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Fading Light: 'Nocturne' at Everard Read

By **Isabella Kuijers**

October 14, 2016

Everard Read, Cape Town

15.09.2016 – 09.10.2016

The musical Nocturne originated in the Middle Ages as a liturgical hymn sung at intervals to mark the canonical hours. In the time of Chopin's Nocturnes in every key, the term was used to describe music that took its inspiration from the night, but it took James Abbott McNeill Whistler to apply it to painting in the 1860s when he frequently prefixed the titles of his gauzy, Tonalist oils with: 'Nocturne in ...'

Within the group exhibition, 'Nocturne,' at Everard Read, the most alike Whistler's oeuvre are a collection of oils by Thomas Cartwright. *It's a Good Life (if You Can Find It)* shows the view from what must be the top floor of the Gardens Centre from which an insomniac might watch the haloed procession of headlights to and from De Waal Drive. Cartwright's flat, scrubby shapes resemble a Luc Tuymans paint-by-numbers and hint at the misty, otherworldly quality of night time. Unlike Whistler's works, Cartwright's paintings of spaces devoid of discernible figures have highly sentimental titles, such as *God Lives Only in Our Dreams* and *I Am No Use to You at All*.



Vusi Khumalo *Informal Settlement in Black*, 2016.
Mixed Media on board

Vusi Khumalo's two mixed-media works provide a yardstick for viewing the show with their polar attitudes towards the dusk. In *Night in Sodukwe Informal Settlement* he riffs on shanty-town art often sold by the side of the road in which miniature shacks lean forward and off the picture plane. Instead of their usual chipper palette Khumalo's work depicts a peaceful township awash with moonbeams. Figures huddle congenially around a fire and a woman and child stroll home.

Adjacent to *Night in Sodukwe Informal Settlement* is *Informal Settlements in Black*, in which a proliferation of two-dimensional shacks tightly interlock, each aspect of the tiny cubic homes is patterned with corrugations that appear to have been made by pulling a comb through pitch. These are uniformly, claustrophobically black. This work feels constrictive and introduces the theme of darkness as metaphorical and unrelenting beyond the confines of literal nighttime. Without Khumalo's contribution, 'Nocturne' could be said to represent a numbingly affluent take on nocturnal life.

If Khumalo's works express the range of the exhibition, James Nilsen-Misra's diptych, of *Nocturne I* and *Nocturne II*, is its restrained and sophisticated high point. Both images have the same suburban interior as their subject but a slight change of light between the works connotes the silent passing of time. They could be two frames lifted from film noir footage of the empty room. Fresh-cut flowers, an unplayed piano and empty chairs offer a quiet intermission from the day and respite for photosensitive art-viewers. The drawings feel totally dormant and contained so that they can be looked at without being contaminated by one's own clamouring thoughts.

Where Nilsen-Misra's technique is characterised by his disciplined tonal limitation, Aliza Levi's photographs, *House 1 - 5*, rely on the contrast between the dense gloom of the street and the glowing apertures of wealthy households. The premise of the work is strong and quippy; a visual one liner about inclusion and exclusion. However, her presentation leaves much to be desired; most of the works are buckling and non-reflective glass is conspicuous by its absence.

The remainder of the works appear to deal with a noisier iteration of the witching hours, Matthew Hindley's painterly forest at midnight has areas of dribbled lime green and flecked lilac that break my immersion into what might have been a Blair Witch Project-type escapade. In a style that reminds one of portraits of hunting dogs commissioned by the landed gentry, Andrew Barlow's hounds feel conspicuously diurnal. An array of Sasha Hartsliof's work contributes an well-executed but overblown romanticism that reminds me of young adult fiction or DeviantArt. Her gorgeous, mopey protagonists loiter like modern vampires in the breaking dawn. And finally, Syndi Kahn's *Caliginous R.E.M.* is an abstract take on a psychedelic glam-rock nightmare and feels too luridly bright for this show.



James Nilsen-Misra *Nocturne #1*, 2016. Gum Pastel on Fabriano Elle Erre

Themed group shows have the exhilarating potential to show how divergent art is created when artists work from a similar point of departure with similar themes in mind. The title of Everard Read's group exhibition, 'Nocturne', implies a solemn, contemplative encounter, and although the show includes moments of beauty and pensivity, it appears disjointed and seems to have been titled after the fact.

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