

Caravan Paintings II

Dark Night of the Soul



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**MARK MAKING AND MELANCHOLIA IN PAINTING:
A LANGUAGE FOR VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE MELANCHOLIC**

MICHAEL WILLIAM NEWTON

PRACTICAL STUDY: CARAVAN PAINTINGS II

APPENDIX 2.3

**to the thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of Bath Spa University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Appendix 2.3

PRACTICAL STUDY: CARAVAN PAINTINGS II

A2.3.1 100 MONOCHROME STUDIES ON CANVAS AND PANEL

A2.3.1 100 Monochrome Studies on Canvas and Panel

Objective: To paint 100 monochrome compositions of a solitary caravan in the landscape, make immediate observations on both the success of the composition and the melancholic aura of the work. Each composition would be photographed after painting and at the end of the session wiped off. The results would be collated in a matrix and then evaluated to establish whether any patterns emerged and in particular what worked the best. These paintings would all be the same size, on the same type of support and painted using uniform materials and techniques to reduce the variable elements. I also resolved to restrict the supporting imagery in the composition to landscape elements such as trees, buildings, grass, lakes, paths fences and rocks to try and curb my tendency to introduce melodramatic elements that might confuse the reading of the base image.

Method: I made a number of small pencil sketches of a variety of compositions to provide a starting framework for the paintings to ensure that I wasn't casting around for ideas in front of the easel. I prepared a 35 x 45cm mdf panel covered with 3 coats Spectrum Thixotropic primer that had been allowed to dry for 48hours before finishing with fine "wet and dry" paper. The panel had been used before and the image sanded off back to the original primer, so a good level surface was obtained. I used two mediums throughout, turpentine and a Meyer's glaze using linseed oil. I mix French Ultramarine (W) and Burnt Sienna (W) with a little of the thick glaze to give a near black. Using a wide brush I coat the panel with turpentine and then with the same brush I work in some paint horizontally and vertically until I have the panel uniformly coated with thin dilute colour. Then using a variety of brushes and palette knives I add and remove paint to build up the image. Once I have established the basic composition I then start to vary elements to test what works best. As planned I photographed the result at each stage and made quick observations about what was working and what to try next to improve the quality of the image. At the end of each session I entered the observations into a matrix and gave each of the compositions a rating from 1 to 10 both for the success of the composition and the strength of the melancholic aura I felt.

My only deviation from my original intention came at the end of the second session when I realised I had a very successful painting in its own right and that it would be useful to keep this as a physical record for the next phase rather than rely on photographs. I decided to do this for future sessions too so consequently I had to prepare a number of panels and one canvas, all the same size and orientation using the same method.

Observations: Having completed the matrix for the 100 sample paintings I was able to sort them based on my subjective quality ratings and look for patterns in each field:

Horizon: Where the horizon is placed in the composition didn't seem to be a major contributing factor and I could make compositions work with each placing of the horizon line. I did develop a preference for a very shallow horizon that was influenced by the work of Arnold Böcklin, Nigel Cooke (not my chosen painting), Casper David Friedrich, Norbert Schwontkowski, Michael Simpson, Dirk Skreber and August Strindberg (see Appendix 1), but this may just be the novelty of breaking the compositional rules of landscape painting. There is also a correlation between the low horizon and the large expanse of background that can press down upon the subject such as in the examples I chose of work by Cecily Brown, Caravaggio, Goya, and Johannes Kahrs (see Appendix 1) that definitely enhances feelings of melancholia in the work I have seen.

Sky & Clouds: I tried four different ways of painting the sky within the constraints of the exercise; vertical downward brushstrokes, horizontal brushstrokes, a stippled effect with the edge of a soft brush, and an abstract approach using random swirling brush marks. It was quickly apparent that the abstract marks were very dominant in the composition and detracted from the intended subject, the caravan. From a practical point of view they are also very difficult to 'repair' convincingly if a mistake is made with the other elements in the painting. Whilst the stippled effect is easier to repair it still tended to "dominate from the back" and by far the most successful was the horizontally and vertically applied skies. These allowed the tone to be easily varied, could be uniform or random, easy to work over and repair and used to diffuse the edges of the caravan. The only note of caution is that the difficulty of handling the paint in the same way on large canvases may prove technically difficult – any bits that dry and cure tend to drag through and spoil the surface.

