

Dark beautiful

This is a personal response to John Bartley's paintings and to a body of work that I know hasn't come easily to him. As it turns out, this short piece of writing hasn't come easily to me. The paintings, whose creation at times was a challenge for John, became for me an almost overwhelming pleasure that indeed overwhelmed me.

There are so many things I want to say. Apart from thinking that these paintings are utterly beautiful I am struck by how strongly they bring to mind ideas around darkness. Why do these paintings feel uplifting when they are at times so dark? Is it the light that seems to glow from behind the dark paint? And what is that light in darkness doing to the surrounding colours that takes us to the old masters? Because some passages in these works could be abstracted thoughts in paint

that flashed through the mind of Tiepolo, or El Greco, just before sleep. Dreamy, indefinite edges of colour; like clouds, these might shift the next time we turn to look at the canvas. If what John is painting seems like landscapes, then they are decidedly internal lands in which tiny vignettes reveal themselves like little moments of truth, making even the smallest paintings in the show feel strangely monumental.

But it is the tenor of each painting as a whole that reveals to us what I know to be true, that John's response centre is his heart, not his head. It is almost palpable: he reacts to the physicality of mark and colour through his feelings, rather than through his thoughts. We are looking across and through a memory, or a series of deeply felt impressions. The paintings in this exhibition were



hard-won in moments of personal darkness and enlightenment. They are dark and passionate: they are dark beautiful.

I suggest passion because these paintings are, well, steamy. Even those painted in cooler tones seem humid, languid. But Bartley's slow-reveal sensuousness is tempered by restraint: look closely, the paint on the canvas is really very thin, holding the contradiction of sheer smoothness, long depths of field and a nearly tactile but fast evaporating beauty.

The darkness in these paintings more than hints at intimacy. There is a darkness to intimacy, even just to the idea of intimacy: when we are intimate we are up close, enclosed, private. In these paintings there is something of the intimacy and ardour we

hear in certain voices: I'm thinking of Maria Callas and Nick Cave. They share with John Bartley a dark romance of the heart and a suggestion of the flesh yearning along with the heart for meaning.

We turn to art for visual pleasure, but also for clues as to how we might navigate this lived experience, accepting darkness at the same time as maintaining a connection with passion. This is because art opens up the space for us to discuss and consider very personal, meaningful things. Watching reality all the time is not necessarily a good way of seeing life clearly.

Sonia Legge, 2019