The Twilight Realm of Andrew Browne

Artwork by Andrew Browne
Interview and Text by Inga Walton

In a career encompassing over twenty solo exhibitions since 1981, Andrew Browne has achieved considerable renown for his compelling exploration of the ever-present tension between the built-up, urban environment and the natural one. In many ways this thematic construct only serves to amplify his most abiding preoccupation: the mutable and intangible nature of darkness and light, shadow and luminosity, the perceptible and the void.

'It's important to point out that the effect of, and depiction of light, is what links so much of my work—from the spots of light, lights emerging over horizons of the earlier work, through the illuminated architectural forms and onto the more recent images of foliage and detritus caught in the flash of the camera ...', Browne emphasises. 'I have been drawn to the depiction of light in part for its tendency to both illuminate the nocturne, but also the way it abstracts forms—calibration and placement are dependent on the specifics of the composition and the emphasis I want to put on certain parts of a picture. At times the use is more non-objective, at others quite realistic—once again this is at the service of particular themes I am exploring, whether I want to veer toward the depiction of observed phenomena or perhaps invention; the rest is up to the viewer to reflect upon ...'

The unpredictable and often disconcerting quality of light is at one with Browne's *œuvre*, where the inter-relation between photography and painting is pronounced. His fidelity to the initial site of inspiration, and obsessive attention to detail, results in paintings of often unnerving accuracy and unsettling overtones. 'The actual "texture" of photography has always interested me and is evident in the surface I try to get to with the paintings—something I am probably neurotic about!' he admits. 'Also, photography is basically a short-hand for me, a thumb-nail sketch. I don't particularly like the way I draw, or the result of my drawing, and have always been attracted to the distancing and objective quality you get with photography. I'm very critical of my technique, and most of the time don't consider it as fully "there" so I usually fiddle with edges, tone, and contrasts for days ...' Browne's paintings are informed by his peripatetic travels, and sometimes involve revisiting particular places captured earlier. 'I am always looking for images and ideas (for me, they are the same thing), trying to "recognise" something that may be useful—that may be hiding in plain sight', he explains. 'I have thousands of shots stored on my computer ... plus a lot from the pre-digital era. Only a handful ever make the grade as far as being the basis for paintings. When the photo becomes the basic composition for a painting, it often takes a while before I settle on particular images or sources.'

Although Browne's style is often described as 'photo-realistic', the connection is more fluid in practice. 'My direct use of photos as the basis for paintings really emerged in the early 1990s—the work dealing with silhouetted trees, headlights, horizon lines—all transpired via photography', he relates. 'It is important to point out that there is always a degree of abstraction and manipulation from the source photos before they become a model for the paintings. And even then, the final form always mutates.' The coalescing disciplines continue to inform each other. 'I have made and exhibited photos or photographically-based works such as etchings since the beginning of my practice in the early 1980s. Last year (2008) I made a series of photopolymer photogravures, *Seven Apparitions,* from accumulated images that had previously been used as the basis for a number of paintings. These prints kind of summed up the previous few years' work, yet also functioned as a distinct group of "characters" that both inhabit and emerge out of their source material ... blurring the line between an objective reality and suggestive fictions', he reflects. 'The surface quality you get with this type of printing (in effect photo-etching) is really appealing—rich velvety blacks and great tonal subtlety—something I am also after in my paintings.'

Browne views his output over the last decade as occupying two definable phases. 'From the mid-to-late 1990s until around 2003 I was pretty focused on the more architectural and built landscape images, the result of immersing myself in formal issues of picture-making, dealing with simple and geometric forms and the banality of the urban environment', he comments. 'Out of this I hoped to find a simple poetic image that was both "observation" and "feeling", "sight" and "emotion"—the old binary thing.' Anonymous exteriors were paired with what Browne refers to as, 'stark, cold, denuded trees as companions' in works like *Illuminated Branches & Plaza* (2004). 'That was taken from some shots I did in Basel, Switzerland, of the town square—a clash between the evocative foliage and the banal, even brutal architecture ...', Browne recalls. 'This brings up the issue of the tension you mentioned—it is interesting to me on a couple of levels: firstly the formal possibilities it creates of composition and juxtaposition, and then the sense of the way we attempt to reconcile these different relationships to the world, for better or worse; after that, it is an intuitive response to stimuli ...'