I felt at the outset that abstract clouds would provide a useful melancholic addition to the composition. In the event they were also too distracting and the best types of clouds were those that blended softly and realistically with the sky. Clearly a case of less is more.

Time of Day: At least there were no surprises here, the most successful examples being those at night followed by twilight whilst those set in daylight rarely worked well. Another note of caution is that as the compositions became more developed the paintings got darker, it being easier to add paint, and this may have contributed to the higher score.

Caravan Size & Placement: Another surprise. In my earlier work I felt that it was important that the caravan needed to be small in relation to the landscape, so that it became a “Blot on the Landscape”. In this exercise the compositions with the caravan relatively large in relation to the area worked the best. This might be related to the size of the support and needs testing on a larger working surface. In the past I had also felt that compositions with the van central were too dominant and those with it on the golden section worked better. In this exercise I was able to make both options work. Other placements of the subject were less successful.

Caravan Orientation: Whether the caravan is seen from the one plane from the end or the side, or is shown in a three quarters perspective view. In the past I have felt that those shown in perspective worked the best, but I was able to make convincing and melancholic images with all three. I also experimented with views from above and below the caravan, but struggled to get the perspective right. Some preliminary drawing practice is required.

Caravan Style: How the caravan is painted i.e. realistically, linearly or partially. The linear (outline) representations did work, but are better suited to painting in layers over a number of sessions and are very derivative of the work of Nigel Cooke. The realistic formed the largest component of the exercise and worked well, yet the best were those where the realist representation was partially obscured by the sky or abstract brushstrokes and removal of paint. Maybe it was just the novelty, but I felt that this partial occluding of the view of the van really made the melancholic aura very strong. This approach has similarities to the works of Francis Bacon, Cecily Brown, Eberhard Havekost, Wilhelm Sasnal and Lara Viana (see Appendix 1) but isn't directly related to any of them. Needs more thought and work to be sure it isn't just a cliché that I have introduced.

Foreground: How the foreground is painted didn't seem significant other than that it was helpful to have it more detailed than the sky to help create the illusion of depth.

Other Compositional Elements: As mentioned above I restricted these to rocks, pools, trees and bushes, path, fence, and grass. Grass was the most common and could be stippled, brushed or scratched into the paint with a palette knife. All the others were tried and proved useful compositional devices to balance but not dominate the caravan. I need some practise drawing trees so that I can add to my repertoire. The white of the scrapped out fences was too much but rocks done in a similar way worked well and were easier to 'knock back' with the brush. I also experimented bringing some of the elements out of the frame in the way I had tried in earlier work and also seen in the work of Vincent van Gogh, Alex Katz, Laura Owens and Claire Woods (see Appendix 1). These were less successful, perhaps due to the hurried nature of the exercise and are an area for further experimentation. I also tried a variety of ways of painting these elements but found that a mixture of linear and realistic styles was the best combination.

Conclusions: The disciplined approach to the exercise was extremely useful, and it quickly became apparent that some things didn't work compositionally and others actually detracted from the melancholic aura. My approach to the subject (the caravan in the landscape) made a step change during the exercise and that this was directly related to my studies of other artist's paintings. I was particularly pleased with those works where I had succeeded in blocking the reading of the caravan (with an abstract brush mark) by the viewer yet leaving sufficient visual details that it was clear what the subject was. I believe that this added to the melancholic aura by making the viewer aware that they are looking at a representation or 'sign' and have registered its artificiality. Darian Leader in his book 'The New Black' says this transformation has important parallels in the mourning process where a mourner finds ways of representing reality, emptying it out and assigning the haunting aspects of the reality of loss to a representation . In other words these paintings work on two melancholic levels; they are a depiction of the metaphor for the loss (the caravan) and reference the process of making the reality of loss artificial by inscribing the idea of the loss in a symbolic space. Use of darkness around the subject introduces notions of the 'void' and I suspect that this is why the nocturnal lighting worked the best.

Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, I was also relieved to be able to complete the paintings quickly and move on. This relieved a lot of the pressure I feel while painting, particularly when it is an image that has to be built up over a number of sessions.

