*Symbolically the lost child represents the anxieties of the European Settler .....not only over legitimacy of land tenure but of European Australians' spiritual and psychological lodgement*

Peter Pierce

In Irene Wellm's studio in Clifton Hill amidst the paintings and her considerable collection of old toys and dolls, there was a book open on the landscape of Uluru, a reproduction of Goya's Saturn devouring his children, newspaper clippings about the most recent meditation on the disappearance of the Beaumont children and a copy of Peter Pierce's book, *The Country of Lost Children*; located somewhere between is Wellm's new series of paintings, **We of the Silent Dreaming.**

This exhibition marks a departure into uncharted territory for Irene Wellm. It feels as if she has met her subject and the investigation has begun and will go on for some time. She has gone into landscape - the interior of the continent, this place - it is recognisably Terra Australis



because of the low horizon, but it also Historia Australis - the land of myth, story, a painted backdrop, a diorama on the cultural stage, a place for her lost doll children to reside.

Wellm is fascinated by the stories of "the country of lost children", from our Colonial past and the abductions, kidnappings, disappearances and violent removal of children in the contemporary era. The lost children of the stories got themselves lost, wandered off of their own accord, drawn into the terrain of the unfamiliar, forgetting themselves and the injunctions of their parents not to wander. The contemporary children were taken away by forces unknown. By natural or human agency they disappear and never return. In Wellm's private myth, when the doll children are lost they cross over, they become Other, and gain new insights and knowledge and not incidentally black bodies, as if they have gone through a proving fire which has darkened them with understanding. She says, "They change and become part of their own tribe".

Wellm's own childhood at Beaumaris by the sea and later at Mt Macedon in the mountains was characterised by the freedom to wander where she pleased, to be lost for hours, to just go into the bush and stop and stare at the enormity and strangeness of nature. Both locations are significant sites of lost children - one real and contemporary, the other historical and literary - Eloise Worledge disappeared from her bedroom in Beaumaris in 1976 at the age of ten when Wellm was a similar age, and correspondingly Wellm identified with the



teenage Miranda in Joan Lindsay's, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Wellm speaks of roaming the bush on horses, riding around that great attractor of the lost girl child, Hanging Rock, and says she understood the spirit of the place. Miranda was not taken away; rather through her own choices to go deeper into the recesses of the rock, and further away from the group of her school friends, showed herself to be seeking something else, something not of interest to, or unavailable to the other girls. She crossed over and could not come back.

And then there is the still mystifying disappearance of the Beaumont children in 1966 - incidents which happened during Wellm's childhood lodge in the imagination

of the artist, invoking sadness, vulnerability, fear and fascination at the sheer magic of disappearance; where did they all go and are they still there? The lost ones forever inhabit "this Other space in Australian memory and myth ... a landscape good at keeping secrets".

Wellm's doll children do not look frightened, or traumatised by their ordeal; they look placid and content as dolls are wont to do, they might stare out but it's open to interpretation what they are thinking. They could be said to look at peace, as if dead. Some of them even have a favourite toy with them, as a companion in their travels, which reinforces the reading that the doll protagonists are children with their own playthings.

There are no adult authority figures in these paintings, how could there be? What are we doing when we play with dolls? Rehearsing our lives, replaying primal family dramas, mastering our fate at a time when it feels like we are being played with by the big people, our parents. Running through **We of the Silent Dreaming** is a subtext of Aboriginality, the dreamtime pyjama story, of getting back to, or into the real Australia, and the calling up of the taken away children. There was also a dream sense in her previous exhibition, **Bedtime Stories**, the doll or toy as transitional object that the child uses in a psychological sense to deal with separation anxiety, to manage letting go of consciousness and put themselves to sleep. The doll functions as a mask of the unconscious, that conjures "the whispering in our hearts" that disturbs our sleep with silent dreams.



## Endnotes

*A Cry in the Dark* was the title under which the film *Evil Angels*, about the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain, was released in America.

*The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*, Peter Pierce, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

'The Country of lost children' refers to a remark by the character Arkady in Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines* - it is his description of Australia.

'This Other space in Australian memory and myth...' *The Lost Children: The Beaumonts*, Beth Spencer, The Age, January 21, 2006.

'The whispering in our hearts' is Henry Reynold's memorable phrase "what means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts" about the suppression of dispossession in the collective memory of Australia.

**Suzanne Spinner** is a Melbourne playwright and writes on visual arts for Art Monthly, Eycline, Artlink and Real Time.

**Images:** all oil on linen, 2006  
 cover: *lost boy*, 86 x 60cm  
 inside cover: *silent dreaming: the warning*, 122 x 153cm  
 far left: *silent dreaming: land spirit*, 152 x 214cm  
 middle: *pretty dick (as if asleep...)*, 92 x 183cm  
 this page: *silent dreaming: a plea for help*, 183 x 198cm

• nellie castan gallery

lv 1, 12 river st south yarra 3141 : 98047366