

ANDREW BROWNE HORIZON

Horizon plots the evolution of Andrew Browne's studio practice from 2000 to 2012, encompassing the marked shift in his work from transition to transmutation. An early exponent of Melbourne's so called 'club blur' movement, Browne has progressed in more recent years to a sharp crystallization of focus, and a study of the material residue of life.

The exhibition has its foundation in its namesake work, a pivotal piece for the artist that was acquired by the Gippsland Art Gallery in 2001. Within this one work, which melds together five different views over almost twelve metres, Browne laid bare his artistic aspirations, which we have seen come to maturation over the intervening decade. The exhibition culminates in *A Riverbank (culvert, detritus and apparitions)* which represents a summation of Browne's practice to date. A courageous and spirited work, it provides a fitting testament to the artist's remarkable achievements over that time.

Between these two works, *Horizon* presents a brief history of Browne's artistic development and key points of its evolution. His enduring preoccupation with travel and transition, and the natural and built environments is present throughout.

This compelling and timely exhibition, developed by Gippsland Art Gallery's Curator Simon Gregg in close collaboration with the artist, would not have been possible without the generosity of a host of lenders, whose works have been sourced Australia-wide. The ongoing support of Wellington Shire Council and Arts Victoria, a Division of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, enables the Gallery to present important exhibitions such as this. We are also most appreciative of the efforts of our Gallery staff and volunteers.

Our greatest appreciation, however, is reserved for Andrew Browne, whose enthusiasm and dedication to this project has made the end result greater than any of us dared dream.



Horizon

2000

Oil on linen, 81.3 x 1150cm (4 panels)

Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale



Apparition #2
2009
Oil on linen, 153 x 330cm
Collection of the artist

Defining something as 'Browneism' would be an absurd linguistical proposition. Yet how else to describe the unique and immersive visual phenomena that is the product of Melbourne-based artist Andrew Browne? The worlds that he creates, distilled and amplified from our own, are unlike any other, in spite of having spawned in recent years a school of Browne-ites who work within his shadow. But there is only one Andrew Browne – an artist who consistently keeps evolving and re-evolving both the possibilities of paint on canvas and the way in which it relates to the physical world.

Andrew Browne occupies an important and unique niche within the spectrum of contemporary Australian art. He draws from a wide field of references, including photography, cinema and art history, to devise a new approach to image making, which is governed by the joint dictates of sensation, innovation and revelation. Primarily a painter, Browne also works in various photographic mediums – photopolymer photogravure and lithography, as well as digital media.

Since the late 1980s he has developed a charged and dynamic visual language that oscillates between figurative and abstraction, and the man-made and natural environment. His readily identifiable style is derived from recalibrating observed phenomena, in such a way as to recast the physical world as a source of unexpected mystery, danger and delight. Key to this is his attention to the effects of light and illumination, as well as shadows and darkness.

In the last decade Andrew Browne has radically progressed his practice, all the while maintaining a sense of heightened perception; a sharpening of the senses through hyperreal abstraction – although his work is neither hyperreal nor abstract. It locates specific points of interest in the built environment and zones in on them until they become fragmented and ambiguous. In this way his imagery achieves the condition of being at once familiar and foreign.

Horizon (2000) exemplifies Browne's dual preoccupations with speed and solace. Like his previous and subsequent works, it speaks both of our time, and of no time. Time itself, and our grasp on the material world, dissolves into its unfathomable panoramic depths. Browne invents a new world in his pictures that is based on our own, but also upon an abstracted altercation with reality, in which the speeding motion of life and disorienting effects of night have consumed our capacity for logic, and propose instead that an unseen internal logic is at work.

Horizon represents Browne's most intensive consideration of transition and travel to that point. The work suffuses a number of disparate elements, jarred further by differing stylistic forms, to create a continual sense of motion. *Horizon* opens and closes with strange opalescent lights (car headlights or moons), and in between glides from neon and billboard illumination, to distended trees and glowing highway lights. Each of the elements, observed and photographed by Browne, were collaged

through the painting process to create a 'subjective reality'. An ambitious work, *Horizon* runs to 1,150cm over four individual panels, each longer than the next to parallel the blurred vision of a car occupant who is moving through the landscape. The sensation of speed seems to increase, and we feel carried along by the work as if by forces beyond our control. Presented as a series of cinematic 'jump-cuts', *Horizon* has a filmic or photographic quality, and a precision that belies its material components.