Cross Reference: Leader, Darian [The New Black](#) 2008 Hamish Hamilton, London **101-4**

Caravan 201



Caravan 202



Caravan 203



Caravan 204

Caravan 205



Caravan 206



Caravan 207

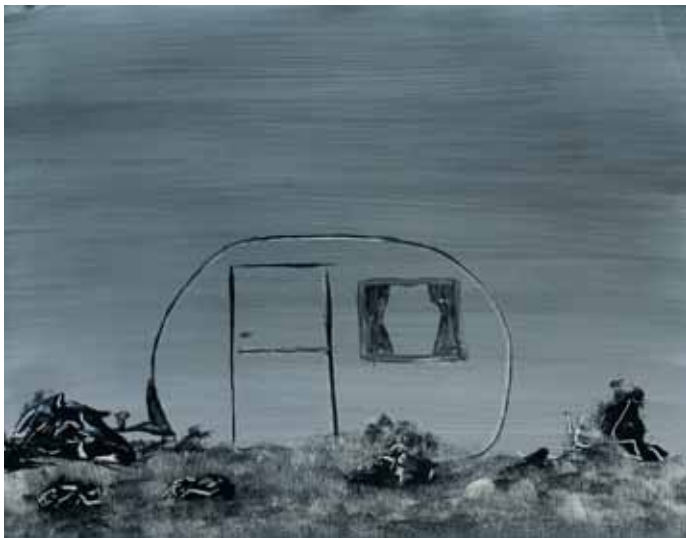


Caravan 208

Caravan 209



Caravan 210



Caravan 211



Caravan 212

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Caravan 214



Caravan 215



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Caravan 218



Caravan 219



Caravan 220

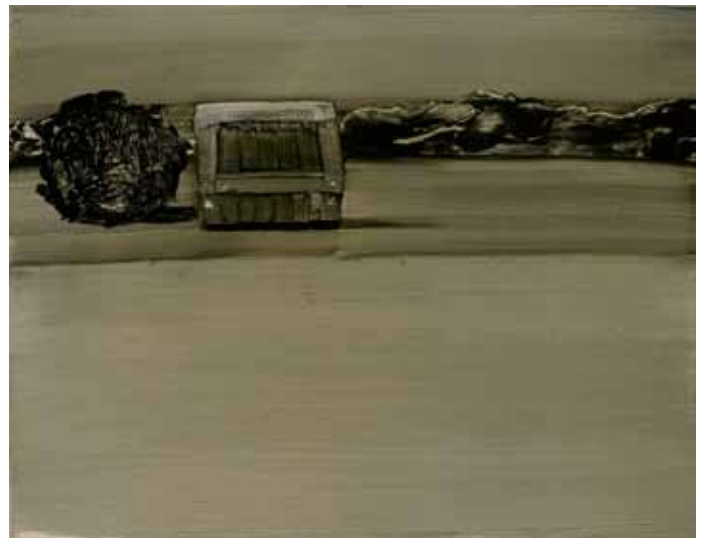
Caravan 221



Caravan 222



Caravan 223

