



BEN HOWE

WAXING AND WEAVING REALITIES

ben-howe.com // words by Justine Morrow

The human experience is based in the realm of perception, but impacted with the inherited traumas and gifts of the past. Each person makes their way through the pathways of life, turmoil and happiness dotting the landscape of a deeply personal, perspective based reality. Perhaps the collective unconscious that Jung proposed may be supported or negated by society, but it is hard to ignore the questions of being that almost everyone asks at one time or another. Trying to grasp the meaning of it all, blundering about in a constant shape shifting existential crises, each person grapples with the overwhelming task of the why's and how's, but is there an explanation? An answer? These are the weighty questions and concepts simmering under the surface of Ben Howe's paintings.

There are many theories of reality that float in and out of the spheres of philosophy and science, but for Ben it's the reality that may not be exposed that is of interest. "I've become obsessed with the reality that sits just out of view, beyond our everyday field of perception...it also seems that I've been channeling these intangible thoughts since the beginning: exploring the penumbra, that fuzzy place between light and shadow, reality and imagination." So while Ben's paintings may look like an abstraction, or a surrealist morphing of the tangible, physical world, he is also delving into the subconscious and bringing it to life. Examples of this dual reality play can be seen in his series *Surface Variations*, as well as *Weave*. The bodies within the piece *Rosette* intertwine in a circu-



opposite page
Alignment, 2014
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 168 cm

left
Nest, 2016
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 75 cm

right
Late in the Day, 2016
Oil on canvas, 86 cm x 120 cm



lar motion that is at once beautiful but also terrifying. The naked bodies mid-turn, or clutched within the fetal position, reminds of transience, of connection but also a vast loneliness within a physically and emotionally claustrophobic, yet often empty, world. The faces within the *Surface* series are strips of flesh curving in a labyrinthine thought process like straw baskets, while other faces are literally sliced, ribbons of exhaustion and quiet surrender bend throughout the portraits. One can truly feel the reticent melancholic overtone; it is both comforting to find commonality within darkness, but the stark awareness can be difficult to accept.

There is a dialectic quality to Ben's paintings. There is the conversation about the metaphysical and emotional state of being, but also the historical and tangible application of those concepts. His work itself is a paradigm for these vast connective webs, including what it means, and has meant, to be a working artist. "Realist painting is burdened with history, and therefore with certain expectations and biases. Everyone believes they are an authority because the 'painting' has always been there, along with drawing and mark-making. Its very existence is in our DNA. As a consequence of this history painting is also, perhaps unfortunately, linked to commodity. Part of being a successful painter is to sell paintings. This immediately places the embattled painter in a position where they are caught between the bank and the unadulterated creative vision." It's this connective tissue, the concentration on the many facts of existence, both physical and philosophical, that make Ben's work so successful. The viewer is faced with a very authentic and brutally honest depiction of not one reality, but many realities, each informing the other.

Perhaps the physicality of Ben's work is so deeply felt partly because the process alone to create these massive paintings is impelled by his initial studies and preparations through mostly 3D work. Often he uses clay to shape and inform pieces of the series before any actual painting begins. "The paintings are always based on something tangible, whether it's a sculpture, diorama, collage, or sequence of video footage. In this way, much of the process is undertaken before the painting even begins." Through this palpable task the series commences to breathe, becoming the environment that Ben envisions. "In a way, these are 'hyperrealist' paintings, not because of the detail but in the sense that they try to reveal or highlight something about reality that would otherwise be hidden or ignored. This often comes across as 'surreal' because I overlap moments of time, construct landscapes, bend geographical space and rearrange components of the human form." And, of course, the canvas, the paint, each labor intensive moment that he lays upon the piece is compacted by the conceptual underpinnings of the artist.

