



WILLIAM BREEN

PAINTER OF LIGHT

SASHA GRISHIN looks at the career of a Melbourne painter whose landscapes embody shifting moods and fugitive sensations.

At thirty-eight, Will Breen is one of the most successful young figurative artists working in Melbourne today. His moody, unpopulated urbanscapes and landscapes are primarily studies in light on surfaces and explore formal geometric structures. Although the subject matter in his work is instantly recognisable, it seems to imply a deeper reality where feelings of nostalgia and of the uncanny meet.

Raised in a family of academics — his father a historian and his American-born mother a teacher — he was born in the Heidelberg area of Melbourne with its historic connotations of the so-called Heidelberg School and of the later expressionists associated with the Heide circle. Breen was drawn to art in the final years of his high school studies, where at the Marcellin College at Bulleen the newly appointed art teacher, Anita Ellis, opened his eyes to art, and painting quickly became his life's obsession. From the outset he was particularly attracted to the work of Jeffrey Smart, which appealed to him for its starkness, a surreal quality which suggested urban alienation, while the imagery itself was set within an urban environment which remained very familiar. The play between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the seen reality and the felt reality became an important preoccupation in his thinking.

He moved straight from school to the Victorian College of the Arts in 1990, when he was aged

only seventeen, and he describes himself as feeling 'quite young' within the arts school. For a very young person, it was even more remarkable that he became a non-conformist and in some ways his art was out of step with the prevailing fashion at school for installation art. However, the VCA with Gareth Sansom at its helm was an institution which adopted a broad church approach and Breen's adherence to figurative painting was more than tolerated. In fact, on graduation, he was awarded the Christopher James Blyth Memorial Prize. In his work at the time he was attracted to deserted roads and railway stations for his subject matter, while the purpose of his art remained the desire to paint light and the attempt to capture its transient nature. Artists who particularly attracted him at the time included Richard Diebenkorn with his wonderful sense of tight formal structure and subtle colour.

Following art school he found a studio on the fifth floor in Flinders Street in the city, while he supported himself working as one of the army of assistants in John Young's studio. He found it difficult initially to break into the commercial art gallery scene. In 1996, he participated in a group exhibition in the Stripp Gallery in Fitzroy and the following year the charismatic Bruce Pollard invited him to hold a solo exhibition at the well-respected Pinacotheca Gallery. By 2001, Will Breen had joined the Flinders Lane Gallery and for the past decade has supported himself as a full-time painter.



Opposite: William Breen, *Christmas Hills*, 2010, oil on linen, 92 x 214cm.

Top: William Breen, *Panton Hill*, 2010, oil on linen, 92 x 214cm.

Above: William Breen, *Simpson Road*, 2010, oil on linen, 76 x 102cm.



Although he established an early reputation as a painter of urban streetscapes with deserted shop facades and unadorned city walls bathed in light, the landscape has been an equally important subject in his art. He recently observed “the landscape is more organic, emotive, there is more passion in it and more of a mood about it, with a sense of urgency in recording it ... It is quite a different way of working compared with the urban settings — it is more fluid, not the stop and start process of the urban paintings and it usually means working on smaller canvases.”

Breen is primarily an artist with a Romantic sensibility with an endless fascination with his own response to the surrounding world. He is drawn to images which he feels transcend an everyday reality and which possess the sense of the sublime. He usually works from photographs that he has taken which become a diary-like device and which, once projected onto the canvas, serve as an aide-mémoire for quickly working out a composition and plotting the details. Whereas many artists try to divorce themselves from the photographic properties and disguise their use of photographic elements, for Breen photographs are not only a point of departure, but also hint at a surface which he tries to simulate in his paintings. “I like the look of the photographs with their flatness of surface. In my paintings I try to achieve a photograph-like surface, I aspire to that aesthetic, with a softness and essentially an elimination of surface brushstrokes.” At the same time, his paintings are not exercises in photorealism, they have undeniably a painted surface which is moody and atmospheric.

As a conscious device, Breen excludes figures from his paintings. He creates urban and landscape spaces which you, as a spectator, are invited to enter, occupy and inhabit in your imagination. They are essentially meditative works where you encounter visual clues that act as emotional and spiritual triggers. There is often a surreal stillness in his work, as if time has deliberately been slowed down as in a Bill Viola installation, and within this soft focus stillness we catch a glimpse of some sort of deeper reality. In his most recent paintings, which are also amongst his best, the palette has grown increasingly monochromatic as landscape forms and the towering cloud masses seem to merge and melt into one another or alternatively, all is kissed and embraced by a misty veil.

Represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne. □

Top: William Breen, *Four Winds*, 2010, oil on linen, 76 x 102cm.

Above: William Breen, *Napoleon Hill*, 2010, oil on linen, 102 x 138cm.