

PAGAN RITES

IN HER PHOTOGRAPHS TAMARA DEAN TRIES TO RECREATE THE OLD RITES THAT USED TO MARK OUR WAY THROUGH LIFE WRITES **ASHLEY CRAWFORD**. PORTRAIT BY **NICHOLAS WATT**.

Tamara Dean's moody and evocative photographs, captured in strange, quasi-surreal light and colour, explore the heady subject of "what it is to be human," the artist says. With her often nude or scantily clad figures in the bush, Dean says she is probing notions of fragility and vulnerability and "our intrinsic connection to the natural world".

Dean's work has always carried a sensuous air, bordering almost on the pagan. It celebrates both the body and the land, drawing on the elemental forces of nature for inspiration. "I use the bush or wilderness as a metaphor for our primal world," she explains, "where the structure of the culture we have built around us is stripped back and the interplay between the people (in the photographs), with both each other and the physical environment, become the story".

There is also a powerful sense of ritual in her imagery, a sense of ceremonial cleaning or pageantry. "I have always been drawn to ritual in my work," Dean says. "I am very interested in the lack of formal rites of passage in contemporary Western society and the rituals which we in turn look for to move through different stages of our lives. Since I was a teenager I looked to the landscape of the Australian bush. It was somewhere I went for both solitude and inspiration, it also being a space where I go to confront my fears and to create my own rites of passage."

"The bush strips back any sense of invincibility, to take your clothes off in the bush leaves you vulnerable – skin can tear, insects bite, animals can hunt you, bones can break.

"There are so many things we are taught to stay away from in the bush ... we are taught not to go out alone lest we get bitten by a snake, not to dive into rivers in case of snags, to be sure to watch the way you went in, lest you not be able to find your way out and perish. So, to even go out into the bush, you are confronting a whole list of fears that have been taught through childhood.

"It brings you in touch with the elements, water, fire, wind, earth. You have to listen to the elements for your safety in a way that is removed when living in a city."

Dean clearly carries with her an intense work drive. Alongside her art practice she is a photographer with *The Sydney Morning Herald* and is a key figure in the photographers' collective Oculi which specialises in art imagery and reportage.

She has been a finalist in various photographic awards including the Moran Contemporary Photography Prize, the Josephine Ulrick & Win



"I am very interested in the lack of formal rites of passage in contemporary Western society and the rituals which we in turn look for to move through different stages of our lives."



Schubert Photography Award, the Head On Alternative Portrait Prize, the 5th Leica/CCP Documentary Photography Award and the Olive Cotton Award for photographic portraiture.

"It is a very intense workload, as I also have two young children, but I find that they all feed into one another which keeps my momentum going.

"My years of working as a photographer in the realm of documentary and photojournalism have been fundamental to the style which defines my work now. It is important to me that my works have a sense of honesty and integrity to the intimacy portrayed. For the past 10 years I have trained myself to both direct subjects and to look for the decisive moment in a fluid scenario. I think what gives my work the integrity which I strive for, is that whilst I stage these works, there is still an honesty to the situation from which I can draw a moment of integrity." *

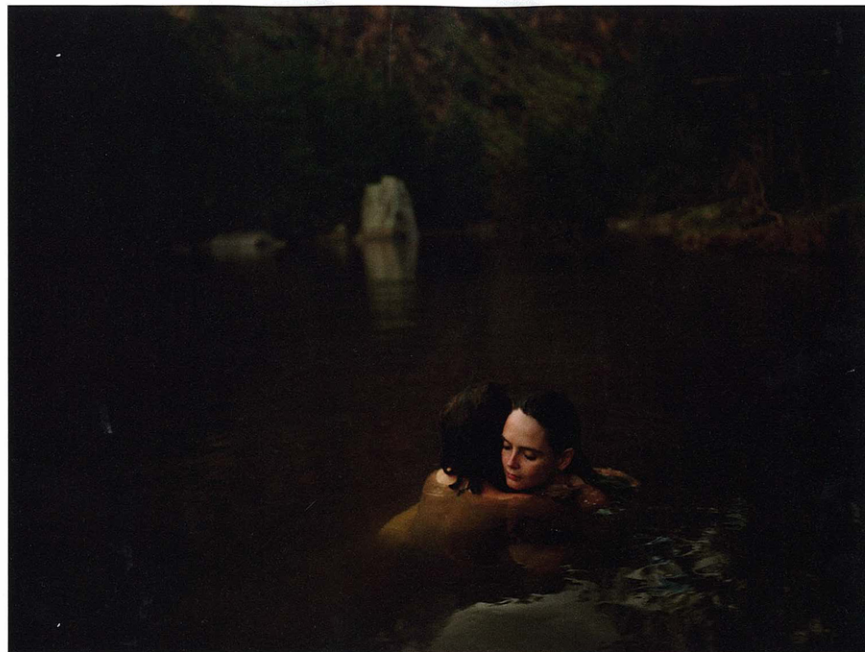
Tamara Dean's next exhibition, *This too shall pass*, will be at Tim Olsen Gallery in Sydney from 24 April to 13 May 2012.

KRYSTAL SEIGERMAN PHOTOGRAPHER

"The 14 images from *This too shall pass* continue Tamara Dean's exploration of spirituality through staged photographs. Shot mainly in decaying urban locations, Sydney morphs into a world where nature threatens to claw back control. The ephemeral nature of the locations echo one of documentary photography's central concerns – to record our visual history before it disappears. Indeed, Dean contends that most of these locations have now been transformed, hence the melancholy title borrowed from a well-worn proverb.

"Although Dean includes some male models, it is the girls and young women who dominate. As in her documentary practice these women are Dean's friends, family and acquaintances; strong women, they navigate their place in an ambiguous world."

Ashley Crawford



TIM OLSEN DIRECTOR, TIM OLSEN GALLERY

"Tamara Dean's work obviously displays a tremendous grasp of colour, tone and light. Along with this she achieves the magic of marrying the deliberate cinematic setting with the seemingly spontaneous act.

"Although the images are well composed, there is the sense that everything just fell into place or just happened. Ironically within her considered approach there is also a free spirit, all of which seems to exist simultaneously. Her unassuming and understated demeanour obviously puts her subjects at ease, everything and everyone seems sincere and natural."

Ashley Crawford

From far left:

Tamara Dean, *Centre of the Universe*, 2011. Print on archival cotton rag paper, 76 x 102cm.

Tamara Dean, *Ladies of the Canyon #2*, 2011. Print on archival cotton rag paper, 76 x 102cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TIM OLSEN GALLERY, SYDNEY