

A rhapsody to sizzle the retina and swoon the mind

VISUAL ARTS

AURA

Robert Owen, Arc One Gallery, 45 Flinders Lane, until November 14, arc1gallery.com

LOST TO WORLDS 2

Anne Ferran, Sutton Gallery, 254 Brunswick St, Fitzroy, until November 21, suttongallery.com.au

THIRST

Maryanne Coutts, Australian Galleries, 35 Derby St, Collingwood, until November 8, australiangalleries.com.au

Robert Nelson Reviewer

IMMERSIVE experiences in art are more about content than scale. Admittedly, Robert Owen's multi-panel painting *Ten Eye Colours* at Arc One Gallery is huge; but it overcomes you by taking you to the edge of your visual competence. It's made up of severe vertical stripes in strong colour, both regular and hectic, which sizzle the retina.

You cannot absorb the multiple geometric forms, and the mind jumps around trying to see patterns.

Through this impossible toggling among the optical bars, the mind goes into a swoon. It's a paradox: such rectilinear severity spread over this great distance produces rhapsody.

Similar feelings arise with Owen's *Endings*. What look like bright abstract landscapes are in fact prints made from film stubs that Owen collected from 1968 to the 1990s, when film began to come to an end for the bulk of photography.

The zones of colour on either side of an uneven horizon resonate with associations that the mind tries to deal with. They're about disorientation and wonder. You struggle to gain your bearings yet feel at ease in immersive speculation: how does cast-off matter reach such a spiritual threshold?

Anne Ferran achieves similar immersion in her *Lost to Worlds* at Sutton Gallery. She also has scale on her side, with large photographs digitally printed onto aluminium unfolding on the grassy ground. Your eye has very little to latch upon, as the



The glum streets of brutal light in Maryanne Coutts' *Thirst*.

shaggy terrain disperses your gaze and you search for some bearings.

The reason Ferran brings our nose so close to the ditch is that a certain paddock just outside Ross in the middle of Tasmania was the site of a female penal factory for six years in the middle of the 19th century. Ferran's images reveal how little remains of this slave-labour penitentiary on the same ground that would have supported the Palawa paradise only a few generations earlier.

As you feel the sway and pull of the earth beneath your feet, you feel yourself taken in by the image of a ruined place, distressed by multiple histories of trauma.

The immersion is not reassuring. It's a bit like going into someone else's head, but not with sympathy so much as torture. Cruel mind games would have been played out there — confusing and disempowering — and it is momentarily oppressive to feel it by merely looking at the dirt.

In art, it's also possible to enter someone else's head sympathetically, become disoriented and yet find the immersion reinforcing. The paintings of Maryanne Coutts at Australian Galleries slip and slide between narratives and faces, glum streets of barren corners and brutal light in the eyeball: colours erupt with menacing glare and wild skies loom with portentous rupture.

All is thunderous and shaken and you seem to be conducted

to the consciousness of the artist as if to a precipice. Yet Coutts is not merely an expressionist, artificially seeking a pretext for emotional discharge. Just as her modelling is deliberate, so her construction of space is searching and investigative. The energy in her work centres on processes of perception and feeling.

A remarkable video enigmatically called *Thirst* demonstrates this searching vein most forcefully. The video records rapidly changing paintings, as perspectives and protagonists are shifted around, painted over; images successively grow and fade, all conspicuously wrought by hand with drawn traits and yet folded organically into the flow of time.

Perception is not static but evolving with every moment. Using the time-based medium of video, Coutts captures the mercurial properties of seeing, which are impossible adequately to summarise in a single frame. Perhaps stimulated by the writings of James Elkins, Coutts refers to the alchemical, the transformative character of paint, that malleable chromatic paste that can turn itself into anything.

As the paint and the painting-video mutate, so might our mind, drawn in by the enticing turns of signifying matter at the end of a brush.

Coutts shows that aesthetic immersion can also be as intimate as a brushstroke.

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