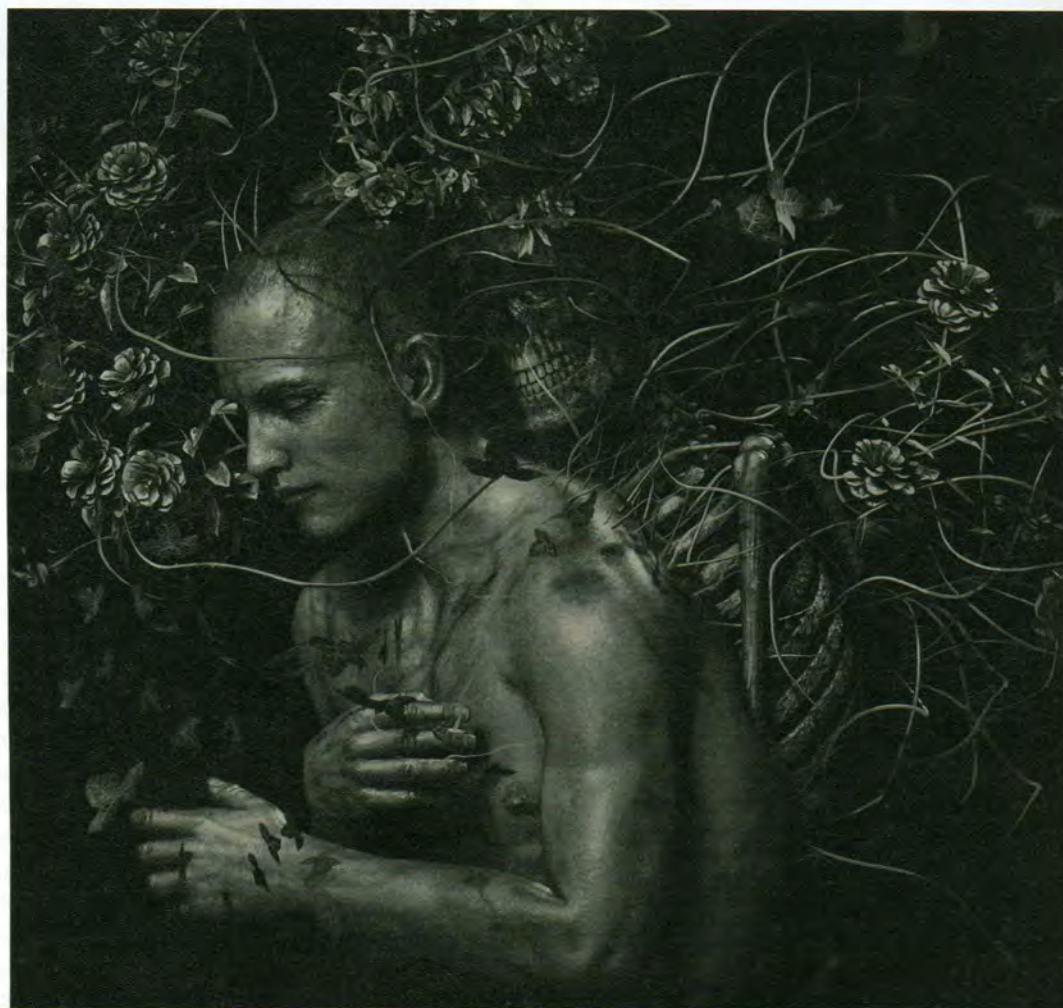
While there are many emotive abstractions within the works, there is also an overwhelming socially political awareness. Conceivably, this may be due to Ben's personal experiences with the hard circumstances and phenomena of life. He is very willing to be blunt about these experiences, and this is partly because authenticity is so important to the fabric of his work. "My life has indeed been peppered by adversity and strange occurrences..."



