

The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness

An inter-modal exhibition by Matt Ottley

The Write Gallery, 1- 29 February 2024.

The Lighthouse complex, which includes the Write Gallery, is a safe place. It is a sanctuary which celebrates difference through inclusion, acceptance and understanding. It offers the opportunity for open discussion, it is a catalyst for growth and awareness, as well as the exchange of information. It also encourages and promotes children's literacy by offering writing workshops, book readings, and storytelling, and holds exhibitions that are odes to the art of book illustration.

The current exhibition, "The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbelievable Sadness", is an inter-modal experience of profound emotion. It presents the illustrations that shape the eponymous book against a background of specially written music. Time should be invested to read the detailed didactic panels as these reflect the artist's voice that defines the narrative and shares the creative process in the weaving of the story. The protagonist, a young boy tormented by an internal, and growing despair, adopts the persona of a bird and flies over the landscapes of the world seeking beauty. What he finds, in coming to terms with his demons, is a message of hope that is universal. It is a seamless link to Emily Dickinson's little poem that begins:

"Hope is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul-

And sings the tune without the words-

And never stops - at all -..."¹.

"The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness" is a multi-winged opus that has been created, nurtured, developed, and finally set free by artist, writer, musician, and film maker, Matt Ottley. This gentle, humble, yet fragile human being is surely a national treasure.

Throughout his life Ottley has experienced the crippling isolation of mental illness. Undiagnosed for many years the little boy, then adolescent, and now man has fought his battle in a private, fearful, and often lonely juggling act of survival. Today he has a name for his illness: bipolar disorder. It is now mostly managed, and he has strategies in place to balance the mood swings, although he has to occasionally contend with psychotic episodes.

Writing and illustration have been an essential part of Ottley's safety net. These he has now combined with music, gloriously orchestrated to circle the visualization of his words with warm, sometimes strident colour interposed with jagged shard-like forms of noise in harmony.

"The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbelievable Sadness" tells the story of a boy consumed by the growth of a seed deep within him.

The seed becomes a tree whose flowers offer ecstasy but whose fruit garners sadness. Graphic, painful, yet curiously reassuring, the story of discovery gradually unfolds in an epic fairy story that is both fierce and comforting. The boy, transformed into a bird, discovers a curious city. He visits an ornate cathedral-like palace ruled by a despotic sovereign, an embodiment of corrupt power and merciless control. The sovereign, whose intestines are inflated with the fetid effluence of negativity, has an outside toilet attached to the palace walls and supported by thin chicken leg stilts in true Baba Yaga style. She banishes the boy-bird, sentencing him to fly far and wide seeking beauty.

Ottley's illustrations capture the magic of flight, the wonder of the world. Light and shade and elongated shadows form patterns of experience and celebrate the majesty of nature. The boy in the story mirrors this sense of awe but also feels the haunting, yet fleeting quality of beauty. There is war and capitulation, endings and beginnings. The boy acknowledges that the tree that lives within him is part of his human condition, partly ecstasy and partly sadness. Its branches and roots may torment and embrace, yet they also bear flowers and fruit.

Ottley's music takes the viewer-participator to new levels of consciousness. The Brno Philharmonic Orchestra combined with the Czech Philharmonic Choir of Brno give vitality to Ottley's colourful score which carries the narrative through soaring rhapsodies and heart-breaking choral crescendos that evoke flight, spatial geometries, and a sense of resilience and hope that echo in the words of Albert Camus:

"In the midst of winter, I at last discovered that, there is in me, an invincible summer"².

Copies of the book "The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness" come with a CD of the music and are available at the Gallery, as are other publications by Matt Ottley. Read the book and listen to the music and be transported to a world of hope and love and belief in a future of possibilities.

Sandy Pottinger, February 2024

Sandy Pottinger is a Toowoomba based artist and writer. She is a retired lecturer in Visual Arts from the University of Southern Queensland and was the art critic for the Toowoomba Chronicle, writing the *Around the Galleries* column for twenty-five years.

¹ "Hope is The Thing with Feathers" from The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson, Thomas A Johnson, Ed., Harvard University Press, 1999

² "The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays", Camus, A., Translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage Books, New York, 1991, p 121.