

JOHANN LOUW

Lacrimosa

15.02.19 – 23.03.19

Cape Town



Johann Louw | Lacrimosa | 2019

The word *lacrimosa* – which is the title under which this collection of work by Johann Louw falls – is central to understanding his current artistic preoccupations. Deriving from the Latin *lacrimosus*, which is the state of being tearful or mournful, Louw underscores the act of weeping as one of the most important qualities that he wishes to activate in this body of work. In addition, the *Lacrimosa* is a significant part of the *Dies Irae* sequence in the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. The Latin text that makes up this sequence have inspired various composers, including Mozart, Berlioz, and Verdi, who have all used the text as a focal movement of their own compositions. As the *Lacrimosa* movement reads:

Lacrimosa dies illa [Full of tears will be that day]

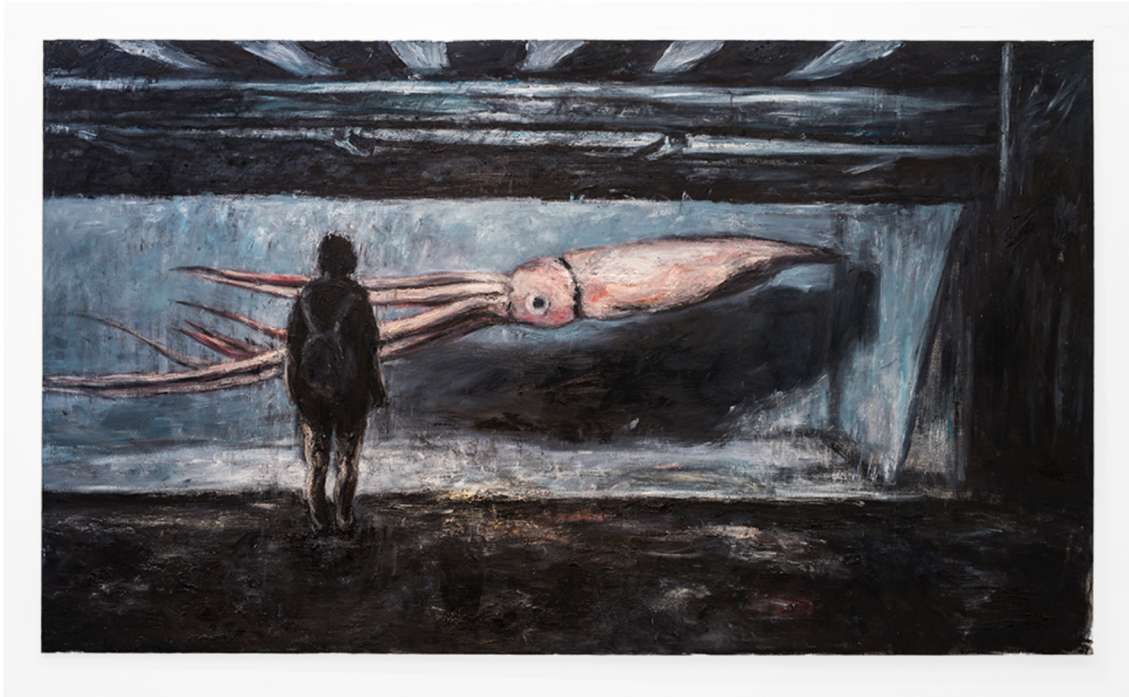
Qua resurget ex favilla [When from the ashes shall arise] *Judicandus homo reus.* [The guilty man to be judged.]

Huic ergo parce, Deus: [Therefore spare him, O God:]

Pie Jesu Domine, [Merciful Lord Jesus,]

Dona eis requiem. Amen. [Grant them eternal rest. Amen.]

Within such a context where the symptoms of sorrow and the ritual of supplication are predominant, Louw's work begs an important question: how can eternal rest be achieved, and is it possible at all? What do we call those places where sorrow resides, and how do we represent them? For in his largescale paintings, we see humans confronting the beasts of their own sorrow – be it a giant squid floating in a glass tank or a beached whale stranded on a shore. Staring at these creatures from the deep, the human figures that Louw paints seem to be at once mesmerised by the sight of these fantastical beasts, but also overcome by their magnitude and the strangeness of their lifeless bodies. These creatures dominate the pictorial space, and their fleshiness – the pink and white and grey of their bodies – offers a striking counterpoint to the enraptured human spectators who gaze at them.



Klein Requiem
2018-2019
Oil and Oil Pastel on Canvas
197 x 338,5 cm

It is exactly at this intersection between life and death, presence and absence, that Louw's work dwells. For in many ways, Louw is dealing with a theme that spans much of his work, which is the form and texture of the body in times of weakness and loss – the corporeal remnants, so to speak. But these are bodily forms bereft of some essential vitality, which leaves the viewer with the aftermath of life. In the context of his current work, the creatures that he paints – suspended between the states of animism and decay – remind us of the vulnerability of existence, and our profound longing to capture and understand the fleeting qualities of life.

In both his paintings and sculptural work, Louw activates another derivative of the Latin *lacrimosus*, namely that of the *lachrymatory* – a small vessel of terracotta or glass, mostly found in Roman and late Greek tombs, that was allegedly used for storing the tears of mourners. As the legend goes, these tear-catchers were placed with the body of the deceased as a reminder of those who were left behind, bereft and inconsolable. Louw's work functions in a similar manner, as he presents us with vessels that speak of grief and loss. When life departs, when faced with the lifeless body, we need some ritual for marking our loss, for recognising death and making sense of our relation to the unknown thereafter. But, as Louw suggests, there is beauty to be found in this process of grieving, especially in the vessels and the objects, the paintings and the sculptures, that we use to store our tears and tell our stories of life and death.

Written by Dr. Ernst van der Wal