

LOVER OF THE EAST

JACO VAN SCHALKWYK'S 'ARIUM'

BY ASHRAF JAMAL

'The East is a career', Benjamin Disraeli remarked in *Tancred*. Edward Said would select this remark as the epigraph for his ground-breaking study, *Orientalism*. A defining 19th-century imperial obsession, the East conjured everything that existed beyond the pale of Western reason and objectivity – a world intoxicating, seductive, inscrutable and haunting. I myself have spent two years in its heady embrace, namely on the mainland of Southeast Asia and its sprawling archipelago, the largest fretwork of islands on Earth.

It is this region that also drew Jaco van Schalkwyk. Indeed, it remains one of the most alluring regions on Earth and the engine room of a ceaselessly booming trade in tourism. Most of my students, in search of a 'gap year', have ventured eastward rather than to the West. In *Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East*, Pico Iyer regales us with some of the most compelling explanations for its magnetic allure. "Bali ... was a common paradise," he says, "tourism hung around" it "like chains around a mermaid."

Iyer demystifies the region, not because he seeks to ruin the fantasy, but because 'memory, the mind's great cosmetician', is compromised, always, by the chains of fact. Nevertheless, Asia also appealed to Pico Iyer "because it was unmatched in its heterogeneity". "In China, Japan and India alone, the continent had three great traditions as deep as they were diverse." It is this depth of complexity, this 'heterogeneity', which makes it impossible to simplify the East, despite our persistent desire to do so.

"Oh, East is east, and West is west, and never the twain shall meet," Rudyard Kipling famously remarked, but few recall the words that follow: "But there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth, / When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"

If, historically, East and West have been perceived as opposed realms, "on the human level," Iyer notes, "the meeting more

closely resembled a mating dance." "Whenever a Westerner meets an Easterner, each is to some extent confronted with the unknown. And the unknown is at once an enticement and a challenge; it awakens in us both the lover and the would-be conqueror."

This twin-pronged approach – as lover and master – reveals the paradox that persists at the heart of tourism today. It is as though the Westerner must re-enact this paradoxical fantasy each time he or she encounters the putatively 'Other'. But what of our humanity, what of that which connects us? In seeking that which separates us, we fall victim to the illusion that we – a given caste, culture, race – are somehow impregnable, somehow different. Iyer's 'mating dance', however, reminds us that far more connects than separates cultures.

It is this desire to connect that impels Jaco van Schalkwyk. His 'Arium' – a mix of painting, sculpture, installation, assemblage and film – is more love affair than cool acquisition, for in the artist's representation, or rather the recovery and incantation of the 'East', it is this more tender, more evocative love-song that compels one. That said, Charis de Kock remains correct in noting that Van Schalkwyk's exhibition also defers to the cabinet of curiosities, or Wunderkammer, that is, to a long imperial aesthetic tradition founded on the appropriation and fetishisation of the Other. Collecting and cataloguing, she rightly notes, is an attempt to contain and reduce the world – all that is seen, absorbed, consumed in the world. One particular variation on this acquisitive imperial drive catches De Kock's attention, and rightly so, and that is the artist's use of the smart phone – a 'a modern-day, digital cabinet of curiosities'.

We survey and itemise the world, and no more ubiquitously than through our smart phones. By encasing a live or streaming phone in glass, by sealing it off yet ensuring its visible presence, Van Schalkwyk forces a barrier and stalls an addictive connection, and, in so doing, suspends our insatiable need to gratify ourselves through a mediated and screened connection with the world. It is as though Van Schalkwyk, after E.M. Forster, is asking us



Jaco van Schalkwyk, *Pteridomania*, 2017. Oil on Canvas, 210 x 200 cm. Courtesy of Barnard Gallery and the artist.



LEFT: Jaco van Schalkwyk, *Retroquire xiGubu*, 2017. Found object & mixed media mobile sculpture, 115 x 154 x 185 cm. **RIGHT:** Collaboration with Allen Laing. Installation shot of -arium. Images courtesy of Barnard Gallery.

to reflect upon why it is we need to truly connect with others in-and-through the world, a connection arrested and estranged in a mediated world.

For a more visceral and more sensuous link, the artist draws us back to a more compelling medium – painting. Perhaps the greater and more consuming passion, painting for Van Schalkwyk allows one to bend time, hold the instant, and in the holding, connect the human pulse to the pulse of art. It is painting, perhaps, that best embodies Van Schalkwyk’s ‘mating dance’. Though here one should acknowledge that ‘Arium’ – the artist’s fourth solo exhibition through the Barnard Gallery – is also his most experimental and most performative to date. It is as though the artist wills his audience to inhabit Asia, to breathe in its rich singularities, succumb to its customs, revere its wisdom, and do so without a blind fascination.

Rather, Van Schalkwyk’s encounter with the East evokes the tender and erotic final moments of *E.M. Forster’s Passage to India*, in which it dawns upon Aziz and Fielding, in the moment they are torn asunder, that theirs is a profound and everlasting love.

It is this self-same romanticism, this refusal to separate worlds, this yearning for a greater togetherness, that inspires Van Schalkwyk. Contra Charis de Kock, the artist is not simply a ‘photorealist’, someone seduced by ‘illusionism’, for whom what matters most is the perfected surface. Yes, this artist may gesture towards such an aesthetic ideal, but that which drives and modifies that ideal at every turn is the grace of the moment, its emotional detail.

For Van Schalkwyk, what matters is the artist as lover, as one who touches the world into existence, and who is touched in turn. Without this erotic fold, there would be nothing other than a mere objective grasp of detail. Jaco van Schalkwyk’s ‘Arium’, then, is

about a way of orienting oneself, a way of being as a lover, as much as one who loves.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* reads: “Orient: The east; lustrous, sparkling, precious; radiant, rising, nascent; place or exactly determine position, settle or find bearings; bring into clearly understood relations; direct towards; determine how one stands in relation to one’s surroundings. Turn eastward. Reorient: Give new orientation to; readjust, change outlook.”

These definitions sum up Van Schalkwyk’s approach to the East, for his presentation thereof – which reads as a gift – embraces both the region’s surfaces and its depths, its material and spiritual textures, its scents and sensuousness, its secrets and its wonders. The scale of the works is modest, for what Van Schalkwyk seeks to convey is that infinity can also reside in modesty, the great in the small. Indeed, perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to say that what Jaco van Schalkwyk has sought most avidly to convey through his modestly scaled works is the very soul of the East – its magic and its seduction.

In his novel, *Malaisie*, translated as the *Soul of Malaya*, Henri Fauconnier arrives upon this enigmatic point – that the ‘soul’ of Malaya (and here we can speak more broadly of the East) defies rational containment as much as it defies the Western art of illusion. “We should do more than interpret the thoughts that hover in the air about us,” he writes. “That is what the Malays do. Malayan spirits are dumb: but the Malays understand them” – as do the lovers of the East.

Ashraf Jamal is a writer and teacher. His collected essays on contemporary South African art, *In the World*, is published by SKIRA.