

## The Consolation of Skies

Kari Henriksen has consistently explored the atmospheric affects of weather, changes in light, and the ephemeral nature of “these glimpsed moments in time” that the artist describes in an essay for the catalogue of her 2010 show, “Being at Bundanon”, also at the Catherine Asquith Gallery. The themes in Kari’s work are transience, temporality, the impact of nature on human beings and the impact of humans on nature.

The works in this exhibition are inspired, as the title suggests, by sky, and they also celebrate light. The paintings are not simply *about* these things but, as the artist states, the sky and atmosphere “took over” at a certain point. In Kari’s paintings, ephemeral light is filtered through cloud, rain, and air. The air itself, that most ephemeral of the material constellations, is rendered through subtle layers or veils of colour. These paintings resonate through the body, through all of the senses, rather than purely through distancing vision. The sensation that is experienced is of light falling onto the skin, of feeling and breathing the air. These are not distant skies. The viewer looks from a point outside the painting, but viewer and painting are connected. Light falls from these skies, and the viewer receives it. The viewer receives the blessing of the light in a moment of transference akin to what Martin Buber calls “the wave”, when what he calls the “buried relational power of man rises again” and “swells in living streams to give new life to our world.” This is not a mystical experience of the sublime, but a connecting and meditative one. The state of being encouraged by the artist is one in which time is stilled and a space opens up in which to dwell. For a moment, this condition of interior stillness, which for me occurs most notably in response to “Those Soft Gippsland Skies”, allows the boundaries between the observer and the observed, and the inside and the outside, to disappear. For a moment, we are aware of the nature that we ourselves are.

Romantic landscape painting often foregrounds the phenomena of atmosphere, however, both the notion of “Nature” and the category of art have become more problematic in recent times. Contemporary ecological art challenges our assumptions about both nature and art. Kari Henriksen’s work is poetic, not didactic, but by offering moments of contemplation, she allows the embodied human perceiver to rediscover what other-than-human nature means to us. The painting “Ominous Skies” is unsettling, hinting as it does at a threat to our world without explicitly stating what that threat is. The painting is not descriptive, but that sense of uncertainty may refer to our awareness of climate change and other signs of incipient environmental collapse. Kari’s work does not overtly deal with ecological themes, nevertheless, she exhibits an ecological aesthetics that invites us to consider how we might live well under this sky and on the earth.

Kari is inspired by her Norwegian heritage, and there are strong similarities to be found historically in Norwegian and Australian landscape painting, ideas about nature and, more recently, in ecophilosophical ideas. However, her work is not about localism or nationalism; it is expansive and universal. The paintings stem from personal experience but they cannot be categorised into notions of place. Nor can they be described in terms of the “New Romantics”, a title given to an artistic stream in Australia by Simon Gregg, or of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Nordic sublime. The harshness of the Norwegian and Australian landscapes has dictated the terms of human existence and created a dependence on the surrounding environment that is often reflected in painting. But contemporary Norwegian painting focusses less on the natural environment itself and more on human responses to landscape. Kari’s painting “Tiepolo Sky” refers to cultural history, and the direction of her future work may be hinted at in the paintings that contain buildings and human figures. The buildings are visible through layers that may represent human memory and time, and by adding figures to one of the paintings, Kari recognises that art is always about the embodied human. Paintings bear witness through the eloquence of silence, but the response to painting ultimately involves meditation, then thought and interpretation.

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