



philip wolfhagen

vapour trails



Idyll XXII 2006
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm



Memento mori II 2006
oil & beeswax on linen
180 x 192 cm (diptych)

A cruciform landscape (cover detail) 2006
oil & beeswax on linen
180 x 192 cm (diptych)



Idyll XXIV 2007
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm



Idyll XXV 2007
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm

vapour trails

To be confronted with a room full of John Constable's oil sketches, as I was in March last year, is to be at once exhilarated and intimidated. What breathtaking freshness these have: nature crystallised in exuberant paint. The exhibition was *Constable: Impressions of Land, Sea and Sky* at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, which placed particular emphasis on his outdoor sketches that I have loved for so long. I first fell under the spell cast by Constable's oil sketches as a graduate printmaker in 1987. It was the cloud studies from Hampstead Heath painted in 1821 and 1822 that interested me most. To a young artist interested in nature, these paintings of clouds seemed exciting and of contemporary relevance. Henceforth I abandoned the printing press and commenced this new craft of illusion; painting.

Experiencing Constable after a 20 year interval reminded me of the power of the sky, of the power it has to solicit emotional responses from us. Clouds are possibly the most subjective of all 'natural' scenery: we respond with spontaneous emotion to a threatening sky, with both rapture and fear.

The paintings in this exhibition are the product of 12 months ceaseless searching for the fleeting moment when the sky swells with meaning. I have found the flux of clouds to be frustrating; most of the time I look up to see only chaos in the cloud forms – not meaningful enough to paint – merely indicating the approaching weather. But when the clouds do 'form up' in my eyes they become a field on which I can project concerns about climate, nature and culture. Such portentous moments are naturally rare.

Aside from these conceptual and compositional concerns, one of the challenges I thought I would face was the limited scale imposed by the practicalities of transport. Painting the sublime landscape three feet square is demanding when you really want a six foot canvas to convey the magnitude implied



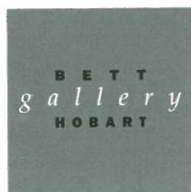
– size really is meaningful, I thought. In retrospect, I feel that this limitation actually expanded my vision; I found I had to dig deeper into my reserves of concentration and painterly skill than I ever had before. I am still a little bemused with this unexpected discovery. Somehow my intense concentration caused a distillation of the image, a kind of dehydration of nature just awaiting the viewer's imagination to allow the image to swell up again.

Above all I have sought to impart my feelings of uneasiness about the changing weather in these paintings. I want to convey this latent anxiety, of anticipation of something important about to happen. It is for the audience to speculate on what that event might turn out to be.

Philip Wolfhagen
April 2007

17 May – 15 July 2007

Embassy of Australia, Washington DC, USA



369 Elizabeth Street

North Hobart Tasmania 7000

Telephone: (03) 6231 6511

Email: dick@bettgallery.com.au

Web: www.bettgallery.com.au

■ ■ System II 2007
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm

□ □ System VI 2007
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm

■ ■ System V 2007
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm

□ □ System VII 2007
oil & beeswax on linen
96 x 103 cm