



# CHIMERA CINEMA

ANDREW BROWNE'S WORK OFTEN LEAVES VIEWERS WITH AN UNEASY URGE TO LOOK OVER THEIR SHOULDER. REDOLENT WITH THREAT AND THE SUGGESTION OF MENACING STORYLINES, HIS CANVASES OF TANGLED BRANCHES FEEL LIKE SPOOKY CINEMA FREEZE-FRAMES, WRITES **ASHLEY CRAWFORD**. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.

The limbs shimmer in the darkness, mute witness to strangely ominous events beyond the picture frame. This all began on the cold *noir* streets of Vienna in 2004, where **Andrew Browne** found himself seduced by the leafless maples lining the roads.

Browne has been exhibiting with consistent critical and commercial success since 1981, but it is in the new century that he seems to have truly found his pace. His work throughout the late 1980s and 1990s had embraced movement, the peripheral glance out the car window, a sense of shiftlessness and perhaps escape. But in 2004 the gears seemed to shift, the sense of movement stilled and the silent threat became palpable.

"A lot of those earlier works were actually inspired by travel, hence movement," Browne says. "Plus, the blurring of the formal qualities of the landscape has always interested me, all the way back to the late 1980s. The long horizontal paintings from that time were about episodic moments and sensations, caught and strung together." The newer work, he says, deals "formally with objects/nature caught by the flash of artificial or natural light. They are caught, frozen if you like.

"Emotionally and psychologically, there has been a change in the work. I have been conscious of this, encouraged it subtly. It seems to have evolved in response to a feeling that there needed to be extra nuances in the work – in hindsight this seems obvious, but it is difficult to pin it down to a specific intent or moment."

The more recent work is executed in vertical or square formats. His earlier work tackled an almost cinematic horizontal format that lent itself to a feeling of progression "from one place to another," he says.

The influence of photography in Browne's work is roundly apparent and he is an obsessive collector of found moments for fodder in his paintings. "I am always taking lots of photos, particularly when I am travelling and I will return to places over the 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 recognise something that may be useful – that



may be hiding in plain sight.

"Only a handful ever makes the grade as far as being the basis for paintings. But it is important to point out that there is always a degree of abstraction/manipulation from the source photos before they become a model for the paintings. And even then, the final form always mutates. The actual texture of photography has always interested me and is evident in the surface I try to get – something I am probably neurotic about!"

Browne has made and exhibited photos or photographically-based works such as etchings since the beginnings of his practice in the early 1980s. Monash Gallery of Art acquired the 2003 to 2005 series *Light Effect* and the Bendigo Art Gallery's 1999 survey of his work included a number of photographs relating to light and abstraction and the illuminated urban nocturne. In 2008 he made a series of photopolymer photogravures, *Seven Apparitions*, which has been recently acquired by the British Museum.

Rather than photography, viewers often refer to cinema, as though the works are stills from a broader narrative. In the older works they were stills from a road movie, but the newer works have a dark tinge of threat. "The idea that they read as parts of a broader narrative has been mentioned a number of times, so that seems to be how a lot of people interpret them," says Browne. "That's fine! As long as they are looking and responding then I am happy. The influence of film and

*"The influence of film and advertising encourages us all to consider single images this way, to fill in the blanks, to create the story."*

Clockwise from top left:

Andrew Browne, *Fitzroy*, 2004. Oil on linen, 138 x 396cm. Collection of the RACV, Melbourne.

Andrew Browne, *Apparition #1*, 2009. Oil on linen, 193 x 193cm.

Andrew Browne, *Apparition #3*, 2009. Oil on linen, 96 x 120cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST, KALIMAN GALLERY, SYDNEY AND TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE





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In terms of the sense of threat, Browne says: "I am very much trying to load some aspect of that into the more recent work, the ambiguous and spooky, banal things that then seem to mutate into something else. Even in my early work – the poured, surrealist paintings I showed in the late 1980s, early 1990s – I was after a sense of that, and the paintings with clusters of lights and floating orbs were certainly attempting to convey some feeling of threat or mystery."

Browne's 2007 exhibition at Tolarno Galleries was titled *Chimera*, a term that, apart from its traditional mythological reference, is also used contemporaneously to describe an organism or organ consisting of tissues merged from differing genetic compositions produced via organ transplants, grafting or genetic engineering. "My use of 'chimera' wasn't about evoking the specifics of the mythological beast, but as an associative and evocative term – synonyms for chimera – dream, spectre, illusion, fabrication," he says. "The paintings showed trees and detritus that appeared to be morphing or mutating into other things, suggestive of the anthropomorphic – faces emerging – images that belied their origin." ■

Andrew Browne will be exhibiting new work at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne from 17 September to 17 October 2009.

*"The use of flash-style lighting inevitably suggests a freeze-frame. It is not hard to imagine these branches thrashing in some wintry squall."*

Above:

Andrew Browne, *The space between...*, 2009. Oil on linen, 90 x300cm. Collection of the Sofitel, Melbourne.

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### SAM LEACH, ARTIST

"These paintings need time to work and deliver most of their rewards with contemplation. [Browne's work] comprises large, monochromatic paintings of densely entangled branches of trees or vines. The stark frontal lighting suggests that flash photography at night was the source for these images. The branches are defoliated, suggesting death, or at least winter. In any event, something dark and cold.

"The paintings are dense with information. Still, it is strangely hypnotic to consider these images and to follow the interwoven boughs and twigs. Given time, an interesting thing happens – secondary images begin to emerge. Certain configurations suggest faces and figures lurking in, or perhaps formed by the twigs. This is an exploitation of a human survival trait – the tendency to interpret ambiguous imagery as potentially threatening animals – and especially as the most threatening animal, namely humans.

"It also calls to mind notions of spirits embedded within the trees – maybe a nod to animist religions such as Shinto. The title of the 2007 show, *Chimera*, may be revealing here, calling to mind hybridised beasties. Are these merely hybrid plants or part plant/part human monsters? The use of flash-style lighting inevitably suggests a freeze-frame. It is not hard to imagine these branches thrashing in some wintry 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.

"Browne's technique is superb. The paint appears to have been layered and rubbed back with highlights added. But it is applied masterfully so that process of creating the work disappears, leaving just the imagery and the seductive object-presence of skilful painting."

*Ashley Crawford*

### VASILI KALIMAN, DIRECTOR, KALIMAN GALLERY

"Andrew Browne's paintings are exquisitely made objects with meticulous execution. From a distance they portray a grand and expansive vision, while up close the paintings are very subtle in their soft tonal transitions and the rubbed back surfaces.

"Andrew Browne is distinctive in Australian art because of his take on the history of landscape painting. Rather than being purely landscape or purely urban, Andrew's vision takes place on the edge of both the urban and rural setting.

"What I particularly enjoy about Andrew's work is that he imbues his subject with a psychological and evocative nature. His nightscapes, for example, have a romantic and gothic sensibility that transforms the everyday into the strange and unusual."

*Ashley Crawford*