





ARTHUR APANSKI



ANTHROPOCENE



FOREWORD

As a political activist during the days of the Soviet Union Moscow, born artist Arthur Apanski's dissident views put him in direct conflict with the government. Abhorring the flagrant and rampant government corruption around him, and the lack of personal freedoms which were endemic and an inevitable part of life, he became an outspoken advocate for reform and change. It was a risky and dangerous position to take and one for which Arthur paid a heavy personal price through incarceration and torture. It was a dark and life-altering chapter for Arthur, the experiences of which continue to permeate and inform all aspects of his life and work today.

A self-taught artist, Arthur's finely rendered, incredibly detailed paintings draw on his experiences to question political, corporate and religious power paradigms, militarism, greed and hypocrisy, and the slippery slope that faces all people and nations once knowledge is curtailed and freedoms are lost.

Arthur's exhibition *Anthropocene* explores the current world epoch and questions the insidious nature of humanity's impact on every aspect of life on this planet. Never before in the world's history has one organism so dominated and been able to influence life not only in the present but with grave implications for the future.

This exhibition of selected works is the culmination of a nearly 10 year journey by the artist to articulate his concerns and provide a forum to discuss these pervasive yet difficult issues. The exhibition also provides a glimpse into the development of Arthur's artistic practice as it has evolved from his early biblical-like apocalyptic paintings to subtler images informed by his life and the landscape in Wollongong's northern suburbs.

In spite of all its dark undercurrents and foreboding messages and themes, Arthur's work is ultimately optimistic challenging us to acknowledge and speak about these issues so that we have an opportunity to change our future.

We would like to thank Arthur for sharing his vision with us and hope that you too will be engaged by this provocative exhibition.

John Monteleone
Program Director

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Arthur Apanski wants to make art about light. He seeks to open our senses to truths about excess, corruption and absence of empathy. His devotion to *hope* is crucial; making art nurtures him from the memories of a not-so-straightforward life. Never separating the personal and public, he effortlessly offers hope through uncompromising imagery.

Apanski, 33 years old, arrived in Sydney in 1997 from the Soviet Union. He couldn't afford art school and had little English. With the help of the Belarus community in Sydney, he found employment and, slowly, his English improved. An enthusiastic visitor to the Soviet Union's great museums: the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, The Russian Museum, and State Hermitage, he was inspired by Bosch, Michelangelo, Goya, Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh, and Seurat. He continued his passion by studying the paintings at the Art Gallery of NSW, and found Dali (whose work was banned by the Soviets).

His aesthetic is connected to painting and film, and firmly anchored in European traditions. The *Anthropocene* exhibition resembles an Hermitage installation, because Apanski has measured and selected the works with the Wollongong Art Gallery octagonal room in mind. In Australia, Apanski has been inspired by the paintings of Boyd, Whiteley, and Nolan. He relates to Neo-noir science fiction films, such as *Blade Runner* and the *Mad Max* series. His art, like these films, explores the dark paradoxical attraction of humans and machines connected in an emotionless bio-mechanical relationship. This contradictory presentation of darkness to reveal light makes his art unusually sharp and telling.

Since 2002 Apanski has lived in Coledale, a seaside suburb of Wollongong. The large *Premonition Red, Blue and Black* paintings each nearly four metres long, are the most outstanding of his productive time in Coledale. These three paintings are nature breathing, rather than seascapes, real because there are so many waves. Each colour marks a stage to the body's death blow. The paintings are a *tripartite* rather than a *triptych*. Each work exists on its own, but is part of a narrative about the protection of nature.

Apanski's pointillist-like method builds the surface of the waves, each short stroke of paint intuitively applied, the colours and tones evoking emotion. Layers of colour are painted over gold and silver mixed into white, then



scratched to expose the white, to represent the physical world. White becomes a divine light, a white for a new pure reality, dreamlike, filled with hope and nostalgia, devoid of human presence, with a new energy for change. Depth is achieved across the surface of the canvas, its luminescence and subdued colour producing serenity that enriches the psychological reality of his subject. *Premonition Red, Blue and Black* reveal Apanski's belief that our destructive path toward nature can be reversed.

