

KEN SMITH; Coast Light – Recent Paintings.
Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne, 2017.

Simon Gregg, Curator Gippsland Art Gallery.

A striking characteristic of art is that it embodies a paradox of time, projecting at once a fleeting moment of creation and the summation of a lifetime's experiences. It can be an unsettling effect but in the paintings of Ken Smith it brings a sense of depth and dimensionality. His revelation of sweeping landscapes and coastlines rouse memories of times both distant and recent, brought together in a symphonic whole.

The effect is no accident. It is the result of years of looking, of studying the curves and geometry of the natural environment, and refining the ability to translate these observations into paint. The elegance and apparent ease of Smith's paintings belies the thought and extensive process that goes into them. For Smith is a craftsman of the highest order; the landscape is his subject but his object is to translate what he sees into a self-contained system of complementary colours, tones and lines.

It begins, naturally enough, outdoors. Field trips along his coastline home at Mount Martha produce visual data, which is then processed in the studio. Here decisions are made about composition, structure, light and tone. An image will be developed through progressive drawings, studies and then, ultimately, a final studio painting. Much of the original information will be removed to achieve the greatest organizational clarity.

Being immersed within his subject means that Smith is perceptive to the subtlest shifts in light and atmosphere. The landscape is, as he points out, like a new picture every day. It is these minute variations in atmosphere that engage him on a deep level, and which he endeavours to describe within his work. A by-product of this approach is that his paintings have an aching stillness about them. The speed and noise of our accelerating society has been hushed, enabling the quiet voice of nature to emerge. All movement has been eliminated, with the effect that we, too, become still. Smith's paintings, in a manner, teach us how to look again. Our eyes follow his line of trees, the arc of coastline or the gradient of hillside, in a gentle, meandering journey.

While visually sparse, these arrangements of form are not sparse of soul. The point of painting, according to Smith, is that it allows one's individual sensibility to emerge. A painting is more than a product of visual observation; it speaks of feelings, emotions and how the artist responds to the world. For Smith, a painting is an expression of visual and emotional perception. A subject must be invested with wonder and empathy in order for it to function effectively.

In their slow, gradually unfolding nature, Ken Smith's paintings reveal the essence of place. While figures are not present, the residue of humanity remains. Cultivated landscapes contrast with natural, and distance contrasts with proximity. These are the clues and signals by which these paintings communicate with us; theirs is a language not of fragmentary detail but of totality of sensation. They represent, in every sense, a triumph of painting.