

COMING TO THE DARK TOWER: ANNA TANNER FOR NWSP 2009

When viewing Anna Tanner's exhibition for NWSP 2009 at the Collective Gallery, I was reminded of Robert Browning's poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' (1855). Employing deliberately archaic language, Browning's work tracks a vigilante wandering through landscape sparsely populated with only 'that hoary cripple, with malicious eye... to waylay with his lies, ensnare all travellers who might find him posted there'. Traversing the vacant expanse of an unexplored wilderness, the terrain is peppered with phantasms, delirious distortions that prey on the edges of the would-be hero's psyche.

Browning claimed that the work came to him, complete, in a dream. Tanner's paintings similarly appear as dream-like snapshots, places glimpsed, a déjà vu mix of images garnered from second-hand experience. The places Tanner depicts seem to exist on the peripheries of familiarity, occasionally collapsing into abnormal hallucinations; places afflicted with a feeling of futility and seclusion. Within her works, Tanner opens up 'schisms' for the allusive within the artificial structures of contemporary, cultivated environments. In recent works, she has investigated the siting of the modern-day 'hero' (explorer, traveller, gunslinger) within a landscape where so little remains un-mapped and unknown – heroes like Roland, engaged in unrewarding endeavours. Mutations in space, time and scale are made to occur, to seek out these pockets of the unknown.

The shadowed, lone figure of 'Yellow Mist' is lit by otherworldly solar flares, reminiscent of the famed (but seen by few) Northern Lights. The portrayed man, hunched and perhaps cloaked is nearly lost in this phenomenon of nature, amplified through Tanner's use of heightened colour and the delicate materiality of the paint. Tanner's paintings portray scenes of greater magnitude than their actual size; works which are less than A4 capture seemingly vast landscapes, which reminded me a little of the greener settings of American cowboy films. These landscapes have a power that is lost in (the comparatively) densely populated Europe. When the scale of the works does become larger, as in 'Subway stairs', lines break down into an attack of ink work, erratic and agitated. Yet I have to admit that, perversely, this larger work was less interesting next to the concentration of the smaller pieces.

In 'Calico Rock', the only sculpture on show, and for me, the most intriguing work in the exhibition, the landscape of the small panoramic diorama is lit by a miniaturized rotating mirrorball. With the light fixtures un-hidden and the mechanisms on display, the space is emphasised as an interior, a contrived environment – yet if you can suspend your disbelief it convinces as cold, constantly changing sunlight, dappling the scene. Strangely for a work that should invoke intimacy, sized so only one person can view it clearly from the front, there is the feeling of wastelands, emptiness, and the eerie sense that, despite its seeming abandonment, there is a character just around the corner, poised at the edge of the scene. Within the clearing, there is less peacefulness than strained consciousness; the mirrorball turns like a metronome, measuring out the interminable pause of the scene.

It is difficult for me to articulate exactly the kind of feeling Tanner's works achieve – there is a certain opacity to them that discourages effortless readings. Tanner's paintings and sculptures seem frustratingly (and absorbingly) contradictory, having moments of incredible intensity, and yet a distance, or acute numbness to them. There is a tension between transcendent natural beauty and urban oblivion and increasingly, as I re-visit the works, a sense of danger.

However, what I can say is that Tanner's works have their best moments when she takes an image we half remember – a house perched on a hill, a strangely familiar landscape – then cracks its universe open and waits to see what darkness spills out.