

Jason Benjamin

As you love... I love

15 August – 13 September 2017

The hawk, wings outstretched, caught in its motion, completes the landscape, and calls the eye. The dirt road leads to the horizon, the dead trees reach heavenwards: all of them point urgently beyond the world we see around us, they serve as tokens, they shape these paintings, they define them, and bear witness to the long pilgrimage journey of the artist who made them, Jason Benjamin, a man seeking to peer beyond the veils and screens of our sensory surrounds. This quest has been under way for years, and is very much in evidence in Benjamin's earlier exhibitions, and in his writings: it moves towards its fulfilment at last here, by the simple expedient of confessing itself – these are paintings that take the patterns and the forms of nature as their subject, that dwell on texture and on the play of light, yet see in them signs of order and meaning beyond our senses, beyond the picture's frame. Benjamin paints away from himself, he paints scenes and objects, he depicts them with a dedicated, studious eye – and yet each one of these depictions is a way-stage on his path towards balance, freedom, self-mastery, each is a progress through a dark vale of silence, abandonment and doubt towards more illuminated terrain.

What can we, as spectators in this theatre, viewers of these works, make with them, take away from them, give to them? What is the exchange this art, so wrapped up in its own processes of discovery and transformation, wishes to make? Benjamin knows himself to be a seeker: he says as much, repeatedly: he surrenders himself to the process of making images, he takes himself back, he concentrates his forces, he lets himself go. Here he is discussing the sequence of works in this exhibition, and his surrender to the act of unconscious painting, of painting as meditation. "All have been worked, edited, abandoned, re-imagined quite extensively." This seems an exceptionally revealing guide to these paintings, to the struggle to make them and to the overcoming they represent: they are works that have travelled through various states of evolution, they have become something their maker half-glimpsed but could not see in his first intention, they have passed through the personality of the painter and been influenced by forces set further back in the world: they are no longer what they were first designed to be. There are traces of this change of state in the successive items of the Australian Psalms series, the sequence that forms the central element in this exhibition. The first "psalm" is, on the face of things, a standard bush landscape, red soil, dry spinifex grass, three parched trees, a hawk in the air, mulga in the distance: all the standard features of the dispassionately recorded outback vista, each one present and correct, each recorded with appropriate precision and finesse – but there is a further element in the picture: light, light from off stage, slanting from above in a sharp diagonal, picking out the dust in the air, lending a tension and a splendour to the scene. So it is, in different ways, with each one of these psalms in paint – works that insistently recall the biblical psalmist's declaration – "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills." In the fourth work of the series, a single tree leans brokenly to the right while a diffuse glow from the lower left streams into the image from behind clouds; in the two dusk scenes in the sequence, light's gleam from beyond the horizon's line irradiates the world; in the two most complex works in the sequence, Australian Psalm 5 and the piece titled One True Vine, the light is at once everywhere and nowhere.

This pair of canvases are well considered together, as the completion of the journey Benjamin has embarked on and reached for. In them, light and the natural realm that light illuminates and enlivens stand in balance, the picture is presented with an unemphatic perspective, the whole bush is revealed, and stands in peace. No one view is the right view, no one element is foregrounded, all – sky, birds hovering in flight, the tree trunks, shadows, clouds – all compose themselves into an order that seemed beyond reach in the earlier works. These paintings are the fruits of a long ordeal Benjamin refers to in his exhibition notes, in which he speaks with self-baring candor of the need to bend the knee for

“acceptance from God or Nature or whatever describes for people the force underpinning our hearts and minds’ compass.” They are much more than mere landscapes, just as the accompanying suite of still life paintings are more than dead nature captured in paint. They bear the impress of an artist caught in a struggle, and using his artistry to achieve victories of the spirit. The paintings may have the deceptive air of mere bush studies, but they are best conceived as mirrors, in which Benjamin discloses his reflected self – all he contends against and all he wishes for, the bleak, blasted, harsh contours of the inland irradiated by the grace and loveliness of the inland’s light, that light, at once sober and dispassionate, that travelers in both geographical and psychological wildernesses know very well, for it is the clue to the hidden answers we dream of to every question in the world.

Nicolas Rothwell - 2017