

Night world pulses with dangerous allure

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Andrew Browne: Night Pictures *Lister Gallery, Perth. More: (08) 9382 8188. Until April 14.*

THERE is something eerily enthralling about Andrew Browne's nocturnes on show at the Lister Gallery. They transport you into a world that is dangerous and disorienting, a place covered in a pall of darkness where you are alone with only a torch to guide you. Its beam freezes the tangled undergrowth into grotesquely twisted creatures that loom up on the path ahead. Some threaten to envelop you; others act as a screen and a couple mimic human figures with drooping shoulders and menacing heads. Their attraction is in part because we have all experienced the excitement and terror of a late night wander through the bush, and also because this memory is presented by the artist with a nod in the direction of Alfred Hitchcock and film noir combined with a dash of Ansel Adams and a nudge towards Japanese woodblock prints. They resonate with all these references and draw you into their dense undergrowth again and again to find more. They are also extremely beautiful and beautifully made. The meticulous process of painting, wiping back and repainting creates a seductive surface that reinforces their allure. Up close they blur and you lose focus. Step back and they lock into place, the branches spreading out across the picture plane and setting themselves within the limited depth of field thrown by the spotlight. Untitled No.6 plays with this formula by presenting a cascade of branches that dangle ominously, while off in the distance something approaches. The soft lights of a vehicle or several torches pulse

ominously yet, like all nocturnes, the distortions and filtering are extremely seductive. Browne keeps this tension delicately balanced so that it never pitches into melodrama or slides into decoration. Each painting is tightly controlled and carefully nuanced.

In Untitled No.7 the thicket is reduced to a compact ball, like a linear skull that looms up from the left-hand side of the canvas. At times it looks like a bird, its eye fixed and alert, then it becomes a benign shape before reconstituting itself once more. "The night," Joseph Conrad wrote in Lord Jim, "has all the dispassionateness of a disembodied soul and something of its inconceivable mystery."

Set within the pristine space of the new, purpose-built Lister Gallery in Perth's Subiaco, Browne's paintings take you beyond the confines of the white cube into the realm of memory and conjecture.