The neo-gothic *Light Effect #2 – December '02* (2003) was taken in Paris: '... the cold winter light arcing over buildings and the heavy grey clouds, the dark vertical form is part of a window frame but could be read as a pole.' The most identifiable street-scape, *City At Night (N.Y '97)* (2003), took some years to resolve, as Browne sought to avoid the obvious visual clichés. 'It was from a big group of New York photos, and became a painting when I realised the juxtaposition between the skyscrapers and the single slender tree might be interesting to attempt—on both a poetic and formal level. I was also interested in the dark bluish light common to dusk and big cities ...', he remembers. The *Outside – Watching* works (2004–05) suggest surveillance, intrusion, and the lone observer within a tightly confined setting, or as Browne puts it, they 'are an attempt at a spooky sense of someone hovering near illuminated windows at night ...' Several of his works seem to resemble a film story-board, the 'scene' abruptly contained by the canvas, an inference Browne acknowledges: 'The idea that the paintings read as parts of a broader narrative, as in cinema, has been mentioned a number of times, so that seems to be how a lot of people interpret them. The influence of film
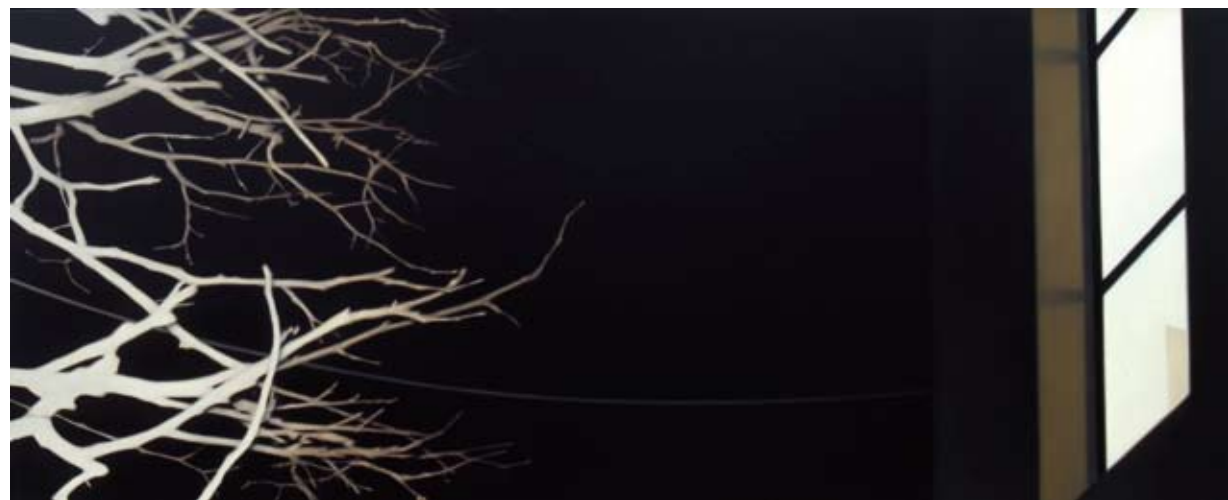

Illuminated Branches & Plaza (2004), oil on linen, 183 x 183 cm (Private Collection, Melbourne)

City At Night (NY '97) (2003), oil on linen, 91.5 x 244 cm (Private Collection, Perth)

Light Effect #2 – December '02 (2003), oil on linen, 152.5 x 152.5 cm (Private Collection, Sydney)

Outside – Watching (2004), oil on linen, 122 x 300 cm (Private Collection, Sydney)

Untitled #6 (2005), oil on linen, 183 x 183 cm (Private Collection, Perth)

Fitzroy #2 – Lookin' Out My Backdoor (2004), oil on linen, 183 x 183 cm (Private Collection, Melbourne)

Exit – Morning (2003), oil on linen, 153 x 153 cm (Private Collection, Perth)

Untitled (2003), oil on linen, 100 x 100 cm (Private Collection, Perth)

Untitled #1 (2007), oil on linen, 240 x 179 cm (Private Collection, Melbourne)

Untitled #3 (2007), oil on linen, 240 x 179 cm (Private Collection, Melbourne)

Melbourne Nocturne (2005), oil on linen, 101 x 101 cm (Private Collection, Melbourne)

and advertising encourages us all to consider single images this way, to fill in the blanks, to create the story ... also, as the paintings do show the influence of photography, I suspect that people are comfortable placing them within the cinematic context ...'