Horizon was an important work for Andrew Browne. It represented a key point in his practice: a summation of many previous concerns as well as a new beginning. The present project, which takes its name from this work, reveals the evolution of Browne's practice since this landmark painting, exploring his growing fascination with the nocturnal and (un)natural environments. Over the ensuing twelve years we see his practice go from breakthrough to breakthrough, and while a range of themes and subjects appear,

ever present is the unending line of the horizon, as both a feature of the landscape and as an unreachable point in the distance.

As if seeking to reach that horizon, Andrew Browne's work concerns points of transition. Earlier works in particular were characterised by a sense of motion; of moving from one point to another, or one thing becoming another. There is that elusive point during transition when a thing or place is neither one thing nor another – and it is those points that Browne seeks and documents. They often escape literal meaning or interpretation, and so provide access to a range of other aesthetic cues. Browne describes his recent works as 'an accumulation of glimpses':

*I'm interested in how things resonate: in memories packed together to create a fiction; in images that are highly contrived and edited; in figments of the imagination rather than reality.*¹

That Browne works with transitional space is significant. Transitional spaces dwell habitually

on the periphery. Hidden behind temporary fencing they attract little attention, whether they be in the process of building up to a dramatic unveiling or in the solitary decline of decay. For Browne to present carefully framed and edited views of just such sites is to directly contradict the amount of time we would ordinarily spend in front of them; he engages us with a subject that surrounds us daily and yet evades our attention.

The evasiveness of Browne's subject is compounded by its containment within the confines of Melbourne's inner suburbs. The corporate gloss of Melbourne's street façades do not concern the artist, instead it is the interstitial gaps in the façade, and the spectral underbelly of the inner city that attracts his scrutiny.

The walls of Browne's studio are adorned with clusters of photographs, of nearby scenery (usually darkly shot and ambiguous) and previous works, while centrally located

tables are stacked with art reference books. Monet is an unlikely favourite (Browne cites the 'cumulative quality' of his long works as an influence), as is the gentle and incandescent pastures of Millet (especially his *Le Printemps* of 1866-73). Gerhard Richter may seem an obvious presence, both on the book table and as in influence in Browne's paintings, to which Browne demurs; 'Richter blurs the paint, I blur the photograph'.²

The importance of photography to Andrew Browne's art practice cannot be underestimated. It has guided his way of seeing the world; his vision has become habitually cinematic. The colours, tones and compositions of his canvases may betray his extensive knowledge of earlier art epochs, but they remain essentially informed by the photograph. 'Photography, and its manipulation through a variety of means, has become my drawing method' he said in 2003. The photograph possesses inherent qualities that are consistent with what Browne seeks to achieve in paint – not only the 'accumulation of glimpses', but a

certain refraction of light, a reductiveness, a flattening of form, and an articulation of detail. That Browne also creates photographs for exhibition, in tandem with suites of paintings, is not surprising. What yields the greatest insight, however, is the way each inform the other, with the cinematic scope of the paintings countered by the painterly interventions in a set of photographs, where accidental spots and drips of paint have introduced a Whistler-esque constellation of surface patterns.

The relationship between painting and photography has long underpinned Andrew Browne's practice. We can see it in an early work, *Sfumato Nocturne with White Wholes* (1991), and subsequent works such as *Landscape with Flares* (1992), *Nineteen and Twenty-First Century* (1994), and the photographic series *Nocturne (city)* (1995). Each of the photographs comprising *Nocturne (city)* represents a finished work in its own right, an elegiac essay on the city's otherworldliness at night. *Nineteen and*



UPPER

Sfumato Nocturne with White Wholes
1991
Oil on linen, 152 x 640cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

LOWER

Landscape with Flares
1992
Oil on linen, 60 x 60cm
Private collection



UPPER

Nineteen and Twenty-First Century

1994

Oil on linen, 183 x 300cm

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

LOWER

Nocturne (city) #1 - #4

1993/5

Unique cibachrome prints, each 49 x 74cm

Private collection

Twenty-First Century retains the hauntedness of the photographs, but furnishes it with a Surrealistic sweep, in which the literal depiction of luminous cranes and power lines becomes disassembled.

Sfumato Nocturne with White Wholes, the earliest of these works, outlays the artist's field of enquiry for the decade to come. There is a certain aura of the occult at work in these canvases. Whether the night is a present feature or not, the influence of the nocturnal seeps through these 'glimpses' to shift or blur them just slightly beyond our field of vision. The work is rich in Browne's longstanding interest in the uncanny and otherworldly experience, and is derived 'from a nineteenth century interest in Romantic and psychological relationships to the land'.

