

Jennings Kerr

Harry Martin
The Fading Light

"I must stay alone and know that I am alone to contemplate and feel nature in full; I have to surrender myself to what encircles me, I have to merge with my clouds and rocks in order to be what I am. Solitude is indispensable for my dialogue with nature." - Casper David Friedrich

I think of Harry Martin through his paintings or certainly with them in mind. I think of Martin being an old soul, a romantic but someone with an ability to touch people through his handle of space and light. These large paintings are powerful and full of wonder but they are also intimate and they hold your gaze, while their horizons tempt movement and adventure. Martin has made his own journey, relocating to the other side of the world, folding the easel, packing up the brushes but carting his landscapes in his mind. These paintings fold space, they are like gateways from his home and upbringing in these terrains to his new setting in London. Many of the paintings in the show have been painted from memory of his times here, some are imagined, stitched together as he sketches them out, or most recently found in the English country side. I don't really think it a concern where they are, or if it's a rural vista or a figment of Martin's imagination, they are worlds to get lost in, backdrops or stage sets to fill in. They are spaces for contemplation and for our own imaginations to run wild and free.

Family tales of chasing green pastures, bouncing in the reverse order of that of the artist, England to Tasmania, and onto the Southern Highlands and beyond. I think these lands inspire with their expanse and fertility. These movements rooted on my wife's fathers side, her mothers side long in the hills of Kangaloon and in my case having moved from the hustle and bustle to the clean air. I think we all hold places with us, perhaps they are special memories or places that helped inform who we are. Martin continues his dotted line on the globe, and I have followed his visits to the great galleries and Museums in London and elsewhere on his European bounce around. He seems to gravitate to the traditional, to the Old Masters and to pieces of formal quality. This move has certainly given a focus to his drawing and a chance to explore new courses and schools of training. Martin attempts to infuse a little nostalgia in the work. I am impressed by his handle of composition, his grasp of form and volume but most importantly his ability to balance a sense of the familiar with a fresh perspective. I feel a sensation similar to being in expansive passages of nature, a release and lift. The power of the void and the endless stretch to Martin's horizon. I can't help but take a break and see the grey skies forming above the tree line from the gallery window. A reminder of these scenes all around.

Martin has been able to find space in Surrey and Oxfordshire, paddocks and hillsides but through his hand, less idyllic and lacking in action but carrying a similar intensity to the skies of John Constable. These works aren't about the grazing livestock or the ducks by the dam, Martin is more interested in painting an ethereal scene. The romancing of the rural, the English countryside by William Turner, Thomas Gainsborough, and Constable all very relevant here. We certainly feel the emotional charge from Martin in his naturalistic scenes but I also think of the German painter Casper David Friedrich who was considered one of the great romantic landscape painters. His work comes to mind because of the sublimity in Martin's canvases. The search for something more in the fields, the spiritual quest in the clouds and trees. They express a little magic and wonder, certainly moody with their low light piercing the cloud cover. Martin favours this dim light as his theatrical device. It sets his scene and his compositional structures blend a low horizon to allow a generous sky. It brings to mind long days, and grasses in the wind, resting the back on the earth and watching the clouds drift around above.

I know Martin is looking to reduce, to express with less, and to use a softness in the painting. There is very little sign of activity, perhaps with a different perspective we could find some demarcation and paddocks. The scenes are open, they allow the viewer in very comfortably but hold you there. The softness of light and the blending of the grounds makes for an immersive experience. Where there was often a Rückenfigur in the works of Casper David Friedrich, there is only the expanse in these paintings. The Rückenfigur involved placing a figure in the foreground of the image in order to invite the imagination and experience of the perspective of the figure. I look into these and imagine Martin out in the hills of Kangaloon or more recently in the English countryside, finding himself or plotting his next adventure. So there is a looking in but perhaps also a looking or imagining outside of the picture plane.

Country to the city, city to country, or staying still and content. Places touch us in different ways, they travel with us like a creased boarding pass, long haul flight in the pocket. Martin despite his old soul is chasing the horizon, setting out on his great adventure. These paintings are awesome, they are sensitive but also strong and for me they are far more than a view or vista. These gestures and marks come together from the hand, signing the soul. They give purpose and peace to audience and artist. They might be seen as windows in this gallery with its rural location, but they are far more than. Interpretation here exceeding reality with comfort, touch and sensibility well beyond Martin's years. Maybe this show sent back instead of a postcard to his home country, incredibly beautiful and sophisticated, a connection to a special place and his means to connect to it and to those special to him. These paintings should be enjoyed and celebrated amongst friends and family and then sent out along another dotted line.

James Kerr, 2023