***Andrew Southall: peering into the blackness***

In 1915 Kazmir Malevich unveiled his groundbreaking work *The Black Square* in the group exhibition *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10*. Challenging now, just as it was then, Malevich removed all traits of representation—the mainstay of painting—distilling creativity and inventiveness down to the simplest of shapes and colour. Perhaps the first work to celebrate the possibility and expansiveness of the colour black, *The Black Square* continues to be a key reference point in the transition from modernist cubist ideals to those of pure abstraction.

In his new exhibition, *‘both and’* Andrew Southall like Malevich before him celebrates the power and dynamism of the colour black while also revealing his own transition from abstraction to representation. This exhibition is a continuation of Southall’s investigation into the possibilities of abstraction, the outcomes of his daily walks and wanderings and a celebration of his new love for drawing. It is not an exhibition in two parts but rather one with two symbiotic components, which together reveal the artist’s interests, working methods and his relationship with the land around his new home of Elmore. One is not encouraged to try and find links between how the figurative leads to the abstraction or vice versa, instead this body of work guides us to much bigger and far more fascinating places: the gothic and melancholic landscape, history both personal and communal, and a sense of time but not as the human construct which tends to dominate our lives.

Some time ago in a conversation over lunch with Andrew I looked on with amazement at a collection of recent pencil drawings. My knowledge of Andrew’s practice prior to this centred on his beautifully constructed abstract paintings, in particular his recent body of luminous yellow works. I was not surprised by the dexterity of Southall’s drawings but I was by his humility in expressing that he made them to prove to both himself and to others that he could draw. I remember asking myself how an artist such as Southall with an extensive career both nationally and internationally could feel the need to prove that he could do something so fundamental to being an artist.

Since that time Southall has maintained an elite sportsman-like discipline by drawing everyday. These are not simple journal jottings; they are complex and comprehensive drawings that sit beside his weighty paintings. They are not made to inform anything else or to act as springboards for other artistic pursuits. They are in and of themselves magical, important, thoughtful and inventive artworks. They tell us much about the artist and his surrounds, just like his abstract paintings do. They reveal, just like his other works, Southall’s continuous experimentation and search for something new as well as his acknowledgement and understanding of the art of the past. They also reveal the inherent trait of most abstractionists: acute observational skills, the pursuit of the essence of place or object and an understanding of the formal qualities of all that we see and experience.

Much of Southall’s work begins with his wandering spirit. His daily walks and bike rides through the lands around his Elmore home have often been discussed. Like an early pioneer of new lands he remains ever vigilant in his observation: relics of the past, detritus of contemporary life or the majesty of an old tree trunk in the last of its days are all of interest to this journeyman. The outcome of this acute sense of looking is the intimacy, which manifests itself in all of Southall’s works. This is perhaps best seen in the series of River Drawings: snapshots of the waterway just across the road from Southall’s Elmore home. Viewing these feels like we are crouching down under the canopy of a river tree looking at the landscape through a cropped viewfinder. We are invited to explore the knotted tree-trunks, the tangled branches and the stillness of the river. We become witnesses to the complexity of the ecology, which sustains life. The intimacy and macro view of these drawings amplifies their formalist qualities. They are a series of drawings that have much in common with Vincent van Gogh’s late canvasses of undergrowth, which careered him towards abstraction, towards compositions where the importance of line, shape and colour was paramount. Van Gogh never pushed through to full abstraction but his paintings reveal an intent to do so. Southall’s drawings likewise show intent. The intent to bridge together his long-standing abstractionism with his new found confidence and love of highly detailed figurative landscape drawings.

Southall’s other landscapes drawings, while retaining the intimacy of the River Drawings, are meditations on the open space so synonymous with the Australian landscape. Large areas of sky, monotonous but rhythmic fields of agricultural land and large areas of sunlit grass are captured in detailed rendering. *Elmore* consists predominately of a menacing sky; the land below a strip of deep black with the horizon dotted by a few silhouetted trees. The dominating skies of *Mia Mia* and *Near Barfold* is balanced with rolling hills of swaying grass, punctuated by the vernacular architecture of the bush: a fully open shelter on stilts and a monolithic concrete water tank. In both of these drawings we peer up towards the peak of a hill, knowing without seeing that the other side majestically drops away into a wide expansive field.

