Reconnection
An Exploration of Australian Landscape Beyond History and Myth

by

John Robert Barnes  BFA (Hons)

An exegesis in support of his candidature for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Statement of Originality

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John Robert Barnes
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Abstract

*Reconnection - an Exploration of Australian Landscape Beyond History and Myth* is an investigation into whether the materials and processes of landscape-focussed studio research, structured on an experiential foundation, can act as a portal of connection with nature for an arguably disconnected humanity.

My direct experience of the land is central to *Reconnection* but the studio is the place where imagination and labour operated as complementary processes to produce the seven series of paintings that form the exhibition. The Australian landscape is the constant reference through which I have attempted to engage an audience with the ideas and emotions that underpin this visual exploration.

This exegesis aims to establish the personal, philosophical, environmental, historic and intellectual background in which to position the exhibition. From within this context I explore notions of belonging and connection to place and by examining the conceptual and material particularities of each series, I have tried to reveal the framework on which they are constructed and how they inter-act to form a self-contained whole.

Throughout *Reconnection* I have attempted to assess the continuing relevance of landscape painting within the plurality of contemporary art practice by examining and questioning its changing forms and focus within non-Indigenous Australian art since colonisation, as this is the testing ground for my works. This project is founded on my own experience and history and so to venture into the complexities of Indigenous artistic production with which I have had little direct personal involvement, is to go beyond its scope.

Within this research and completed body of paintings I have sought to establish a point of connection between nature and a viewing audience while questioning the abilities of landscape painting to act as a communicative medium in the exchange of ideas and emotion.
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Introduction

The arts, in ways rough and precise, were created and directly enjoyed long before they became to be objects of theoretical rumination. They are not technical products needing expert analysis but rich, scattered, and variegated realms of human practice and experience.

Background

The title of this research project, *Reconnection – an exploration of Australian landscape beyond history and myth* contains the central themes and ideas contained in the bodies of art works, that I have produced over the past four years and which make up the final exhibition. These ideas inform the research and conceptual and practical development of my studio practice while also directing the structure of this exegesis. In the following chapters I aim to develop a context in which to view and evaluate the work by examining different but inter-related component themes.

The paintings and other related images that make up Reconnection, have resulted from a long, personal involvement with the land and an exploration of visual artistic responses to the Australian landscape by non-Indigenous artists since British colonisation. It is this land which is the focal, sensual, experiential, cerebral and emotional pivot point from which all aspects of my research and artistic production are suspended.

The word ‘reconnection’ implies an existing disconnection and I believe a major consequence of an ever-enlarging population living in increasingly larger cities has been an accelerating dislocation and disengagement from the natural systems that sustain life. However humankind is not separate from nature, let alone superior as some would believe. We are an inseparable part of it despite our reluctance to accept responsibility for the mounting negative effects of our actions.

Structure – the Chapters

The degradation of the lands and the pollution of the air and water will continue, unabated unless popular demand and will is able to change the course of history or nature responds in whatever form it presents itself. Finally we have
reached the point where it is admitted that climate change and global warming are a direct result of human activity and it is the global and continental environment that is the substance of Chapter 1, *Landscape from Nature*.

Against this ‘universal’ background, in Chapter 2, *Learning to Belong* I explore the development of my personal relationship with the land from interludes of childhood play and adolescent holidays to spending most of my adult life living and working on a rural property near Binalong in south-west New South Wales. In this chapter I also address some of the reasons for not attempting to relate my own work to the largely ill-defined area of ‘Aboriginal Art’ which I believe is beyond the scope of my research.

In Chapter 3, *Antipodean Extraction*, I have attempted to provide an overview of the social, physical, environmental and political changes that have occurred since Australia’s first European settlements in order to gain some insight into the values that have accompanied or compelled them. Chapter 4, *Changing Land, Changing Landscape* and Chapter 5, *Through a Shifting Gaze*, examine the changing nature of depictions of landscape which expressed those values including their positions in history and myth.

While all artwork is produced within its own time, culture and context it can only be experienced in the present and my research has sought to position the paintings that make up the *Reconnection* series within a relevant historical framework where “we do not seek to suspend the effects of history but admit we are only part of them and cannot attempt to know the past in itself but only from the vantage point of the present.”

