

Commissioned essay for the catalogue and exhibition -

'Andrew Browne: From the Periphery'  
McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park 2010

From the Periphery  
By Alan R. Dodge

On the strength of his accumulated series of nocturnal landscape paintings of the past several years Andrew Browne was invited to survey the newly acquired land adjoining McClelland Gallery, with a view to both map and respond to the eight hectares of apparently 'degraded' landscape at the periphery of the existing sculpture park. The result is an installation of a closely related group of paintings and photographic works that focus on details extracted from that area.

Through 2009 and early 2010 Browne made a series of field trips to the site, an area with a history that included a variety of uses - a quarry at one point, grazing land, a convenient place for locals to dump detritus - a swampy lake bordering one corner, groves of collapsing ti-tree, a generally scrubby and down at heel site in fact.

Visiting this landscape with the artist late in the development of the work I was struck by how he had managed to mine what was to me an uninspiring subject - his eye tuned, he was able to find images and relationships where I could find little trace of visual excitement. The result is a poetry of place: a manipulation of the accumulated images of bush, branches and the detritus of human presence in the landscape, crafted by the artist to provide a syntax of elements that allow the viewer to respond emotionally. An uneasy mood inhabits this work and also the sense of the liminal which has always been evident: the edge between day and

night, the cloaking of the nocturne, the play of nature and the man-made, the space beyond the window and the illuminated horizon. Much are recurring elements in Browne's visual vocabulary since the end of the 1980's: as an example, the juxtaposition of a tree in silhouette against the illuminated grid of a crane rigging - 'Tree and Grid' 1994 - provides an atmosphere of hovering mystery at the edge of nature.

This work then is a series of discoveries - elements that might generally be ignored or discounted as simply banal or commonplace have become subjects that resonate and are highly suggestive of both psychological states and at times surreal language. Tangles of bush, the exposed complexity of the roots of collapsed trees and the stark remnant trunks of various exotic species are appropriated for their formal qualities, and then stretched, morphed and isolated in order to make memorable images. Of particular significance is the manipulation and exaggeration of the anthropomorphism at play in much of the source material. A rotting piece of fabric tangled and clinging to the side of a stump takes on a facial and somewhat mournful character for instance, exposed roots appear as threatening limbs and the rotting shaft of a conifer (a remnant of the earlier European plantings on the new McClelland site) appears as a shrieking visage.

This particular interest in the morphing image has been an increasing focus of Browne's work in recent years. It is not his usual method to simply pick something and literally represent it - there is generally much manipulation of form and composition, and as a result, implied meaning. Often he assembles his individual images from a variety of sources and these elements placed in new contexts that may be foreign to the original scale and playfully accentuate certain relationships. Paintings and to a lesser degree photographs from the last decade or so have

explored this interest in shifting contexts: works in the 2004 exhibition 'Various Places' involved images taken from the everyday urban world and shuffled them with contrived lighting, summary cropping and odd angles. The works derived from photography where the glaring light of a flash became a predominant concern - for example 'Apparition' 2008 and 'Driving thru the night...' 2008 - appeared from 2004 through 2008. With their tangle of foliage and enveloping darkness these are elegant, haunting images that inspired both a stunning array of paintings as well as a suite of photogravure prints. And increasingly the forms in these works began shifting - before, the web of branches served as barrier to a possible sinister beyond, but now the threat was in the forms themselves

More recently, this playful and very deliberate contriving of the anthropomorphic is exemplified in paintings such as - 'Apparition #2' 2009, 'Apparition #6 (Wraith)' 2009 and 'Visitation #1' 2009 - all direct precursors and relations of the works exhibited at McClelland and all displaying the developing and ongoing interest in atmospheric light, moving out of the inky blackness toward something less determinate.

One object/form in particular, that has become a touchstone for this group of exhibited works, is a stump (or Lil' Stumpy as the artist jokingly refers to it) - the remnant of a relatively mature conifer that had been cut down at some point in the last few years. Unlike much of the deteriorating plantings in the vicinity, this form was relatively solid and displayed a curious faciality - the horizontal and then vertical cuts provided a shelf or seat of sorts and the entirely coincidental knots in the exposed wood gave the form a very particular anthropomorphic quality. To add to this, over time and possibly as a result of nefarious activity, broken glass had been placed on the form, becoming at one with it as the last of the extant trees sap oozed out.

Two paintings and a lithograph to date memorialise this odd find, one that needed little manipulation to become a memorable image.

The suite of photographs exhibited - 'From the Periphery (McClelland Series)' # 1 - 16, 2010 - serve as a highly edited group that stand in for the hundreds of shots taken during the course of this project. Browne has had a deep and abiding interest in photography, as well as of course painting. Amongst his earlier influences were photographers such as Lee Friedlander and Robert Adams, Americans who found much of their subjects in the banal, the everyday and the overlooked. Some of the formal character of their work finds its way into these photographs - but Browne is intent here on documenting various finds and perhaps suggesting some possible narratives. The paintings however take us into more fictive realms.