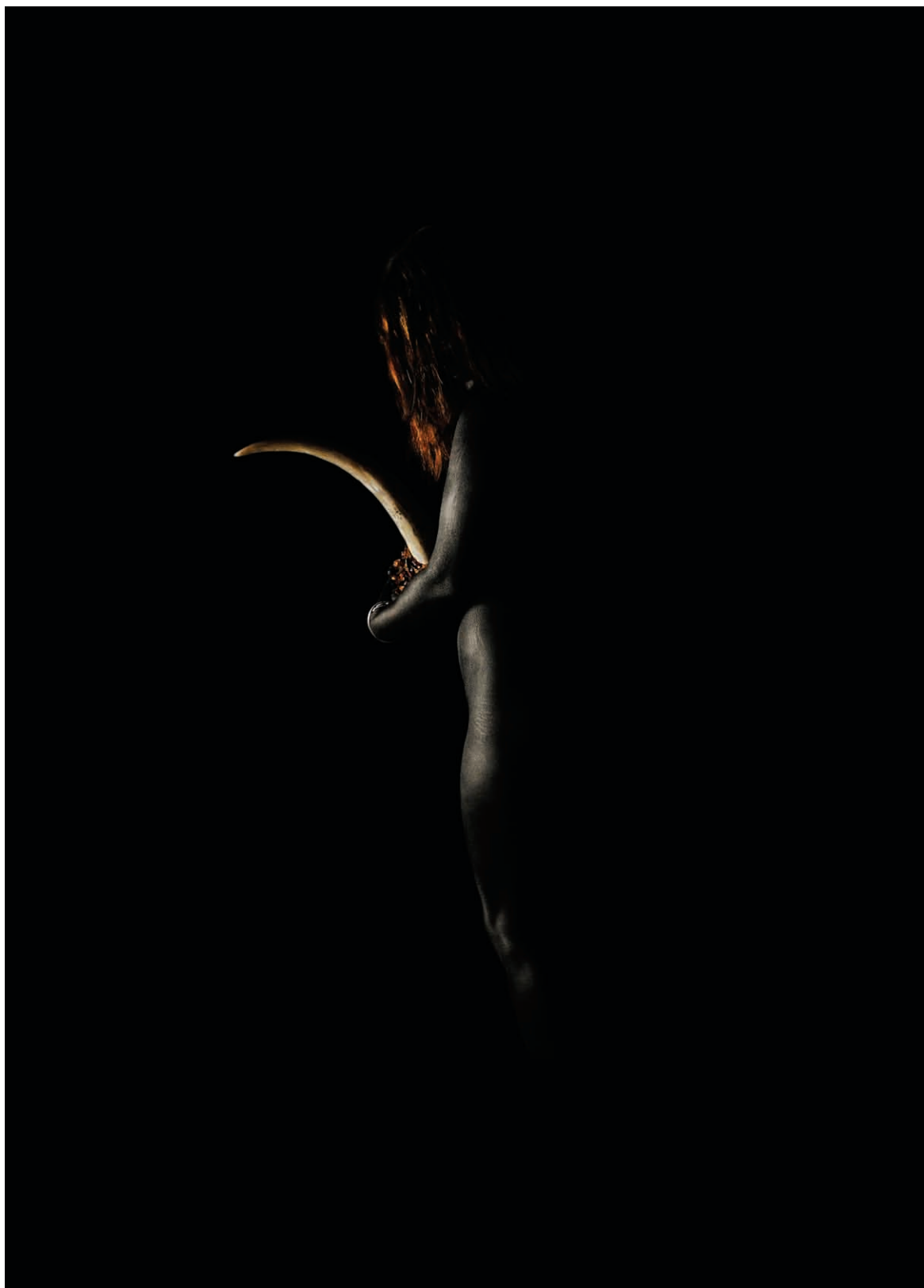


DEBUT



GARDEN  **EARTHLY SHADOWS**

BY MAURICE O'RIORDAN



ARTIST SIMONE EISLER

GARDENS CAN BE BOTH A RETREAT FROM AND AN ENTRY INTO NATURE: THE MOWN AND MANICURED SUBURBAN PLOT AS AGAINST THE RAMBLING, BUSHY VARIETY THAT SPILLS OUT FROM THE CUSP OF CIVILISATION. ARTIST SIMONE EISLER'S BRISBANE GARDEN IS MORE THE LATTER: A GENEROUS, ROUGHLY RECTANGULAR SPACE OOZING WITH SEMI-TROPICAL FECUNDITY – AN ANOMALY IN THE INNER-CITY, HIGH-RISE RIVERSIDE SUBURB OF KANGAROO POINT, AND A HOME FOR SOME OF EISLER'S SEMI-NATURAL SCULPTURES, REPRISED FROM THEIR LARGER INSTALLATION SETTINGS.

