

Text for catalogue and exhibition Andrew Browne 'Night Pictures'

Lister Gallery Perth 2007

Night pictures - by Jonathan Nichols

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 the 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 of 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 up 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 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 material, 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 an existent 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.

The basic painterly processes, where the artist has progressively re-applied broad areas of darker paint against more slender sections of paler colour and raw primer, barely seem enough. Thin, even-handed applications of paint are put down wet over the entire surface before the beginnings of motifs are rubbed back and then articulated more exactly with new paint. The repeated moving forward and backward, putting down new paint then rubbing away and again applying more paint creates a densely worked painterly effect, a chiaroscuro, where

innumerable warmer and cooler tones are held against shimmering lighter ones. Each finished image is seen as a pale after-image, oscillating in a way that is clear and obscure at once, so that our own focus, our own conscious regard of these paintings, is drawn in like a moth to light.

We sometimes stop in recognition of a particular tree, or guess at its variety and notice that these are usually 'exotics' but often mangy and unkempt. Nevertheless, I don't think Browne's interest is really in the 'original' or unusual aspects of these trees. There is no positive incentive to break down the images into verbal elements, or pull apart their meanings and affirm or disaffirm authenticity here or there—those things in art that depend on our differing expectations. The trees are tangled and turn back on one another—have they run wild? As motifs they do not function rhetorically or symbolically, and the combined effect of the pictures doesn't suggest connotations other than what seem most directly apparent. We read these paintings with our wits.

Nonetheless in each of these paintings there is a very specifically defined depth to the picture plane—a curious 'depth of field' that brings forward the whole notion of depth as strategic in Browne's art. Each painting offers the illusion that there are no more than eight or ten metres of pictorial space before the blackness of the background overtakes each subject. By delimiting this illusion of spatial depth—or at least finessing it inward toward the painted surface rather than outward—Browne is alluding to the painting's finite character. The strictly controlled depth of the painted image comes to exemplify *implicit* depth rather than *infinite* depth. While not inconsistent with a reading of modernism, this approach differs from concepts more usually associated with landscape painting where, for instance, the vista of a traditional landscape conveys a sense of endlessness, and can even call to mind a type of wonky providence. Be it the effect of a cinematic or photographic impulse or some other, this re-orientation of 'depth' in the work of Andrew Browne in part defines its contemporaneity.

It is possible to say that the essential content of any painting is its vitality. With representational painting though, where there is an obvious subject, this vitality—which relates more directly to the character of the artist—can be concealed. The 'realism' of the painted image can distract an audience from seeing the essential content, from seeing the painting as much to do with this character of the artist as to do with interpreting the form of its representation—how and how well

its reality is presented. This circumstance of concealment is accentuated in the work of Andrew Browne. The representationalism of his paintings, their apparently obvious subject matter, provides a screen for Browne to mask and disguise the more human reverberations. For instance, there is something bewilderingly anthropomorphic about the image of these trees, with their deciduous, white 'limbs' etc (whose very roots are deciduous and no doubt naked too). But if we imagine not a body, **with bones and flesh etc**, but a solitary figure nonetheless beneath these painted trees, perhaps this imaginary figure might suggest something more of the pathos of these pictures.

Could it not be a youthful figure that would run beneath this mysterious darkness, born for life with bare skin, the mute sensation one of exhilaration in the cool night air? Bare skin and bare feet—but this would have been so long ago. The slight sadness we sense hidden and masked in the darkness would be the melancholy of a silent witness. Beauty is melancholy of a sort; a type of stillness or slowing down that can feel overwhelming, but it is not the false metaphor of eternity, or an entropic measure. The recognition of what is beautiful turns us inward on our own sense of self-possession and mortality, and we learn introspection accidentally, furtively in the features of what is around us, but no less its fortuitous quality is illusive and dynamic. The point or the poignancy of these paintings might simply be this process. Might Browne's intended effect with these paintings be no more than to remember the innocence of childhood, but as well witness the complicity of a full life? To allow the viewer's own perception, **their own adolescence chance**, to be affected, and that these paintings be experienced not as a testament of finality and stillness (of death), but instead as an enrichment.

Jonathan Nichols