*Even in my early work, I have been interested in ghostly lights at night, a sense of illumination. I am attracted to ambiguity.*³

Browne pinpoints a range of subjects present within *Sfumato* – namely, 1980s vampire movies, images of the developing 1991 Gulf War, the observed nocturnal landscape, and abstracted light (such as the after-burners of an accelerating aircraft) – however the resulting melange of light and drama transcends the material components. The work, over three panels, presaged *Horizon* of nine years later, particularly its expansive continuity. In stitching together a series of 'jump-cuts', Browne suggests a sense of journey and transition, which is only half-remembered and half-real.

Browne constantly places us at the fringe of consciousness. Familiar objects and sensations are snatched away from us before they can be properly apprehended, leading to a feeling of perpetual slippage. This effect was achieved to a startling degree in *Sfumato*, as it was again with latter works *Tree and Illumination at Dusk* (2002), and *Seek Alternative Route #2* (2003). Here, the absolute nocturne has been banished from

view and the emphasis has shifted to a literal engagement with travel and transition. The former work presents a silhouette of a tree, juxtaposed with light reflecting off water and billboard illumination. The elements unify in an unnerving 'shimmer' effect that blurs the distinction between natural and fabricated.

Seek Alternative Route #2 is a slightly different proposition, that has more in common with *Horizon* than anything else that preceded it. As we speed past a highway sign the text remains legible but verges on the precipice of abstraction. We sense the rush of forward movement, but also the shock of sunlight at the left edge of the canvas. What has been strictly experiential slips into metaphysical, and transcends the formal exercise of painting. Browne writes of this billboard subject:

A key reason I found the idea of the billboard as a motif interesting was that for me it represented a found abstracted form in the landscape, one that referred to both

*photography and the 'glimpse' and to a 'contrived' reality...*⁴

While aspects of Browne's works may lend themselves to either transcendent contemplation or metaphysical associations, the artist asserts that 'It is the calibration and contrast of different observed phenomena that interests me'.⁵ His objective is to document and deconstruct the material world and piece it together anew, so that while we may find familiarity and recognition in many of his subjects, we cannot easily explain the way in which these subjects compel us and transport us to another place and time. Browne taps into the eternal language of primeval signs to de-evolve built modernity into a strange siren-call to a deeper pantheism; there is a compulsion when surveying Browne's output to read his staccato of bursts of light and heightened sensation as moments of mystical enlightenment. They forge a fine tension between empirical observation and cosmological transcendence; between the

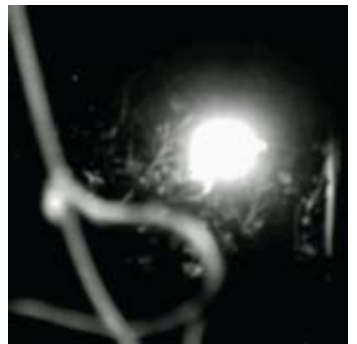


UPPER

Tree and Illumination at Dusk
2002
Oil on linen, 137 x 396cm
Private collection

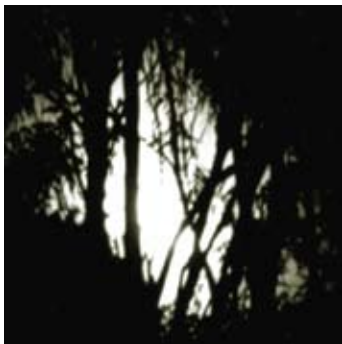
LOWER

Seek Alternative Route #2
2003
Oil on linen, 137.5 x 396.5cm
Private collection



Light Effect #1 - #6
2003/4

Type C prints on Fuji Crystal Archive Paper (edition of 10), each 72 x 72cm (frame 82 x 82cm)
Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne



Light Effect #7 - #12

2003/4

Type C prints on Fuji Crystal Archive Paper (edition of 10), each 72 x 72cm (frame 82 x 82cm)
Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne



Untitled #6
2007
Oil on linen, 153 x 306cm
Private collection

natural and the supernatural – a polarity that has fascinated and spurred artists for millennia.

Browne explored the effects of light in more depth through a series of photographs produced through 2003-4. *Light Effect #1 - #12* is a monochromatic essay on the cinematic 'glimpse'. Each work depicts a fragment of a larger whole, that in itself remains ambiguous and mysterious. The light source is not always clear – sunlight, moonlight or car headlight – but it demarcates an altercation with the uncanny composed of man-made and natural elements. Much more than simple observations, each piece invites our immersion into a liminal world of film-noir affectation.

