

But having established that Romantic art continues to be made in the contemporary world, it is no small effort to define what it actually is, how it arises, and what its effects are. Art historian William Vaughan describes a Romantic as one who strives 'to express the ideal in terms of the real.'¹

This often constitutes an attempt to express abstract ideas in figurative forms, hence the Romantic reliance upon symbolism in nature. For Charles Baudelaire, Romanticism was 'the latest expression of the beautiful';² while for Anita Brookner, writing after the fact in 2000, Romanticism 'is in essence a longing for what is missing, and an attempt to supply it.'³ Other efforts to define the movement are similarly vague, attempting more to describe a poetic sensibility common to the artists of this ilk, than to capture the core motivation behind their specific approach to art-making, subjects and intent. To do so would be fruitless. Romantic artists are bound by their boundlessness, and their aversion to any programme of ideas or school of thought.

Such characteristics combine to make Romanticism perhaps the most elusive of art movements. It is not descriptive of a style, and it cannot be defined by formal qualities alone. It is, instead, a feeling of humility in the face of sublime natural phenomena that infiltrates all the arts: painting, sculpture, poetry, architecture, music, dance and theatre. Romanticism is a way of thinking, an investigation into the other whose key outcome is a universal truth. It is the meeting point of the sublime and the domestic, and as such, both come under scrutiny in this study. Romanticism can and has been the visual outpouring of a society in terror, that has been subject to forces which it cannot understand. If artists are the barometer of a society, their engagement with the Romantic tells us much about our contemporary world. Their immersion into metaphysical 'otherworlds' is no mere act of escapism.

For Marcel Broodthaers, Romanticism was the quest for the Divine, writing: 'I conceive of the romantic disposition as a nostalgia for God.'⁴ Broodthaers' sentiments are borne out in the work of Romantic artists then and now, where the visual language is indebted to empirical observation, but where the intent is the search for the Divine and a deeper meaning. An essential difference between Romantic and non-Romantic

art is that the Romantic looks beyond perception. That is, it represents sensations that exist beyond the physical world. The work of contemporary Romantics is aligned with their antecedents primarily through a common concern to reveal such intangible sensation through the forms of the tangible, however commonplace that may be. Many, then and now, chose to work with the sublime as it occurs in nature, but a true Romantic can render the most disarming and simple object as transcendent.

For many Romantics, the pursuit of nostalgia is a universal goal. Contemporary artist Jason Cordero writes that in his work he seeks 'a nostalgia for a time when the world seemed stable and inexhaustible'.⁵ Common to all doctrines of the Romantic is an engagement with phenomena beyond our comprehension. For E.T.A. Hoffmann for instance, writing in 1810, Beethoven was 'ein rein romantischer ... Komponist' ('a purely Romantic composer'), because his music 'sets in motion the lever of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and awakens that infinite longing which is the essence of Romanticism'.⁶

Romanticism defies simple classification because it embodies ideas that are still viable and current today. In the original Romantic period, individuality or 'inner truth' came to be one of the key criteria by which work was valued. Whereas the preceding period of Neo-Classicism sought to relay universal ideas of balance, order and harmony, Romanticism sought to convey an authentic, individual experience of the artist.

The need to work from personal and individual experiences is no more apparent than in the work of today. The painted landscapes of Kathryn Ryan, for example, might spring to mind as being obviously Romantic (although the artist has never declared this of her work). Here we see either single trees or rows of trees lined up in symmetrical order, rendered in bare, melancholic tones, partly dissolved in hazes of semi-opaque atmosphere. If the meaning of Ryan's work went no further than this empirical, albeit beautiful evocation of a bucolic scene, we would be discussing it in terms of the Picturesque. But there is clearly something deeper at stake, manifest in the absence of life and the promotion of feeling over observation.



Kathryn RYAN, *Panmure Cypress*, 2005, oil on canvas, 61 x 84 cm

Her work, though outwardly secular, suggests an engagement with sensations that can only be described as spiritual. It is symptomatic of the approach of all the artists included in this survey; their work seeks to express the unreal in terms of the real, and the supernatural through the auspices of the natural.

