

Commissioned essay to accompany the catalogue and exhibition -  
'Andrew Browne - From the Periphery'  
McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park 2010

Towards Redemption - Andrew Browne

Riverbanks, seashores, the desolate fringes of suburbia - these are the sorts of marginal areas that captivate Andrew Browne. He has long been a poet of the peripheral, drawn to places that we usually ignore because we tend to unthinkingly dismiss them as non-places - neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there.

Yet, as this imaginatively conceived exhibition suggests, there may be another way of looking at them: not as peripheral, which suggests the fraying edge of something - a sort of wan petering out - but as intermediate; not as no-man's-lands but as possessing their own distinct character and beauty. They are bridges linking differing worlds and times, and different states of being.

Children and adventurous dogs love such places, of course, because they are so wonderfully disorderly, unplanned and potentially dangerous; they do not raise the suspicion (as almost everywhere else does) that someone is trying to boss them around. In short, they assert the virtues of chaos and unpredictability.

Thus, their unfinished, transitional, haphazard state, while it may call forth our need to order and control (who among us does not feel a grown-up urge to see them 'tidied up' and made useful again?), may also stimulate a transgressive, childlike attraction to anarchy. However unpromising they may appear, they remain as the last pathetic refuges of the Romantic imagination in our over-ordered urban lives.

It is their temporal dimension, their sense of being in a constant state of flux, that (if we are susceptible enough) can turn desolate urban wastelands into unintentional *memento-mori*. (Look, for example, to Andrew's photographs, which have all the pathos of religious icons.) Nevertheless, while they morbidly flout the depredations of their past, at the same time they hold out the promise of rejuvenation, blending memory and desire, death and new life.

So the question naturally arises: why fix them in paint if it is their very transience that endears them to us? The particular plot of land that is the subject of this exhibition bears all the scars of past abuse. It is littered with rubbish and weeds, the soil has been ravaged, its vegetation stripped. All around, suburban development and light industry crowds in. While it was an inspired idea to commission an artist - especially this artist - to record it before it is transformed, what, exactly, can we expect from it?

It would be a mistake to see these works as a misguided plea for the preservation of this land in its present state: only children and adventurous dogs could wish for that. On the contrary, it is fleetingness itself, and the potential for change, that is being commemorated. What this exhibition does is to tease

out a narrative. And, importantly for us, it is one with a happy ending. Would we be so interested if we thought this block of land was to become an industrial estate or streets of housing? Probably not, or at least not in the same way. It is the promise of regeneration that moves us, the thought that it will be returned to some semblance of its natural state. This is a story about revisiting Eden.

Andrew brings out the poetry in what we thought of as ugly or uninteresting. This is one significant thing art can do. But he offers us a lot more than that. By recording, with precision and respect, a part of the natural world that has fallen from grace, he opens the way for its redemption.

Peter Timms.