

# Evocative imagery draws on memory

*Through the trees.* By Thornton Walker. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin, Until May 22.

**Reviewer:** Sasha Grishin.

While some artists depict a scene or slice of nature that is in front of them, Thornton Walker sets out to recreate a scene from memory rather than depict what he sees, and does this in such a manner that it will evoke an emotional and spiritual response.

He is an exacting, figurative artist, yet his oil paintings and watercolour drawings in this exhibition are highly abstracted, layered and distilled. In a large painting, such as *Through the trees II*, the foreground trees have been truncated and pressed hard against the picture plane, as in a Japanese woodblock print, while the shoreline and the far distance are covered by a misty haze. The painting is more of an evocative mood impression or a meditation, rather than an exacting observation. This is also true of most of the other oil paintings in the exhibition, including *Twisted trees*, *Path in forest* and the large *Through the trees* canvas.

The landscapes in this exhibition are drawn from the South Coast, areas not far from Batemans Bay, that the artist has visited over a number of years. He notes "over the last year or so I have felt confident to put these glimpses and memories down on

canvas, resulting in a number of ambitious oil paintings. These paintings are memories of a momentary glimpse". This is a lovely expression, "memories of a momentary glance", and conveys something of the conflicting emotions that his paintings evoke.

His paintings could be described as belonging to a "dream journal", where we are provided with some clues about the scene before us, but insufficient for us to feel that we fully own the experience. His technique of painting in oils, with very thin washes, gives his surfaces a certain slippery quality and what at a distance may appear as quite a literal transcription of nature, on closer examination seems highly abstracted in the treatment of foreground spaces or the bark on the trees. What is remarkable is his ability to create an ambiguous transfigured reality.

In my mind, I associate Thornton Walker's art with the notion of the uncanny, where something can be simultaneously familiar, yet alien, and the viewer can be both attracted and disturbed by the image at the same time. As we peer through the frieze of foreground trees, beyond them lies something a bit mysterious and perhaps even slightly menacing. These are not simply pretty scenes, but images imbued with mystery.

Watercolour still life compositions, where the artist juxtaposes some of his favourite Chinese bowls, some of



*Through the trees II* by Thornton Walker is on display at Beaver Galleries.

which he collected while he was in Malacca and Penang in the 1990s, with fruit, leaves, shells, bones and paint-spattered tablecloths, are also present in the exhibition. They have been a popular fixture in Walker's exhibitions over many years. His meticulousness in technique, when conveying surfaces, is contrasted

with loose splashes of paint, scribbles and other seemingly arbitrary marks. They are captivating pieces that immerse the beholder.

Now aged in his early 60s, Thornton Walker is consolidating his position as one of the most highly-regarded and successful contemporary Australian painters.