These explorations in light and drama led to a new body of work, represented here by *Untitled #6* (2007) and *Driving Thru the Night...* (2008). Browne's quintessential urbanity remains in place, but the rush of speed and highway billboards has been replaced with ragged clusters of barren foliage either floating or descending through space. Consistent with the

highway paintings is Browne's carefully manipulated composition, in which diverse elements have been brought together on canvas where they had not been in reality. Each of these works also whispers of the earlier *Sfumato Nocturne with White Wholes*; the eerie use of light returns (produced here by the implied camera flash) compounded by the stygian darkness of the background. There is a quietness here and a disquiet, which we have not previously encountered in Browne's oeuvre, which makes viewers feel both uneasy and spellbound. The tree and moon motifs are familiar, but not so are the arrangements. As Browne says:

*Look again and perhaps the visage of something sinister emerges – ghostly and spectral. Each of these pictures treads a line between describing found, seemingly banal forms and an ambiguous anthropomorphic identity.*⁶

Key here is the encroachment of suburbia, which remains at some distance from the

unfolding drama. Where the material fabric of humankind had occupied the foreground in earlier works, here nature reasserts its dominance and reclaims centre stage. The twisted, tangles of bush are like blood vessels in the brain, and describe both inner and outer experience. The formal treatment of the subject and meticulous paintwork suggests a heightened reality, which is allayed by the peculiar lighting and unfeasible composition. Rather than placing us within a physical space, Browne succeeds in transporting us into a psychological space, governed by laws we cannot discern.

Untitled #6 stands out for its acutely anthropomorphic device, in which the stripped vine recedes dramatically toward the vanishing point (recalling the Star Destroyer in the opening sequence of *Star Wars*). *Driving Thru the Night*..., meanwhile, presents the vine as passing across the surface of the picture plane, in apparent pursuit of the static moon. Browne heightens the tension between the natural and supernatural world in both canvases, and blurs

the distinction between observation and memory. Both were part of a larger series of works that explored dramatically lit branches as a means of evoking an uneasy Surrealism through the everyday. Browne adds that:

*...the use of the horizon format was returned to a number of times, referring to the landscape format as a formal device but also to movement from one point to another (time and transition), and evoking the cinematic.*⁷

As Browne's maturation as an artist has progressed, so too has his awareness of his place within the landscape tradition. Much of his work retains the palpable convention of landscape, albeit if only through the formal properties of his canvases, and through an engagement with natural subject material. The earth itself is more often than not missing from his work, and he locates us instead in an elevated position, where we float above or through the vista. Further, his natural material is frequently dead, dying or decayed, as if we are experiencing the after



Driving Thru the Night...
2008
Oil on linen, 122 x 306cm
Private collection



Down by the River
2011
Oil on linen, 175 x 262cm
Private collection

effects of a cataclysm. These aspects give rise to the sensation that we ourselves have perished in the destructive event, and now observe these vistas as might a bodiless spirit – an unseen observer with no form of its own.

These aspects conspire no more effectively than in *Apparition #2* (2009), where the horizon line drops below the bottom edge of the picture plane, leaving us to consider three upended tree trunks or branches. The man-made has receded completely here for the first time, yet the sense of contrived composure and manipulation remains. *Apparition #2* marks a further shift with the imminent threat of darkness now removed, to be replaced with the threat of starkness. The clear daylight dissolves ambiguity and thrusts materiality into sharp focus, to firmly anoint the subject within the landscape tradition. The tree forms have gained in substance since the spindly vines, and instead propose a subject that is wholly more sculptural, an effect that is amplified by the pronounced contrasts between light

and shadow. As if to reaffirm his mastery of illusionistic depth, *Apparition #2* is both a summation of Browne's practice to that point, and a stepping stone towards the next development.

In *Down by the River* (2011) and *A Riverbank* (2012) – the latter produced for this project – Browne intensifies his gaze upon subject matter that is especially abject, namely, a river bank after a flood. That these are still inner-suburban locations is all too evident from the abundance of litter that has been caught up in the respective tree branches and foliage. As Browne's need for speed subsides, so his need for detail increases, with *A Riverbank* taking its complexity to a fanatical level. Where *Down by the River* provides an eloquent study of a single subject, *A Riverbank* restores the episodic flow first seen in *Horizon*, providing evidence of a circle fully turned. The reappearance of man-made form is notable for its progression from earlier work



A Riverbank (culvert, detritus and apparitions)
2012
Oil on linen, 130 x 900cm (3 panels)
Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries



Seek Alternative Route #2, where the product of humankind once had an impenetrable sheen, it has now broken down to become vulnerable, decayed and dismantled. Nature asserts its primacy, and again, we apprehend a scene in the wake of destruction.

