

Witness

There are two consistent threads that weave throughout my practice. First, the tensions between the perception of a group or individual and the reality of their lived experience. Second, boundaries/borders and the physical, geographical, political, and spiritual metamorphoses we undergo as we journey across them.

In my new body of work Witness, I integrate these motifs by examining how we transpose simplified archetypal myths onto complex historical and personal narratives to claim better understandings of and contextualise our relationships to these realities. These reductive codes or short hands may give us comfort, or the illusion of containing or categorising these experiences, but rarely correlate perfectly outside of fiction.

This series features two traveling companions in fantastical landscapes, simply put: on the way to somewhere. The intention, destination and origin of their excursion is deliberately undisclosed and left to interpretation. I was drawn to depictions of the horse and cat, specifically for their status and history as companion animals. I was also interested in the literary tradition of using these specific animals as placeholders and repositories for human characteristics; the horse being loyal, determined and often heroic, and the cat being independent and uniquely intelligent, but prone to caution.

For me these qualities also nod to Freud's writing on the Super Ego and The Id; where the horse could stand for projected authority and purpose, while the cat is the challenging and questioning internal voice. To emphasise this intention the horse is depicted as materially and visually congruent with the environments it has been placed in, while the cat is a simplified rendering transposed on what would otherwise be a deliberately kitsch landscape reminiscent of a postcard scene, or traditional horse paintings of the American mid-west. These references also allude to a practice of national myth building and nostalgia to contextualise contemporary experiences into the hero's journey of a nation. This visual distinction between the two subjects is a strategy designed to encourage an audience interrogation of that relationship. This would then extrapolate to a broader narrative relating to their journey.

As part of the research for this series I consumed contemporary and historical uses of the hero's journey as a narrative device in film and literature; from The Wizard of Oz (1939), O' Brother where art thou (2000), Mad Max; Fury Road (2015) and Lord of the Rings, to the works of Gary

Jennings, Robin Hobb and Joe Abercrombie, to the epic poem, Homer's Odyssey.

Beyond the escapism of fantasy and historical fiction as genres, these modes of story telling are compelling because they provide archetypal structures that we can use to understand our own narratives and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our experiences. One personally relevant example of this simplified reduction of complex histories, political happenings and personal relationships is evidenced by the adoption of the 'good-guy' and 'bad-guy' monikers in post 9/11 analysis of global conflicts on mainstream news networks. In real-life situations the denial of complexity in the human experience can lead to the denial of humanity itself, and as I have written before; it can justify the unjust seizure of land, labour, bodies and resources. While the benefits of understanding complexity through the lens of archetypes is evident, the application of such analysis at the macro level can disregard nuance and serve to reinforce hierarchies of power and dominance.

Although I welcome interpretations of my subjects as protagonists on a journey as well as apolitical readings, my choice of 'companion animals'; a riderless horse and an ephemeral cat is intended to place the audience as the principal character in this narrative. It is my hope that the audience is both a companion of my subjects, as well as a combination of my subjects, on a quest to a destination of their own choosing. In a departure from traditional tellings of the hero's journey, where we are introduced to the hero or anti-hero who is depicted as someone who elicits the audiences' sympathies, in *Witness* there is no separation between the role of audience and protagonist. By repositioning the audience within the narrative as both witness and witnessed, it is my hope that we become co-conspirators in our examination from within of the stories used to define us from without.

Abdul Abdullah