

Andrew Browne: Artist's Statement

(for Sonya Payes: Untitled - Portraits of Australian Artists - Macmillan Art Publishing)

I work primarily in painting and photography. Since the late 1980s I have focused on the landscape, both natural and man-made, with a particular interest in representing observed phenomena, the effects of illumination and the poetics and ambiguities of the nocturne and nature. The images tread a line between realism and abstraction, taking into account the formal lessons of modernism, and seeking to insert the artificial, contrived 'irreality' into the natural world and visa versa. Subjects as varied as signage, trees, architecture, the night sky, various forms of illumination including headlights and streetlights, the horizon line and the void have entered the work at different times. While my photographs generally deal with an intuitive and direct response to the landscape, the paintings have emerged out of a more complex series of relationships that encompasses the photographic, the history of landscape painting, advancing technological and social change and our ambiguous and contradictory relationship with nature and our place within the evolving environment. Most recently they embrace the surreal, detritus, 'spookiness', fright and flight....

My paintings have been variously described as romantic, cool, eerie or spectral in quality, uncanny, iconic and emblematic, odd and engaging. They have been identified as essentially psychic landscapes of apprehension but also as giving the impression of realism while using the language of abstraction. In the past I have referred to an interest in creating an interpretive and introspective space via an engagement with a lived experience of the contemporary landscape. Increasingly, though, I am concerned with the psychological impact of particular images, both in the paintings—which have become more surreal and stylized and anthropomorphic—and the photographs, where clarity, crisp focus and overt description have been jettisoned in favor of a reductive palette, suppressed detail and blurred form.

Jonathan Nichols discusses the psychological foundations and affect of my (circa 2007-8) paintings in a recent unpublished essay. A short extract follows:

Andrew Browne's recent pictures are paintings of the night's surface. They are paintings of the night remembered, learned by heart. Generally he calls them 'nocturnes' but leaves them otherwise without specific titles. The images are for the most part trees seen from underneath, caught hovering and wavering, angled upward into the darkness. We do not know and probably never will know exactly what is these artworks' emotional substance, not as a matter of evidence alone. Rainer Maria Rilke had it that we give up on any objective sense of verisimilitude for the sake of vision; to become an 'ear to the earth', to let the earth—by which Rilke meant those dead as well as those still living, and the historical past as well as an ecstatic (because unknown) future—speak within us.

These paintings convey the sense that they have been saved cumulatively, their taste and affect, their content, distilled over years. Painterly nuances appear to reach back impossibly, to earlier years of painting no doubt, but to earlier lives as well.

If these were documents their effort would be the recording of tens of years over, simultaneously. As paintings they evoke in part the sensual qualities and vernacular of 1970s and 1980s art and style—post-production materials, b & w skill-sets and now outmoded graphic technologies—maybe it was Ektachrome or Kodachrome, it's hard to remember. But as well, there are more recent preferences and a physicality that permeates the painterly treatment, one that draws due attention to how sight connects to smell and touch and fixes time or so it seems. Thinking of Rilke, we might begin to imagine that each of these works is a vision of the future too—a picture of a complete life, pre-birth and post-death..