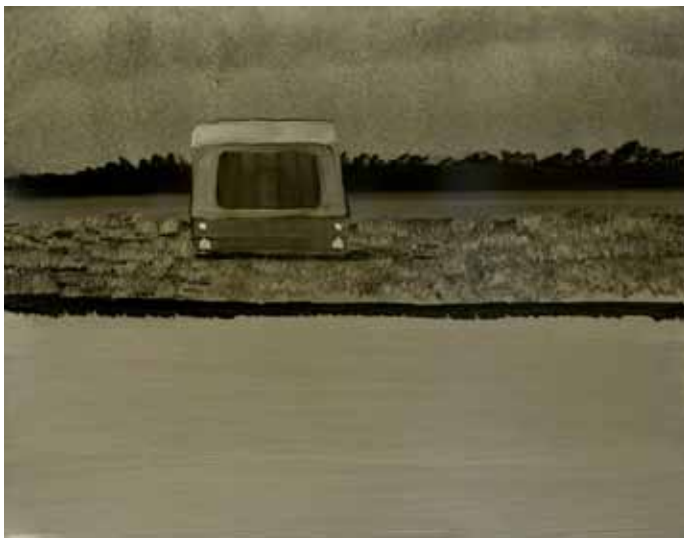


Caravan 224

Caravan 225



Caravan 226



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Caravan 300

A2.3.1 100 MONOCHROME STUDIES ON CANVAS AND PANEL

8 SELECTED PAINTINGS



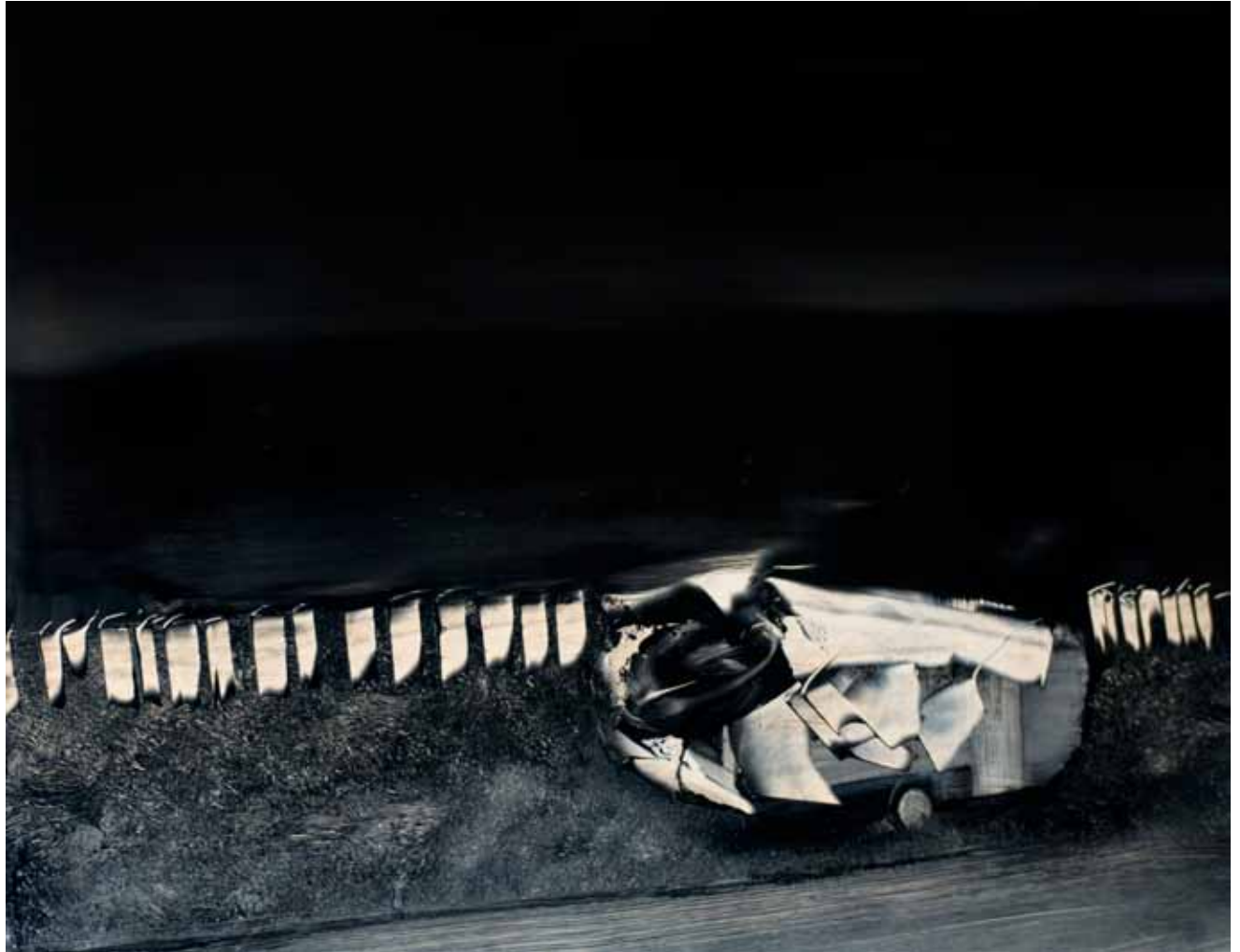
Caravan 221, 2010
Oil on Panel 35x45cm



Caravan 249, 2010
Oil on Panel 35x45cm



Caravan 248, 2010
Oil on Panel 35x45cm



Caravan 226, 2010
Oil on Panel 35x45cm



Caravan 294, 2010
Oil on Panel 35x45cm



Caravan 300, 2010
Oil on Canvas 35x45cm

A2.3.2 'DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL'

