

# Tomorrow's World, Yesterday's Fever

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Fantasy is one of those words that mean different things to different people. In its everyday usage, it implies an escape from reality into the world of the imagination, into the free-play of visual invention, into the idle pleasures of daydream and reverie. In its stricter psychoanalytic sense, however, the term has an additional dimension: one with a capacity to overwhelm or overturn reality, assailing it with images and impulses from the depths of the unconscious mind. Fantasy, of this latter Freudian imprint, has often been one of the mainsprings of Abigail Lane's art. Her arresting and compelling installations, photographs, videos and wall-based pieces examine and explore this darker side of human nature, echo to the after-shocks of violence, eke out disconcerting secrets, exhume the traces of irrational and inexplicable acts. Although her work has the kick and the edge one would expect from a leading light of the so-called Young British Artists, it also sits somewhat apart from the main Britpack players of the last few years. Maybe it is the fact that Lane's interests and influences have tended to stray from the confines of the artworld, finding recent expression in the areas of theatre, fashion and design, that has lent her work its quixotic, *recherché* quality; not out-of-place with a *fin-de-millennium* mood of sensation and apocalypse but equally steeped in the romantic, almost visionary *zeitgeist* of an earlier *fin de siècle*.

Lane's large-scale exhibition 'Tomorrow's World, Yesterday's Fever (Mental Guests Incorporated)' marries her preoccupation with the looking glass world of the psyche with her equally long-standing fascination with turn-of-the-century phenomena such as séances, freak-shows and circus and magic acts. Trailed across a trio of Barnum-style posters, and played out alongside a number of installation elements (a glittering mirrorball, a tinkling fountain) that help to conjure an almost fairground setting, Lane's films 'The Figment', 'The Inspirator' and 'The Inclination' are funhouse-mirror reflections of different facets of the life of the mind. 'The Figment' is the first of her psychic *dramatis personae* to appear, spirited in via the electromagnetic medium of (video) projection, preceded by a similarly apparitional ghost-image formed out of puffs of smoke. Acting up in his vivid red spotlight like an Elm Street version of the Artful Dodger, 'The Figment' is a product of a cinema-haunted imagination, a bastard-cousin of the scuttling scarlet imp in Nic Roeg's 'Don't Look Now' or of the sinister dancing-dwarf in Lynch's 'Twin Peaks'. Although he seems to simply want to play, there's no telling where following him might take you. 'The Figment' is a voice of temptation, a devil on your shoulder, not so much guiding you as goading you, drawing you down into his enveloping, annihilating darkness.

The female protagonist of 'The Inclination', on the other hand, is almost his antithesis. Emerging equally enigmatically in the dawn glow of an ocean shoreline, she, too, entreats us to trust her and follow her as she lights her way, slowly and fitfully, up the slope of the beach. From passage from fear to serenity. If 'The Figment' represents the regressive forces of the id, playful, irruptive and anarchic, 'The Inclination' more closely resembles the efforts of the (fragile) ego to impose itself on the world. All nicely Freudian, and all well and good, although it does rather beg the question, when we come to the last part of the trilogy, 'The Inspirator', of what exactly a vision of a panda playing a trumpet in a forest might be intended to symbolise. Maybe nothing more than the creative spirit itself: capricious, serendipitous, smiling fleetingly on those it favours; before disappearing, leaving only the outline of its grin.

All cultures have their own versions of these fantasy figures, of course; handed down through myths and fables, painted up on stage and on screen. Think of smiling Ganesh and destructive Shiva. Think of Shakespeare and think of panto. Trace your steps right back to the animistic origins of primitive art. Once we might have pinned these phantom figure as archetypes, primordial images from the collective unconscious ('The Figment' as the Trickster, 'The Inclination' as the Anima; to use the original Jungian terms). Now, though, plugged in to the mediascape of our new technological Millennium, it is tempting to cast them as avatars: those simulacral stand-ins for the human subject such are starting to appear on the web and in computer games; one of an ever-growing series of virtual identities to be swapped and traded in a postmodern Pokemon pantheon.

It is a shift that is half-suggested by the title of the work itself: away from the fevered phantasmagoria of an earlier *fin de siècle* toward an increasingly corporate fantasia of the (not-so-distant) future, where desire becomes ever-more mediated by the spectacles of Hollywood and Disney, by the icons of celebrity, by the wish-fulfillments of the toys industry, by the ersatz fantasies of porn — from mental guests incorporated to Mental Guests Inc. In these beguiling and engaging installations, Lane offers vivid reminders of both the irreducible strangeness of fantasy and of how quickly the imaginative material it generates can be co-opted by the language of kitsch. Continuing to find her inspiration in the uncanny, transgressive potential of fantasy, and in a *fin-de-siècle* period and sensibility simultaneously more turbulent and more innocent than our own, Lane only serves to highlight the anodyne, escapist nature of so much of what passes for fantasy today. Behind their disarmingly playful and theatrical surface, Lane's new installations brim with deceptive significance. Fantasy's not what it used to be, but it can still tell us something inescapable about who we are and who we want to be.