

Walking by Water: Ken Smith

Ken Smith's ongoing investigation into the interplay between duration and visual perception is evocatively explored in this series of paintings of Port Phillip Bay and Sydney Harbour. Returning over and over again to the same location at different times of the day, Smith creates works that bring to attention the inconstancy of constant things.

Smith's interest is primarily in the fluidity of the visual field. Dawn is a fleeting moment as the sun arcs its way through the sky. Dusk carries its own particular register of light before the curtain of night envelopes the scene. The shifting sun catches a slanting roof one moment, illuminating it in high key tones, only to cast it in shadow the next. As light shadow-dances across the sky, subtle shifts in the opacity of hue change the mood of the scene before him.

Smith's practice of painting *en plein air* requires this ongoing navigation of flux. On each return to the site his aim is essentially descriptive. Through meticulous looking he has attuned his perceptual ability to capture the changes in the landscape that make each moment unique. From his vantage point at Mt Martha, the view across Port Phillip Bay brings the You Yangs into stark relief one day, enveloping them by clouds or sun haze the next. The ability of light to conceal - to render presence as absence - is also at work in these paintings. For Smith, light is not a metaphor for a higher state of knowing but rather a phenomenon of much complexity. His is not a neo-Romantic sensibility but an investigative curiosity into the optical sensations created by the intersection between sea and sky.

First and foremost a colourist, Smith plays with the relationship between colour and visual comprehension. In his latest series *Coastline*, 2014, painted on a recent trip to Sydney, the sea no longer meets the skyline. Positioned at the bottom of the canvas, the harbour forms a thin sliver of changing tones. During different light conditions it is depicted in flat grey shades, which render it almost imperceptible. The viewer is unsure whether they are looking at a road or a building. It is only when the band is painted in a saturated blue that it is understood as a body of water.

Also included in the exhibition is the early work *Walking by Water*, 1983, which was the catalyst for Smith's interest in the effects of light on water. Living at Port Melbourne at the time, it is a more urban depiction of the local seascape.

At a time when what we see is so often mediated by technology, whether through screens or the cameras in mobile devices, Smith's paintings encourage us to pay attention and exercise our attention span. For this reason spacing is also important in Smith's paintings. Like the 'slow food' movement that encourages diners to savour food, Ken Smith seeks to slow down the visual consumption of images. To this end the pauses between his works are significant. Precisely spaced, the encounter with each seascape vignette is punctuated by a visual rest. These act like moments of silence. An encounter with Smith's work necessitates movement in space. The viewer must walk to view each work in the series as a whole. Visual consumption of the entire series is confounded because the detail can't be comprehended from a distance. Rather the scale of Smith's paintings draws the viewer in close into a more intimate relationship with the scene. And it is in this close viewing encounter that visual understanding is attained.

Ken Smith has been a practising artist for over thirty years. He studied painting at the Victorian College of the Arts and after completing a Graduate Diploma of Fine Arts, he attained a Master of Arts at Monash University in 1996. The recipient of a number of awards, his earliest recognition was the *Hugh Ramsay Portrait Prize* in 1974 while recent acknowledgment includes the *Rick Amor Drawing Prize* held at the Art Gallery of Ballarat in 2012.

Ken Smith was Lecturer in Drawing within the Faculty of Arts and Design at Monash University for 30 years. A long time resident of Mt Martha, he has held 10 solo exhibitions and been involved in over 60 group exhibitions around Australia. His works are held in numerous public collections in Victoria and interstate and private collections around the world.

Wendy Garden, Curator, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery