

**Joe Frost**

***Riders and Terrains - 2021***

Road cycling is human endurance and popular history. It is a contest staged in city centres, industrial zones, residential suburbs, and across all the terrains that nature lays out. Only one competitor is crowned as race winner from a field of two hundred. For that single story of triumph there are one hundred and ninety-nine other views to complement it, plus an endless array of spectators' impressions formed at the roadside and from television. These are the enduring substance of the sport.

Performance-enhancing substances have played a part in road cycling since the first races were run, marring the illusion of a pure contest. This does not entirely undo the sport's legitimacy as a poetic encapsulation of the human condition, but it shifts the terms of our spectatorship. To be a cycling fan is now to be a critic and an historian, reassessing the pantheon of champions and recognising those saints whose heroism is to be measured not in victories but in their anonymity, and in some cases a sad and silent withdrawal from competition. There are similarities between the professional cyclist and the exhibiting artist, for both work within structures that elevate individuals based on performances that may not be what they are supposed to be, while other participants wait for the rest of the story to be told.

At the time when I discovered the sport – the eighties - there was almost no television coverage in Australia and factual information on the sport's codes and history was profoundly lacking. The void into which events and figures had to be imagined is now filled with data. Every team and rider that ever raced can be researched. Race footage can be viewed online. My mind navigates, as if in a state of trance, an unending matrix of palmarés and parcours through internet archives, with my collection of team postcards giving faces to the names. These items matter to me because I have never actually been to a European race. The thrill I derive from the sport is based entirely upon media representations and book learning, augmented by memories of the sensation of riding a bicycle.

As a painter I have been curious to see what I can make of a subject that exists vividly in my mind's eye, but that I have never been present with.\* While a few of the paintings in this exhibition have their origins in particular photographs or videos, I have largely avoided working from any source except for my imagination, because I have wanted to dredge down and see what has endured after years spent consuming the sport's imagery. I used to think that to paint a subject one needed to know it first-hand, but even when I do that, I give as much credence to my mind's eye as my other two eyes. Where do images come from, if not the mind?

Looking at the paintings, I find to my surprise that I have made pictures in which the overriding mood is of quietness and contemplation. The noise has been turned down; the action has been stilled. Where are the sponsors' logos, the signs and symbols? The paintings are mute on ethical questions and issues of morality. They may even affirm the illusion of heroism that I had meant to avoid. They certainly promote the aesthetic appeal of the subject.

But in the end, perhaps that is the true value of road cycling. Its reliability as sport can be doubted, but as an aesthetic spectacle it is supreme. To me, it opens a space in the imagination. It will always be associated with the years when my childhood consciousness shifted into adolescence and I discovered another, European culture of riders crossing mythical terrains.

\*I intended to see Strade Bianche in March 2020, but on my way from Florence to the start-town of Siena, two days ahead of the race, it was announced that the event had been cancelled due to Coronavirus.