

Artists love a bad pun. With the mordant wit of Marcel Duchamp as the template, Steve Tyerman gives us *Sisyphus Rocks On*. Sisyphus was the founder of Corinth and alleged father of Odysseus who defied Zeus and Thanatos (death) with the result that he was condemned to forever roll a rock up a hill, only to watch it roll back down again once he reached the summit.

This, of course, is the paradox of any committed artist. Never satisfied with their work, they create single moments of dazzling synthesis only to allow doubt and challenge back into the arena, with the result that, like Sisyphus, they have to start all over again in pursuit of that elusive perfect image. In his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus saw him as personifying the absurdity of human life, but Camus also concluded that 'one must imagine Sisyphus happy' as 'the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.' Other writers claim Sisyphus was condemned for his deceitfulness (and, okay, he was a merciless, blood-spilling tyrant) but I prefer the alternative, that his strategic cunning defied the gods and their egos were affronted; hence the magnitude – and the pettiness – of their response.

It is too grand a gesture to say that Tyerman is Sisyphus, but the allusions are obvious, the strategy, the endless toil, the punishment for getting too close to the truth only to have it roll away again, all countered by the satisfaction of the struggle itself. For an artist, 'truth' may combine a comprehensive understanding of materials, a total absorption of knowledge and history, and the ability to channel all this into seamless, peerless imagery; but the possible attainment of such a position is also another form of 'truth', in that such perfection is impossible. Worse, for an artist, it would be evidence of a hubristic self-belief of one who feels there is no more need to enquire or to challenge. And by that road goes atrophy.

A survey of Steve Tyerman's output from the last ten years shows all evidence that Tyerman will never be smug and satisfied with his work. I, for one, will hunt him down if this happens. In *Sisyphus Rocks On*, the challenge and excitement of depiction versus application remains abundantly clear. The exhibition divides into two distinct parts, depictions of the artist (and muse?) as he approaches the act of painting, and the resultant images from these actions. In *Seeking a Fresh Start*, the canvas is dominant, white and mocking, taunting in its purity. *Seeking a Fresh Start* then shows Tyerman staring at its impudence, mindful perhaps of the classic maxim by Maurice Denis (of the Nabis) that 'before it becomes a war-horse, a nude woman or some anecdote, a painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.' The task exists in the artist's mind, the subject is laid before him, the canvas in between – but the gulf between all three is both concentrated and immense.

On the other side of the easel is Tyerman's subject and for the most part, this is the nature and land in front of him. Whilst he has much figurative and narrative art in his back catalogue, it is Tyerman's evocative rendering of landscape that remains the most powerful of his streams, free of any awkwardness or bombast. Crucially, Tyerman understands the abstract armature which underpins the heart of the world and – using pigment loaded with medium – he applies great swathes of paint, building up the image out of texture, mark and heightened colour. Not quite a fauve, his colours are instead informed by nature but are somehow not of nature, consisting instead of acid pinks, citric greens and industrial tangerine. The effect, unsurprisingly, is lurid.

Here, it is timely to reconsider an earlier Tyerman series from 2005. In *Kurrajong I & II*, and *Box Hill II*, the paint is thinner and the colours are mute. Form, such as it is, is barely described by a

succession of fluid zig-zags. It is as if the artist is trying to capture the energy of the location, a form of impressionism informed not by light but by tremour. The result of these attempts continue to pulsate beneath the landscape paintings in *Sisyphus Rocks On*, and all are key demonstrations of Cezanne's belief that a painting is never reality, it is always an image of reality. This is especially so in *Where Truth is Hid*. Here, Tyerman depicts a coastal path which leads into, and inevitable dissolves within, a tumult of paint, juicy paint, lush and all encompassing. It attains that perfect balance for the viewer who recognises the image but can't help being equally aware of the artist's technique and application. Each informs the other and the two combine to a greater whole.

But then comes the denouement of the final painting. *And Then it All Fell Apart*. Having completed such a synthesis, the artist now lies slumped before the canvas. Like Sisyphus, he has to go through it all over again.

Catalogue notes

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