

Not of this world, only in it: Andrew Southall's Country

In September 1888 Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo advising him of his project to paint a series of still-lives with sunflowers. These were no ordinary paintings. Rather they were conceived as a welcome decoration for the impending arrival of Paul Gauguin, the artist to whom van Gogh looked to establish the Studio of the South. Sunflowers, which had enamoured van Gogh in his later life and draped his coffin in death, were nature's palette of yellow; a colour van Gogh believed was the symbol of friendship. Gauguin did arrive in the south of France, spent a short and intense ten weeks with van Gogh, and admired the sunflowers: so much so that after his traumatic departure he requested one in exchange. These now iconic paintings resonate as symbols of life and friendship and for those lucky enough to have seen a group of them hung together they remain joyous and welcoming. For those who haven't, Andrew Southall's exhibition *Country* picks up the baton of extending an invitation into a world of warmth and yellow.

The word "country" is irrefutably linked to the landscape. However, Southall's paintings are not landscape paintings in that grand tradition which has defined much of Australian Art. They are not depictions of places or deconstructions of vistas. Instead, they are, as the artist declares, *about* and *inspired* by the landscape, in particular the lands around the small town of Elmore in North Central Victoria which for the last few years Southall has called home. The flat and expansive yellow surfaces, which push beyond the picture-frame, are reflections of the wheat and canola fields which surround the town. The intensity of the yellow is synonymous with the golden fields of canola in full bloom that cover the landscape in hyper-colour richness and the consistency and uniformity of swaying sheafheads in a wheatfield. However, rather than being seduced by the warm tones of the early morning or late afternoon sun, so widely used in the broader canon of landscape painting, Southall prefers a saturated, solid and highly-keyed yellow—a domestic house paint rather than traditional fine art oils—creating a poetic, unnatural amplification which, seduces and encourages further investigation.

These works are more than abstracted experiments, a minimalist representation of canola and wheat fields. They engage beyond the mere emotional response. They are content driven in the truest sense of the word, investigating place, time and personal experience.

The layering of paint—considered, poured and manipulated by the artist—signals the layering of time and history in the land: layers that inform us about place. Engaging with place is a completely different proposition to reading the landscape as a vista. Place is about a location's history: its people, its events, its multiple personalities and the many experiences that are ploughed into the very earth which we view. It is also about what we bring, our own biases and luggage and how we impart that through our interaction with a landscape. Likewise it is about what will happen in the future. Southall's poured thick pools of expansive colour on colour, the darting lines tracking across the surface and impasto punctuations rising from the canvas speak of the endless cycle of natural and anthropogenic activity and the minimal yet resounding human presence always obvious and visible on pastoral lands.

Southall expands his layering in some works to include a number of found objects: a cigarette box, an old glove, a can of soft drink, random rocks and stones, and handfuls of clumped grass. He finds these innocuous and missable objects on his many rides and walks through the countryside, a form of research to better know his subjects. The inclusion of these objects is not some sort of

environmental commentor a didactic clear story and narrative articulated by the artist for the viewer. Rather they are vignettes of nature and human presence and activity, entry points for us to create our own stories and a revelation of the diversity that makes up our landscapes.

These paintings, their layers and the objects projecting from the canvas are also personal. They tell us much but not all about the artist. The abundant use of yellow suggests the influence of Southall's recent move to a rural setting. Likewise, it is a colour that he has often used, because he likes it and perhaps because it subconsciously reveals his artistic influences. The found objects may hint at what interests and captures his eye but more importantly and overtly they show the artist as a wanderer, a fossicker and a man with an unending inquisitive and explorative mind.

Andrew Southall has over a long period of time remained committed to his artistic practice – as a drawer but mostly as a painter. Like his wanderings throughout the landscapes of North Central Victoria, the region which has been present and central to many of his recent works, his practice has not been static. It has always been in pursuit of knowing and understanding more and exploring the possibilities of paint, painting and art-making. These new works are a continuum and investigation of this enduring practice. They are also an acknowledgement of the influence of many artists in the canon, including that great colourist and lover of yellow, Vincent van Gogh. However, like all mature and great artists Southall takes what he needs and uses those lessons to create his own artistic voice which reveals for us his ongoing and current concerns and his experiences of the world through which he walks and rides.

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