Further attention has been paid to the evocation of an atmospheric light. Where *Apparition #2* restored an intense daylight after a series of desolate nocturnes, *A Riverbank* adjusts the levels to instil its light with a slightly damp and meandering quality. There is a richness in colour not seen previously, and also a depth of field implemented by the – albeit shallow – fore, middle and background. The entire work operates on an immersive level; little smaller than life size it seizes its viewer and envelopes us in its visceral quagmire. That it rises above its subject so triumphantly is *A Riverbank's* indelible achievement. It possesses an opulent beauty as no previous Browne work has. The rhythm and flow of

Horizon, the transitional quality of the works that immediately followed, and the brazen spookiness of the nocturnes have been funnelled into a work that is all these things and more.

Throughout the period of Andrew Browne's practice surveyed by this project, we continually observe his ability to transform and reinvent banal subject matter. This transformation is not always obvious – sometimes he leaves it to us to see faces, or skulls, in twisted contortions of vines, or light shimmering on water – but his deep-rooted interrogation of reality yields surprising results. The horizon line, subject of the earliest work here, becomes prone and transitional, revealing an ability to take on many forms and illusions. It continually shifts through this series of works until we arrive at *A Riverbank*, where it has undergone a complete transformation while retaining its inherently unattainable character.

As Browne has progressed deeper into his investigation into the fringes of built form, we have developed our own appreciation for the lost pockets of urbanity, and for the fleeting moments of enlightenment. Neither a realist nor an abstractionist, Browne mines the interstitial voids between points of experience, where an uncanny otherness is allowed to flourish. He constantly shifts and transforms the way we look at the world, and repeals our absolute reliance upon an experiential outlook upon it, proposing instead a less tactile and more fluid approach. We are the richer for our encounter with Browne's art, whose own horizon knows no limits.

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Browne in conversation with the author, 7 March 2012
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 Andrew Browne, quoted in Prue Gibson, *The Rapture of Death*, Boccalatte, Sydney, 2010, p.116
- 4 Andrew Browne, email to the author, 14 March 2012
- 5 Andrew Browne, quoted in *Andrew Browne* [exhibition catalogue], Lister Calder Gallery, Perth, 2003 [unpag.]
- 6 Andrew Browne, quoted in Gibson, *op.cit.*, p.118
- 7 Andrew Browne, email to the author, 14 March 2012



UPPER

Untitled #1 (jump-cuts)

2012

Photographs on Canson Rag Photographique 310gsm
(edition of 5), 55 x 180cm

Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries

LOWER

Untitled #2 (jump-cuts)

2012

Photographs on Canson Rag Photographique 310gsm
(edition of 5), 55 x 180cm

Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries





UPPER

Untitled #3 (jump-cuts)

2012

Photographs on Canson Rag Photographique 310gsm

(edition of 5), 55 x 180cm

Collection of the artist

LOWER

Untitled #4 (jump-cuts)

2012

Photographs on Canson Rag Photographique 310gsm

(edition of 5), 55 x 180cm

Collection of the artist





UPPER LEFT

Untitled (Flare)

2005-7

Colour Photograph on Fuji Crystal Archive Paper

Edition 30, 40 x 40cm

Collection of the artist



UPPER RIGHT

Untitled (Forest and Splatter)

2003

Colour Photograph on Fuji Crystal Archive Paper

Edition 30, 40 x 40cm

Collection of the artist



LOWER

Untitled (Landscape)

2003

Colour Photograph on Fuji Crystal Archive Paper

Edition 30, 40 x 40cm

Collection of the artist

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

27

Horizon

2000

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Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale

Tree and Illumination at Dusk

2002

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Private collection

Seek Alternative Route #2

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Oil on linen, 137.5 x 396.5cm
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Andrew Browne

Horizon

26 May to 22 July 2012

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FREE ENTRY

Cover:

Horizon

2000

Oil on linen, 81.3 x 1150cm (4 panels)

Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale

Andrew Browne appears courtesy of Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney, and Lister Gallery, Perth



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VICTORIA**



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