These drawings, along with many others in this exhibition, reveal Southall’s understanding and embracing of the concept that less is more. They are detailed but not incessantly. Instead Southall shows the qualities of a draftsman and artist at the peak of his power by knowing what details to focus on and what when left out is still there. There is power in the negative spaces, which become activated simply by the dynamism of where a mark stops. In the drawing *Irrigation Weir* the fluidity of running water is present not by the marks laid down by the artist but rather by marks which remain absent. Southall draws only the wall, the steps and the bricked bank allowing these man-made features to define the flowing water.

While Southall’s drawings have an inherit intimacy about them they also capture a sense of the gothic and melancholy that seems to be omnipresent in the Australian landscape. However, they always tend to oscillate between something that is dangerous and foreboding and something that is comforting and restorative. *Deserves Our Respect,* a drawing of a black silhouetted tree, is a powerful addition to the history of the Australian gothic that has permeated the visual arts, literature, film and music. It is a modern day equivalent of the Heidelberg school’s depiction of the Australian bush. However, while they presented the dangers of the bush by way of claustrophobia, Southall does it by way of space and solitude. His drawing is about the history of place, notions of time and our relationship with nature. *Backyard Elmore*, a house in the streets of this small country town sits quietly under a broad sky. The dark spaces of endless black, which frame the drawing speak of this sense of melancholy. As do the empty pot in the foreground, the line of towering cypress trees in the distance and the black windows of the shed: gestural punctuations, which both guide us around the composition and reveal a sense of human presence – both past and present. But this is not the overall essence of the work. Instead it is balanced with a real sense of optimism: optimism in the beauty of the landscape; optimism in that the sun keeps coming up; optimism in the pioneering spirit of humans.

The endless layers of black pencil present in many of Southall’s drawings adds a dynamic depth and movement to the images and links them with the series of abstract paintings in this exhibition. It is this depth, this space that we peer into without really knowing what is there, that holds these two disparate aesthetics together. One does not necessarily inform the other. Instead, they form a symbiotic relationship born out of similar investigations, observations and a need to understand the new landscape, which has become home for the artist.

Southall’s black paintings build on the work he has created over the last few years. While the confident pooling of paint remains present in this new body of work, Southall has extended his practice by creating heavily textured and collage-like structured paintings. Each surface is a snapshot of the artist’s wanderings; covered with objects such as cans, buttons and shattered windscreens found and cherished by Southall on his walking trips. However, the enshrining of such detritus on the canvas is not an environmental call-to-arms; they are not part of any environmental movement. They are, though, apocalyptic and windows into a post human world. There is a sense of violence in the complete denseness of their black and the fracturing of the surface, such as in *Untitled #9.*

However, these paintings are not all doom and gloom. There is a real sense of time and place embedded in them. The self-forming patterns in the work happens slowly—beyond the artist’s control—and references the time of year when they were made: during the heart of winter when thick layers of paint take days to dry. The expansiveness seen both across the surface and in the depth of the blackness is very much about the land where these paintings are created: the quietness of Elmore and the expanding farmland, which surrounds it.

The power, dynamism and intimacy of all of the works in this exhibition reveal Southall’s interrogative and close relationship with his immediate landscape. They are evidence of an artist becoming familiar with the lands around his new home. However, they are not simply documentary. Southall’s works have a warmth and a sense of affection for the landscape coupled with a healthy respect for its gothic and melancholic character. There is an acknowledgement of the threat and danger of the landscape as well as its beauty, its layers of history, and the peacefulness of the open spaces of rural Australia. There is a sense of contemplation in these works. They are not rushed, instead they reveal a sense of time: time spent out wandering and observing, time spent drawing and painting, and time in a truly historical sense where the history of place and the history of the artist come together in magical moments.

Dr Vincent Alessi

Senior Lecturer, Creative Arts and English

La Trobe University