Tree structures with long, anthropomorphic branches probing into the undefined night like apparitions began to dominate Browne's vision. 'The focus on foliage and the isolated trees were a reaction to what I felt had been an end-point to the previous group; the more architectural images had become very minimal and had, I felt, played themselves out for the moment', he says. 'The natural forms offered a re-immersion in some complexity of image, and an ability to leverage a more metaphoric or poetic quality into the work. The newer paintings deal formally with objects caught by the flash of artificial or natural light—they are "frozen" if you like; emotionally and psychologically, there has been a definite change in the timbre of the work ...' An unearthly, almost 'fairytale' quality pervades, suggesting an artistic *mise en scène* open to the mysterious and illusory, one which explores the divergent possibilities associated with a solitary presence and an ominous expanse. 'I have continued to infuse an uneasy and ambiguous presence into these new works, one that conjures up highly suggestive forms derived from both direct observation and more fanciful manipulation', Browne concurs. 'Though they ostensibly represent tangles of foliage, detritus, trees and fabric, look again and the visage of something sinister emerges—ghostly and spectral. Each of these pictures then treads this line between describing found, seemingly banal forms and pursuing a much more ambiguous and complex character ...'

Isolation, remoteness and a latent melancholy seem to dominate many of Browne's vistas, even when the light is brighter, or warmer, the distance remains. 'I guess it's simply my "sensibility". I like the more cool, denuded type of formation, both on a formal level, but also in a metaphorical way. Though I try to avoid loading my pictures with "commentary", I suspect that my broader interest in the world and the multi-level relationships within it have an influence on what I am attracted to ...', he offers. As the

eerie night gives way to the first tremulous moments of daybreak there is no lingering sense of unease. *Untitled* (2003) beckons the viewer into the gauzy twilight. 'A study of the effect of light-glare and the edge of a band of clouds, with a slightly romantic use of cropped tree forms …', he comments. *Exit – Morning* (2003) has the unfocused look of objects fleetingly glimpsed in the periphery. 'It relates to a series of photos and paintings that were based on signage and travel through the landscape—this one from a trip to Canberra, hence the cool wintry light and the foggy quality of a certain time of the year there …', Browne recollects. 'I was very interested in the placement of large man-made forms such as billboards, buildings, and pylons in the landscape at that time and found the jarring contrasts of some interest …'

Browne's sources of inspiration are diverse and culturally omnivorous: 'I am very broad in my taste, and when I travel it is always to look at exhibitions and particular artists in depth. For instance, I am especially attracted to the reserved sensibility and highly stylized images of Japanese screen painting. One of my favorite artworks is an Edo period screen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Kanō Sansetsu [1589–1651] called *The Old Plum* [c.1645]. I also look at Japanese prints for the design and abstraction—they continue to seem radical to me.' References from European artistic traditions are perhaps more readily identifiable in Browne's approach: 'Images and themes emerge both from paying full attention, and adopting a more docile, relaxed response via observation and contemplation. The painting *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* [1819-20] by Casper David Friedrich [1774–1840] has been identified as a touch-stone for a number of my works and I generally concur …', he notes. 'These days I actually try to avoid some artists or influences that I feel are too close to what I do—I think as an artist develops, their own history and output takes on a greater role as an influence … you are able to dip back into your own past and find ideas and solutions that may have been temporarily discarded …'

Browne is deeply attuned to the notion of selective vision, how we as individuals perceive, order, and ultimately make sense of our surroundings. 'Each period of my work seems to be prompted by quite intuitive responses, and then groups of images and an implied relationship seems to firm up, later leading to the paintings and what could be termed a series …', he posits. 'Having said that, it is generally the case that having exhausted the specifics of a place or image, I am waiting for new forms, resonances, symbols or relationships to show themselves … There have been shifts in my work every several years, and there is a major one percolating at the moment! I don't know where the work is going, but I am enjoying watching what happens, and trying to be less controlling, less logical, once again trusting in the intuition', Browne says. 'Some artists shift maybe once or twice within their career, some trademark one particular thing and polish it, some range widely, and some have a nice steady progression that helps to comfort everybody!', he quips. 'Personally I like to move the work along—the imagery and ideas all come from observation of the world, the phenomena of light, formal structures in the landscape and within nature. I encounter them, get interested and make images, and I trust that when my work is laid out in a line with all the little byways and diversions it will have its own internal logic.'

As Browne continues to ruminate on such timeless and universally intelligible themes, no doubt his audience will be drawn to the evocative results—fellow wanderers towards an incandescent source.