

*Natascha Stellmach*

# *The Book of Back*

## Foreword

There are artists who breathe an integrity that says their work will live beyond them. They renounce the celebrity of the artist when it is baseless and superficial and therefore only spin, and they work solidly on in spite of themselves, honouring substance and ideas and the duty of vigilance that an artist owes to the world. These artists break our hearts, often their own, guiding us to a place called truth.

Natascha Stellmach is such an artist. Such a poet, one should say, with all the magic and beauty and tragedy that this word carries. Brave, because she stands before a world that often causes her pain, that hurts and she stands up nonetheless and responds virulently to it, honestly, passionately, richly, imagining that she owes all the artists and poets who have taken their own lives these words, these pictures.

‘We stand on a precipice’, wrote photographer Diane Arbus to the friend that would find her dead in her own bathtub, wrists slashed in 1971 ‘we stand on a precipice, then before a chasm, and as we wait it becomes higher, wider, deeper, but I am crazy enough to think it doesn’t matter which way we leap because when we leap we will have learned to fly.’

Here in *The Book of Back*, Natascha takes us by the hand to the edge of the precipice and through her eye and her experience she shines a light upon Australia and Deutschland and the dark histories of both, underpinned by the poetic Germanic idea of *Zerrissenheit* – being torn between lands, being torn between worlds, being torn.

One must not shy away from speaking of the Dead when one enters the work of Natascha Stellmach. The Dead are highly present and she is highly conscious of the proximity of death and its relevance to the love we bring to the living. She sees symbolism in death and ecstasy in tragedy and she pulls threads from these moments back into her own life and her own work and her own story.

Amongst this story is a cycle of violence and a cycle of tragedy that flows out of the home and through the landscapes of Australia and Germany and returning home, is seeping down through the generations and Natascha is breaking it by giving it a voice and slamming the bits-torn-in-two back together again. When she takes these old photographs and these forgotten lives and these dead frogs and gives them their story, when she invokes in them all the pain and longing and love that might have been there, then she is healing them all.

Last summer we walked along a hot bitumen road amongst the woods around Schloss Groß Leuthen outside Berlin, her partner Boris Eldagsen and another artist from Künstlerhaus Bethanien making us four, full of laughter and smoked fish and *Ostbier* and as we went Natascha scraped the flattened corpses of frogs from the road. As we wandered, her observations of the last moments of the frogs were delirious and inspired. One way to read *The Book of Back* is to imagine her bending down with a knife prising a dried corpse from its resting place, re-presenting it as the *memento mori* of the past, of our homelands, of all our futures.

Another way is to imagine two lands, two *Geschichten*, a woman falling between them. The German word *Geschichte* invokes *history* and *story* at once, contains it within language. In Australia language separates the two, yet finds a resolution in the Aboriginal belief that story and history are inextricably linked, contained within land. However, Natascha Stellmach's story is no exploration of reconciliation between peoples or between lands. Here instead is a story of reconciliation with self.

*The Book of Back* is a personal epic poem of images and words and memories and Natascha is binding them together, undoing the *Zerrissenheit* with a question all of us face, no matter that we do not or cannot name it: today do I live or do I die? Today do I love or do I die?

Scott Millwood, Berlin, May 2007