MEDIUM SCALE PAINTINGS ON CANVAS

A2.3.2 'Dark Night of the Soul'

Objective: Utilising a studio space at Sion Hill for 8 weeks the primary objective was to complete 4-8 paintings based on the best of the results from the work done earlier in the year, A2.3.1 100 Monochrome Studies on Canvas and Panel. This would test out whether some of the lessons learned and spontaneous 'discoveries' could be adapted to a larger scale. Apart from the practical problems posed by the larger scale I was also interested to see if the larger works were more successful in terms of melancholic 'aura' or sensation. To make best use of the time in the studio I also did some smaller pieces experimenting with the flow of ideas that have presented themselves for this melancholic metaphor.

Method: All the paintings described below use predominantly a palette which is basically variations of Burnt Sienna with French Ultramarine and a method of painting that involves wetting the surface with turpentine then working in a glaze to get a light background that the image can be 'drawn' into freehand by removing paint, and then detail added and removed with a variety of brushes and scrapers with a final overall glaze to adjust or unify tonality. Where the image hasn't worked at the first attempt the paint is removed with a large window scraper, the surface cleaned with White Spirit and left to dry before a fresh attempt started.

Conclusion: The primary objective had been to get 5 paintings that seemed to work on a small scale successfully translated to a larger version. I think I managed this for two of the five proposed, the other three were more successful small, although this was more related to my failure to capture the spontaneity of the earlier brush work rather than scale.

The time in between was spent trying out promising ideas, few of which were successful. It helps to be prolific, but only if you are a good editor of the results. I would say I am getting better, although it is usually only with hindsight that I can see the flaws. With my style of painting that involve getting it right at the first attempt or restarting from scratch it would be helpful if I could make better snap decisions. The alternatives are to accept that there will be failures that I don't see at the time or I change my whole way of painting to accommodate making corrections as I work.

Caravan #125 'Brain Damage': The image is from what I thought was the most successful of the 100 monochromes studies #280. I did have some problems with evaporation in the warm studio and had to keep adding glaze medium into the paint on the surface as I worked the image. It was difficult trying to recreate another painting, but I was pleased with the result. The only real negative was the drip from the roof had to be simulated (the original was accidental and the blue came from the separation of the component colours in the mixed paint) this time due to the temperature, however, it does look natural enough.

The finished painting has proved to be my most successful to date. It has been exhibited a number of times and been shortlisted for and won art prizes. It was accepted for the second stage judging of the John Moores 2012 Painting Prize, but didn't make it into the exhibition. Consequently it is important to analyse why it has proved so successful.

It is certainly a bleak image, the black caravan with only one small window showing abandoned in a field below a black sky. There are no additional clues describing the landscape (nor competing with the caravan). The roof catches a touch of moonlight helping to define the volume and show the deterioration of the exterior. The brush work follows the form of the caravan, but it is the small details the wheel, the towing axle and the window, that bring it to life and help the viewer make sense of the image. The stabbed brush marks do read well as grass but are probably used too many times and too repetitively. More successful are the few erasures of blades of grass by the side of the van that convey its sense of permanence in the landscape.

Certainly not a typical holiday home but open to interpretation as a metaphor for loss. The colour, brush work, framing all support the strong melancholy narrative. My hope is that the image is sufficiently ambiguous to allow the viewer to project their own feelings onto the painting although this may be blocked to some extent by my choice of title for the work.



Brain Damage, 2010
Oil on Canvas 100x140cm

Caravan #126 'Dead End': The image is from another of the 100 monochromes studies, #260. With this image the scale transformed the image, in particular the landscape (based on memories of walking along the fell side in the twilight in the Lake District).

