

# ANITA TRAVERSO GALLERY

## GABRIELLE COURTENAY

### *Navigating Dark Waters*

26 November – 21 December 2013

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#### CATALOGUE ESSAY

Gabrielle Courtenay's paintings are heavily laden with symbols. From floating trees, neo-classical statuary and carved Buddhas, to narrow ellipse-shaped portals, alchemical signs and navigational notations, every delicately rendered image clearly means something.

Although they are instantly recognisable as symbols, the distinctive elements of Courtenay's visual language aren't the archetypal "primordial images" theorised by influential psychoanalyst Carl Jung: symbolic elements drifting through the collective unconscious, universal and un-tethered from the bonds of a specific culture. Instead, they have more in common with the notion of memes: a cultural unit that is disseminated and replicated by communication between individuals, communities and across generations.

These days the term meme is almost inextricably linked with Internet culture and it is used to describe the silly low-fi animated gifs and sound-byte clips that have 'gone viral' on YouTube. But whereas internet memes are deliberately altered or fabricated, memes, as first postulated by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, mutate naturally in much the same way as genes do. In fact, Dawkins coined the phrase based on the Greek mimeme (loosely translated as likeness or imitation) to deliberately mimic the word gene. For him, memes are evidence of a kind of cultural natural selection. Like genes they transmit information, but they can also evolve over time.

In Courtenay's work, culturally specific symbols seem to have been caught on the brink of mutation, poised between one meaning and another. In her *Wunderkammer Series* she has assembled a plethora of culturally loaded symbols and arranged them according to the principals of her own personal taxonomy. Divorced from their original contexts and housed in her canvas cabinets of curiosities, recognisable images become ambiguous and slippery; they resist conventional classification. Elsewhere, free-floating through the star speckled galaxies of Courtenay's mini-mundi, they become infused with possibility and open to interpretation.

In the liminal zone of Courtenay's paintings memes mutate and become mnemonics as she charts the territory of not only her own individual memories but also the recollections and repercussions of our colonial past: dark waters indeed.

#### Tracey Clement

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Tracey Clement is an artist and writer currently based in Sydney. The former editor of the now defunct 'Metro Art Page' in the Sydney Morning Herald, she is now an independent art critic.