

“The Sound of Picture Books”

By Matt Ottley

An intermodal exhibition of books, illustrations, and musical scores

The Write Gallery 5 October-26 October 2024

“The Sound of Picture Books” - a review by Sandy Pottinger.

The Write Gallery is a versatile creative hub that revels in the diversity of the artists and events which grace its big, inclusive space. The current exhibition shapes the visual framework for “The Sound of Picture Books”, an initiative of artist, composer, musician, and writer Matt Ottley. Regular visitors to the Write Gallery will remember Matt Ottley’s “The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness,” a multi-faceted and hypnotic exhibition, musical performances, and book launch, that happened in February this year.

Matt Ottley is a remarkable human being. He is a gentle, modest and skilful artist who has learnt to fight his demons through imagery and music. He is a survivor in a cruel battle with mental health and his psychotic nemesis. He has plumbed the depths of despair and isolation, and amongst the debris of experience and circumstance he has found wholeness at his core. Vulnerability coupled with strength, and the tough carapace of tenderness have shaped for him the colours and forms that are hope and resilience.

“The Sound of Picture Books” features some ninety illustrations that include oil painted originals, prints, and digital imagery from twelve books that have been brought to life by Ottley’s artwork and music. For most of the publications Ottley has worked with different writers to create outcomes of seamless harmony. Collaboration can be the complex interaction of individuality and teamwork so eloquently evoked in the words of the Lebanese artist and poet, Kahlil Gibran who said:

“Even as the strings of a lute are alone, though they quiver with the same music.”

The similarities and differences of style in the illustrations across the variety of books are fascinating to discern. The palette can be bright and luminous, but also quietly muted. Ottley’s use of shifting shadows suggests a drift of memories half recalled, acknowledging a presence, yet haunted by its absence. Creative expression is given free rein as it moves through diverse aspects of sensory perception. Colours become sounds, words are linear shapes, stories have taste and texture. Noise becomes sound which becomes music. Ottley is the conduit who has given life and liberation to the characters in the stories, and now they, and the worlds they inhabit, tease out a musical blanket to wrap around themselves. What is intriguing, however, is that as the written characters morph into recognizable entities, they seem to assume an independence and individuality that takes over from the artist and guides his hand in determined directions. There is a sense that the drawn figures, the settings, the animal familiars, even the exotic machines, and prehensile trees are dictating how

they wish to be remembered. They have also been given the dimension of sound through Ottley's original music scores. But to think that this intermodal process is just about setting pictures to music would seriously underestimate a phenomenal experience. The music fills the spaces between literature and artwork and speaks for both, almost as if the music becomes the picture book itself.

A new book "Stickboy", written by Rebecca Young and illustrated by Matt Ottley was launched at the opening of the exhibition. It is the latest in the "Sound of Picture Books" project. Ottley and Young have collaborated before with "Teacup," also part of the project, which won the prestigious Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature in 2016. The relationship between an author and an illustrator can be a balancing act based on trust and respect. While some publishing houses separate their writers and illustrators, Scholastic Australia, who published both books, acted as a benevolent matchmaker, allowing Young and Ottley to develop a creative rapport. Ottley's softly modified palette embraces Young's poetic sensitivity that is an allegory of hope in a world that at times feels bereft of humanity, and whose physical environment is in damage control. Stickboy gains the confidence to open his heart, and Ottley has tenderly filled it with music shaped by the colours, the lines, and the patterns that are the boy's habitat.

Copies of all the books are on sale in the gallery.