A blackness beyond the branches: the paintings of Andrew Browne

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A SINGLE, MELANCHOLY NOTE sounds from a bass guitar followed by a slim melody on the piano, then two bass guitar notes which open into a flow of hypnotic counterpoint slowly building into a full orchestral line. On camera a deserted road appears running into a forest of bare branches with snow-capped mountains hovering above. As the music beats out its mournful, yearning sounds the camera pans over a waterfall and a timber mill, all elements of a fictional town in the northwest of America. Angelo Badalamenti's haunting musical score underpins a world of ominous possibility in a place where nothing is as it seems. In 1990 millions were glued to their television sets wondering who killed Laura Palmer, a popular homecoming queen who was found naked and dead, tightly wrapped up in plastic. But it wasn't just Laura's death that fascinated us in David Lynch and Mark Frost's brilliant but flawed series *Twin Peaks*; we were seduced by a landscape and a town pulsing with mystery, opportunity and danger. Every trip the camera made through the forest was something to be feared: a sense that another life abides in these trees.

For me, this is the essence of a series of nightscapes produced by Melbourne artist Andrew Browne. Works from the early 1990s are alive with cinematic opportunity. They hum with mystery. Headlights appear through a crepuscular landscape where details are obscured by the approach of night. There are no figures in these works and yet all of them have the presence of something. Yearning and contemplation when viewing these paintings merge with hidden narratives that sit beyond the field of visual articulation. It is the filmic quality of these works that inspires my vision of *Twin Peaks*.

Andrew Browne has already had a relatively long and full career. Throughout he has used photography in various ways: sometimes used as is, more often manipulated and used as a source for variation and development of visual ideas. Painted works are not only referential to his own photographic sources; they are often mistaken for being the result of photographic process themselves. Close inspection reveals meticulously crafted paintwork, painstakingly applied and rubbed back, removing all traces of painterly gesture. The artist has explored qualities of day and night and the evasive light and forms from the times in between – those liminal moments that were so seized upon in 19th century Romantic paintings to convey the transcendental sublime in nature. However, in Browne's case, the arena is the greater urban scene, a contemporary landscape of equivocal elements: car parks, streetlights, billboards, and the edges of architecture. Often these details seem to be items of focus within a larger field, like fragments caught at the periphery of vision.

