

Richard Dunlop – Deep Water Memorials

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2 Comments

RETRO REVIEW: This catalogue essay accompanied an exhibition of paintings by Richard Dunlop, *Still Life, Still Death: ANZAC Memorials and Other New Paintings* (31st March – 31st April 2011 @ James Makin Gallery)

In this exhibition Richard Dunlop reveals a deep sensitivity to the essential fragility of life in all forms, and the tenuous beauty that arises from a transient state of being. Notions of death, life and war are all referenced throughout the exhibition – however the real territory explored is not war in itself, but what happens in its aftermath. In particular the importance Australian society places on keeping the memory of past World Wars alive and present, and the rituals and markers employed to facilitate this maintenance of memory, a memory of events that only a few remaining soldiers experienced first-hand. In exploring this realm Dunlop displays an ability to express through visual media, profound sentiments that defy easy rationalisation.



Richard Dunlop, *ANZAC Memorial Gifts to the River Gods*, 2011, oil on linen.

Dunlop cites a drive through Victorian country towns during the ANZAC day period in 2010 as the spark of genesis for this exhibition. As an artist that for many years has sought to re-invigorate the still life genre, witnessing the floral wreaths laid at the base of stone monuments and noting the tension between the ephemeral, decaying wreaths and the solidity of the stone, had a resonating impact. These rituals of the living to honour the dead have a kind of didactic function, a way of consistently reminding society about the horror of war in order to avoid its reoccurrence. Yet perhaps more important to their conveyance of meaning, is the tragic beauty encapsulated by a slowly fading wreath, as through the steady progress of time something once alive is reduced to dust, air and matter. These memorials form a gentle but pervasive metaphor for a greater context.

Dunlop seizes upon this soft remembrance, rendering it with painterly depth, and giving it form through organic shapes and colours that are reminiscent of plants and flowers. Yet his depiction of plant life stops short of a fine, anatomical style of description, which might limit its ability to express the incomprehensible. Within the picture plane Dunlop oscillates between defined forms, and abstracted voids where said forms seem to dissolve and transmutate. While a cascade of painterly interruptions, superpositions, marks and scratchings clamour for attention, there is a lyrical overarching flow that governs the composition of his paintings, as seen in *Anzac Memorial, flows to the river*. This seems to derive from an intuitive source that shifts from work to work, rather than a consistently regulated one. It is this almost poetic impulse that contributes to the tender beauty of these paintings, which is nevertheless tempered by his acknowledgement of dark, unknowable spaces that exist alongside it.

Some works, like *Anzac Memorial, gifts to the river gods*, and his *Decoy* series contain the impression of water through the depiction of reflected forms floating along the surface. These works are intriguing in their evocation of a strange, illusionary space that would be claustrophobic were it not for the vivid forms that illuminate the image. Others contain familiar shapes akin to microcosmic plant structures, their hidden patterns revealed and enlarged for all to see. Here Dunlop communicates systems of biological information into a pictorial space, imbuing it with emotional resonance along the way. One is reminded of the 1973 text by Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird, *The Secret Life of Plants* which describes plants as sentient beings capable of feelings and perception, with a metaphysical connection to humans. This hypothesised connection could be one that Dunlop registers in his paintings, as perhaps we all do (albeit unconsciously) through the persistence of rituals like giving flowers when words won't suffice, and laying wreaths at monuments of those long since departed.



Richard Dunlop, *Memorial (to Beauty)*, 2011 oil on linen. Private Collection, Melbourne.

Dunlop has also imbued these works with a sensuality that speaks of the sights, smells and textures of the natural world that grounds their thematic richness with an earthly accent. These tender meditations on the nature of memory and how we express loss are moving in their depiction of that which is so difficult to fathom, yet so important to our awareness of history, and the meaning of sacrifice.