The *Premonition* paintings whisper, the other sculptures and paintings in *Anthropocene* yell out Apanski's dystopias. His subject allegiances have vividly divided. The four early *Rider* paintings and the three-dimensional object *HELLP!!!* reveal a drive to bare parallel psychological realities as either explosive or meditative, apocalyptic or contemplative. The *Premonition* paintings may signal a new attitude or state of mind for Apanski, yet each of the 15 works reveals struggles to conquer memories. It seems whatever Apanski tries, the harsh experiences of Belarus are impossible to remove.

Apanski always looks for the middle ground. *HELLP!!!*, 240 centimetres high, resembles a modern United States-made-United Nations hand grenade; he has adapted the spherical steel body containing the explosive as an illustration of a black earth. The choice is: leave, or pull the safety pin. Of all the works in the *Anthropocene* exhibition it is the most confronting, but Apanski provides hope, by including a fundamental human possibility – choice.

The five surreal *Disposable Disciples* paintings consider the exploitation of innocence. Images of a hovering baby wearing or holding a variety of modern weapons – explosive vests, a rocket-propelled grenade, a hand revolver – relate to Apanski's early experiences in Belarus. As a child he was confronted by his own mortality. A 16th century Jewish cemetery near his home was converted into a park and the exhumed remains were scattered. Locals searched for valuables such as gold teeth. The young Apanski held a skull: his initial fear of death later grew into an inspiration for a life with purpose. At the age of 18 he refused to be conscripted into the Soviet army to fight in Afghanistan. A grandson of a founding organiser of the KGB, he was removed from his home and given chemical shock therapy in a psychiatric ward and released with a disability pension for schizophrenia. This managed the unacceptable notion of an unpunished dissident.

To express his hatred of pestilence, famine, war and death he uses the four horsemen of the apocalypse from the Bible's *Book of Revelation*. The symbolism is used in two ways, as a metaphor of the uneven global treatment of humanity, and as vivid dreams of his own reality; on one occasion he was revived from clinical death caused by abuse of prescribed drugs. Another realised dream is *Corporate Drone Shiva One*. Apanski's *Shiva* is armed for its death dance with swords, machine guns, chainsaws and a flame thrower. His *Shiva* denies hope. In *Anthropocene*, this work alone is heartless, because whether *Shiva* is dancing or not, all is destined to be destroyed.

By contrast, overabundance in the painting *Cornucopia XXI A.D.* intertwines fruit, meat and bones. Here Apanski reflects on excesses of his adopted democratic country, choosing an aerial perspective, hovering over a field of human and animal bones with the fresh yet anticipated decay of fruit and meat. The luminescent haze over the subdued colours suggests a faith that humanity will eventually empathise with nature. Apanski presents a convincing narrative of why we have to change and why he changed.

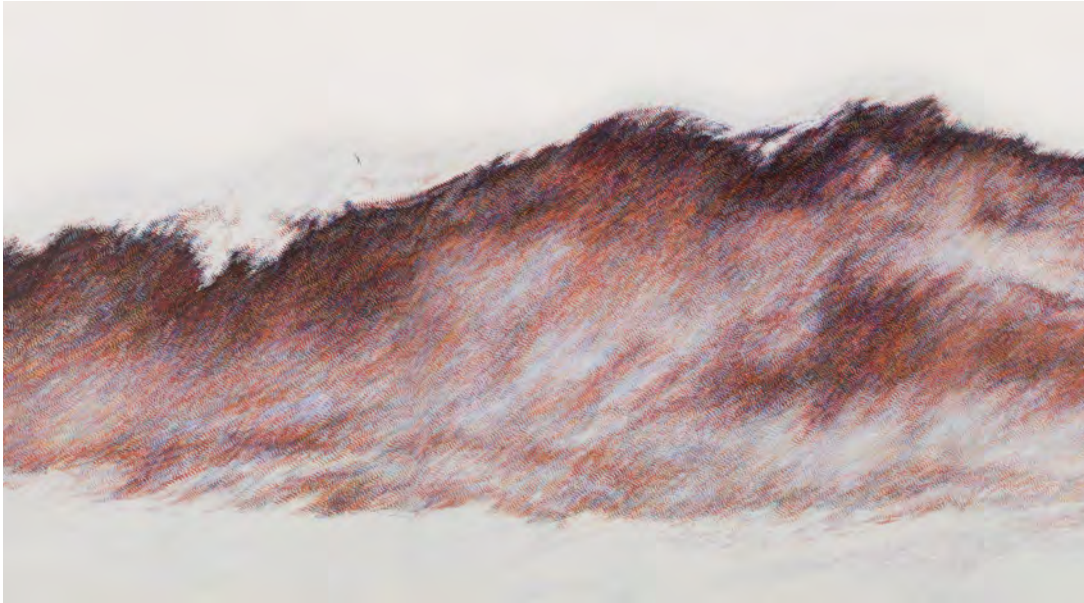
Kon Gouriotis
April 2017











Images:

(above): *Premonition Red*, 2016, oil on canvas, 88 x 395cm.

