

OPENING REMARKS

Suze van der Beek – ‘Blue Room’, Moonah Arts Centre

Jeff Malpas

When I came into this room during the setting up of this exhibition, a line came to my mind from the nineteenth century German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘In lieblicher Bläue’ – ‘In lovely blue’. The line is the title as well as the opening of one of Hölderlin’s most famous poems – a poem that meditates on human life and death. The line seems especially apt in relation to Suze van der Beek’s ‘Blue Room’ images.

Hölderlin’s blue is the blue of the sky, and the poem is a poem of place, of places, and of human being in place – the poem ending with a reference to Oedipus: “Son of Laios, poor stranger in Greece. Life is death, and death a life”. The blue of these images is also the blue of the sky, but it is a blue deepened and intensified, sometimes almost to indigo black, by the still concentration of focus on that delicate surface at which water meets air, and in which the sky, as well as the immediate landscape, is itself reflected.

As Hölderlin’s poem is a poem of place, and so too of landscape, though unconventionally so (indeed its unconventional character led it to be described by one critic as the ravings of a lunatic), so Suze’s images are also images of place and landscape that draw the experience of landscape into an almost *purified* form. Hölderlin writes, again from ‘In lovely blue’, “But purity is also beauty”, and he goes on “A grave spirit arises from within/Out of manifold things. Yet so simple/These images, so very holy,/One fears to describe them”. Here place, both the place of the image and the place in the image, appears simply the conjunction of surface and bound, of field and horizon, of movement (the breath of air on water), and of colour and depth.

Essential to place, to landscape, and to appearance, is its boundedness, and within that boundedness is an opening up that is without bound – an opening up into depth within boundaries. In Suze’s images, the opening up of this purified mode of place is also an opening that, perhaps in virtue of its very *purity* of form, is also an opening into something strange and even eerie. Into something uncanny, we might say, which in German is *unheimlich*, literally ‘unhomely’ – a disturbance of that in which we are ordinarily at home, a disturbance of the everyday placedness of things. Strange though they might be, these images are of no alien planet or foreign landscape, but images that arise through the play of reflection on a circumscribed surface of water set in the open air. It is among the simplest of things, perhaps the simplest of places, the simplest landscape there might be.

Of course, the images are also the product of the photographer’s art – these are images that are drawn to show themselves only through the skill of the artist in establishing the circumstances for such appearance. And this is the essence of artist’s practice – to enable the appearance of what might otherwise remain hidden. This is also perhaps, the essence of the beautiful, even of the beauty that manifests in the awful and of the strange, for beauty is nothing other than the pure appearing of appearance. That appearing, that beauty, as it is both bounded and yet also unbounded in its depth, belongs not to the eternal as that which is without end, but precisely to the momentary and the liminal – the same moment, the same threshold that appears in these images as a depth of darkest blue that draws one’s gaze inwards, to a strangeness that reflects the strangeness of those most ordinary of things: water, air, sky, place, world.

Thanks and congratulations to Suze for a remarkable set of images, and a remarkable practice from which they have come.

Jeff Malpas - July 26, 2018