

The Tenderness of Last Light

There is no art without light. The withdrawal of light from the world is the recession of life; art, which has always had an interest in portraying death and dying, goes the way of death, as all else does, when light's last gleaming shines. Art, however, retains even in the duration of the terminal the quality which is both its making and its perversity. It is the will, even where other gazes flinch and quail, to *curiosity*; it is the desire, even where what is directed is the dying of the gaze upon death itself, to look, to *watch*.

What does it mean, however, to think that it is possible to look at – upon – last light? How do thought first, then art – or art first, then thought, for the sequence of those two is ever inscrutable, and never more so than in the impossible time of their co-implicated expiry – think and represent the time and space of the penultimate? *Last Light*, Anthony Catania's exhibition, dares to ask that and to think to see. In doing so, it is the most impossible of exhibitions, for it positions us in a speculative glimpsing of the dying of the light, of the death of being, of the death of the life of death itself.

These are heavy themes, undoubtedly. *Death's Rictus*, this exhibition might also have been called. Death has already died in some of Catania's depictions, and we are called into this exhibition – there, where light scarcely enters except to shadow, dimly, the terminal trembling of the tenebrous – to identify the body. Stayed there, though we shrink to realize it, we are spectres. What else, who else, can witness the dying of death too after all else has died? Who, what, is the other that can still pant there as it thinks that it can impossibly paint, still, representing the final futility of representation when all subjects of representation are beyond even the fugitive? For this is the great, redeeming imposture of *Last Light*: the conceit of an art which somehow contrives affirmation even where nothing comes to overcome being.

How does it do that? How does it discover luminescence in the withdrawal of the light? We can shiver in *Last Light* and walk out preferring not to look, or troubled that we have seen what we have, for though we are curious we might wish not to turn into spectres quite yet. We are, probably, disturbed by the strange temporality that plays across these representations : where we see a future which we know will not be like that, not quite like that, and yet which we also know is true, for unenforced we have ushered ourselves in to see the future sense – the sense of the future – of *the was of our will-have-been*. Like the line of time, the grammar of language breaks down there, as it must, and the grammars of all representation and art do too, in the revealing of what last light might yet reveal. And yet – and this is crucial and indeed all senses *vital* – we somehow emerge *lightened*.

If we are to speculate on the psychology of the promptings of *Last Light* this, surely, is what we must stop on. The darkest image in this exhibition is the sunniest, *Pale Rider*, where what we see is the sandy, scorched fossilization of death. This is death desiccated, not death dead. Light, we realize, promises nothing, even when it beats down, and perhaps all the more so then. But – we realize with a saving shock – it is delicate, *tender*, in all the spaces elsewhere in this exhibition. The light we see just before it too becomes unseeable is a tender light, tendering beauty. It attends to death and attends upon it at the last, knowing that the light of art has no other duty but to gleam, just, around what remains. We see, too, that even in the darkness that light is reflected back by the something that remains. It is, I think, why we emerge affirming and affirmed, for the remains depicted in *Last Light* gleam in their remaining. Darkness is not descended, and the last light is not terminal but timeless.