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In Chapter 6, *Research Through Making* I have attempted to place my works within the framework of contemporary discourse by examining the position of the art object in current thought and practice, and also by addressing the legitimacy of painting itself, with the landscape as the focal point of creative activity. As historian Richard Kalina noted

> one has to study the present to understand the past – every bit as much as one is obliged to study the past to understand the present. If our interpretation of history is conditioned by its flexibility and its interplay with the present, then it stands to reason that the historical observer – the audience for history – is no more fixed than the implied observer of a modernist (not to say postmodernist) work of art.³

Continuing in Chapter 6, the notion of an ‘autographic’ or ‘signature’ artistic style in an age of post-modern plurality is questioned. Throughout the *Reconnection* paintings I have been attempting to establish a sense of unity between bodies of work which are stylistically different in order to expand the possibilities of engagement, unencumbered by demands for stylistic recognition. As Arthur Danto noted, “Variations in style may have historical explanation but no philosophical justification, for philosophy cannot discriminate between style and style.”⁴

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Chapter 7, *1770 and Winton, History and Myth* is a return to the immediate experience of landscape, tracing different aspects of my personal and ‘collective,’ connection with its history, myths and mysteries. I also discuss our divorce from nature and retreat into the world of humanly constructed familiarity which led to the production of the *Postcard Anywhere* series of images.

It is within the studio that I have sought to acquire what Paul Cézanne described as “the knowledge of the means of expressing our emotions”\(^5\) and it is in the studio that the transformative processes, from the experience of landscape to the production of the painted works took place, which forms the substance of Chapter 8, *Roles of the Studio*.

**The Paintings**

Chapter 9, *Landscapes in Paint* examines the shared and differentiating properties of the early studio paintings, establishing a framework for Chapter 10, “Reconnection – landscape beyond history and myth” in which I discuss the first two bodies of work that became the 2008 exhibition of the same title. The idea of an un-navigable divide between representational and abstract forms of art is questioned in this chapter as are other barriers to an expansive artistic environment. In this context I also address fundamental distinctions between my own practice and that of Indigenous Australian artists.

In Chapter 11, *Through Strangers’ Eyes and Dreamers’ and My Own* the development of the final series of paintings is examined. Each series is discussed individually while being related to each other and positioned within the inter-connected final work.

Chapter 12, *Conclusion* summarises the areas involved in my research which have been discussed in this exegesis and attempts to link them into a complex whole.

*Reconnection – an Exploration of Australian Landscape Beyond History and Myth* has resulted from a long period of observation, contemplation and experience of the land and my place within it. In this research project I have also examined humankind’s relationship with nature while seeking to transform all the ideas encapsulated in these thoughts into a visual, sensual and material presence which expands the notion of ‘landscape painting’.
Chapter 1

Landscape from Nature

My concern is with the origins of our responses to landscape as encountered through direct interaction with it and thence through its representation in the arts¹

Of Weather, Climate and Population

In Australia in recent years, television and newspaper cameras have been focussed on the waterless riverbeds and dams, the grassless grasslands and eucalypt forests in their die-back death throes. In the closing months of 2010, after a decade of drought, the images in both electronic and print media switched to the vast expanses of floodwaters inundating the eastern half of the continent, yet there was snow on the Great Dividing Range in December. As summer advances and temperatures rise these scenes will be replaced by the smoke and flame of all-engulfing bushfires. “We’ll all be rooned, said

Hanrahan”, ² John O’Brien’s quintessential Australian ‘bushie’ for whom life in rural Australia was one continuous natural disaster.

I have selected the following verses from O’Brien’s 1948 poem, Said Hanrahan, which trace the ever changing weather and its consequences, both physical and psychological. The bush seer’s unchanging prediction of doom has merged into the Australian vernacular, alluding to someone never happy with their situation, specifically the ‘whinging cockey,’ (either farmer or grazier). This dismissal of legitimate, though sometimes exaggerated despair at one’s relationship with the vagaries of the elements, perhaps conceals realities of our increasingly precarious, adversarial relationship with a fragile environment.

"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,  
In accents most forlorn,  
Outside the church, ere Mass began,  
One frosty Sunday morn.

