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'Bringing the scrub to life' Andrew Browne

By Ashley Crawford

For many years it sat neglected, a ragged 'green zone', eight hectares of scrub, a place of teenage liaisons and inevitable rum and coke cans. A former quarry, it sat on the edge of the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park in Langwarrin, the genteel home of numerous sculptures established by Dame Elisabeth Murdoch's Sculpture Foundation in 1989, creating a buffer between art and industry.

In 2007 McClelland found the funds to acquire this desolate fringe of land and plan to rejuvenate the zone as further parkland, but before doing so the gallery's curator, Penny Teale, decided to invite renowned landscape artist Andrew Browne to spend 12 months exploring the region and record his findings.

The result, *From the Periphery*, is a distinctly haunting affair. Using both painting and photography, Browne captures the sense of desolation

and deprivation that the untended landscape has acquired. Luminous tree trunks loom out of murky shadows and strange detritus scattered throughout the bush are captured. The results could be film stills from an experiment by David Lynch.

There are a number of distinctly surreal moments such as a knife and cutting board, seemingly random pieces of wood nailed for no particular reason to a tree stump, a piece of lumber hanging from a rope. These were almost all 'found' structures and moments, all too suggestive of a forensic crime scene, Browne playing the role of a bush Weegee.

"I came across the knife as it is photographed - part of a makeshift area where I assume kids had been drinking and mucking around," Browne says. "The next time I went to this area the knife had gone... it was obvious from the time I spent there that the area was much used for nefarious activities! The box with the tag on it contained some markers and a spray-can - a hiding place for a budding artist's tools of the trade. The rope, the make-shift ladder, the hanging swing, the spooky happy face balloon

were all as is... I was really interested in teasing out these sorts of suggestive, as you say surreal, images but some work better as straight photography and others in a more manipulated painted form."

Only one image was physically manipulated, that of a moribund, face-like swathe of fabric. "I contrived various arrangements of it, playing up a facial quality," Browne says, with the result suggestive of a ghost-like wraith.

"I was split between a literal and much more wacky approach - I wasn't satisfied in attempting only one aspect as I was visually and physically responding to this landscape on a number of levels - both as a documentary of details and an establishment of mood and I wanted to be true to it, not just jump off into fictions. Having said that it really is a peripheral, down-at-heel spot that feels like it's had a chequered history and I wanted to tease out various aspects of it while maintaining a creative approach."

The clearly gothic, surreal aesthetic was directly a result of the location, the artist says. "If it had simply been a polite park-like landscape there would have been very little for me to work with..."

Browne visited the site at all times of the day including at dusk and night. "It was a bit creepy at times," he admits. "Even during the day. A lot of the old European plantings like the pine trees are deteriorating and there are extensive bushy thickets that obscure sightlines. I remember when I came across the camp-like area where the knife and empty cans of Jim Beam were that I had a sense of being watched and made a quick exit."

Represented by Lister Gallery in Perth, Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne and Kaliman Gallery in Sydney, Browne's works are eagerly anticipated by collectors.

Browne held his first solo exhibition in Melbourne in 1981 and has continued to exhibit regularly since that time in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. In 1999, Bendigo Art Gallery mounted the exhibition *Andrew*

*Browne Painting Light* spanning a decade of painting, photography and works on paper from 1991 to 1998. His work is represented in state, public and private collections throughout Australia and overseas.

**Andrew Browne: *From the Periphery* from 25 April - 27 June 2010 at McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, 390 McClelland Drive, Langwarrin.**