









THE FLIPSIDE OF (HUMAN) NATURE

I first came across Zadok Ben-David and his uncanny sculptures when living and working in London in the late 1980s. He made work that was more idiosyncratic than fashionable at the time, sometimes witty, always magical, and held in such high esteem that it was selected to represent his childhood homeland of Israel at the 1988 Venice Biennale. In the intervening decades the artist's practice has continued to evolve and grow in conceptual scope and international reputation.

The Perth Festival is pleased to present two of Ben-David's most important installations of recent years at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

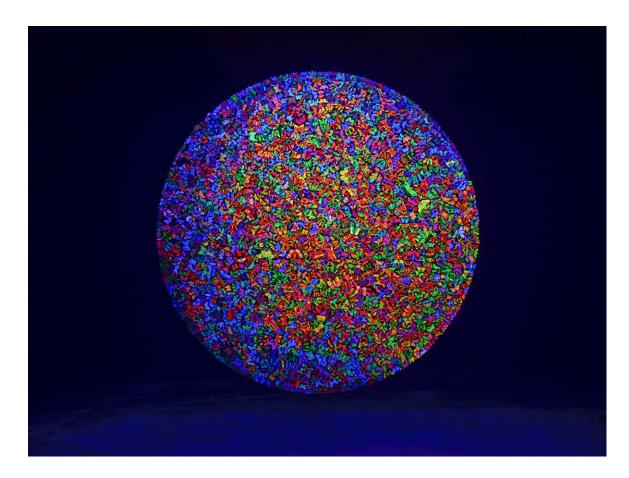
Zadok Ben-David's work fuses fables from his childhood with metaphorical juxtapositions of western logic and eastern mysticism. Linking science and alchemy, whimsy and humour, he manipulates the core principles of vision and illusion, challenging accepted tropes of phenomenological belief. The artist himself has a remarkable talent as a magician, performing simple tricks with whatever materials are to hand. In the best manifestations of magic, people and objects vanish into thin air, becoming incorporeal and invisible. Air and weightlessness have always been integral components of Ben-David's work, the invisible forces of gravity and flight informing improbable compositions of imaginative delight.

In 2008 Ben-David was invited by Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo to create a work for the Singapore Biennale. The resulting installation, *Blackfield*, comprises 20,000 tiny, flat metal sculptures of different plants from around the world that stand erect on a bed of white sand. Upon entering the

space the vegetation looks uniformly black, resembling a bushfire-ravaged landscape. The flipside of the flat silhouettes, in striking contrast, boasts a vibrant field of brightly coloured vegetation. The coloured side is revealed iteratively, as the viewer walks around the work: it is in this gradual recognition that the imaginary field represents new life, not only death, that lends the installation an unexpectedly optimistic and magical dimension.

In nature, flowers also call to mind rebirth and the future, symbolising the passing of life to the next generation... [Blackfield] is a work that resists classification into a particular school or trend. But it moves us profoundly in ways that are emotional, non-verbal, extremely visual, instinctive and intuitive. The work goes beyond language to reach into our hearts. Here, meaning is not what they artist was trying to convey, but what the viewer reads in the work. And the strength of the work is its power to move us in this way. (Fumio Nanjo, p. 98.)

In the 20 years that Ben-David has been making sculptural installations based on changing aspects of the natural world, of which *Blackfield* and *The Other Side of Midnight* are key examples. human-induced climate change has increased the pace of extinction rates a thousand-fold. Ben-David is interested not just in the science of climate catastrophe, but in the human response to the inevitability of change and adaptation:



images left to right: The Other Side of Midnight (detail), 2013, hand painted stainless steel, dia. 300cm

Blackfield (detail), 2006–09, hand painted stainless steel and sand, measurements variable

Conversation Peace, still from video, 2018, 4 minutes

The Other Side of Midnight, 2013, hand painted stainless steel, dia. 300cm

The Other Side of Midnight (detail), 2013, hand painted stainless steel, dia. 300cm

I try in my work to explore human attitudes and behaviour. Blackfield is an optimistic psychological installation presenting two extreme situations – life and death. Yet it is more about choice than fate. The flowers are intended as a metaphor, a symbol of two extreme emotional states – happiness and grief. (Zadok Ben-David, p. 84.)

A hundred years ago in 1917, Giorgio de Chirico, with his brother Savinio and Carlo Carra, formulated the principles of the Scuola Metafisica, which aimed to evoke those disquieting states of mind that prompt one to doubt the detached and impersonal existence of the empirical world, judging each object instead as only the external part of an experience which is chiefly enigmatic in meaning; and to do this through solid, clearly defined constructions which, paradoxically, seem entirely objective. The Scuola Metafisica artists stressed the importance of thoughtfully ordered compositions: closely linked to the Platonic philosophy of inner beauty, exterior harmony becomes a mirror of the mental control needed in order to gain metaphysical insight. (It is here that the metaphysicians diverged from the Surrealists, who were instead interested in the unexplained workings of the subconscious and the representation of dreams.) While the inherent optimism of *Blackfield* unexpectedly and joyfully reveals itself as the viewer moves around it, The Other Side of Midnight, which at the first encounter appears to be a celebration of nature's beauty, reveals a dark pessimism upon closer inspection:

Taking us to 'the other side of midnight', Ben-David gives us a vision of a planet overrun with beetles and cockroaches – the likely survivors of a nuclear catastrophe. It is commonly believed that after we have used our Promethean talents to dispose of humanity in a highly sophisticated manner, these simple organisms are destined to inherit the earth. The human butterflies on the front of the disc now seem to refer to the frivolous, carefree existence we enjoy while the clock keeps ticking. (John McDonald, p. 156.)

Embracing hope and despair, attraction and repulsion, Ben-David's installations share De Chirico's metaphysical interest in exploring through metaphor and illusion the uneasy tension between knowledge and enigma. Yet the apparent playfulness of the individual forms in Ben-David's work provides a pertinent counterpoint to the seriousness of the artist's intellectual premise, which is underpinned by concern around climate change and its impact on the world as we know it. Balancing elegy and magic, Zadok Ben-David deftly proposes that the future of all species – including the human species – should be our most urgent cause for concern.

Felicity Fenner

For further reading see Fenner, F. 'Anthropology and Art', McDonald, J. 'Magical Realities' and Nanjo, F. 'Symbols of Sorrow and Elation' in *Zadok Ben-David: Human Nature*, Circa Press, London, 2017. Quotes in this essay are drawn from the book; pages references as indicated.







ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Perth Festival Visual Arts Program Associates Felicity Fenner and Anne Loxley wholeheartedly thank Zadok Ben-David not only for his willingness for two major works to be included in the 2018 program, but for his readiness to travel all the way to Australia and work closely with staff and volunteers to achieve a spectacular outcome. Thanks also to Professor Ted Snell for his enthusiastic support for the exhibition, and to the LWAG team for helping realise the artist's ambitious vision. Special thanks to Grace Huffer and her wonderful team of volunteers for devoting many hours and days to making this project a reality.

Campus Partner: Centre for Human and Cultural Values

Cover image: Blockfield, 2006–09, hand painted stainless steel and sand, measurements variable.

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LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA, Australia 6005 P+61 (0)8 6488 3707 W lwag uwa.edu.au

LIST OF WORKS

Blackfield, 2006–09, hand painted stainless steel and sand, measurements variable

The Other Side of Midnight, 2013, hand painted stainless steel, diameter 300cm

Conversation Peace, video, 2018, 4 minutes

All work is by Zadok Ben-David and courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery

Published by the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at The University of Western Australia, 2018. All rights reserved. ISBN 978 1 876793 97 5

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