"If rain don't come this month," said Dan,  
And cleared his throat to speak--  
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,  
"If rain don't come this week."

"If we don't get three inches, man,  
Or four to break this drought,  
We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,  
"Before the year is out."

In God's good time down came the rain;  
And all the afternoon  
On iron roof and window-pane  
It drummed a homely tune.

And every creek a banker ran,  
And dams filled overtop;  
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,  
"If this rain doesn't stop."

And stop it did, in God's good time;  
And spring came in to fold  
A mantle o'er the hills sublime  
Of green and pink and gold.

"There'll be bush-fires for sure, me man,  
There will, without a doubt;  
We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,  
"Before the year is out." 

Since colonisation artists have responded to nature’s extremes, (such as W.C Piguenit's *Flood on the Darling*, (7)) however the current media concentration on catastrophic weather conditions has accompanied growing domestic and international research and discussion surrounding human-induced climate change, its ramifications and possible solutions. The overwhelming body of reputable scientific evidence asserts the influence of human cause in such change, as Lesley Hughes pointed out in his 2003 paper, *Climate Change and Australia*.

Climate change as a result of the enhanced greenhouse effect is no longer a hypothesis. The global average surface temperature of the Earth has increased by $0.6 \pm 0.2^\circ C$ since 1900 and it is likely that the rate and duration of the warming are greater than at any time in the past 1000 years. The warming trends, together with changes in rainfall and sea level, appear to be now discernible above natural decadal and century-scale variability. The most recent report from
the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded, ‘most of the observed warming over the past 50 years is likely to have been due to the increase in greenhouse gas concentration’. There is also clear evidence that recent climate trends have already had significant impacts on species and ecosystems.

Meanwhile world governments prevaricate, appearing to believe that the idea of limitless growth, that is fundamental to contemporary capitalism, is attainable despite the impossibility of its achievement and the profound environmental cost of its pursuit. The planet would seem to be conceived as Norman Lindsey’s *Magic Pudding*, a “cut-an’-come-again Puddin’” which can never be exhausted no matter how much it is consumed, and this is a perilous proposition to entertain.

Some thirty-eight years ago the editors of *The Ecologist* magazine noted that

> the main problems of the environment do not arise from a temporary and accidental malfunctions of existing economic and social systems. On the contrary, they are the warning signs of a profound incompatibility between deeply rooted beliefs in continuous growth and the dawning recognition of the Earth as a space ship, limited in its resources and vulnerable to thoughtless mishandling.

Since this observation was made, uncontrolled population growth, with its accompanying increase in consumption of the world’s finite resources has placed the planet under unprecedented pressure. Despite our wishes and fantasies to the contrary, nature operates within its own critical limits and its reactions to this unsustainable pressure are beyond prediction.

The Anglican Minister and proto-economist, Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) reached radical conclusions regarding the relationship between population changes and material supplies which are now encompassed within the notions

of the ‘carrying capacity’ and ‘sustainability’ of any given piece of land, or body of water. Some two hundred years ago he argued that the world cannot persistently support a human population whose demands are beyond its capability to supply. In referring to nature’s adjustment mechanisms used to maintain, or return to, a state of equilibrium where human demand and nature’s supply are sustainable Malthus says,

if fertility will not decline, the only method of reaching an equilibrium of population is by increasing mortality, and mortality is increased mainly through misery and starvation...if the only ultimate check on the growth of population is misery, then the population will grow until it is miserable enough to stop its growth.8

One third of the earth’s population live in abject poverty with no power to change their circumstances while the remaining two thirds consume increasingly more, without desire to alter their behaviour, despite their capacity to do so without discomfort. Historian Jacques Barzun points out a clear but often denied truth when he stated, “human stupidity is ancestral and endemic. The ship of fools has sailed in every age from every port”9 and unfortunately, our own age seems unexceptional from this perspective.

