

LOST IN LEIPZIG

Anita DeSoto



Figure 1. Anita DeSoto, *Other Wordly* (2011), oil on canvas, 183 x 137 cm.

'Lost in Leipzig' sums up my three-month artist's residency experience in 2010 at Leipzig International Art Residency programme. Located in the continent's largest former cotton mill, the Spinnerei is now dedicated to art-related businesses and artists' studios.

Leipzig is an East German city of around half a million people, and is still in the process of realising the reunification of Germany. The enormous cultural impact of this political upheaval has given rise to an impressive new school of painters over the last 20 years. Of particular interest to me was the work of Neo Rauch (b. 1960), hailed by some as Germany's greatest living painter; his wife Rosa Loy (b. 1958) and friend Tilo Baumgartel (b. 1972).



Figure 2. Anita DeSoto, *Coming Home* (2011), oil on canvas, 183 x 137 cm.

All three are natives of Saxony and feature the human figure extensively in their work. Their formal artistic training in the GDR laid a highly skilled technical foundation for their now abstracted and surreal figurative scenes combined with strong narrative elements reflecting GDR history. These artists had their studios neighbouring mine and, while I had little contact with them, the Spinnerei celebrated their work with much enthusiasm, and the influence of their work was everywhere.

I became engrossed in absorbing the recent and ancient history of that part of the world, and this had an immediate impact on my ideas.

When I began this residency, I had anticipated what I was going to paint there. How could I have been so wrong? Instead, I experienced an artistic crisis that had me thinking I would never paint another figure. Ironically, I had flown across the world to the most exciting location for figure painting. It has taken many months for me to translate all that inspired me into a context relevant for me, and embrace figure painting again.

The critique offered by visiting artists to the residency programme was challenging and valuable, and mostly relevant. The approach offered by the Leipzig School of painters has encouraged me to work towards the creation of a mood in a work, rather than the use of symbol to create a narrative; using the uncanny, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*.



Figure 3. Anita DeSoto, *Primal Wound* (2011), oil on canvas, 90 x 123 cm.

Figure 4. Anita DeSoto, *Portrait of Abigail* (2011), oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm.



Figure 5. Anita DeSoto, *Mater*, (2011), oil on canvas, 76 x 200 cm.

Anita DeSoto is a lecturer in drawing in the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. She has been exhibiting nationally for the last 11 years. Located within the Neo-Romantic style, DeSoto's paintings point to a recurring theme of perception coloured by desire – nothing is quite what it might first seem. There is an evocation of the uncanny in her work, a continual playing off between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. Her life-size figures are often engaged in, or subject to, inexplicable activities. Oils on canvas, her paintings use classical Renaissance brush techniques. Anita Desoto is also inspired by the surrealist tradition, her work invoking the romantic surrealism of artists such as Leonora Fini.