top
Passage, 2017
Oil on board, 87 cm x 92 cm

bottom
Wayfarer, 2017
Oil on board, 77 cm x 92 cm

opposite page
Something to Hold on to, 2016
Oil on canvas, 66 cm x 112 cm



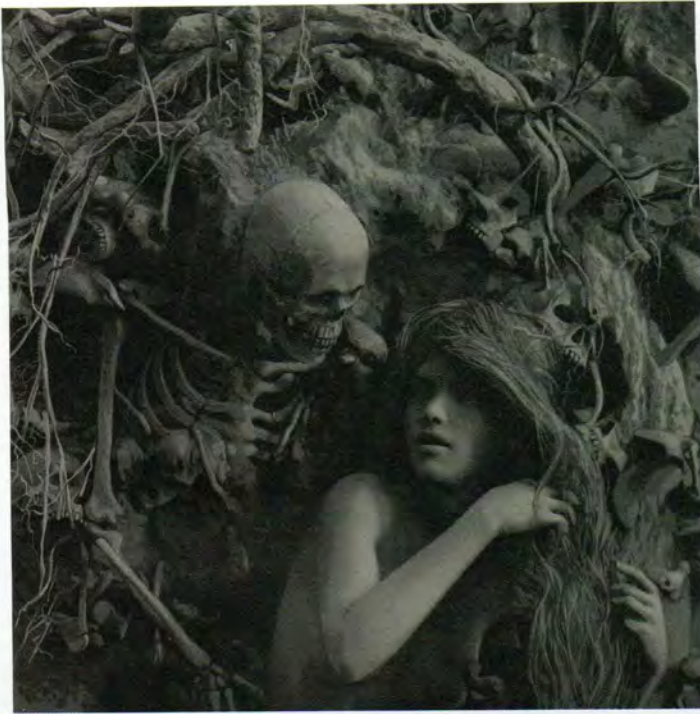


When I was twenty I left everything and made the decision to travel to Europe. It was disastrous in so many ways. I had no skills other than drawing, which led to periods of sleeping on the streets and having to participate in pharmaceutical trials for money. Exhausted, alone and possessed by the tenacity of youth, I ended up being kidnapped for four days in Morocco. I looked mortality in the eye. Needless to say, I got away and began painting with a particular view of the world... trying to see how people work, and understand how I fit into it all." It is when survival is of the utmost importance that the frivolous worries of the world dissipate, and what is left are the ancient fibers of raw, genuine realness. The perception laid upon us by the world, societal norms and expectations, can be cracked by a collision with hard truth, a reversal or breaking of one's accepted reality. What is real, and what is not, what is important and what is not, is all a matter of perception, but Ben has used his own trauma to create a life that embraces these questions and hopes to illustrate them as faithfully and genuinely as possible. "I feel that authenticity is such an important thing with art... in the end you can just 'feel' when something's missing."

This socially aware aspect of Ben's work is also, as he says, an echo of the many facets of our physical, political, and philosophical world. "If art is to hold up some kind of mirror to our times, I think it should reflect intense isolation and depression very strongly. Many of the paintings simultaneously reference both world events and the mundane rituals of contemporary existence... art is many things, but its social agency should never be overlooked." It is this amalgamation of subconscious

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and conscious states, both personal and public, both corporeal and emotional that makes Ben's paintings so internally wrenching. If we all were so bare with our lives our realities would be much different. Ben takes this truth and lays the current reality next to the future possibility. If his paintings are what is, there is also the question of what could be.

Hoping to return to his clay to conceive more three-dimensionally based series, there are also many ideas that are currently dormant, but ready to be revitalised and brought to fruition. "I basically need to sit down and generate a new body of work! I always have about five different ideas that I would like to explore at the same time, but have to put most of them to sleep." With a solo and group show already scheduled this year Ben has a number of works in the pipeline, but he's also keeping an open mind for the time to come. "Between now and then, who knows?"

opposite page
Rosette, 2017

Oil on canvas, 120 cm x 100 cm

left

Century Egg, 2017

Oil on board, 35 cm x 35 cm

right

Excavation, 2017

Oil on board, 92 cm x 87 cm

EXHIBITIONS:

SOLO EXHIBITION - Late 2018:
Hill Smith Gallery, Adelaide, Australia

GROUP EXHIBITION - April 2018:
Beinart Gallery, Melbourne, Australia