

# katy woodroffe —

*swan lake*



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The symbolic contrast of light and dark in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, suggests a world of good and evil. The black and white swans are opposites which perhaps reflects the distance between their European and antipodean habitats.

The works in this exhibition have been inspired by these swans with glimpses into the life of Josephine, the wife of Napoleon Bonaparte.

In 1804 Nicolas Baudin's expedition to Australia (and Van Diemen's Land) brought back exotic flora and fauna, including black swans, to Josephine's idyllic garden at the Chateau Malmaison in Paris. Her vision and significance as a gardener played an important role in the natural history of France and she had a particular passion for roses.

The swans became the most celebrated creatures in the park and visitors flocked to see them from all over Europe. They roamed at liberty with the other birds and animals and were often featured in early illustrations of the lake.

Josephine became the first person in history to successfully breed the black swans in captivity and they became her unofficial emblem, with many swan decorations featured inside the chateau.

The problem she had with providing Bonaparte with an heir is a bittersweet parallel story and this has been part of the narrative.

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In 1831, a particular family of flamingos was introduced by Napoleon’s nephew, Charles Bonaparte, a french zoologist. He named many bird species including birds of paradise and these provided inspiration for a series of imagined scenarios. Fantasies of a lavish lifestyle have also been created, using images from Josephine’s collection of birds, fish and butterflies.

The black swans existed simultaneously in both France and Tasmania during this time and I have included a fragment of my own colonial family history, when the early settlers from England had knowledge only of white swans. Curiously, the term “black swan” had earlier been used in Britain to describe the impossible, because every swan was white.

*“Every lake belongs to the quietness desired by the swans.”*

Munia Khan  
Writer and poet

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