

"They're the titans of tenderness... the sultans of sensitivity... the monsters of mellow..."

One of the fundamentally enticing qualities of abstraction is its claim to otherness and its hold on nothing. Lara Merrett's current body of work on show in *Soft Rock* affirms this idea. On the one hand this work is neatly positioned within the genre of abstraction, on the other it's a distinctly new, free association of equal parts humour and a beguiling type of irrational anamorphism.

The key to understanding these descriptive qualities and many of Merrett's cryptic titles, is the artist's Romanticised approach to abstraction. Cleverly, Merrett uses her knowledge of abstraction, sets it aside, then goes about the dissolution of the hard edges and sharp geometrical forms. The results are wholeheartedly emotive works. The artist, in a very considered manner, maintains the hard-hitting poignancy of her abstractionist forebears, albeit with a sobering dash of wit and irony.

At the substrata level of appreciation, Merrett's Romanticised skills come into action. Stimulating our collective imaginations in playful and adventurous works Merrett uses organic forms rendered in ink and acrylic at a one to one scale ratio. At times deeply layered, at others economically pared back, each work functions like a map of the unfamiliar.

Unfamiliar territories, or atmospheres where competing viscera juices combine over the surface of the canvas, all come into visual play. Merrett skews and scrambles the visual shapes into forms that seem as if they could potentially be reinstated into representational type motifs if the *right* perspective were to be located. In complicating the non-representational status of the abstractionist genre, and tripping it up with a style of irrational anamorphism¹, the artist makes claim to a latent interplay of the conscious and unconscious.

As maps these paintings reference their mostly topographic construction. Rather than just a two dimensional surface, Merrett works around the canvas like a sculptor, shaping, balancing and layering each work until its completion. It's an intuitive methodology that again harks back to the Romantic sensibility. Conceptually imagining these works is not unlike the manner in which many of the Romantic painters and engravers constructed their works. Leaving aside the obvious point of difference², both imagine geographies of space, atmosphere and physicality. For the Romantics it was the depths of the uncharted seas, and the reconciliation of the creationist and the evolutionist histories among many other inquiries into the subject of nature. For Merrett it's the inquiry into the picture plane and surface, balance of ink and acrylic, of depth and opacity, chaos with order and the reference to the otherness through that which goes beyond the frame.

Evoking a Romantic tainted irony, Merrett's exhibition title *Soft Rock* is an example of how the artist uses witty irony in her aesthetic to disavow finite anchoring of her practice. The musical genre "soft rock" has been referred to as *"the titans of tenderness... the sultans of sensitivity..."*

*the monsters of mellow..."*³, sung by the likes of Lionel Richie, Roxette, Phil Collins and others. Indeed the contemporaneity of this practice would lead you in this metaphoric direction, yet the forms themselves also appear reminiscent of geography, especially cavernous though non-sensical spaces of a vibrant underworld. Perhaps these are paintings and drawings of a literary world, think Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* or Alain Corbin's *The Lure of the Sea*, in which he traces the shift in visualisation and the metaphoric embracing of the sea and coast during the Enlightenment Period.⁴ Needless to say there is the cheeky aside to abstract expression.

In moving away from real world natural associations, equally we might see windows on the unknown world of science fiction. Not the creepy crawlies, or the personified animal subjects. Rather, dare I say it the visual *nature* of science fiction. Arbitrary swirling and floating forms across the canvas like amoebic mass oscillating in undefined atmospheric space.

Working intuitively on each painting, Merrett steps into uncharted territory at the beginning of each new work. Working from the first mark on the canvas through until the final detail is a brave passage that when successful, yields limitless possibilities in the eyes of the beholder. Understanding the manner in which the Romantic sensibility operates provides a crucial inroad to this artist's journey through an ostensibly abstract genre.

Whether or not these paintings summon the full or part thereof imaginative experience described, what they undoubtedly achieve is an escape from the everyday, representational world. In shifting from the world of reality to the world of the imagination we move from things seen to things dreamed.

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1 *"The image must be viewed from a position that is very far from the usual in-front and straight-ahead position from which we normally expect images to be looked at"* adapted from <http://www.widescreenmuseum.com/widescreen/squeeze.htm>

2 Representational and non-representational aesthetics

3 Wish it was mine, borrowed from http://www.vh1.com/shows/dyn/the_greatest/120061/episode.jhtml

4 Corbin Alain *The Lure of the Sea: the discovery of the seaside (1750-1840)* Penguin 1995 Translated Jocelyn Phelps. Corbin's book is an account of the angst with which, until the eighteenth century, the sea and coast was viewed. At this point however Corbin traces the manner in which the imagination embraces the unfamiliar or unknown sea and coastline in a terrific account drawn from artistic, scientific and philosophical evidence.