It is fair to describe a particular kind of work produced in Australia today as 'Romantic' because Romanticism was not just an historical phenomenon; it is also a state of mind found in all periods and all cultures. Criticised often and openly by those who liken it to a form of emotional weakness or sentimentality,

Romanticism in fact represents the opposite. Baudelaire said that 'Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling.'⁷ Hence the difficulty in describing Romanticism which led its first historian to declare, in 1829, that it is 'just that which cannot be defined'.⁸

With definitions of Romanticism diverging from one theorist to the next, most contemporary writers find it easier to declare the movement as being beyond definition. Indeed, art historian Hugh Honour titled the opening chapter of his text *Romanticism* (1979) 'For Lack of a Better Name'. It is also worth noting that



John MORRIS, *Weight of Heaven*, 2004, oil on canvas, 142 x 148 cm

Romanticism is a constant part of the human emotional make-up, activated by reflection or longing or loss ... A small Caspar David Friedrich at the National Gallery landscape show called me back for one more look before I left Canberra last year, a single tree. I have painted landscapes with similar content for the same reason Friedrich would have undertaken the painting of that tree. The dilemma of cause and effect. Of being there and subjected to forces far greater than your collective self.⁶

If Romanticism is the expression of the divine within the secular – a new language of religion formed by trees, mountains and rivers – then John Morris is most certainly a part of it. 'Maybe [Romanticism] is a way to find god within each of us', he concludes. 'I hope this doesn't sound religious. I am not.'⁷

Spending time with the work of John Morris, Kathryn Ryan or any other artist in this chapter will instil in the viewer an appreciation for indirect, luminous light. Just what is it about this quality of light – sunrise, sunset, or midday light shrouded in fog or low-lying clouds – that facilitates a departure from the physical world and into the inner world of dreams?

In the previous chapter, we saw how light affects the way we read the content of an image, and how it changes its mood and creates atmosphere. Here, the blockage of direct natural light is like a shielding from the natural, or real world. With this opaque mask preventing our engagement with reality, we inevitably turn inward to explore our own psychology. In later chapters, we will see how the absence of any kind of natural light pitches us wholly into the world of the unreal, of dreams and nightmares. Here, amid the pastoral, however, we are still gliding over the surface of the

earth, aware of its shapes, sounds and scents, but we are beginning to see how it informs our own psychological make-up. Bachelard, in the domestic, taught us how our homes become containers for our hopes and dreams, but here, in the wilderness, the great expansive world of nature, our dreams are formed by the beauty and terror of the unrestrained world. For Kathryn Ryan, this world becomes the means of transporting us into a symbolic landscape of sensuality, religiosity and an amplified closeness with the earth.

'I have found a definition of the Beautiful', wrote Baudelaire. 'It is something intense and sad, something a little vague, leaving scope for conjecture.' Throughout his life, the French poet advocated a link between sadness and beauty, declaring that 'I can scarcely conceive ... a type of Beauty which has nothing to do with Sorrow.'⁸ Kathryn Ryan's marriage of beauty and sorrow is quintessentially Baudelairean. Her Neo-Romantic landscapes focus on isolated trees buried in the sediment of memory. The sweet ache of melancholy saturates a place of deep and abiding spirituality, where depictions of the pastoral Picturesque become distorted by perpetual longing. This is the 'weird melancholy' that Marcus Clarke wrote of, inherent in the Australian sublime: 'funereal, secret, stern.'⁹ Ryan renders her compelling canvases with a dark, brooding sky, and in so doing transforms the earth beyond anything recognisable – an otherworldly dreamscape of pastures immemorial.

Kathryn Ryan's vast, painted landscapes, often encompassing a single or a small cluster of trees within a field, are reminiscent of if not directly descended from English pastoral traditions of the early nineteenth century. A group of painters at this time, which included J.M.W. Turner in his early years, sought, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge has perhaps best described it, to 'give the charm of novelty to things of everyday.'¹⁰ Against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, European landscape artists were, for the large majority, considering and meditating on the landscape as an end in itself. It was a time when much of this landscape had first come under threat, due to radical social and industrial upheavals. To capture in oils – to sentimentalise and to Romanticise this landscape – was to proffer reasons on why it should be retained, enjoyed and to be allowed to become a source of spiritual fulfilment. It was John Glover who brought this English pastoral tradition of serenity and pleasantry to Australia, and it flourished in this country at a time when a deeper, Romantic engagement with the natural world was taking root throughout the European arts.