From 2005 there was a preoccupation with *Night Pictures*, the title of two solo exhibitions: one in 2006 at Kaliman Gallery in Sydney, and one in 2007 at Lister Gallery in Perth. Featured were rich, black paintings strewed with branches caught close up reflecting the light of a camera flash. The branches team along the edges and across the surface of the paintings. Like the camera images in *Twin Peaks* these 'scenes' are claustrophobic and at the same time filled with the suspense of what lies in the blackness beyond. In one case a massive work (153 x 306cm), *Untitled #5* (2007), presents a vast field of black flanked on either side by a tangle of vertical branches. The resemblance, in composition, of this work to the colourful *Unfurleds* paintings of American Colour Field artist Morris Louis is uncanny. However, Louis's running drips of bright colour framing a large, open field are replaced in Browne's case by articulated branches framing a black void. The virtue of the *Night Pictures* is that they have not only provided a means to investigate an uneasy relationship with urban surroundings and the elements of nature, but also have opened up a wealth of formal possibilities for the artist to pursue. Although no stranger to works conceived with daylight as an armature, it did seem that the *Night Pictures*
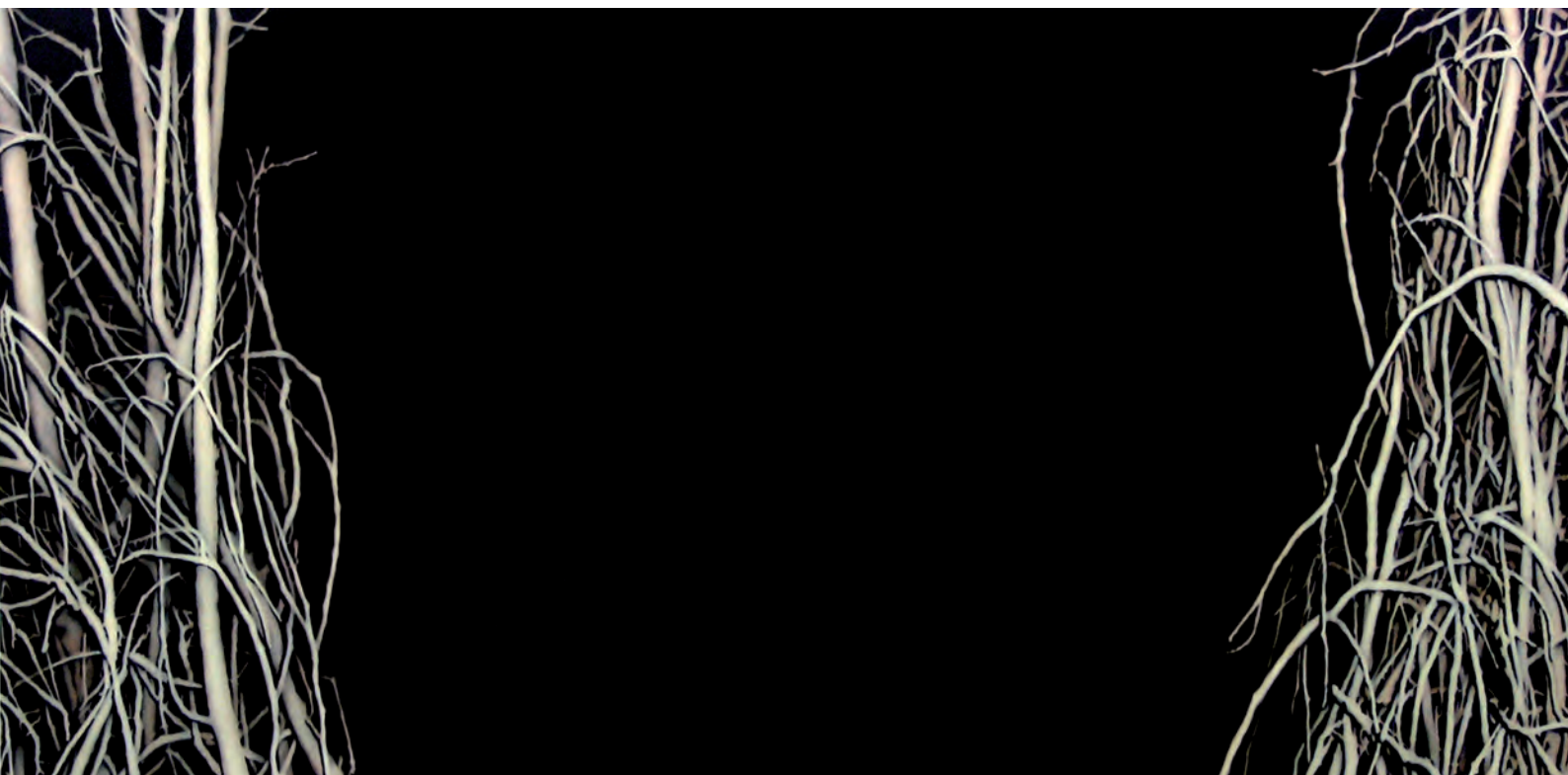
Page 35: *Untitled #5* 2007, oil on linen, 153 x 306 cm. Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne; TOP: *Nocturne-Carpark Painting*, 1994, oil on linen, 183 x 274 cm. Private collection, Melbourne; ABOVE: *Two Trees*, 2009, oil on linen, 120 x 96 cm. Courtesy Kaliman Gallery, Sydney. All works by Andrew Browne, images courtesy the artist.

were to be the signature of the artist's work for some time to come. The variations, the baroque and gothic elements continued to feed a fresh set of circumstances within the works.

However, in an exhibition at Lister Gallery in November 2008, four small paintings appeared, rendered in the refulgent light of a blue sky. Browne states that these works were 'a joy to make. I remembered that bright light has the ability to abstract form as much as darkness might cloak form.'[1] Another shift had also taken place. Although trees and articulated branches were still the stuff of his repertory, Browne's imagery started to take on anthropomorphic forms. Branches became implied limbs, and facial elements were emerging from knotted trunks. With the exception of one truly heroic 'daylight' work, these paintings were grouped with a few of the more familiar *Night Paintings* and an elegant set of photogravure prints,

once again exploring the blackness beyond the branches.

All this reached a new plane with the recent exhibition at Kaliman Gallery. *Apparition*, like the exhibition in Perth, featured a few of the *Night Paintings* and the same set of photogravure prints, but the surprise was the next instalment of works to come out of the new daylight series. Browne sees the work at this time as 'the culmination of several years of paintings that have explored the nocturnal world, one that exists at the edge of our urban and rational experience. I have sought to insert an uneasy and ambiguous presence into these works – one that conjures up highly suggestive forms derived from both direct observation and more fanciful manipulation.'[2]

In *Apparition* three works in particular stood out, each moving in a different direction. *Two Trees* (2009) shows a sun (or possibly a moon) shining between two flanking trees. The light impinges upon the forms of the tree trunks thus increasing the dream-like luminosity of the composition. The subject invites contemplation. In fact the painting could be seen as one in a long lineage of moonscapes that were so in vogue in the early 19th century, as characterised by the nocturnal world of German artist Caspar David Friedrich. Between 1819 and 1830 Friedrich made three versions of the same composition. Two figures contemplate a sinking moon and the evening star from a hilltop framed by two trees and a gigantic boulder in the landscape.[3] The moon is a silent witness, not intruding into earthly life. It is a focus of the 'other', something beyond; in Friedrich's case, an entrée into the sublime. In the Friedrich paintings, nature is observed by the viewer through figures in the landscape, almost always with their backs to the surface of the painting and serving as both subject and surrogate for the viewer. In Browne's paintings the figure is absent. We are invited to play the role of Friedrich's moon viewers without the intermediary; we become an anchor to the space of contemplation beyond.

