

STANLEY PALMER

Signs of Living

As well as being personal takes on the landscape, Stanley Palmer's recent monoprints and paintings play out various historical dramas in an understated, enigmatic way, hinting at the processes of history and colonisation. They exemplify what Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris calls 'the necessity to read reality in strange and unpredictable ways, re-visionary ways'. The artist's venture into the visual field finds a revealing analogy in Harris' description of going into the Guyanese landscape where 'one can immerse oneself in a world that is much stranger than one thinks and . . . this world has areas in which one is strange to oneself. One becomes aware of an everlasting stranger within oneself, and that stranger is now able to address one, whereas in more settled areas that stranger is unwelcome . . .'¹

'There are dangers in using landscape,' Palmer acknowledges. 'You have to have quite a lot to say about other things or else it just becomes a "material" landscape and a vehicle for restating traditional things. These days painting landscapes is, in some ways, a political statement and may be perceived as reactionary.' The continued viability of landscape painting has been questioned by critics including Francis Pound who, in his 1982 introduction to *Frames on the Land*, consigned such art to the past tense 'since, it seems, at least for the moment, and for first-rate painters, largely to be over . . .'²

'People would like to categorise me as a landscape painter,' Palmer continues. 'Relationship to place is important to me . . . also the sense that things are fleeting and do not last, which makes me think of those lines by Burns: "Snow falling on the water lasts a moment, is gone forever"'. As well as commenting on the tradition of landscape painting, there is a sense of melancholy in my paintings.'

Palmer asserts the potency of the New Zealand landscape as a metaphor for ourselves, 'reflecting our own experiences and perceptions, as well as the inherent fragility and isolation of living in a country surrounded by a vast ocean'. Refusing to fulfil landscape art's traditional role of the surveyance, appropriation and ownership of the natural world, or to lend themselves to notions of the sublime, the images are inhabited by the past and a sense of implied 'event'. Beneath their predominantly calm surfaces there are unsettling echoes, a buried sense of conflict and struggle.

Beside the Road, Karama, 1992.

Monoprint 1020 x 640.

Collection of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.