Similarly Kathryn Ryan seeks to capture landscape under threat, specifically, along the southwest coast of Victoria. The pines and pastures that are central to her practice can be found, in the cold light of reality, to be overshadowed by wind farms, cut down by graziers, and rendered barren and lifeless by a brutal drought. But in her work, the same motifs are illuminated



Kathryn RYAN, *The South West*, 2005, oil on canvas, 76 x 183 cm

by a mysterious, otherworldly light. Geography, here, is not important. She paints the anywhere and any-when; her subject is the transcendent. Where other landscapists describe the scenery and construct an elaborate facade, Ryan employs landscape as a window for accessing non-physical space. The land is a means rather than an end – a portal through which we observe a beyond, a phenomenon remote from the physical and empirical. Where Glover had envisaged 'a place of refuge and solace', Ryan's trees transcend mere Picturesque delight. They become spectral, like ghosts of once-real, mighty and proud oaks, dispensed to the ether by forces that they were powerless against. They are totemic beacons to an otherworld – not real, but spiritual, meditative, charged with the melancholic psychology of the author as much as depictions of the real. They characterise the Romantic tendency to transcend perception – to search for the divine and for deeper meaning in empirical observation.

Perhaps more than any other practising Australian artist, Kathryn Ryan defines the Romantic spirit as manifest in today's art, and emphasises its relevance. In her evocative works, we see how Romantic art does not merely make plaintive the mortality of life on planet Earth, but it imbues that mortality with enigma. The space described within is irrational and subjective, and suggestive of inner struggles and turmoils.

Ryan's practice brings to mind the words of Friedrich, when he said 'The artist should not merely paint what he sees in front of him, he ought to paint what he sees within himself. If he sees nothing within, he should not paint what he sees before him.'¹¹ Similarly, Ryan speaks of seeking out 'a quiet place, to hear from within'; of drawing on 'memories that have shaped me'.¹² In these haunting pastoral plains, she draws from the melancholia within to imbue what we see with a humanness, and a personality and charisma that are all her own.

It is impossible to gauge where the real landscape ends, and the landscape of the artist begins. The views upon which she has gazed as the subject of her work were no doubt inspiring. They were full of nature at its finest, at its most transcendental, its most ravishingly poetic. But Ryan has not simply recreated these views on canvas. What she has brought to the vision she first observed,

and invested of herself, has enabled her works to straddle the here and now and a world beyond. Where other artists present a landscape as a description of the Earth's skin, Ryan fathoms a window into another universe – a portal for transcendence. Her works speak enigmatically of distant lands, times and experiences. They evoke a sensation of the sublime defined by the ultimate perfection of earthly forms in heaven – a sensation of the sublime as a physical representation of the divine.

Ryan's plaintive paddocks are not about material or acquisition. She speaks of her work in terms of its relationship with nature, its connection to spirituality and with elemental forces.¹³ For her, painting is an attempt to bring about a closeness with the earth, the atmosphere, the grass and trees, and the physical experience of nature. While not explicitly so, this sense of divine interconnectedness lends a religiosity to her work that, like Friedrich's altarpiece of 1808, would enable it to sit comfortably within the confines of a church.

Raised as a Catholic in Western Victoria, Ryan readily admits to the influence of religion in her art practice, and emphasises the connection between Catholicism and the land:

I see a great deal of similarity between practising as an artist, being a farmer, and following some spiritual path. They all require a great deal of faith, belief, and stamina. Although I don't follow an organised religion, certain qualities remain: ritual, substance, consistency.¹⁴

Like Friedrich, Ryan paints landscapes that have very little to do with the real world, acting instead as a metaphor for the soul – a barometer of her emotional bearings. 'My work is about mysteriousness. It's about ambiguity, about finding harmony,' she says. The process of composing an artwork is, for Ryan, a personal journey that has little to do with the viewer admiring the finished work. 'I want to go to that deeper place. The spaces she depicts are ones that she knows intimately, but over time and with separation there comes a blurry nostalgia that also heightens the psychological import of the works. The dreamy pastures owe as much to the artist's remembrance



Kathryn RYAN, *Cattle Track*, 2005, oil on canvas, 112 x 183 cm

of them, as they do to reality. When she describes them, we sense that she is moving through her own mind as much as a physical space:

On the farm, it is all so familiar, my knowledge is intimate. I know how the paddocks look, their layout, rises and dips, the space between cypress trees, opening gates, climbing over fences and walking on dirt roads. The horizon is all around, clouds reach down to the ground and a veil of morning mist softens all edges. The loss of detail evokes a mood of mystery and ambiguity.

There is a sense of isolation, solitude, space, quietness and stillness, which is calming and comfortable. Totally surrounded by light, space, horizon and a quiet stillness, you are brought closer to yourself, there are no distractions, you are aware of your own presence.¹⁶

In her work *Cattle Track Hedges* (2003), Ryan invites us to immerse ourselves in a meditative landscape drawn from paddocks near Warrambool. This is the Western District of Victoria, where Ryan spent her childhood on a farm. Three-fifths of the picture plane is given to a grey, empty atmosphere, which bleeds downward into the groupings of cypress trees and open, sweeping fields. An atmosphere of cold, damp mist pervades the whole picture, infiltrating and overwhelming all that is depicted within, until it is saturated in its entirety with a misty, melancholic longing.

