



# ARCADIA

Jaco van Schalkwyk

By Ashraf Jamal

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Installation view of Jaco van Schalkwyk's series 'Arcadia' at the FNB JoburgArtFair 2016, Barnard Gallery. Photo: Nina Lieska | Repro Pictures. Image courtesy of the artist and Barnard Gallery, Cape Town.

Jaco van Schalkwyk's series of paintings in oil on Belgian linen possess a monumentality rarely encountered in the South African art world. On arriving at the FNB JoburgArtFair at around 10AM on the first day, the dealerships frenziedly preparing their stands, I was struck by the Barnard Gallery. Barring a final lighting rig, they had already set up an elegant framework in which to witness and experience their artist's world.

A sumptuously long wall work, 'Arcadia' possesses a quiet rarely countenanced these days. On first viewing the work in a sombre light, I thought I was looking at a series of black and white photographs. Initially, the paintings appeared to me as the blown up hyper-realistic detailed images of a forest scene. On closer viewing however the grain of linen and a subtle mark-making

emerged. Moreover, what I thought of as a monochromatic series now revealed its cryptic colouration, for van Schalkwyk's world is not a desaturated world of sharp contrasts but a milky, misty, penumbral vision of a forest-scape at once shaded and opaque, overcast yet illuminated. It is this moment, this specific time when light kisses darkness, when all is illuminated, which van Schalkwyk has made his forested home. Therein, as we place our noses millimetres from the surface, we begin to see other faint colours, blues and greens, which lend bough and mist their opacity.

A term typically associated with the pastoral, or bucolic – some ideal and rustic paradise – one would be forgiven for thinking that in his 'Arcadia,' van Schalkwyk has created a series of landscape paintings. This is not

the case. A term which enters the English vocabulary in the 16th century, the word 'landscape' is commonly associated with a grand perspectival vision, a rolling lake and river, with John Constable's picturesque green isle or William Turner's romantic sun-drenched tempests. Neither mood, however, is put into play in van Schalkwyk's series of paintings. He is neither composing a psychologically restorative scene nor is he forcing a reckoning with the majestic grandeur of the elements.

Contra the picturesque landscape which, as J.M. Coetzee notes, 'compels itself, or is composed by the viewer, in receding plains... a dark coulisse on one side shadowing the foreground, a middle plane with a larger central figure such as a clump of trees; a plane of luminous distance,' van



THIS PAGE AND THE FACING PAGE: Installation view of Jaco van Schalkwyk's series 'Arcadia' at the FNB JoburgArtFair 2016, Barnard Gallery. Photo: Nina Lieska | Repro Pictures; Jaco van Schalkwyk, *Arcadia VII*, 2016. Oil on belgian linen, 175 x 130 cm. Images courtesy of the artist and Barnard Gallery, Cape Town

Schalkwyk's vision is foreshortened. There is no distant horizon, middle ground, or coulisse at the fore that could guide the eye, ensure repose, or centre and settle vision. This allows for some parity, some completion of the viewer's being within the world of the work. Rather, it is as if we are plunged into the scene, caught up in its entanglement of bough and mist, light and dark.

Entering van Schalkwyk's world one arrives at a thicket. Here the eye, heart, and soul of the viewer finds itself embroiled in a delicately gnarled world. With its recesses, its densely obstructed perspective, its refusal to compose the viewer, van Schalkwyk's 'Arcadia' emerges less as an ideal than as a psychic frisson, for therein it is not one's lofty and ennobled sense of self which is triggered but one's sensuous, immersive, connectedness to an infinitely detailed world.

I am reminded of John Fowles' 'common'

in *The French Lieutenant's woman*, a hidden densely green world where illicit encounters occur; a place of secrets, lusts, yearnings; where sight gives way to touch, ease of movement to the precarious rub of thorn and twig. My meaning here is that van Schalkwyk is not concerned with the lofty ideals of the Romantic or Picturesque, but with the psychological and libidinal drives that are coaxed from worlds as intimate as they are clammy, as difficult to disinter as they are seductively inviting. Here the unconscious and Eros reign, here we are returned to our hidden lives, for as tropes, forests or thickets have always been bonded to the hidden and illicit. By this I do not mean that van Schalkwyk has enshrined taboo, rather, that he has given us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in a world freed from surfaces, opinion, perspective; he has allowed us to loosen ourselves, to be drenched, to lose form, ease certainty, become one with nature.

This return to thicket and forest is not simply

a nostalgic return to an idealised and primal moment, though this certainly does seem to be the case – this series of rarefied moments can be said to express such an ideal. Yet it is not nostalgia which van Schalkwyk provides but sublimity. He has taken us away from the trying burden of secularism, and done so not to cynically seduce us with a bucolic getaway, but, rather, to restore to us that which is most sacred – a state of grace and inner calm mixed with a fervid restlessness, wonder, unease, repose, and thrill. 'Arcadia' stands as an astounding series of detailed and isolated secret moments. As powerful as they are barely perceptible, these moments remind us of our connectedness, our beauty, our fragility, and our undivided divinity...

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