The elements of nature in the foreground of Friedrich's paintings, the gnarled tree and evergreen, et cetera, all have symbolic significance. It was typical of the era that many artists attempted to find spiritual and religious symbols in the landscape. For example, Thomas Cole, an American artist admired by Browne, employed the entire repertory of symbols: blasted stumps, clearing storms, et cetera, inherited from the tradition of earlier landscape artists like Salvator Rosa. In fact, throughout the 19th century there was an obsession with finding religious symbols, like crosses, in the wilderness; or as in Friedrich's case, using groups of three trees (often planted for the purpose) to represent the three crosses on Calvary. In Browne's painting such heavy-handed symbolism does not exist, but rather an uneasy relationship with elements of the contemporary landscape as props for contemplation. For example, in a number of earlier works, Browne used a streetlamp to take on a role reminiscent of the moon in Friedrich's paintings.

A second painting, *Apparition #6* (2009) is a dramatic, vertical work showing a cascade of branches outlined against the light of the sky. Unlike the other daylight works, this painting employs a graduated tint in the background, which only serves to bring the forms more strangely to life. Now the branches themselves are taking on breath. They seem capable of organic movement. That a face in profile can be imagined in the wooden forms only emphasises the sense of unease when looking at these supposedly inanimate forms. Further, branches hang like menacing tentacles.

Most powerful of all is a large (193 x 193cm) square work, *Apparition # 1* (2009). The subject is an upturned stump wrapped with material, perhaps to be carted away, which has been left for a considerable length of time. As a result the material has begun to fray and rot around the forms of the stump. The work is at once skeletal and animated although it is clearly composed of dead material. There appear to be eye sockets and even a mouth – the cloth is both bone and shroud. The image is confronting, awkward, even embarrassing. Irritatingly one small branch protrudes from the top of the shroud smack in the middle line of the canvas. The result is something so totally unsettling as to get underneath the viewer's skin and burn its image into the brain. The strange, tawny twilight behind and a march of carefully delineated plants in the foreground, polish off the sensory array presented in the work.

I know of only one other painting of a stump that has the power to awe and irritate in like fashion – Fred Williams's *Stump II* (1976), in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.[4] This painting, which Williams kept with him to the end of his life, employs a massive repertory of paint handling. Ugly dragged 'wet on wet' paint, stippling, strong strokes outlining forms; all work together to enliven the surface of his painting. Williams's work is at once a choreography of surfaces and form, and a portrayal of the elements of a landscape that have morphed so that the stump can be read as a head thumbing its nose. It's an ugly, powerful, upsetting work that I find deeply moving. Its facture is so breathtaking that the painting ploughs itself into the psyche.

It is interesting that in *Stump II* Williams used the entire range of possibilities to apply his pigment whereas Browne painted his stump leaving no element of relieved paint on the surface of the canvas (linen). To me, both are works of immense power but each reflects the era in which it was made. Williams's approach bears witness to someone who had steeped himself in Modernism and the painterly concerns of early and mid-20th century Europe and America. It is the result of the artist's emergence from and understanding of the craft of 20th century painting. In contrast, Andrew Browne is a product of a new hyper-mediated world – a world saturated with images provided with amazing ease and immediacy. It's a hi-tech world but ironically, Browne has achieved the effect of a machine-made surface in his paintings by using a time-honoured approach of deft application and manual craft.

Like Fred Williams's *Stump II*, Browne's painting of a lowly stump may be one of the pivotal moments of his career.

Notes

1. Andrew Browne, in conversation with the author, 2 May 2009.

2. Andrew Browne, statement by the artist made as notes for British Museum curator Stephen Coppell on the British Museum's acquisition of the suite of prints *Seven Apparitions*, 2008, 2009.

3. The Metropolitan Museum in New York held an exhibition, *Caspar David Friedrich: Moonwatchers* (11 September to 11 November, 2001) to celebrate the recent acquisition of one of the three versions of Friedrich's moon-watchers. The Metropolitan's acquisition, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (*Zwei Männer in Betrachtung des Mondes*), c. 1830, was shown with the other two known versions of the composition by the artist's hand, along with related paintings, drawings and prints.

4. For background to the painting of *Stump II* by Fred Williams, see James Mollison, *A singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams*, The Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p. 208.

Andrew Browne's latest solo exhibition, *Apparitions*, was shown at Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, 3 to 25 April 2009.

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TOP: Andrew Browne, *Apparition #1*, 2009, oil on linen, 193 x 193 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kaliman Galery, Sydney. ABOVE: Fred R. Williams, *Stump II*, 1976, oil on canvas, 122.2 x 122.3cm. State Art Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth. Purchased with funds from the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, 2001. Image courtesy Lynne Williams and Art Gallery of Western Australia.