FACING PAGE
Night Vision 4, 2010
 - *Night Vision* series
 Chromogenic prints
 84 x 60cm

ABOVE
Night Vision 3, 2010
 - *Night Vision* series
 Chromogenic prints
 84 x 60cm

But Eisler's installations live on in other ways. Her latest series of photographs, *Night Vision*, which were exhibited as part of the 2009 Arc Biennial of Art, were shot amidst her Armoured Forest installation in Brisbane's Howard Smith Wharves and became a site for performance and photographic exploration. Some of her earlier photographic series - such as *Spot* and *Invisible Harvest* - also emerged from similar installations.

While the large-scale Armoured Forest installation continues Eisler's interest in the 'garden' as, in her words, "a site for transformation and enchantment - a place to reconnect and re-engage people with the creative forces of nature and the imagination," the *Night Vision* series presented a more ritualised and visceral embodiment. In a similar fashion to all her previous photographic series, Eisler performs in front of the camera; it is her body - blackened, burnished and abstracted, poised and posed - with various 'props' that become works of art in their own right.

One senses that even without the photographic impulse Eisler would

be compelled to inhabit her installations. While much of her work deals with the human/animal tension and a Darwinian evolutionary instinct, the post - or even pre-human aesthetic of her installations invoke some bodily, and self-referential, intervention. With many of the photographs, the actual space of the installation is dissolved - using digital manipulation - into pitch blackness. This turns the installation into a purely conceptual springboard leading to another artistic and perceptual dimension. But for the most part the female figure floats in Stygian solitude, engulfed but also enriched by this nether world.

For curator Kevin Wilson, the *Night Vision* series portends a picture of alarm: "... A powerful body of work that explores a primal and sexual thread that links humans to animals whilst at the same time masking an unidentifiable sense of possible terror and death." While Eisler's images come across as more contemplative than 'doom's day', there are post-apocalyptic overtones in the charred tree stump, a play with exoskeletal

WHILE THE LARGE-SCALE ARMoured FOREST INSTALLATION CONTINUES EISLER'S INTEREST IN THE 'GARDEN' AS, IN HER WORDS, "A SITE FOR TRANSFORMATION AND ENCHANTMENT – A PLACE TO RECONNECT AND RE-ENGAGE PEOPLE WITH THE CREATIVE FORCES OF NATURE AND THE IMAGINATION," THE NIGHT VISION SERIES PRESENTED A MORE RITUALISED AND VISCERAL EMBODIMENT.



remains, and in the overbearingly barren murkiness.

Of course, this murkiness need not be seen as being 'barren'. Wilson's use of the words 'primal' and 'sexual' seem to encapsulate this and other of Eisler's photographic series which use the 'garden' as a place for unchecked desire, a playground for carnal indulgence and experimentation. This is very present in the *Night Vision* narrative, underpinned by a pagan sexuality and animistic eroticism. In *Night Vision 3*, for example, with its elegant sliver of fleshy hide and red-streaked hair, the elongated arc of the animal horn is like a phallus cradled by the figure. In *Night Vision 4*, on the other hand, this analogy is more strident and confrontational. Perhaps Eisler is foregrounding an active, extroverted female sexuality? But then again, in *Night Vision 1*, the primary figure's gender is indeterminate as it recedes behind a bound, half-illuminated mask of a deer's head.

For Eisler, the key theme is sexuality: "Sexuality is at the forefront of creativity and is in itself a creative act - [it] can create new life but also contributes to the evolutionary side of things. This work explores future bodies/future worlds."

Exactly what future is imaged by Eisler's *Night Vision* series is uncertain. Elements of past, present and future seem intrinsically fused in her sculptures and installations and the irrevocation of an ever-evolving humanity. The series also encrusts layers of photographic time and ritual time onto this fusion. "Are these images our last images - the last rites of a civilisation defenceless against our own weapons," asks Wilson, "or are they harbingers of a lost or new physical power re-emerging or emerging once again?" The enigma of Eisler's imagery is no doubt part of its overall seduction, the trace of an 'Armoured Forest' lost and regained.

ABOVE
Night Vision 1, 2010
- *Night Vision* series
Chromogenic prints
60 x 84cm