Of central importance to this work is the use of symmetry, just as it was for Friedrich's work. The employment of symmetry – the equal spacing of the equally massed groups of oaks – speaks of an underlying order of things. This helps to lift the work beyond mere evocation to Kant's depiction of the 'mathematical' sublime, where the universe is in perfect harmony. While the sublime opposes ideals of balance and harmony as they relate to classical beauty, in favour of expressions of excess, boundless forms,



Kathryn RYAN, *Cattle Track Hedges*, 2003, oil on canvas, 76 x 183 cm

contradictory concepts and an engagement with the infinite, the employment of symmetry is one of the key touchstones of Romanticism. We see the use of symmetry recurring throughout this study, and it is one of the pictorial elements that ties contemporary Romanticism to its historical precedent. The Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler, identified by Robert Rosenblum as a Romantic revivalist in the early twentieth century, devised a pictorial structure of absolute symmetry which he called 'parallelism'.¹⁷ Hodler, whose work *Dents du Midi Seen from Chesières* (1912) is representative of his ideals, used parallelism to translate the diversity of nature into a frozen emblem that stresses its ultimate unity. For Hodler, as for Friedrich or any other Romantic artist, symmetry makes it explicitly clear that the subject in a work has transcended the empirical, and we are in a symbolic realm.

This is especially true for Kathryn Ryan, whose rows of trees espouse a divinity quite foreign to empirical observation. *Cattle Track Hedges* also achieves a sensation of longing, a plaintive

yearning through its blurred edges, and ambiguous definition. It recalls a scene drawn from memory, brought to mind by dint of its association with loss, joy, free-spiritedness or despair. Regardless of whether or not the viewer is familiar with the surrounds of rural Warrnambool, one is put in mind of these emotions. We become helplessly immersed in an emotional whirlpool of landscape, where memories, aspirations and forgotten sadnesses are recalled.

In this sense, the landscapes are more like self-portraits for Ryan; they become repositories for her emotional baggage. 'It's about knowing yourself really well,' she says on the process of painting. 'And that is reflected in your work.' The solitary trees, in particular, bear closer resonance with portraiture than the landscape genre. Each tree is carefully and tenderly painted, full of nuance and character. The trees, like people, are grafted with a unique personality. 'The silhouette pines are intimate portraits,' says Ryan. 'I am drawn to the beauty, the delicate, fragile and sensitive qualities of the battered and ageing cypress pines,



Ferdinand HODLER, *Dents de Midi Seen from Chesières* 1912, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 88.5 cm, Kunstmuseum, Basel

contrasted with the serene and evocative landscape.¹⁸ In her statements, Ryan places herself within the lineage of artists to which John Ruskin applied the phrase 'pathetic fallacy', where artists and poets ascribed non-human subjects with human feelings and emotions.¹⁹ Both Constable and Friedrich provided excellent examples in the form of trees: Constable's *Elm Tree* (c.1821) is rich in human charisma and character detail. It fills the picture plane and Constable has approached his subject with the same respect as one would expect for a human sitter.

In Friedrich's contemporaneous *Village Landscape in Morning Light (Lone Tree)* (1822), the village becomes a mere backdrop to a portrait of a lonely tree. In its withered branches and acute angles and rhythms, we intuit an intense empathy from the artist for the tree. Friedrich's placement of the tree at the picture's centre suggests a powerful symbology within this secular image, and bespeaks of a cosmic order within the empirical. In this desire to articulate the unique mood and personality of a simple tree, Friedrich's work becomes the direct ancestor of a work like Ryan's *Winter Light* (2008). Ryan observes the same quiet respect for her tree as does Friedrich, but douses her surrounding landscape with a luscious, impenetrable fog, with the effect that the presence of the tree is heightened to mythic proportions.

Spending three to four months on each canvas, Ryan shows in her tree works the pines and cypresses in ambiguous states of semi-transparency, as they drift in and out of reality. In their gradual but pronounced disappearance from this world, the pines



Above John CONSTABLE, *Elm Tree*, c. 1821, oil on paper, 30.6 x 24.8 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Below Caspar David FRIEDRICH, *Village Landscape in Morning Light (Lone Tree)*, 1822, oil on canvas, 55 x 71 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin