

# Insight for sore eyes

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Phenomena

## Howard Taylor

Museum of Contemporary Art

Until November 30

**Howard Taylor** was an artist whose visual language sat on the cusp of vision and blindness.

How do we begin to describe the extraordinary and subtle art works of the late **Howard Taylor**, on exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art? I had various failed attempts at writing about this work. I found there was no way I could even come close to re-creating the visual experience through language, and that rather pleased me but it didn't move my review along very far.

In my frustration I recalled the artist Douglas Gordon telling me how he was once offered an enormous space in Glasgow's Tramway Gallery. It was about the size of a football field and used to be where all the city's trams were housed overnight. In his frustration he switched off all the lights and the problem went away there was only blackness. That was how, as a text-based conceptualist, he eventually moved into video art as a way of filling the space.

It is also how I finally approached **Taylor's** work. I tried to imagine I was blind. And then, very gradually, I tried to imagine my sight was returning. I see shapes that may or may not be objects, but they certainly don't have any words attached to them. What faint colour exists keeps slipping back into darkness before blooming again into mauves and deep purples. I have trouble telling if I am two feet or two light years away from that dim circle of light.

Not for nothing are the exhibition and catalogue called Phenomena. The work **Taylor** produced in the 1990s is the culmination of decades of hard looking, thinking, and searching relentlessly for two-dimensional visual equivalents to spatial and atmospheric events. It is the same labour of love and discovery built on decades of research that took Monet to his water lilies and Mark Rothko to his abstracted landscapes.

Where Rothko stared at the horizon, however, **Taylor** stared directly at the sun. Bush fire sun (1996), along with Light source reverse (1994), are destined to become two of Australia's great iconic images and Wesfarmers and the Art Gallery of Western Australia are fortunate to have them in their collections. Paintings of the sun and the moon are minefields for visual cliché, as any first-year painting lecturer will tell you with a groan. I don't think anyone since the English mystic Samuel Palmer has succeeded as well as **Taylor**.

How did he come to this style of painting? Gary Dufour, deputy director of the Art Gallery of WA, where this exhibition originated, gives a good overview of the artist's life.

**Taylor**, the son of an architect, grew up in Perth. His skills at aeroplane model-making not from a purchased kit, but forming complex, aerodynamic wing structures from raw materials soon led to **Taylor** craving the real experience. He joined the RAAF in 1937 and within two years was fighting in France for the Royal Air Force. Captured in 1940 he spent his time at

Stalag Luft 111 honing his life-drawing skills. Instead of returning to Australia, on his release he went to England and studied art at Birmingham. "He described his three years as a student as 'ideal'," writes Dufour, "the situation offering him access to faculty and life-drawing classes for instruction and criticism, but allowing him the freedom to roam the countryside discovering and drawing the landscape."

By 1949 **Taylor** and his wife, Sheila, were back in Western Australia, living on a 24-hectare property at Bickley, in the hills east of Perth.

Over the decades his work evolved through self-portraits, landscapes and experimental sculptures into what I consider to be some of the finest paintings made anywhere in the last years of the 20th century. But was there a unifying element in all that diversity?

"I was always interested in painting techniques," **Taylor** once said. "I used mixed techniques such as the earlier painters used tempera with oil and so on. Then I got into egg tempera itself, and that taught me much more and backed up my wish for a disciplined way of working because it simply demands it. Tempera taught me almost all I know about colour and the behaviour of materials in a physical sense."

That, and the Australian landscape. For, as he says elsewhere about moving from northern Europe back to Australia, "I think the first jolt you get is a change of climatic conditions. The sun is straight up above you; it tends to flatten things out. You miss that half-covered sky or the diffused light that you get in Europe. You have burnt-out stuff in the bush; it's a harsher country altogether, so even if you think like Constable, you come out here and you can't really paint like Constable."

**Taylor** has been compared with Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland in England and to Rosalie Gascoigne, Clarice Beckett, Max Meldrum and Robert MacPherson in Australia. When I think of how his work evolved over many decades the two artists he most reminds me of are Piet Mondrian and the English Op artist Bridget Riley. All three looked long and hard at the landscape, searched for equivalents, then created a visual language that became ever more abstracted from nature.

But is any of this any practical use to society? Again, of course it is though it may not have to be. The multibillion-dollar world of advertising, fashion and new technologies has always drawn on the pure research of Picasso, Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Barbara Kruger and Damien Hirst for its applied research injected into the marketplace.

But **Taylor** was years ahead of Madison Avenue, colour forecasters and critical theorists who appropriate artistic research, and that is a cause for celebration. I am more drawn to the cusp of vision and blindness, where we realise the preciousness of what we have, yet might lose.

H. G. Wells wrote a story called *The Country of the Blind* in which the main character, who was sighted, was not as good at navigating his way around the valley into which he had fallen as its non-sighted inhabitants. Commentators often thought this an interesting conceit for a fiction but one that did not reflect the real world. However, in a recent *New Yorker* article, "Building a better eye", Jerome Groopman quotes an aluminium machinist working with heavy tools: "Everyone I worked with at the machine shop got hurt deep cuts and lost fingers. I was the only one, even with my poor vision, who was never injured."

But it was the reactions of the totally blind Connie Schoeman, as reported in the same *New Yorker* article, who had been given a "bionic eye" and was gradually having her vision returned that most reminded me of the **Taylor** experience. When asked what she saw with the apparatus, she replied: "I see a string of lights, like the kind you drape on a Christmas tree these strings of Christmas lights allow me to distinguish one object, like a knife, from another, like a plate."