

Michael Vale, The Conquest of Space

Five Walls Projects, Footscray; 4 September – 28 September 2013

Under acrid skies of orange, mauve and green, a population of carnivalesque characters launch rockets into the stratosphere. Alchemical experiments light the dusky evenings as their smoky entrails waft across a soupy atmosphere of fading hope. Scientists shield their animal instincts under gauze and read their hypotheses in the oval symbols that guide their ambitions.

Michael Vale has orchestrated a netherworld of creatures born of the pleasure of paint strokes. If the cities of superheroes and arch-villains were built on the landscape backgrounds of Da Vinci paintings, this is where Michael's creatures would find their home. There's an under-glow of light that seeps through a certain darkness in the work, like a humorous punchline lurking in a tragic tale. This inner luminescence is a key characteristic of Michael's painting, which sets free a painterly conceit and imbues his images with a dreamlike quality. It's a shadow play of theatre sets cast before a universe of swirling narratives.

Possibly the most striking aspect of the series, once you set aside the richly painted painterliness of the oils, is the overwhelming sense of identity crisis. Masked faces, animals heads, robots, beards, visors and floating eyes abound across the canvases and panels. No-one is who they seem nor who they think they are. A face is taken over by gaping orifices in Cone Head while a trousered Rat-Man ponders abseiling a sky-scraper in Zone of Regrets. A rocket scientist is a gentleman rat with stars in his eyes and a cosmonaut with beaming eye sockets dreams of anti-gravity free radicals. These are portraits of inner psychology writ large on tumbling landscapes of iridescence.

Landscape settings meld urban and rural, city and country – all under the watchful gaze of a pregnant sky. It's the sky that brings a dense and weighted atmosphere to the series. Changing colours ring in the variations of an endless dusk. The streets are the forests are the towns are the plains, and an ever-present sky casts its intent across the land. The lead character in an ensemble cast of lost souls.

Trenchcoats, sunglasses and cravats speak of secret conversations and there's a coded language scattered across the paintings that begs to be deciphered. A clown is our guide and threatens to turn it all into a joke before our eyes. Aspirational trajectories are doomed to imminent failure, resting on pillars of smokescreens under a carpeted sky. Who's to say what means what, but there's joy in the attempt as we linger inside a painted world rich with layers.

Take a trip inside the mind of the artist and discover yourself inside your own.

Kent Wilson, 2013