

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Pools of light illuminate fragility of humanity in the natural setting

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ARTS EDITOR

THE evolution of sophisticated but relatively cheap digital cameras, the availability of computer software and the use of technical trickery means pretty much anyone these days can call themselves a photographer.

Tamara Dean eschews such baggage, preferring to rely on technique, ingenuity and natural light.

It is an approach that has won the Fairfax photographer critical acclaim, most recently for her exhibitions featuring stylised tableaux with an other-worldly quality – shows such as *This Too Shall Pass*, depicting subjects in vanishing urban spaces, and *Ritualism*, finding reverence and ritual in daily life.

For her latest exhibition, *Only Human*, Dean has gone bush.

"I wanted to take that notion of humans being only human and reflect their vulnerability and fragility in the natural environment," she says.

Dean shot the exhibition's 18 works in 2010 and 2011, during residencies at the Montsalvat artists' colony in Victoria and Hill End in western NSW, a favourite retreat.

The photographs have a moody, painterly quality, a result of using only natural light – something Dean acknowledges is not common among modern photographers.

"I'm just really interested in the way that light is used. I have used natural light for all these works, so you get that aesthetic of a time

when electricity wasn't around," she says.

Centre of the Universe, depicting two women in the Turon River in Hill End, resulted from Dean watching how a group of young women interacted with each other in the water. She even ventured in, despite being a "massive chicken" when it comes to cold water.

"I told them I wanted to create works that talk about the relationship between the body and the natural world and that sense of intimacy," Dean says.

While the women are naked, it was important to Dean to create images that weren't highly sexualised.

"I wanted to offer a counter to the raunch way that we are used to seeing and produce something more about the intimate relationships women have," she says.

In the exhibition's title image, a naked woman reclines on the lap of another. Her alabaster skin almost glows in the light, while the clothed woman is shrouded in shadow.

"I went into their bedroom, blocked out the light I didn't want, then used cotton scarves to drape across the window. Then I let the wind blow them to get this kind of cast. It's that kind of random thing that is impossible to replicate," she says.

That is typical of how Dean works – turn up with an idea but not really knowing how to realise it.

"I've learned that while it's fantastic to go into a shoot with a good idea of what you want and what you want your subjects to do, the most important thing is to give [the] sub-



Swimming against the tide ... Tamara Dean's exhibition, *Only Human*, embraces the use of natural light over technical trickery. Photo: Tamara Dean

ject the chance to also bring something to it," she says.

"It's about breaking down that self-consciousness."

It is also about letting go of some

control to achieve that important spontaneity.

Dean has found a willing market for her photographs and, before last night's opening, many had already

sold. "I'm constantly surprised that my work touches people but it's an affirmation of what I've been doing," she says. "I do have a strong sense of touching people on an

emotional level, so in that way it doesn't surprise me so much."

Only Human is at the Tim Olsen Gallery Annex until May 13.