

## ART &amp; DESIGN

## ROMANTICISM

# Stirring a sleeping beauty

BY GABRIELLA COSLOVICH

WITH its taint of superficiality and triteness, beauty has been unfashionable in the art world — unless tempered by a heavy dose of irony and self-knowing. The “concept” has been king and brave are the artists who have favoured beauty and aesthetics over a more theoretical approach.

But a new book on contemporary Australian art reclaims a space for beauty — specifically romanticism. Simon Gregg, the dynamic curator of the Gippsland Art Gallery, makes a bold assertion in his debut book, *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, arguing that romanticism, an ideal that originated in the late 18th century as a reaction against the rationalism and order of the Enlightenment, has been flourishing in Australia

during the past 10 years. Characterised by art works that were unapologetically beautiful, romanticism valued emotion and intuition over reasoning and intellect. It was typified by artists such as German painter Caspar David Friedrich and England's Joseph Turner, masters of the brooding, vaporous landscape.

But it fell out of favour in the cool, irony-laden, post-modern era — unaided by the fact that romanticism was readily confused with that prosaic adjective “romantic”, referring to all things saccharine and sentimental, to Hallmark cards and candle-lit dinners.

Romanticism, on the other hand, was anything but sentimental — it could be surreal and sinister too, as anyone familiar with the paintings of those other romantic greats, Francisco de Goya

and Eugene Delacroix, would know. “For much of the 20th century, artists were afraid to make art that was beautiful ... and it's come back in a big way and quite instinctively, not consciously,” Gregg says.

He sees the echoes of romanticism in the stylistically diverse works of many contemporary Australian artists, 36 of whom he has surveyed in his book. He sees it in the febrile night scenes and moody skies of photographer Bill Henson. In the surreal landscapes of Louise Hearman, painter of

bizarre, supernatural compositions with disembodied heads, spooky children, grotesque animals and ghostly figures. He sees it in the gothic photographs of Jane Burton, her images of dark, decrepit houses and sensual, suggestive nudes, silhouetted against gauzy drapes. And in the atmospheric, ethereal canvases of Chris Langlois, William Breen and Greg Wood, which evoke the play of light, cloud and fog.

He even sees it in the cement casts of everyday objects by Susan Milne — whose sculptures of toast-

ers, food processors and portable TVs he describes as “future ruins” or “fossilised totems”.

“What all these artists bring to their work is ... a search for truth and beauty,” he says.

The romantic search for meaning ranged into the mystic and spiritual, communicated through paintings of the natural environment. A contemporary example is Melbourne artist Kathryn Ryan, known for her meditative and unashamedly beautiful paintings of trees. Ryan grew up on a dairy farm





From left, *Deep in the Woods* by Tony Lloyd, *Untitled* by Louise Hearman and *Panmure Cypress* by Kathryn Ryan bring emotion and intuition into the artistic framework. They are among the works featured in *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*.

near Warrnambool, one of 10 children in a Catholic family. For her, the land has always been imbued with a strong sense of spirituality, which she reflects in her paintings.

No longer a practising Catholic, art has become her substitute for religion, fulfilling her need for "ritual, substance, consistency".

Some of the artists featured in Gregg's book, however, were reluctant to be labelled "romantic", not wanting their work to be reduced to one idea. In some ways, their resistance is true to the romantic spirit,

which favoured the primacy of the individual. Romantics were lone wolves rather than pack animals.

Among those who embraced the term "romantic" is Melbourne painter Tony Lloyd, whose work *Eternity*, graces the cover of Gregg's book. Lloyd believes that a renewed attention on beauty and romanticism is overdue.

"You have not been allowed to talk about art in terms of the romantic for the last 20 years, certainly not in academic circles," Lloyd says. "You certainly weren't

allowed to talk about the beauty of art, that was my experience at university, and I think what was lost in that academic dismissal of the romantic is that people forgot how to talk about beauty in art.

"In most of the discourses on art, it seemed that beauty could only be used in an ironic and knowingly post-modern way ... that didn't stop me from wanting to paint the sort of paintings that I wanted to make but I did wish that there was more writing about the sort of art that I was making."

Lloyd's oil paintings, with their slick surfaces and blurred edges, are dangerously alluring. His dark highways, bordered by shadows of towering trees, and his menacing mountain peaks draw you in — you want to drive down that highway, climb those mountains, despite, or even because of, the risk. Lloyd and Gregg were in the same year at university, both studying painting.

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But while Lloyd persisted, university killed Gregg's desire to paint.

"My own art practice was never remotely romantic," he says. "Perhaps because romanticism was such a huge thing for me, I was too afraid to make art about it, perhaps also because I knew it wasn't 'cool' and I was worried what people would think. So it's given me an enormous amount of respect and admiration for the artists in the book, because they've had the courage to be brave and individual in their art where I was not."

*New Romantics* is a vindication

of Gregg's stifled impulses. He is now championing the work of artists who persevered with their take on beauty. Five years in the making, Gregg's book was self-funded. Having spent about \$6000 for the rights to publish historical images, he's not expecting to make a profit from sales. But he was never motivated by money. He was driven, rather, by the desire to bring these artists to the attention of a broader public.

"This is a book I've wanted to pick up and buy for years and years, but it simply didn't exist. I had to go out and make it myself," Gregg says.

■ *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art* is published by Australian Scholarly Publishing. An exhibition based on the book will open at the Gippsland Art Gallery, in Sale, on November 19.

■ Chris Langlois's latest exhibition, *Another Place*, is at Gould Galleries, 270 Toorak Road, South Yarra, until November 12.