

**Essay to accompany the exhibition and catalogue for
'Wilderness - Balnaves Contemporary Painting' at the Art
Gallery New South Wales 2010**

Andrew Browne

He was glad that he liked the country undecorated, hard, and stripped of its finery. He had got down to the bare bones of it, and they were fine and strong and simple . . . with great cheerfulness of spirit he pushed on towards the Wild Wood, which lay before him low and threatening, like a black reef in some still southern sea.

There was nothing to alarm him at first entry. Twigs crackled under his feet, logs tripped him, funguses on stumps resembled caricatures, and startled him for the moment by their likeness to something familiar and far away; but that was all fun, and exciting. It led him on, and he penetrated to where the light was less, and trees crouched nearer and nearer, and holes made ugly mouths at him on either side.

Everything was very still now. The dusk advanced on him steadily, rapidly, gathering in behind and before; and the light seemed to be draining away like floodwater.

Then the faces began.

It was over his shoulder, and indistinctly, that he first thought he saw a face: a little evil wedge-shaped face, looking out at him from a hole. When he turned and confronted it, the thing had vanished.¹

Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*.

At dusk in the suburbs near his home in inner-city Melbourne, Andrew Browne scouts for images. Forms catch his attention out of the corner of one eye - twisted trunks, stumps with faces like folded paper, or fingers of branches separated by sky. As he walks through the natural bushland of Studley Park, which flanks the Yarra River, or along the city's Southbank, he is struck by scenes that might make good paintings - those with strong formal qualities,

¹ Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, Methuen Children's Books, London, 1979, pp 49-50.

imaginative or emotional resonances. Bitten by forms, he bites right back, photographing them with a bright flash.

The transforming qualities of natural and artificial light have always been central to Browne's work. Paintings in horizontal formats from the late 1990s and early 2000s were concerned with the blurring and abstraction of lit forms associated with movement - the headlights of a car driving through hills, orbs of coloured light floating on the horizon, or a road sign interrupted by the sun's flare. The interest in painting light is inseparable from Browne's photographic practice, which he has continued since art school, where photography was one of his majors. In recent years, digital source images have been manipulated - elements removed, subjects cropped and contrast and tone altered - before being printed and then projected on to linen canvas as a starting point for the paintings. Having blocked out the first black areas and essential forms, Browne soon abandons the projection and then the digital print as the paintings are resolved on their own terms. While their conception is digital, the finished paintings have the seamless sepia-toned surface of film photographs, as though the white forms have gestated and developed in the dark incubation of chemical baths.

Visitation #2 2009 originated as a photograph of a wrapped part of a tree and root-ball, which someone - perhaps council workers - had covered with fabric, presumably so that it could be removed and planted elsewhere. Browne came across it on a walk in Melbourne's Southbank, where over several months it became obvious that the tree was not going to be transplanted, and the fabric began to droop and decay. It was almost as if someone had purposely rearranged the fabric to enhance the skull-like qualities.

Having printed the photograph, Browne put it up in his studio, where it stayed for several years as "a productive irritant . . . that demanded a response".² The image was of primary importance to the development of the *Visitation* series. *Visitation #2*, *Time* (*Visitation #3*) 2009 and *Curtain* 2008 show a progression in the work over the past four years towards imagery that emphasises the mysterious and uncanny qualities of nature.³ Like the *Wild Wood* that

² Andrew Browne, email correspondence with the author, 8 December 2009.

³ The emphasis on the uncanny, sinister or threatening aspects of night-time landscapes, while present in earlier work, such as the *Nocturnes* of the late 1990s, has become particularly pronounced in the latest

terrifies the Mole in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, the nightscapes are anthropomorphic and menacing.

The recent paintings, while not directly influenced by children's literature, conjure memories of fantastical fictional landscapes. In *Time (Visitation #3)*, the gnarled and strangled limbs stride across the picture plane like the humanoid trees, the Ents, in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. *Curtain 2008* evokes the moment in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where Lucy walks through the wardrobe, the rows of fur coats that brush her face supplanted by sharp branches of winter trees as she emerges into the forest of Narnia. Rather than a fantasy landscape, at the centre of *Curtain 2008* we encounter a black void, as though we have walked along the edges of representation, past the monochrome and deep into the abyss that threatened the end of painting.⁴

Like the fictional creations of forests populated by dangerous creatures in children's literature, Browne's landscapes seem threatening precisely because of the ways in which the artist and the viewers' imaginations apply themselves to those landscapes. As the Mole walks deeper into the Wild Wood, more and more faces emerge from the darkness; whistling and pattering sounds begin to surround and pursue him, as if the whole wood has taken bodily and malevolent form. Yet we have the feeling that somehow it is Mole's own terror that is spurring the forest on - the sounds growing louder and closer as he becomes more and more frightened - as though the Wild Wood is only trees, animals and earth until it becomes the place where he projects his fears.

Similarly, these paintings elicit emotional responses that are at least partially based on the fears we associate with wilderness - as uncontrollable, unpredictable, unknowable and isolating. Though we are aware of the culturally and historically constructed discourse of fear around the subject of wilderness - as epitomised in children's literature and fairytales - the awareness may mediate our anxieties, but it does not displace them. Anyone who has trudged up a hillside at night knows that rustling branches can only be partially illuminated, and a tree stump,

series shown in exhibitions including *Night pictures 2006/2007*, *Chimera*, 2007; *Paintings and photogravures*, 2008; *Apparition*, 2009; and *Visitation + seven apparitions*, 2009.

⁴ Alan Dodge, 'A blackness beyond the branches: the paintings of Andrew Browne', *Art Monthly Australia*, #220, June 2009, pp 35-37.

however well understood, can still trip you up. Browne paints the effects of light, the seamlessness of photographic surfaces, and the dark thrill of nature-fear that can strike us, unexpectedly, at night in our own backyards.

Naomi Flatt