

ShanaJames Interplay Catalogue Essay 2008
by Ted Snell

I dream my painting and then paint my dream. Vincent Van Gogh

There is a poignancy and melancholy that pervades Shana James' prints. They seem to spring both from the imagination and the processes of printmaking, their dense blacks a kind of dreamlike fog of ink and ideas that summon up her cast of characters. The imagery arises from a linking of inner and outer worlds, the unconscious and the conscious and in that sense they act as illustrations for an autobiography that is constantly evolving.

Like many artists before her James creates a world with it's own rhythm and order. Marc Chagall, Paul Klee and the British painter Ken Kiff were able to convince us of another parallel world where the mysterious and visionary were an everyday experience. They created a place of escape, like dreams, that were not entirely safe but provided a kind of security and familiarity. Like a fairytale her narratives unfold and gather us in, giving us the strength to deal with fears and doubts in the expectation that all will be well, in the end.

There is a humanness in these works that evolves from her poetic interpretation of incidents in everyday life. These simple stories become infused with a melancholy that suggests a deeper and more poignant truth waiting to be revealed. As Martha Kapos explained in her essay on Ken Kiff this '... fantasy world (is) not an alternative to reality but an integral part of it'¹. Recurring motifs such as the tree, the lonely figure and the fish act as symbols, though their precise meaning is unclear.

What is evident in this body of works is a preoccupation with the need to be safe and with establishing a sense of belonging and sharing. This is vital to life and come through the knowledge that giving is the essential companion of receiving. There is also a sense of loss in James' work, of unreachable goals and if not sadness then as the Italian novelist Italo Calvino explained when defining melancholy '... a sadness that has taken on lightness'. In this exhibition James has honed her skills as an image-maker and she provides us with a coherent and poetic body of works that is engaging, moving and memorable.

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¹ Martha Kapos, "Illuminating Images", *Ken Kiff: Paintings 1965-85*, Serpentine Gallery, London, Jan-Feb 1986, Arts Council, London, p.35.