(below) (detail): *Premonition Blue*, 2017, oil on canvas, 120 x 270cm.

(cover): *HELLP!!!*, Arthur Apanski & Philip Girardot, 2017, steel, fibreglass, tin, plywood, resin, acrylic and varnish, light fittings, 240 x 150 x 150cm.

(inside front cover): *Cornucopia XXI A.D.*, 2016, oil on canvas, 155 x 210cm.

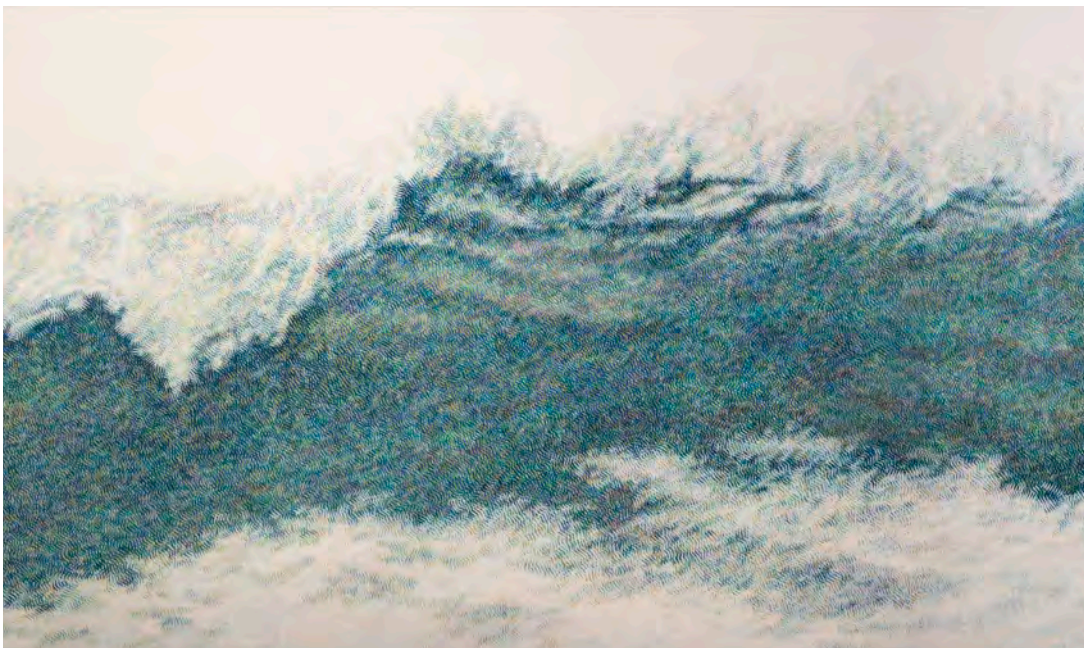
(above Foreword) (detail): *Premonition Black*, 2017, oil on canvas, 88 x 395cm.

(Rider series): *White rider, Pestilence*, 2014, oil on canvas, 195 x 120cm, *Black rider, Famine*, 2012, oil on canvas, 195 x 120cm, *Red rider, War*, 2010, oil on canvas, 195 x 120cm, *Pale rider, Death*, 2013, oil on canvas, 195 x 120cm.

(inside back cover) Disposable Disciples series: *Disposable disciples*, 2014, oil on canvas, 101 x 101cm (4 pieces) and centre *Disposable disciples*, 2015, oil on canvas, 172 x 172cm.

(back cover): Arthur Apanski & Philip Girardot, *Corporate drone Shiva One*, 2017, steel, cotton, plastic, aluminium, found objects, electrical and computer components, 290 x 290 x 140cm.

All photography Bernie Fischer.







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