Melancholy

Jill Stowell, Melancholy exhibition catalogue, Legge Gallery, August 2000

"The Beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the Sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality."

—Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgement*, Analytic of the Sublime, 1790

Landscape and Memory … memory and landscape … Simon Schama's rather unwieldy book recently reminded us that however urban human beings may become, they never lose the atavistic need to scan the sky.

It is this intuitive need to look up and out which forms the context for Chris Langlois's paintings. In his annual exhibitions we have come to recognise a patterning of dark and light, sunlight and shadow, caught in hazy time and space. Perspective, even scale, are often deliberately ambiguous, except where the gaze meanders through the cloud layers into deeper and deeper levels of the empyrean.

Water is Chris's element; clouds, vapour, mists, the sea.

The recent seascapes take greater risks, with an uncompromising division of the composition into sky and water, denying us the pleasures of the nebulous or the abstracted. As we look, we find the horizon pulsating with energy. As with the significant margins of those earlier clouds, tensions are set up which the waves seek to dissipate. The restless sea becomes once again a metaphor for time and its passage. But Chris never quite shows us the waves finally vanishing in a string of bubbles on the beach. The nearer shallows lose focus; it is the horizon which demands our attention.

These are not paintings about journeys or particular places. The elements of the landscape are as non-specific as possible. There are no towering mountains or shadowy valleys, cataclysmic storms or Olympian sunsets, the conventional trappings of the sublime. Yet these are paintings to lead us, as music does, into a halcyon space beyond ourselves. The more intently one looks, the more one sees, the more one feels.

It keeps eternal whisperings around
Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell
Gluts twice ten thousand Caverns, till the spell
Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.
Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,
That scarcely will the very smallest shell
Be mov'd for days from where it sometime fell,
When last the winds of Heaven were unbound.
Oh ye! Who have your eye-balls vex'd and tired.
Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;
Oh ye! Whose ears are dinn'd with uproar rude,
Or fed too much with cloying melody —
Sit ye near some old Cavern's Mouth, and brood
Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quir'd!

—John Keats, On the Sea, 1818

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