

Danelle Bergstrom

Whisper

ARTHOUSE GALLERY

Wednesday 9th - Sunday 27th October 2013

"Sweden has become known round the world as the land of detective novels. In those books by authors such as Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson, there are frequent scenes set in forests or remote, isolated townships. Even in pulp fiction one begins to imagine Sweden, and Scandinavia in general, as a place where human life seems small and trivial alongside the vast presence of nature.

In 2011 Danelle Bergstrom spent an entire year in Sweden, undertaking a residency at Konstspidemin in Göteborg, a not-for-profit institution that provides 105 studios, but only five for international artists. Bergstrom is half-Swedish by birth, but born and raised in Australia. This was the first time she has been able to spend such an extended period in her father's country. Her parents had divorced when Bergstrom was five years old, and she grew up with little knowledge of the European side of her family.

Travelling north into Lapland, Bergstrom was struck by the silence of the forests. For an artist accustomed to the cacophony of the Australian bush, the atmosphere was eerie and perhaps a little disturbing. Yet she admits to never previously having experienced such peacefulness and tranquility.

It was an opportunity for introspection, as Bergstrom was able to look back on a sad and difficult period in her life. Spending time in a foreign landscape to which she felt some residual connection, was a way of restoring the balance of her existence.

The paintings she made in Sweden put Bergstrom firmly within a tradition that sees landscape as a mirror of the mind. The recurrent motif of the empty boat on a calm expanse of water is an image of perfect repose, as if a mass of turbulent thoughts and emotions had been tamed. The boat may represent the self, but also a journey into the unknown. One thinks of those ancient Swedes, the Vikings, who would bury their dead in a boat.

Although there is a melancholy aspect to these paintings the outstanding feature is Bergstrom's attempt to capture the special quality of Nordic light. Sunlight glistens on the surface of a lake that reflects sky, clouds and trees with mirror-like precision.

Inevitably there are echoes of Monet in his garden, painting reflections on the water of a lily pond, as his vision grew increasingly blurred. Bergstrom is aware she is venturing into territory that will always be associated with these late Impressionist masterpieces, but she is working from her own observations and experiences, not from the art history books.

In these pictures Bergstrom has responded in a spontaneous, lyrical fashion to the experience of an unfamiliar landscape. In doing so she has diffused her own cares and sorrows into her experience of the physical world, letting the senses chip away at the emotions. There is a feeling of optimism in these works, a suggestion of catharsis and renewal. The exhibition describes a slow spiral outwards, from the dark recesses of the mind to the clear light of a Scandinavian summer's day."

John McDonald is art critic for the SMH & film critic for the AFR