

# Nocturne

Clarice Beckett's capacity to distil light, atmosphere, colour, tone, and emotion in images that are just 'there' reaches a peak in her evening scenes painted in the early 1930s.

In its title and compositional minimalism, Beckett's *Nocturne* pays homage to the paintings of nineteenth century American/British artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler. In assigning this musical term to his paintings, Whistler sought to emphasise mood and emotion over subject matter, narrative, or place. A Whistlerian approach underpins Beckett's radical simplification of subject, reduced palette, thinned, diluted paint, and the composition's elevated horizon line inspired by unconventional, flattened perspective found in some Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints.

Beckett's *Nocturne* teeters on the edge of abstraction. The diminutive moon in the upper right, and the declarative vertical strip representing the moon's reflection are the most subtle of elements to frame a grey watery expanse opposite a scrubby shoreline and the silhouette of a boatshed darkened by nightfall.

In *Evening, after Whistler*, Beckett takes abstraction further. Darkness and veils of atmosphere bring ambiguity and tenuousness to what it is we are seeing. Beckett does not compel us to attempt to identify the location. Her subject is mood, and here that could be loneliness, longing, or melancholy.

Beckett's nocturnes represent not only her interest in 'the quiet mysteries of dusk and night' [*The Herald*, 4 May 1936] but an artist testing visual perception, and boldly advancing towards the language of abstraction. Through these progressive works of the early 1930s, we can only speculate on where Beckett may have taken her practice—and Australian art—if not for her premature death in 1935, aged only forty-eight.