

S.M.H Nov 22 1996

## Brush notes

**A**ctually, *I Always Wanted To Be A Singer (A Reprise)* is the title of John Bartley's exhibition at Legge Gallery, but don't waste time trying to work out the name as it has nothing to do with the show. Bartley has come up with a bunch of works that positively shimmer with romanticism – each filled with sombre light, rich colour and patches of iridescence that push through from beneath.

They are abstract but tend to suggest ethereal landscapes and water, in the tradition of romanticism and symbolism. You can feel them groping towards the moodiness of late Monet or Turner.

The danger with this sort of painting these days, of course, is that it can please the eye almost too easily. In many ways, the romantic sensibility is highly suited to our epoch (just think of Australian photographer Bill Henson), but it has been weirdly complicated to the point where a work that is simply "beautiful" and "moody" can give off an air of glib facility. It poses no challenge to the eye. Rather

than a bucking, unpredictable ride, it takes you on a smooth one.

Bartley is well aware of these dangers and he's tried (but not too hard) to avoid them. "Hopefully, they're not too seductive. I just got to a point where I thought: 'If they're going to turn out like this, then that's how they'll turn out.'"

In the past, Bartley has mostly worked by applying several layers of paint to the canvas, after which the scraping back gets under way, bringing out the desired highlights. Other

works here, more conventionally, start from an undercoat and build up from there. But Bartley has relied less on his customary method of working from photographic collages ("it's just an excuse to pore over lots of glossy magazines") and, as a consequence, these works are far less structured. They give off a sense of being underwater, with depths unfolding effortlessly before your eyes.

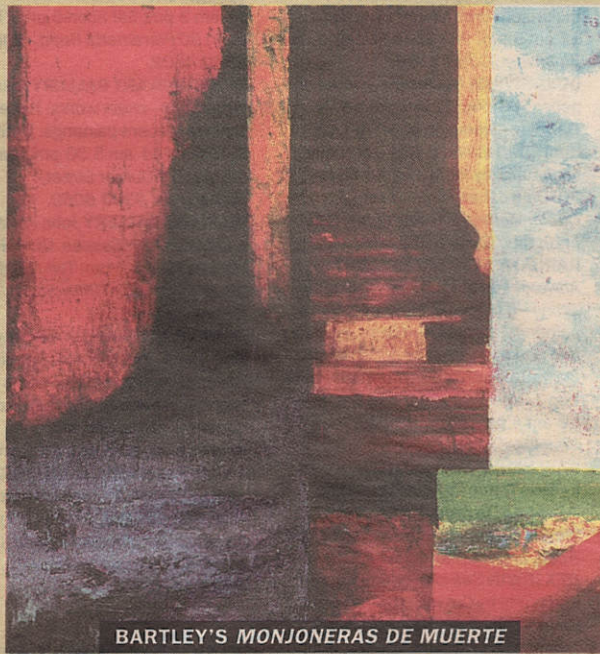
"They went through this awful, ugly stage, so I've gone through that, and I feel they have some integrity as a result. I'm happy."

So, after all this, why the cheesy title? Bartley says he heard someone deliver the line, deadpan, at a party.

"It just floored me," he says, and then, on brief reflection: "I guess you always wish you are doing something else, no matter how good you may be at what you do."

### ■ SEBASTIAN SMEE

Actually, *I Always Wanted To Be A Singer (A Reprise)* is showing at Legge Gallery, Redfern, until November 30.



BARTLEY'S MONJONERAS DE MUERTE