As the scrape out of paint for the palings of the fence didn't work as well on the more flexible canvas I resorted to dabbing turpentine in with a brush. The result was more like grave stones than a fence and all the more successful for it. Unlike the earlier small study #260, I did get the perspective right on the caravan (after many attempts) and couldn't bring myself (also I knew it would be less successful on the pliant surface) to scrape out an abstract curve into the caravan as I had done earlier.

The mood is one of abandoned or broken down at the road side at twilight. The dark foreboding hills in the distance contribute to the mood, but I believe the fence is perhaps even more important than the caravan which becomes more of a cypher than a metaphor.



Dead End, 2010
Oil on Canvas 100x140cm

Caravan #128 'Clearing': This was an attempt to try a more complex composition by varying the light and trying different methods to remove paint. In the end it became too complex and I started striving for too much realism. The use of balled up canvas threads to remove paint for leaves on the tress was quite successful.

Scrapped.



Clearing, 2010
Oil on Canvas 60x80cm

Caravan #129 'The Fall': This was another image from the 100 monochromes studies that I had high hopes for, #221. The problem with the small version seemed to be that I had no vertical height to express the trees either side of the caravan properly and my idea was to try a vertical format painting to overcome this.

The actual painting seemed to go well and although I struggled to get the immediacy with the trees, the foreground was particularly successful. Unfortunately when I returned to the painting the following day I felt it lacked the magic of the original. I expected the weight of the black sky to make the image oppressive, but it didn't seem to work. It just seemed to engulf the van and the trees making the foreground the subject. Perhaps it would be worth trying again with a more varied palette or making the sky more varied and the foreground simpler.



The Fall, 2010
Oil on Canvas 120x100cm

Caravan #130 'Day Tripper': This was another image from the 100 monochromes studies that I had high hopes for (#221) and another disappointment. Maybe I got complacent or it is just that some things on a small scale do not translate well to a larger painting. In this case it was the drag though of paint from the sky into the caravan that I couldn't get right. It was a warm day and the paint kept drying making manipulation with a large brush very difficult.

A minor success was the use of the window squeegee to remove paint from the foreground – I could make smaller versions by reducing the blade size with a hacksaw if this is an effect I wish to use more delicately.



Day Tripper, 2010
Oil on Canvas 100x140cm

Caravan #131 'Black Jack': The idea is a rear view of a caravan based on a Nigel Cooke painting 'Nightfall, 2005 that has a glowing cigarette as the only colour in a grey landscape that uses a very shallow depth (it is a painting of graffiti on a grey concrete wall). I used cadmium red for the tail lights and again I used the window squeegee to reasonable effect, but the overall painting was disappointing.

Lacks atmosphere and doesn't convey a sensation of melancholy at all. I seem to have lost the plot – perhaps it is the low horizon that is causing difficulty, or too much reliance on the ideas of others.

Scrapped.



Black Jack, 2010
Oil on Canvas 60x140cm

Caravan #146 'English Psycho': I was working on my presentation for the 'progression assessment' at the time and one of my slides was Edward Hopper's 'House by the Railroad' from 1925. The low viewpoint from my own photograph was adapted to fit Hopper's composition only with the railroad replaced by Armco. The image seemed to work well as a study on a small panel so although I had intended to paint a large version of #248 on this canvas, the success of the study inspired me to change my plans and try the new composition.

Unfortunately it wasn't as successful on the larger scale. I did paint the Armco more confidently but the caravan turned out too dark and a little short. Not a complete disaster, but disappointing nonetheless.

Seeing the two paintings side by side it is immediately clear that the crucial factor is the space around the caravan that makes the most difference. As was the case with many of the paintings the smaller works were compositionally stronger, the brushwork more interesting and the incident light more suggestive of twilight.



English Psycho, 2010
Oil on Canvas 100x120cm

Caravan #147 'Wyeth': A final painting based on a photograph of a caravan that I have used before #114, #118 and #261-268. This time I isolated the caravan more in the landscape leaving out other details (trees, rocks, pools etc.) and again the simplicity seemed to pay off despite (or because of) the smallness of the caravan within the frame and the modest size of the painting. The lightness in the sky help alleviate the gloom a little making a stronger painting than it would have been all black.



Wyeth, 2010
Oil on Canvas 40x500cm

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