



SEEING
SPRING

MORGAN
ALLENDER

8 JULY - 23 AUGUST, 2015 ARTSPACE GALLERY, ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE

OFFICIAL OPENING FRIDAY 10 JULY, 5.30PM GALLERY HOURS WEDNESDAY - SUNDAY, 11AM - 4PM

The polite found me impolite; the great
Would mortify me, but in vain.
I am a willow of the wilderness,
Loving the wind that bent me. All my hurts
My garden spade can heal. A woodland walk,
A wild rose, or rock-loving columbine,
Salve my worst wounds, and leave no cicatrice.

Extract from "Musketaquid", Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

These paintings are about feeling. Not feelings, but rather the verb feeling: the emotive process of something being felt. I aim for the paintings to be immersive, multi-layered and mysterious, pulling at the viewer while holding their secrets close. For me, they embody longing, melancholy and beauty, three states which I see as inextricably bound.

In this sense there is an overarching spirituality in their misty hazes of light and shadowed subjects. This is not to be confused with religion, or even necessarily related to any religious context; rather an ever-present sense of transcendence, always difficult to pin down or capture but hinted at, *felt*. Within my personal experience, notions of the spiritual are directly related to being in nature, overgrown places where the dipping sun meets the trees. So it follows that these are paintings about Nature, and a human connection to it, the emotional response and desire for it.

Within my studio practice, alongside the painting, I create fresh floral installations for special events. As with any design field, certain trends ebb and flow through the desires of my clients. In recent months a pattern has emerged in requests for enormous overhead or hanging floral installations. They want a lushness and leafiness to lend a magical quality, and often admit that an outdoor garden or forest setting would be preferable but for various reasons not possible. I find this fascinating - my theory is that the trend for large-scale wilder florals is representative of something deeper: part of a widespread craving for a (re)connection with the natural world that we are seeing across various lifestyle and design streams (vegie-plots, guerrilla gardening, urban beekeeping, houseplants, handcrafts, natural fibres, etc). My clients want to emulate the feeling of being immersed in nature, to feel the romantic, childlike wonder of stepping under flowering branches and looking up into the faces of flowers. They want to be enveloped. It's an emotionally driven request I think, that runs much deeper than purely wanting something big or impressive. An attempt, rippling below the surface, to bridge the gap between what is lost and what is longed for.

When they made the Millenium Dome in London, they divided it into zones of interest (eg science, music, history, commerce), and they went out and tried to get sponsorship to support these specialized zones. All of them received money and investments with the exception of one, and that one was called the Spirituality Zone.

I thought that was symptomatic of our time, a time when facile entertainment and slick entrepreneurship can gather all sorts of cash around them while spirituality lies in the corner as a vaguely unpleasant, complicated and unnecessary problem...

It's interesting, and complex, how it is almost impossible to give any kind of quantitative value to the importance of the spiritual. Though history proves again and again that when you take it away everything falls down.

Sean Scully, *Barcelona*, 2002²

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The same could be said of a connection with the natural world, the cycles of day and night, the slow diffusion of Winter into Summer. And so these paintings function as an homage of sorts, to those forces that surround us, shaping our daily lives, and yet are increasingly separate, kept separated.

Within the paintings, themes of nature, landscape and still-life interweave as one. These are not traditional landscape paintings - subject and colour morph into the surreal, horizons shift and melt away, or cease to exist at all. Rather, they are landscapes of the mind, imagined places that carry with them a sense of Place that is both personal and vast. Traditional pictorial space is manipulated: scale and depth distorted within layers of built-up glazes to create otherworldly spaces that tread boundaries between interior and exterior, macro and micro, fertility and void, soft femininity and wild nature.

They are, unavoidably, inspired by the real landscapes of the Adelaide Hills, and most particularly by my own rumpled 5 acres. Within the old garden on our windswept hill lies all the magic of light and weather of any more expansive or exotic location. This physical place, more than any other thing, remains my strongest inspiration. In his book *The Sea Room* Adam Nicolson weaves a lyrical and deeply felt account of his own relationship to landscape and nature. Describing the Shiant Islands in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland he writes, 'I have felt at times...no gap between me and the place. I have absorbed it and been absorbed by it, as if I have no existence apart from it... The place has entered me. It has coloured my life like a stain.'³

Because these paintings were made in an attempt to capture visually something felt, they are also about this physical process, the act of painting; the imperfect beauty of human dexterity. Suspended in their multiple layers is the struggle with the materiality of oil paint. There are many parallels between this medium and the chaotic elements of nature; its slippage, flux and refusal to be tamed. I enjoy relating to paint in this way, letting out the reins, allowing it to frighten and fascinate during the process of developing a new painting. '...it is an active, volatile material that, no matter what one knows about it, one can never know completely...It engages issues of alchemy and mystery that resist the deadening ambition of the modern world to control everything, absolutely.'⁴

As artists, we are inevitably asked to explain what our work is about, a sticky question that makes me bristle, as if the work is not enough that it must be supported by further text and explanation, often rested upon the weighty shoulders of theory and scholarship. For the answer is never simple, as slippery and mercurial as the wind through trees. For me, anyway, there is not a neatly compartmentalised answer, for they are about many things, often deeply personal. And the very nature of them, their mysterious quality, is subsequently at risk of being diminished, dulled, by its layers being unravelled, examined and laid bare. It is through the exhibition of works that I believe we essentially set them free, opening them up to the interpretation of others so that they might find their own connections and meanings. The ability of painting to facilitate and endure this process is of course its very essence, its purpose and its strength.

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Autumn 2015

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THE ARTIST WOULD LIKE TO THANK

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REFERENCES

¹ Emerson, R.W., 1899, *Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Thomas Y Crowell & Company, New York

² Ingleby F.E (Editor) 2006, *Sean Scully: Resistance and Persistence: Selected Writings*, Merrell Publishing, London pg. 116

³ Nicholson A., 2002, *The Sea Room*, Harper Collins, London pg. 3

⁴ Ingleby F.E (Editor) 2006, *Sean Scully: Resistance and Persistence: Selected Writings*, Merrell Publishing, London pg. 78



The Country Arts SA Visual Artist Professional Development Award provides a practicing contemporary visual artist from country South Australia the opportunity to develop a body of work for exhibition in a major gallery space in metropolitan Adelaide and receive a mentorship opportunity to further their career.

Graphic design Beth Wuttke
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Image: Morgan Allender, *Below*, 2015, oil on canvas

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