

Andrew Browne, Watching the River Flow



*Horizon Gippsland Art Gallery until 22 July*

*Slowing down and meandering – these are some of the lessons in the meticulous, patient practice of artist Andrew Browne. **By Megan Backhouse.***

Andrew Browne rode his bike along Melbourne’s Merri Creek from Collingwood to Coburg and back. Over and over, at different times and in all weathers. He pedalled past waterfalls and drains, past verdant grass and rubbish. Camera at the ready, he recorded it all. Then shuffled it to suit. On his computer, he cut and collaged, tinkered with colours. Altered reality.

The three-panel painting that came next, long and thin like a horizon line, starts off with an idyllic (save for the yawning mouth of a drain) frothy flow of water over a flat-topped boulder. But the water (and the pastoral mood) rapidly hits a snag: a log-cum-litter-trap. Paper, plastic and detritus of every kind has wrapped itself round a big, twiggy log. The water keeps a-moving only to run into another even more monstrous trap, so that the painting ends in a virtual creek-block of rubbish.

Browne says he did once paint a series of pretty, calm landscapes, and he’s even got such a picture in his studio to prove it. All pastel colours, soft edges, “natural” scenery. They were successful commercially, he says, “but there wasn’t much to dig into”. Browne prefers to be at the margins of activity; he likes a certain scrappiness, the hint of human presence.



Andrew Browne, *A Riverbank (culvert, detritus and apparitions)*, 2012, oil on linen, overall 130 x 900 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

The Merri Creek painting, *A Riverbank (culvert, detritus and apparitions)*, 2012, is part of Browne's exhibition of paintings and photographs at the Gippsland Art Gallery, which takes as its starting point *Horizon*, 2000, a city landscape painting – a passing flash of billboards, lights and street trees. The gallery acquired the four-panelled *Horizon* in 2001 and, where that has a filmic, jump-cut quality of images glimpsed at speed, the Merri Creek painting is slow and meandering. "This picture shows where I have ended up," Browne says. "Digging in more and looking at specific forms." Where *Horizon* was all about impressions gleaned from the drive-by, for *A Riverbank (culvert, detritus and apparitions)* Browne consciously spent time in the landscape, stilled the imagery, teased out meaning.



Andrew Browne, *A Riverbank (culvert, detritus and apparitions)*, 2012 (detail), oil on linen, overall 130 x 900 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

Browne, who completed a Bachelor of Education Art and Craft in the early 1980s, originally practiced as a sculptor. He still has boxes of three-dimensional pieces he fashioned from drink coasters (never being inclined to teach, he worked in bars), masking tape and PVA glue. After a few years though, he found he preferred painting and photography. The play of light, as well as a certain ambiguity of form, is critical to Browne's paintings. Curiously, the ambiguity stems from either meticulous detail or, by contrast, areas completely absent of descriptive information. The imagery might be natural world and organic but it is often degraded too.

A few years ago Browne was commissioned to record some of the more weedy, littered, unloved land that had then been recently acquired by the McClelland Gallery in Langwarrin. "I returned again and again and spent a day there each time. I'd go and have lunch and come back. It's almost like you're hunting. You're stalking some kind of subject, looking for meaning," he says. He shot up to 2000 photographs, and then whittled the pictures right down until he was left with just enough images to set up a narrative of uneasy isolation. His photographs suggest the slightest whiff of a long-since-departed human presence (rope, torn fabric, a knife and chopping board), all the better to trigger an emotional response. He gets your interest.



Above top: Andrew Browne, *Tree and Illumination at Dusk*, 2002, oil on linen, 137 x 396 cm. Private collection. Above: Andrew Browne, *Seek Alternative Route #2*, 2003, oil on linen, 137.5 x 396.5 cm. Private collection.

While Browne's paintings linger over the landscape – and the forms both artificial and “natural” within it – they are all born in the studio. For more than three years now, Browne's studio has been a converted warehouse in Collingwood, which he shares (one storey each) with his partner and fellow artist Brent Harris. He is usually in here six days a week and the starting point for his paintings are always manipulated photographs.

One of the reference images currently on his art table stems from a series of pictures he took of the rubbish-strewn Hudson River in New York, his and Harris' overseas destination of choice because of the museums, galleries and multitude of exhibitions.

Search online for images of the Hudson River and you see wide expanses of blue, mostly pristine, water but Browne has captured the watercourse awash with leaves, bottles and food wrappers. Critically, he has also photographed it with a white balloon snagged on a floating stick. He says he saw the balloon “in a flash” and immediately took a photo of it (Browne never ventures out without a camera).

He took quite a few photographs, in fact, and has since manipulated the images to come up with a starting point for a painting. He likes the pathos of the balloon trapped in the dirty water and the oddity of making a monumentally scaled image of something so “totally banal”.

On his last trip to New York he has also found himself attracted to the Van Gogh paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Seurat used to be my post-Impressionist of choice, for the scientific theory around it,” Browne says. “But I have found myself enjoying looking at Van Gogh's work more and more.” He's now reading a biography on

the Dutchman and he's got a small Van Gogh reproduction on his studio wall. He likes the painting but it's largely here because of its use of green. For all his imagery of trees and foliage over the years, Browne hasn't really gone in for green. But how else to colour the verdant, albeit neglected, weedy grass on the banks of Merri Creek?

*Andrew Browne is also showing new works at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne from August 18 to September 15.*