

# Romantic spirit in a landscape of theory

There is evidence, here and there, of younger artists re-engaging with aspects of Romanticism. The emotionally arid conceptual years, in which art seemed to consist largely of carefully poised and posed questions, seems at last to be receding. There is a new engagement with the idea of landscape, and how landscape can become embroiled with human feeling. What could be more Romantic than that?

At first glance, the paintings of the 30-year-old Simon Keenleyside are about the landscapes of Essex, his home county. They are often paintings of trees, stark, almost ghostly trunks in close proximity, so that they set up a kind of regular, slow rhythm. These trees – often silver birches (although they seem more memories of trees than particular trees) – are close to dying. The paintings are lacking in any human presence – in fact, there is not a whiff of creatureliness: no scurrying, no birdsong.

Does this make Keenleyside a landscape painter, one moreover who has been visited by the Romantic impulse? Yes, but not an entirely innocent one. Keenleyside, like all his generation, passed through the cold mill of theory: he will have spent valuable painting time thinking about the nature of

the image and to what extent, if at all, painting represents some reflection of reality as we may believe we know it. Yet, thankfully, there is a freshness and an impulsiveness – even an innocence – about Keenleyside's work. Although it shows itself to be aware that a painting is an entanglement of the self with the world-beyond-the-self, both a showing forth of something outside the self and a made thing all wrapped up in one, these paintings do not feel jaundiced by youthful theoretical unwisdom.

Take these blighted-seeming trees of his. Are they emblems or symbols of some kind? Perhaps, but they do not push their point into our faces. There is bizarrely delightful colour: the trees can look like a dance of the harlequins, stage-lit from the front, with a moon like a great ponderous gong hanging in the air. All this makes us smile, then we do start to wonder whether these trees may after all be sad clowns, concealing some inner tragedy, and whether these roots might after all be clutching at some stony rubbish.

**Michael Glover**

*Rokeby Gallery, London, to February 14. Tel 020 7168 9942*



**Ghostly:** Keenleyside's 'The Beauty of the Moonlight Overthrew Me'

# the guide

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## ■ Simon Keenleyside LONDON

Simon Keenleyside imbues Essex with romantic pretensions, offering his audience a vision of this much-maligned county that would surprise the average local resident. Unlike other contemporary artists who have championed the beauty of the shag pile (David Rayson) and the muted colours of



suburban Britain (George Shaw), Keenleyside sees Essex as a kaleidoscopic paradise of woodland glades and playgrounds

that suggest this Essex-born artist spent his youth dropping acid. But there is also the unmistakable mark of the war artist Paul Nash and the 18th-century Romantic painter Samuel Palmer, both of whom found religious mysticism, like Keenleyside, in the south-east. **JL**  
*Rokeby Gallery, WCI,  
Wed 11 to Feb 14*