

Natascha Stellmach

IT IS BLACK IN HERE

FOREWORD

Truth can be illusive. At certain moments in our lives we may catch what we think are glimpses of it, but most of the time we struggle to distinguish fact from fiction. In a world where truth is so easily traded for wider political or economic gain, we are lead to believe that which we desire. We have become resigned to never quite knowing the “real” story. Histories, personal or not, are manipulated, reinterpreted and reinvented. The fact that it is often the most disturbing of events that fall prey to exaggeration, denial or falsification is not lost on Natascha Stellmach.

The vulnerability of truth, the darkness of the human condition and our fleeting insignificance in the grand scheme of things are recurring concerns for this artist and clearly illustrated in this extraordinary publication, launched on the occasion of her exhibition at Fotogalerie Wien, in Vienna, Austria.

Stellmach’s works at first appear delicate and personal, familiarly archival even, yet they soon take us into dark terrain—violence, war, suicide, death. Through a range of media encompassing film, photography, prose and installation, she invites us to share in a taboo, an unspeakable subject around which she has built a narrative. These tales are supported, it seems, by documentary evidence, yet are deliberately confusing in their authenticity. We see a photograph of a roadside memorial, a family portrait, a macabre childhood toy, the ashes of Kurt Cobain rolled into a spliff. We read the accompanying text and feel as though we have become privy to a most intimate, sacred moment.

But we can't help but wonder—what part of that story, if any, was true? And does it really matter anyway?

In Stellmach's work, mementos are re-examined and assigned alternative narratives, or alternative owners with alternative lives. However, it is the universal and transient nature of all things, of life itself, which is being conveyed here.

"When one person leaves a new life begins. We are simply human compost; it's just that we sometimes think we are more."¹

We may all end up as compost, but some will certainly be more remembered than others; a notion beautifully encapsulated in the photograph of a fading piece of Princess Diana memorabilia behind the windscreen of a car, accompanied by Stellmach's text where she plays with the form of a Blues stanza: "Them that's got shall live on. In the photos and tea towels and candle holders. Ever more."²

It is this wit and wry humour, together with an innate intelligence and sense of the poetic, which has enabled Stellmach to so successfully tackle challenging topics; and to do so in a way that is never clichéd or laboured. Her work clearly sits within a strong European, and particularly Germanic, artistic tradition of melancholy. However, it is also very Australian in its treatment of landscape, brooding darkness and the unspoken. It is Australia's unofficial national anthem, after all, sung in a joyous melody by the nation's young and old that tells the unfortunate tale of a man who flees the law by drowning himself in a billabong.

Amy Barrett-Lennard

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¹ Natascha Stellmach, *The Book of Back*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2007, p. 76

² see p. 9