

*Not what something looks like... more what something might feel like.* Phoebe Unwin's paintings acknowledge the actuality of inhabited places, lived encounters and memorable events, but they also clear their own perceptual and sensory space, creating new visual realities from the felt resonance of recalled experience. We might think of them as uniquely sensitive representations: as if vivid intensities of colour and light, rather than verifiable forms, were all our eyes could detect. Or perhaps they are representations of sensory uniqueness: pictures that pick up on the indeterminate, indescribable effects of being precisely *somewhere*, or being with a specific *someone*. They seize a decisive *something* from the fleeting, unrepeatable interplay between inner and outer states.

Sylvia Plath once said that her poems were "quite emphatically about the things of this world": she wished to "recreate... definite situations and landscapes." But for Plath "the things of this world" necessarily included intangible, immaterial phenomena: feelings of "fear and despair", or momentary quotidian awareness of "domestic love and delight in nature." Phoebe Unwin's art seems similarly open to the unknowable range and depth of reality's impact, apprehending the world in terms of what is partially seen and privately sensed. Her paintings are barometers of inter-personal atmospheres. They measure moods — according to their own, idiosyncratic calibrations — registering subjective tensions between self and other, consciousness and context. (A related perspective: Maggie Nelson proposes that writing might serve "as a seismograph of feeling, an open-eyed charting of what has come down the river, rather than a testament to unchanging emotional truths or desires.") Unwin studies "the space around something or someone... how they affect or infect their environment, or the feelings that a particular space, place or person might evoke." And in so doing, her art inevitably exists in a hazy space between depiction and suggestion: between the attractions of figuration and the transformations of abstraction.

Entering the *Field* of Unwin's recent works, what do we find? There are zones of rapturous, dizzying openness, far-reaching terrains lit by dazzling, flummoxing combinations of coming-and-going daylight. Take, for instance, the ebullient title painting: *Field*. Despite the unfussy directness of its name, this is less a study of delimited land than a celebration of surprising, unlimited sky. Low down in the scene, the unshowy, pale-yellow semi-circle of a half-there sun sits on a thin broken line of rusty earth; but above and beyond, the sky's unstable splendour is extravagantly displayed. Orbs and arcs of emanating, variegated yellow radiate upwards, meeting multi-coloured bundles of party-balloon colour that might — with painterly license — be legible as clusters of overlapping clouds. *Field* is a portrait-format painting — as with all works in this recent series — enabling an eyes-up, stretched-out sense of ground-to-air amplitude. The spirit seems hopeful, the zesty tones upbeat, cleansing. But — facing into this field of iridescent emptiness — perhaps there's a hint of existential strangeness too.

(excerpt from "Phoebe Unwin: Field" by Declan Long, exhibition catalogue)