A Position for Landscape

The vulnerability of our continent and its population to sudden climatic shifts, accompanied by the visible scars of rapacious exploitation disfiguring our natural environment, has seen the landscape being assigned renewed relevance as the signifier of the precarious state of contemporary existence. As writer Paul Carter points out, if our current anthropocentric attitude persists then

soon, if the woodchopping companies and the governments that encourage them have their way, we will be able to see for miles in

every direction. But, in the eidetic wilderness thus created, there will be nothing to see. There will be nowhere to stand. Like the nomad without a track, we will be utterly lost.\textsuperscript{10}

In my own painting the landscape has become a vehicle of exploration, contemplation and the expression of possible outcomes resulting from our present circumstance of subjective and collective disconnection from nature. Arnold Berleant points out that, (if it were ever true) then the distinction between the natural and the artificial no longer holds. In light of what we now know about the far-reaching effects of human actions...it is no longer plausible to think of nature, in any significant sense, as separate from humans. Nor, conversely, can we insulate human life from the reciprocal effects of these changes. We are all bound up in one great natural system, an ecosystem of universal proportions in which no part is immune from the events and changes in the others.\textsuperscript{11}

The basis of all my research and practice is experiential for, as Alva Noë noted, “the world as a domain of facts is given to us thanks to the fact that we inhabit the world as a domain of activity.”\textsuperscript{12} My personal interaction with the land has underpinned my enquiry into the landscape where, as art historian Terry Smith observes,

\begin{quote}
  at every point of its expected disappearance, a new purpose appears, usually from a source outside art....But this recurrence may be deceptive; landscape does not come back each time as a revival,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} Alva Noë, \textit{Action in Perception}. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), 179.
a regeneration of a tradition, a new gateway to the essence of
Australianness. It returns, each time, as something still more other.\textsuperscript{13}

From where has my particular, personal relationship with the land grown? How,
why and for what reasons has my interest in the visual depiction of this land
been developed, and how have differing ideas of land and landscape combined
to become the focus of my artistic practice and research?

The paintings of Reconnection derive in major ways from half a lifetime living
and working in rural Australia, being sustained by a particular piece of physical
dirt. But that is only half of a story.

\textsuperscript{13} Terry Smith, “Present Implications” in Geoffrey Levitus ed. \textit{Lying about the Landscape}.
(Sydney: Craftsman House, 1997), 120.
Chapter 2

Learning to Belong

In Australia the topic of identity — at personal, local, regional and national levels — has most frequently been characterised by attempts to draw connections between a sense of self and place.¹

Education through Exploration

I grew up in post—World War II Sydney on the strip of land depicted in Arthur Streeton’s painting, Cremorne, (9) above, living there and in Melbourne until early adulthood and for the past decade I have lived in Newcastle. Now over half my life has been a city-centred existence with all the experiences and influences contained in and exerted by its conditions. However, regardless of my postal address, I have always maintained a connection to the land.

David Tacey has observed that for many the landscape is “dead, empty, unalive” and merely “a dead objective background to our busy, ego-centred and self-propelling human lives”³ but I find it is the land that provides some balance and perspective in my life. If one only inhabits a world of humanly-constructed

² The house where I grew up stands in the mid-right of Streeton’s painting.
simulacra, as a member of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* where “being a star means specialising in the seemingly lived,” ⁴ any notion of a meaningful relationship with nature is obscured, if not erased and the experience of life can only be diminished.

Although I spent my childhood and adolescence on the edge of a large metropolis, I was in the fortunate position of having the natural world close at hand. As children, my brother and I were given great freedom to roam and explore our immediate environment, as we chose. Accompanied by our small, close-knit band of boy-adventurer friends, the narrow strip of nature reserve around the shoreline of Sydney Harbour became more than our playground: it was to become our ‘dominion’.

As I remember, our major preoccupation was the never-ending exploration of this seemingly limitless domain. These were no scientific, fact-finding missions but voyages of discovery, imagination and creativity. The more we discovered that was new and different, the more familiar our surroundings became. As Christopher Tunnard observes in *World with a View*, our view of the landscape was being “conditioned by familiarity.”⁵ Peculiarities within the landscape produce its landmarks and through familiarity to us, the initiated, recognition of these signifiers of place became signs of occupation, if not possession.

We fished from the rocks and underneath the ferry wharf; with crude spears we had made ourselves, we speared octopus which we sold to the Italian migrants fishing above. Across and around the rugged rocks we rascals ran, climbed and clambered, finding new ways through, across or around whatever obstacles presented themselves.

