

BRIONY ANDERSON

Text by Katie Baker, May 2010

Written for exhibition for *Briony Anderson* curated by Meredith Gunderson June 2010

We look to the background for information, to explain and place things in order. Background denotes our social class and standing, encompasses our education and experience. It is the circumstances that lead up to something and what puts ourselves and others in context. Yet it is also that which by definition is furthest from us, unobtrusive, inconspicuous, an accompaniment to something else. A distant blur, a low level hum, the setting for other things.

Briony Anderson's latest series of paintings is an investigation of the background, explicitly landscape as background. Evolving from a previous body of work, which took the portraits of artist Henry Raeburn and omitted the figures from their landscape backdrops, Anderson continues this exploration with work that responds to the landscape backdrops of further eighteenth and nineteenth century portraiture.

In Anderson's re-workings of the portraits, the original landscape has become unrecognisable. Identifying features have been removed and the result is an expressive series of oil paintings detached and unidentifiable from their source. Yet these are not abstract paintings- somewhere, however indistinct, is brought into gradual being and a sense of location is anchored by details that slowly reveal themselves upon looking. Loose, hurried brushwork and dark, muted colours suggest rather than depict remote places with brooding skies and dark horizons. An encounter with some wild and lonely space in all its romantic glory appears to be being dramatically evoked.

Yet far from being pictures of a space in time, these are works that hover disconcertingly between past and present, absence and presence. Without any easily identifiable features the work is destabilized, throwing the viewer into uncertainty. These are evocative and beautiful paintings, but their deliberately self-conscious relationship with other works refuses to allow an uncomplicated encounter with that aesthetic experience. Any attachment to Turner-esque romantic myths of art, a desire for strapped-to-the-mast 'painting from nature', is exposed and refused. These are not paintings about the act of observation, but the act of looking, in which the viewer is firmly implicated.

The portraiture these works draw on is from a period on the brink of landscape's establishment as a genre. Art history tradition would have it that landscape emerged from the margins of other work, in an ahistorical process summed up by Charles Harrison thus-"landscape stands for a space in which history disappears". Anderson's paintings challenge this refusal of history in their reinvestigation of landscape's cultural significance.

Landscape is reframed as a *way* of seeing, in which its darker side- the proprietary relations and those whom it denies and excludes- must be repressed. The evacuation of the figure in Anderson's work echoes the displacement in figure-ground relations in the development of landscape painting, but does so knowingly, leaving the viewer haunted by its spectre. Knowing that there has been a figure removed, we cannot view these pieces without feeling a deprivation. The paintings reverberate with a pervasive melancholy, becoming defined by what is not there as much as what is. Just as the strokes of Rauschenberg's eraser on de Kooning's drawing performed a self-contradictory act of negation and affirmation, so too does the removal of the figure here act as both a deletion and assertion of their presence. Viewing the paintings we are profoundly aware of what is lacking and the landscapes are a place of unease and uncertainty, left indistinct and troubled by this lacuna and what stalks its edges.

The work exposes our assumed identity as viewer- draws attention to the form of imaginary activity and identity that the landscape imposes on the viewer. Several of the works offer further resistance to our encounter with them, with frames painted plainly onto their surface. Dark oval windows and crude white rectangles cut across the landscapes, meaning the work explicitly becomes something that we must see through something else. An illusion of deep space is refused. The view is interrupted and broken, and recedes away from us, at times appearing almost on the verge of being swallowed up by the dark space at its edges. The naming of the work continues this challenge to our encounter. Titles like "A Repeated Act of Viewing" and "A Landscape Would Have Been Nice" confront us with the implication of viewing as an act. Anderson's fragments of landscapes explore their own existence as a set, a device and an act of self-conscious repetition, through the very process of their creation. These paintings ask us to see that what is being framed here is not simply the view, but ourselves as viewers called forth and demanded by the landscape in order to *make* the landscape. We are caught in the act of looking.