



# Antique Electric

*Laurence Simmons unpacks Kushana Bush's timeless myths.*

**N***ew Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl once declared, 'All painting is fairy painting: materialised visions of immaterial entities that are possessed of some spirit.' It is a description we might employ of Kushana Bush's fiercely imagined world of seekers, soothsayers, snake charmers, and stalkers, sacrifice and saga. *Pankration* (street fighting) is the telling title of one of her series of twenty-eight gouaches on paper titled *Antique Electric*, from 2019. They are comic, certainly; they wear their wisdom lightly; and they work to show us a world—a set of human and animal actors—that is absurd and wonderful, unbelievable and irresistible, because this is the nature of the world. They are also about human sociability, the strange mixture of individualism and togetherness that seems intrinsic to it. In one way or another, they all

turn on encounters (hunts in *Boar and Dogs* and *This Way*), moments of recognition (*Gift Bearers* and *Giver's Takers*), and actions and reactions of bodies touching (*Of Fire* and *Cat's Cradle*) or roped together (*Into Submission*).

Bodies, animal and human, Bush suggests, are things of contraries, matter and energy in apposition. Her compositions are full of insolent sexual hints and kinks; a frolic of bodies indulging in something like sex—'something like' being the operative word (see *Harvest*); orgiastic goings-on shot through with story. A balance is struck between an interest in organising and rationalising the world's appearances and a constant sense of what lies beyond it. To paint what lies beyond this world is potentially to make it material, to bring it back down to earth. The people in Bush's works are fictional beings

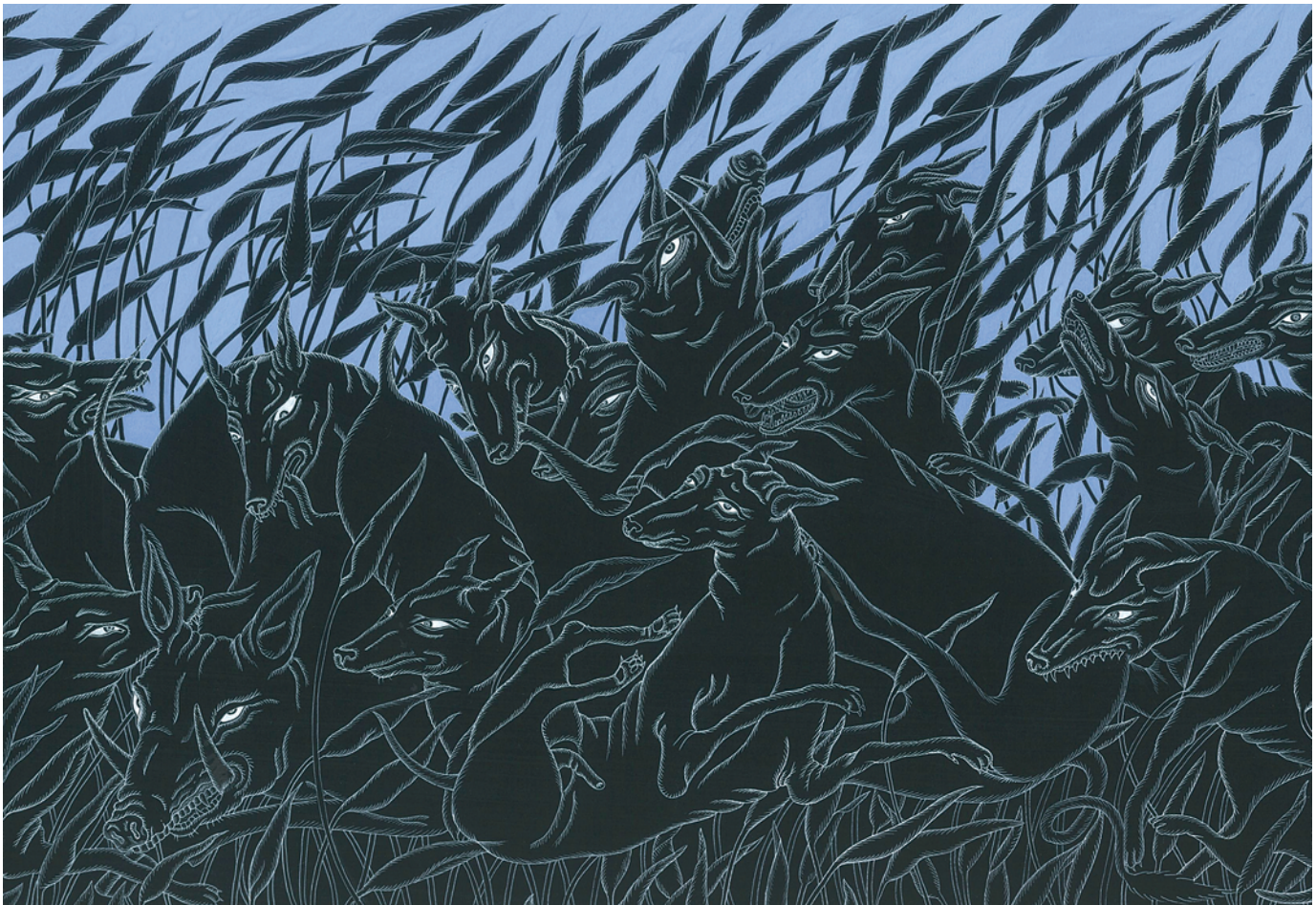
Left: Kushana Bush *Antique Electric* 2019,  
gouache on paper, 197 × 285mm.