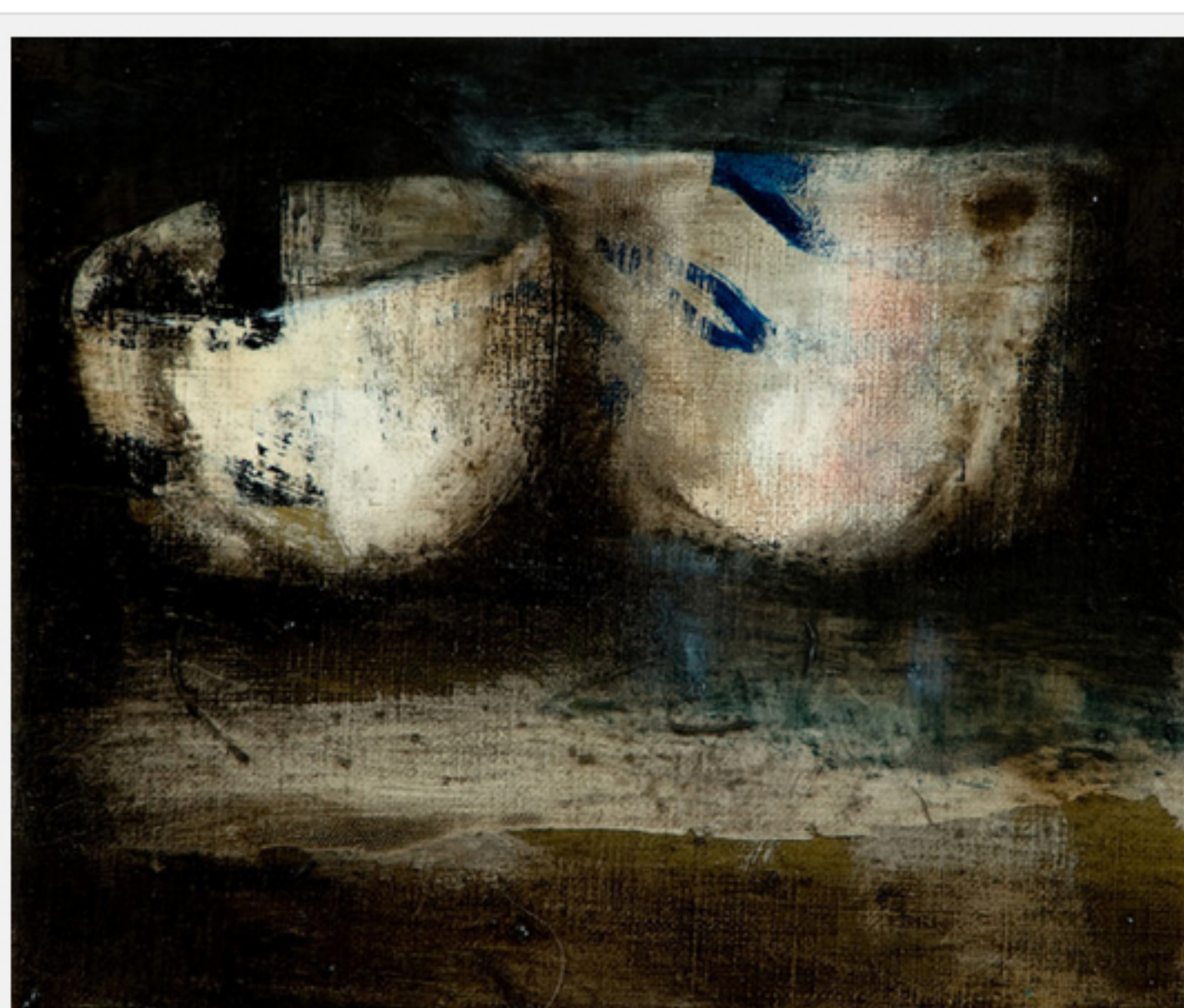
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All images Courtesy Richard Dunlop. <http://richarddunlop.com.au>



Richard Dunlop, *Deep Water Memorial*, 2010, oil on linen.



Richard Dunlop, *Shino Glaze The Remains of Battles Great and Futile II*, oil on linen. Private Collection, Melbourne.

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