

FUGITIVE LIGHT

Notes on the exhibition September 2018

Peter James Smith's works are a harmonious dichotomy, a symbiosis of science and art, of the physical and the spiritual, and of the present and the past. In his images, we are faced with cinematic panoramas, lovingly and beautifully presented, upon which are superimposed ship's log entries, geometric and astronomical equations, and notebook jottings. The focus of the viewer moves from image to writing, from the flowering of nature to its mathematical underpinnings, and back again.

Smith's work takes us back to the age of colonial exploration and discovery, and also to a similar period in art history, when the wonders of nature were being opened up as an amalgam of the intellectual and mystical by romantic artists such as Caspar David Friedrich. We are aware of the ordered logic of creation, yet that does not mean we cannot also be in awe of the sublime within nature.

There is a fluidity to the painting style of Smith which reaches a new height with this exhibition. For the most part, the images have broken free from the artist's earlier use of black framing devices, in many cases now encroaching to the edges of the canvas. In works such as *Lake of the Sorrowing Heart* and *Nine Fathoms' Passage, Dusky Bay, New Zealand, 1773* the scenes - and above all the infinite southern skies - threaten to break out of the canvas and envelop the gallery space.

As if to live up to the exhibition's title, there is more light in these works than in many of Smith's previous paintings. But the light, as the title suggests, is fleeting. These are dusk and late evening scenes for the most part, the images captured in the dying rays of the sun. Not that this is the only interpretation of the title of the exhibition: fugitive can refer to wandering, often as an escape, and as such ties in with the notion of early exploration. Perhaps more importantly, it can refer to the shift of colour over time, a shift which is apparent to anyone who has watched a sunset.

Although the diffuse sky colours are softer and more naturalistic than in some of Smith's earlier works, several of the works also speak of a widening of the artist's palette. In particular, strong reds now make an appearance in works such as *And Like a Cross in the Wilderness* and the astonishing, painterly *Circle of Fire*, a work in which the landscape itself takes second billing to the atmospheric effects the artist has created.

Bjorn Houtman