Below: Kushana Bush *Of Fire* 2019,  
gouache on paper, 197 × 285mm.

cobbled together in collaborations (or conspiracies) with the artist's uncanny life. She is sometimes inspired, she has acknowledged, by things she hears on the radio in her studio. Perhaps, too, this worldliness is why Bush draws attention to multiple details: individual blades of grass and ears of wheat, manifold fluttering leaves, flames, and smoke, numerous dogs gnashing their teeth, and masks that hang down Janus-like from the back of the neck. But this is never tedious, because there is always some nexus of imaginings at play. It is, as if, for a moment, our world is suddenly overtaken, or put in abeyance, by a parallel reality that starts to stake a claim on us—a world of ravenous dogs, captured birds, netted fish, mysterious flames, intertwined bodies, tangled rope, exposed penises. Bush is emotionally committed to her subject matter, which is then depicted in the most unemotional fashion. This makes for the works' 'dissociated' quality. As Justin Paton has said, it is 'as if she were a foreigner learning to enunciate a word in a language she did not understand'.

I will speculate that the 'electric' in Bush's series title refers to the electric blue of her backgrounds. Electric blue, actually a bright cyan, was named after the colour of the ionised air glow produced during electrical discharges. Blue is the most insubstantial of colours. It seldom occurs in the natural world, except as a translucency, an accumulation of emptiness; the void of the heavens, the depths of the sea. The 'blue effect' of these gouaches is astonishing; no one analogy will lay hold of it. It has both a wonderful, watery lightness and a depth like a throw of fine velvet. It is infinite, like the sky, but dry, like a thin papery covering. Its quality of 'forever escaping' is a perfect complement to the paintings' relish for details. Blue, it seems, is an entity the eye can touch. Perhaps Bush has used it because, as Goethe adduces in his *Theory of Colours* (1810), 'We love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it.' The blue in Bush's gouaches draws us in like this and is the very opposite of mere 'atmosphere'. Viewers of these paintings





Left: Kushana Bush *Same Fate* 2019,  
gouache on paper, 197 × 285mm.

Below left: Kushana Bush *And This Way* 2019,  
gouache on paper, 197 × 285mm.

all attest to 'leaning in' to read and unravel, or puzzle over, their signs. For me, Bush's blue is the force of an unknown. Nevertheless, there exists a beguiling paradox of construction in the painting of these gouaches. While blue appears as the background of these compositions, black paper is the literal ground on which the blue and white gouache are deposited; blue and black being the main colours. Formally, the black, both figure and ground, is also a kind of distillation and compression of the blue. The immediate and abiding impression is that their two colour fields are equal, held in balance; the black dividing the blue into visual clauses, and vice versa. Bush has a strong sense of painting as the art of demarcation, and the line between the blue and black is like a complex—deliberately esoteric—yin and yang.

