

Richard Manning's new show, aptly titled "**Quiet**", is stunning.

Followers of this artist will already be familiar with his sensitivity to his chosen subject matter and his strong and fluid visual commentary on natural forms. In this show Manning has reached a high level of confidence, where he reaches towards a more nuanced and even abstract expression of the natural world. In so doing, he has created works that will not only nourish our senses, but will quite likely nourish our very souls.

It is a show arising out of dualities and contrasts. It is a show for quiet contemplation.

From the physical struggle involved with gaining and dealing with the extraordinarily powerful stimuli of a first time visit to Lake Eyre deep in the heart of Australia's arid inland, or to observing and responding to the play of light across the western skies over the Bay from his studio in St Kilda, Manning has developed a body of work that is deeply contemplative.

His inspiration captures the very liquescence and the colour, light and mood of both sea and lake with a focussed vision and definitive eye and beautifully layered washes of paint.

Lake Eyre is a place of stark and harsh contrasts and ecological complexity. Mostly the lake, which itself seems without definable boundaries, shimmers in heat waves and mirages, with searing light cast over glaring expanses of salt and glittering gypsum. Deep and crusty runnels of dry watercourses straggle into it; silence boils around it, trees barely survive.

The lake is more than a lake. Probably one of the most fiercely elemental places in Australia, it is also a kind of abstract presence that draws people to it in a way that perhaps answers a need in their soul, or perhaps goes some way towards connecting people to an imagined unsullied and pure part of Nature.

When monsoonal rains fall across Queensland, the mighty northern inland rivers surge water down through the channel country into Lake Eyre. A complete transformation takes place as every conceivable living thing plunges into a frenetic breeding cycle of renewal and growth. Birds, fish, brine shrimp, dingoes, reptiles, grasses, wildflowers, all embark on a cycle of replenishment which often ends as soon as it began.

Manning is well aware of these sharp contrasts, which have been an inspiration to so many artists before him. But for him, all these things fell away. They are still there but are of tangential importance only. He has eschewed the more obvious material representations of place as described by his predecessors in favour of a more singular and perhaps more fugitive view found in the airy masses that dominate the inland skies.

Flying over the lake on a windless dawn morning gave Manning a perspective of extraordinary beauty. A glassy lake, ruffled yet by no breeze, unfolded below the small aircraft and reflected the small clouds and sky in a way where it was impossible to discern any distinction between the copper glow of the rising sun, the horizon line and the lake below. All references to the harsh country over which he flew, all its complexities and realities, became absorbed by this world of mirrored light and colour.

For Manning, a distillation of direct experience of place, memory and senses has brought him to a place where everything comes together in a higher and calmer realm of air, colour, light, reflection. Ambiguity between the realms of sky and lake float across his canvas.

His St Kilda pieces are informed by a world perhaps not as harsh as that of the Inland, but they nevertheless show Richard an alchemist with the movement of light and colour across a range of western skies where storms and iridescent sunsets resonate and flow from his brushes.

Quietness, contemplation.

Les Sprague

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