The tidal pool or the harbour itself, near where the Port Jackson sharks were breeding, taught us how to swim along with long lazy summers at the beach, which had its own array of challenges and adventures. Acres of scratching and tearing lantana seemed ideal for complex networks of tunnels while trees were

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⁵ Christopher Tunnard, *A World with a View* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1978), 1
for climbing and swinging from on sisal ropes. Rocks were for climbing or throwing, depending on their size, while caves were for shelter from an unexpected southerly.

From these explorations came recognition, familiarity and a certain appreciation, as Gary Catalano observed, that “there’s an extraordinary total order to a given piece of land. When you get to know a particular area you see that it’s an immensely complicated organism.” It was from observation, interaction and consideration that some awareness of this complexity was to emerge.

Our ‘territory’ around Sirius Cove, Cremorne Point and Shell Cove is the same run of recognisable harbourside that over one hundred years ago had intrigued and captivated local Sydney artists such as Julian Ashton (1877-1964) and A.H Fullwood (1863-1930) along with their Heidelberg School peers and friends, Arthur Streeton (1867-1943), Charles Conder (1868-1909) and Tom Roberts (1856-1931). It was perhaps my familiarity with places portrayed in their paintings of Sydney Harbour that attracted me to their work in my youth.

**Rural Interactions**

Interactions with nature were not restricted to our daily after-school play around the harbour as my parents owned a small farm, Noonooora near Camden, which we visited regularly. Our extended family owned several properties in the south and west of the state where we spent large parts of our school holidays. From these visits I became acquainted with different people, rural life, wildlife, livestock and the land itself and this association developed over a number of decades.

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My memories of these early times tend to be of incidents; of certain happenings in particular settings rather than of any individuals from some specific time or date. Away from the city there were big spaces and big skies glowing with stars in the too-quiet silence of the night. The paddocks held stands of evergreen-grey eucalypts plus casuarina, acacia and paperbark trees. In contrast, the homestead gardens were stocked with distinctly scented European pines and imported deciduous elms, poplars and oaks while the vegetable gardens and orchards supplied all the needs of the household.

There was lots of heat and dust and millions of flies, and droughts followed by freezing, black frosts, sleet, and sometimes snow. When the rain finally arrived, as Hanrahan7 foretold, it always seemed to bring with it flooded creeks, burst dams and bogged trucks and tractors. The scream of the Hargan saw and the crack of the axe sounded throughout winter, constantly cutting wood for heating and satisfying the appetite of the kitchen stove. The fecundity of spring was always followed by the fear and reality of summer bushfires. There was always lots of weather but rarely what was wanted.

There were sheep and cattle, horses, chooks, ducks, geese, working dogs and house dogs, the odd pig, plus my brother’s menagerie of finches, budgies and canaries that wouldn’t sing; or was it that they wouldn’t breed? There were tortoises, pet rabbits and lots of different lizards and then there was the indigenous wildlife.

We were familiar with kangaroos, emus and koalas in the wild along with crows, kookaburras and eagles in the endless sky where clouds of parrots of every colour, squawk and size would seem to mask the sun. There were goannas and snakes and spiders of every hue and venom. There was every ant that ever bit plus their winged mates; the bees, hornets and wasps with burning stings. The yellow-brown rivers, creeks and dams hid Murray Cod, yellow-belly and yabbies, with, very occasionally, the evidence of a platypus.

7 John O’Brien, Said Hanrahan
Along with these native animals were all those species of fauna imported for sport, food or companionship that have had such a devastating effect on our environment; rabbits, foxes, and cats, dogs and pigs gone feral. Unfortunately there were also their floral equivalents; patterson’s curse (*Echium plantagineum*), sweet briar (*Rosa rubiginosa*) and Scotch thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*).\(^8\)

While accepting our continuous human mediation and manipulation of the natural environment, the development of an elemental awareness, which occurred through constant interaction with the natural world, formed a substantial part of the reality of my childhood. It was from these experiences that so many of my fundamental skills, understandings and values were to evolve.