What Bush depicts is an apparition, but she seems to want to show us that this appearing-in-the-world takes place outside the visible. Her world is the world as it would be if it became more fully itself, with all its physicality, its myriad details, and its orientation intact and hypervisible. Bush lives in the age of consumerism in which the world of goods has accelerated and expanded—a world transformed by a multiplication of addictive distractions. She knows it, but resists it with her sensitive, suave brushwork—a tissue of touches, where each mark is a particular decision from which there is no return. Her human and animal figures are witnesses; we always see the whites of their eyes—a matter of seeing is believing. All the same, inwardness—invisibility—is what the painting celebrates. For Bush, orientation is crucial. She wants the discontinuity of the two realms on view to be enacted by a turn, from the low relief of her figures' bodies towards a deeper spatiality, that of the blue background. When her figures manoeuvre in space and strike poses, as they do in *Of Fire*, they are dispersed across the picture plane to create astonishing congeries of overlapping planes and textures. Bush is alert to the picture plane but she is ready to puncture or parody it, as a sign of the world she depicts giving way (the torch beams in *To Hide a Fish* do just this, as does the criss-crossing pattern of real leaves and leaf designs on textiles in *Elbows Out*). There is what we might call the object world, and there is its hidden ground. Something is crossing the threshold between them.

Bush's gouaches take us to that moment of suspension in everyday life when something half enters the world, putting our picture of the world to the test. She belongs to contemporary New Zealand art (with hints of Jeffrey Harris's obsessive pencil drawings of the 1970s) but

also looks to the illuminated books of the Middle Ages and to Persian and Mughal miniatures. That is, she is forever pointing forwards to an afterwards. Bush is deliberately allusive and dazzlingly eclectic. *Antique Electric* is speculative but capable of changing how you see things. Never merely antiquarian, Bush takes her viewers to where myths are still happening in a timeless present. What counts in her treatment is the worldliness, the ordinariness, of the meeting of opposites. It is as if, for a moment, our world is suddenly overtaken or put in abeyance. Like our dreams, we experience images that arrive from elsewhere, intriguing or elating us, asking us to understand where they may have come from. Bush's images are out-of-the-ordinary, but, as in our dreams, their out-of-the-ordinariness is modelled on and anchored in the contemporary everyday—see, for example, the asthma inhaler, toothbrush, plastic drink bottle, paper cup, and straw of *Other Instincts*; the saw, scissors, picket fence, and Fila sport waist bag of *Into Submission*; and the figure wearing a Nike t-shirt with a pencil stuck in his turban in *Same Fate*. All entirely physical and familiar—splinters of contemporary actuality. Images from different eras and aesthetic persuasions overlap, mingle, and collide. In this way, Bush's work speaks to the persistence of ancient mythology within modern secular society—such as the siren (used in the Starbucks logo), the staff of Hermes (the symbol of medicine), and even the origins of our days of the week. While myth is fiction posing as history and cosmogony, its function is to connect humans with the divine. A bridge to the invisible, myth is marked by the visible—figures and images, plays and rituals. If I were asked to find a literary equivalent to Bush's art, I think it must be Italian writer Roberto Calasso, who also explores the depths that lie beneath our modern thought processes and belief systems, hunting for truths in places where meaning is ambiguous. Human life, Calasso suggests, 'is constellated with stories suspended, attached to the vault of the sky', and our myths remain strange and violent memories, subject to an alien, evasive logic we cannot quite follow. In *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Calasso writes: 'A life in which the gods are not invited is not worth living. It will be quieter, but there won't be any stories.' Thankfully, Kushana Bush invites us to share the tantalising life of the gods.

*Works from Kushana Bush's Antique Electric were exhibited at Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, in March 2019, and at Sydney Contemporary Art Fair with Sydney's Darren Knight Gallery in September 2019.*