

Kate Gottgens: 'Merry Hell and the Dreambody' at Joao Ferreira

by Sue Williamson

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, wrote Leo Tolstoy famously in *Anna Karenina*. Gazing at the family groupings painted from found family photographs in Kate Gottgens' 'Merry Hell and the Dreambody', one is able to judge little about the happiness - or other state of mind - of the children gazing into the camera. They may be seated in close proximity, but each seems blank, detached from the others, suggesting perhaps the universal alienation of childhood.

Although her palette has brightened somewhat since the ashy colours of her previous exhibition, 'Asleep Inside You' (2009) Gottgens' reduced colorations still manage to suggest a world suspended somewhere between an uncomfortable reality and a threatening dream world. Curiously, interspersed amongst the paintings are smaller works in black ink on white paper with flashes of blue and red. Here, the languor and unease of the larger paintings give way to what look like primitive renditions of spirits engaged in energetic fighting, dancing, erotic or cannibalistic activity.

Though at first the two bodies of work seem at odds with each other, there is a sense in which the small drawings act as a subtext to the paintings – here are the primal emotions suppressed in Gottgens' cool renditions of the frozen moments captured by the camera. And a closer inspection of the paintings picks up some of the same kinds of quick brushstrokes in the paintings themselves.

The juxtaposition of two such different sets of images is risky, but Gottgens pulls it off in a show which marks a career highlight for this accomplished painter.