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'Apparition: the Photography of Andrew Browne'

**Ashley Crawford encounters Andrew Browne's
forest**

Painting and photography have long fed each other in terms of inspiration. A hearty percentage of painters work off photographs - either their own or found materials in magazines and books. And a fair share of photographers have found inspiration in painting.

But few, if any, contemporary Australian artists have found a happy balance between utilising the two media side by side. Andrew Browne would be one of the few.

When Andrew Browne presented two bodies of work - the painting series *Visitation* and the photogravure series *Seven Apparitions* - at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne earlier

this year he struck a rare and poignant balance between the two media. If his paintings hadn't been so intensely surreal they could have been described as photo-realism and similarly if his photographs hadn't glimmered with that ethereal quality of the photogravure one could have imagined them as painterly.

With their title, Browne's photographs have a kinship to the trend of spirit photography that gripped the world post World War II - the 'accidental' capturing of a lost one via photography. The notion of discovering the presence of the dead via this technique became a major fad and was supported strongly by the Spiritualist movement.

The scratching of tree branches on the windowpane has long been the precursor to otherworldly terrors. The dark sinuous forms could just as well be taproots tearing into an underground tomb. Writing for ArtInfo.com, artist and critic Sam Leach was

inspired to comment that: "The use of flash-style lighting inevitably suggests a freeze-frame. It is not hard to imagine these branches thrashing in some wintery squall. This adds to the sense of threat - the branches revealed only momentarily then disappearing again into blackness. Maybe they are advancing on us like a shonky *Dr Who* alien monster. Of course they might just be bare twigs at night. The latter might imply an apocalypse or just cold weather. It is all ominous."

Technically Browne did something decidedly risqué when he exhibited the *Seven Apparitions*, hanging them in the same room as the mammoth painting *Curtain* which utilised the same subject matter executed in oil paint. Whilst more epic in scale and suggestive of a stygian portal into a dark universe, the tonal differences between *Curtain* and the *Apparitions* were barely discernible.

A part of this was Browne's brilliant utilisation of the wonderfully archaic technique of photogravure - a photomechanical process invented by William Henry Fox Talbot in the 1850s. The process was refined by Karel Klič in 1878 by coating a copper plate with a bitumen dust which was heated to secure the image. This was then inked and the image pressed onto paper. It was a technique adopted with extraordinary effect by photographers as diverse as Weegee and Man Ray. But in the day and age of digital printing, photogravure has become a sadly obscure technique.

Browne has made and exhibited photos or photographically-based works since the beginnings of his practice in the early 1980s. Monash Gallery of Art acquired the 2003-05 series *Light Effect* and the Bendigo Art Gallery's survey of his work included a number of photographs relating to light and abstraction and the illuminated urban

nocturne. *Seven Apparitions* has been recently acquired by the British Museum.

"I have made and exhibited photo's or photographically-based works such as etchings, since the early 1980's - at college I made a number of photo etchings," Browne says.

"Photography has been included in shows at Michael Wardell/Verity Street and Deutscher Fine Art in Melbourne, Lister Gallery in Perth and Kaliman Gallery in Sydney. I have also shown them in a number of public galleries, prizes and benefits. Monash Gallery of Art, who own the series of twelve images *Light Effect* (2003-5), and the Bendigo Art Gallery's survey of my work included a number of photo's relating to light and abstraction and also the illuminated urban nocturne."

Browne says that he ponders particular images for a considerable period before he decides whether or not to print them. "Time is the filtering process and I have to get excited about a particular image, then

usually a quick decision to print is made," he says. "Sometimes I don't 'see' an image that might become a print until years later. I made *Seven Apparitions* from accumulated images that had previously been used as the basis for a number of paintings - these prints kind of summed up the previous few years' work, yet also functioned as an interesting discreet group in themselves. The surface quality you get with this type of printing (in effect photo-etching) is really appealing - rich velvety blacks and great tonal subtlety - something I am also after in my paintings.

"I am always taken lots of photos, particularly when I am traveling and I will return to places over years following up particular things I have captured previously," he says. "I am always looking for images/ideas (for me, they are the same thing) and it is kind of like trying to 'recognize' something that may be useful - that may be hiding in plain sight. I have

thousands of shots stored on computer...
plus a lot from the pre-digital era."

Direct use of photography as a source for paintings emerged in the early 1990s, Browne says. "Silhouetted trees, headlights, horizon lines etc. all emerged via photography. The actual 'texture' of photography has always interested me and is evident in the surface I try to get to with the paintings - something I am probably neurotic about!"

"Also, photography is shorthand for me, a thumbnail sketch. I don't particularly like the way I draw or the result of my drawing and have always been attracted to the distancing and objective quality you get with photography."

Still best known as a painter of sublime surface and tonality, Browne's photogravure work proves that he is equally adept at the photographic medium. Browne's oeuvre proves

a bravura balancing act between paint and
print.