

## AMOS GEBHARDT

### *Evanescence*

2018

It has been said that if the earth's lifespan could be represented in 24 hours, the entirety of human existence would begin and end in one second. It is this sense of deep time, and the relative ephemerality of humankind, that Amos Gebhardt draws upon in the performative moving image *Evanescence*, 2018.

Across four large-scale screens, bodies emerge from and coalesce with the land. Forty dancers move within four sprawling Australian landscapes—a salt lake, rock formations, crescent-shaped sand dunes, and a waterfall—all sites that echo the vastness of geological time. Dwarfed by the landscapes, the human figures appear as living sculptures extending upwards from the earth; a reminder that they are made of the same matter.

Time is elastic in *Evanescence*. An infinite loop with no ostensible duration, the unbroken horizon line is fixed in place and the characters are locked in a dance with no beginning and no end. Labelling them 'characters' draws our attention to the way narrative is treated by the artist. A trained filmmaker, Gebhardt is alert to screen language and to our aptitude in reading it. Traditional cinema relies on pulling the camera towards the face to encourage empathy with the protagonist, and Hollywood in particular has asked us to view the world through the metric of the white male body. Without cutaways or close-ups, Gebhardt breaks from these cinematic narrative constructs to offer no such privilege. The bodies that populate *Evanescence* are diverse in age, gender, and race; an array of human expression that creates a space of pluralism and makes visible identities that are frequently excluded from the dominant paradigm of western screen culture. Together, they form a portrait of contemporary Australia – diaspora, settlers and First Nations Australians entwined.

And, while our eyes are trained to focus on the human form, sustained viewing of *Evanescence* reveals an anti-hierarchical treatment of the bodies and the landscapes. The human forms are reduced in the composition, a tactic that disrupts the Anthropocentric belief in our significance. How small we are against the immensity of time, and of the natural world.

Sounds emitting from the dancers are woven through field recordings to create a soundtrack that reinforces the idea that place does not preference the human experience. At once we hear the intake and exhale of breath, a grunt, a slap of skin on skin, running water and the bracing call of the butcherbird. A native Australian songbird, the butcherbird species is thought to have diverged from the currawong thirteen million years ago and the magpie six million years ago. Its ancient song is a call into deep time.

Ruptures ripple through *Evanescence*. At a certain point, the languid movement choreographed by Gebhardt and Melanie Lane takes a dramatic shift and the dancers begin to act out a form of self-flagellation. In this violent flinging of limbs, arms collide with backs and torsos and we hear the impact of flesh on flesh. The dancer's feet slide into the sand as they attempt to find solid ground. The earth makes its mark on the bodies, and the bodies make their mark on the earth. As this scene plays out across the four screens, there is a suggestion that the violence and damage wrought is evidence of humankind's inevitable impermanence. The cycle will end, but when?

— Joanna Kitto

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