

PENNY BOVELL

TWO IMAGES

GODDARD DE FIDDES GALLERY

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No thing

All that was neither a city, nor a church, nor a river, nor colour, nor light, nor shadow: it was reverie. For a long time, I remained motionless, letting myself be penetrated gently by this unspeakable ensemble, by the serenity of the sky and the melancholy of the moment. I do not know what was going on in my mind, and I could not express it; it was one of those ineffable moments when one feels something in himself which is going to sleep and something which is awakening [1].

Victor Hugo

Two images, one of a bright summers day with a cerulean blue sky and luminous cloud formations that send shafts of light projecting optimistically upward. The other is of an overcast day, with a sky of deep grey and a cloud mass that hides the sun; in contrast patches of light yellow hues burst out from behind the massed cloud and project heraldic rays down onto the sea.

One can often see these sort of scenes: driving in the car or while taking a walk along the beach; but one also encounters many such images in the media. The billboard for Karrinyup Shopping Centre is an example, the advertisement depicted a blue sky with cumulous cloud and a slogan that stretched across the image: "shopping heaven - without the unpleasant dying bit". Its aim was seductive, to trigger the insatiable desire to shop. In the West Australian newspaper (August 14 1999) a panoramic apocalyptic vision accompanied the headlines "Shadow of death: a small town's heavy burden" and reported on male suicide in country towns. The purpose of this image was to maximise the tragedy of loss. Circling around the experiences of looking at the real and the real through the media it seemed appropriate, while continuing to work with the meanings inherent in imaging the sky, that one respond to these typical observations.

The two sky types express very different moods with roots that can be traced back in art history and are typical of the romantic painters Turner's and Constable. Their sky's represented distinctly different approaches to the Sublime, where Turner vistas were ecstatic experiences of tumultuous weather, Constable sought the local and more comfortable details of summery afternoon skies.

This exhibition entails the consideration of four things: the sky, loss, desire and painting (both its process and history). The connection between them is perhaps not so obtuse because as a subject in art the sky has been metaphorically imbued with meaning of loss (death or absence) and desire. Often the difference between the ideas seems indistinguishable, both involve a sense of longing and suffering, but the sky offers a third potential that is equally related to the above concepts and is equally upheld within art traditions: change offers a deflection from the tragedy they involve and the sky is constantly changing. Marx and Nietzsche both offered insights into these crucial ideas. Marx suggested that through revolution (praxis) change could be controlled, or at least it provided a social space that did not subject the individual to neverending

cycles. With Nietzsche the concern was not so much with control, it was in the belief 'that Western decadence could be overcome only through a non-rational, self-risking immersion in change' [2]. These philosopher's are pointing to what it is to be human - and importantly as Jonathan Dollimore suggests the idea of change is appropriated 'into the service of life' rather than 'the vehicle of death' [3].

Depicting the sky seems almost superfluous against real experience, however a subject can find a certain clarity through praxis (in this case the practice of painting) and one way to solve the difficulties of mimesis inherent in depiction is to circumnavigate it by considering the process of painting to be part of the content. It is the task of dealing with an aesthetic, of obsessing over a subject or particular idea, or image, that conjurs and opens up meaning for artists. Painting is a procedure that involves a constantly changing knowledge base, it is imbued with space and time and a specific sort of imagination, an aesthetic that is held in the minuteness of layering and marking until an image eventually forms. To specifically convey the notion of loss (death) or desire as concepts becomes more a case of finding the sensory or poetic rather than using an explicit language such as the slogans utilised in the media images I've quoted; nevertheless in these media images the text does not work to subjugate the visual with its sky types carefully chosen for specific effect - in this case uplifting and foreboding, the sky becomes a sign.

In juxtaposing an image of ascendance against one of descent the attempt is to create a space that allows the viewer to reflect on the relationship between two concepts. Concepts that have strong spiritual ties and have been presented before as religious stories of transcendence and apocalypse. Oscar Wilde on the other hand insisted that the romantic artists taught us to see the sky through the mediums of poetry and painting, he insisted fogs and sunsets were invented by artists who surpassed nature in the depiction of beauty [4]. Eventually such attempts became so embedded with nostalgia that the equation between sky and meanings such as loss and desire became disempowered. Nevertheless it is worth reassessing this dilemma in order to reaffirm the positive engagement one can have with the Fine Arts and the enigma that individual images may hold.

Making art enables the intangible to be realised. In accepting that one's experiences are often complex and changable it has been useful for me to choose a subject and process that are

equally insubstantial. However the repetitive process of painting an image over and over again begs the question of difference - the different effects in these paintings are on the one hand extremely conscious, but they are also created by an unsteady hand, inconsistent choices of colour or brushstroke, even a wandering mind. These small things counter the idea of neverending cycles and actions. Small scale is set against the consequences of large scale. Naturalistic painting is set along side abstraction and the difference between looking at an image or being in it. With repetition what happens to the meaning of things? Is a mantra conceived, or an idea annihilated?

The late Peter Fuller asserted of certain mechanisms within our modern age that a 'general anaesthesia' encroaches upon the spirit of things. In elaborating upon the purpose of aesthetics he summarised that since the industrial Revolution the Western world embraced the idea of tradition (codes that establish meaning) by relinquishing it [5]. This has been noted before by Ruskin and whether or not this is the case, or whether such a process is critical is beside the point. What I found to be useful in the story he told was that it reintroduced the notion of hope (in art) against the idea of the void. I could shift the mass of grey cloud toward the right, a small patch of blue growing larger to change the apocalyptic concept to a peaceful and softly hued void, absent of representational configuration. And what method could apply to the imaging of a blue sky? Should I make the clouds disappear to leave an infinite blue or change the image from a naturalistic view to one of solid and playful forms that teases us about reality?

You can recover from grief by desiring material things, but such gain serves no useful purpose in the end; which returns me to the act of painting. Perhaps it is in the process of 'working out' and in the slow and subtle shifts in activity or ways of seeing things that changes the meaning of one's life. More, it is the space between extremes, of ideas (such as the two examples given) that allows for the existence of other dimensions, dimensions that do not necessarily need to be fixed or articulated.

Penny Bovell

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G. Bachelard: *The Poetics of Reverie*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1971, p12. [1]

J. Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, pxxix. [2]

Ibid pxxix. [3]

J. Thorne, "Landscape and Clouds", *Geographical Magazine*, vol. 51 1979, p495-499. [4]

P. Fuller, *Aesthetics After Modernism*, Writers and Readers, London, 1983, p12. [5]



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