![Janet Dawson: Balgalal Creek 1974](image)

However, even though I had come from this background I never really considered that I would ever move to the bush with any sense of permanence but as circumstance and opportunity were to conspire this was to be exactly my situation. I moved to the property, ‘Glenroy’, on the watershed of the

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Murrumbidgee and Lachlan river systems, for ‘a couple of weeks’ in 1975 and ended up leaving a quarter of a century later. The property, near Binalong is very close to Balgalal Creek, of Janet Dawson’s painting, (10) and is also near Illalong Creek where AB ‘Banjo’ Patterson spent the majority of his childhood. Nearby is the final resting place of Johnny Gilbert, the bushranger.

But the whole idea and dynamic of rural life completely changes when, no longer a tourist or visitor, one has become dependent on the land itself for economic survival, if not prosperity. The few romantic notions I may have held were soon dispelled, replaced by the realities of the cycle of mortality and a disinterested nature. Added to this were constant economic demands whose effects on any rural enterprise cannot be underestimated.

As Tim Bonyhady says of the life experienced by one of the few significant rural-based, Australian landscape painters, Kenneth Macqueen (1897-1960), “the business of making a living from the land generally put a check on idealism.” Unfortunately it is the business of making a living coupled with a fundamental desire to conquer wild nature that have often caused the greatest environmental destruction. My awareness of our relationship with nature became integral to my philosophy through these years of making innumerable mistakes while hopefully learning something from them.

Reconnection has evolved from an ecocentric, or biocentric, philosophical position which finds its roots in the pantheistic philosophy of Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677). For Spinoza neither divine substance nor the cognising mind were separate from nature; everything was interconnected in an *infinita idea Dei* (infinite idea of God). His radical idea challenged and still challenges our dominant anthropocentric, dualistic systems whose original theological justification has been replaced by ‘rationalist’ capitalist certitude.

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(9) Ibid. 130-131
There has been a drastic failure of our humanly constructed systems where nature continues to be treated as the limitless provider for humankind’s insatiable needs. Arnold Berleant observed that

in light of what we now know about the far-reaching effects of human actions…it is no longer plausible to think of nature, in any significant sense, as separate from humans. Nor, conversely, can we insulate human life from the reciprocal effects of these changes. We are all bound up in one great natural system, an ecosystem of universal proportions in which no part is immune from the events and changes in the others.¹²

If we continue on our oppositional path ‘critical mass’ will be unknowingly reached and nature will react with Malthusian precision and unpredictable indifference.

On Belonging and Non-Belonging

Even though there are innumerable hardships involved in attempting to adapt to one’s immediate environment it is only through developing an understanding and appreciation of the intricacies of one’s particular place, its geology,

geography, vegetation and aesthetic qualities, that affinity with the land can evolve. As Geoffrey Levitus says,

It is out of this process, the slow and sometimes painful development of some kind of relationship to place, an understanding of which might ultimately settle on being a kind of uneasy peace that becomes the material of artmaking.\(^\text{13}\)

I do not feel, nor have I ever felt, myself to be a stranger in this land, as it is the only land I know. My Russian-born mother and maternal grandmother, (who lived with us throughout my childhood and adolescence), migrated to Australia from France at the end of the Second World War, but unlike their situation of having to adjust to innumerable changes in circumstance and location I was born here and have lived nowhere else. I have visited Russia a number of times but I hold ambivalent feelings regarding any sense of affinity with the place, its people and its heritage. My sense of belonging is not restricted to my relationship with my physical place but with the culture, people, ideas and institutions that surround me.

By virtue of my own example and that of many non-Aboriginal people who are not only in tune with their environment but inseparable from it, I reject a widely disseminated view that only Indigenous people can fully connect with this land and truly belong to this place. This idea continues to be expressed by such authoritative scholars as Peter Fuller\(^\text{14}\), Geoffrey Levitus\(^\text{15}\), Gary Lee\(^\text{16}\), Ian McLean\(^\text{17}\) and Margaret Osborne\(^\text{18}\) who suggest that the disconnection between non-Indigenous people and the land is irreparable and, I believe misguided, identify this dislocation as being a consequence of ethnicity rather than being an outcome of the urbanisation and secularisation of the West. Over forty years ago Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr concluded that,

\(^{13}\) Levitus, *Lying about the Landscape*, 10.
\(^{14}\) Peter Fuller, *The Australian Scapegoat* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1986), 66.
\(^{15}\) Levitus, *Lying About the Landscape*, 8.
almost everyone living in the urbanized centres of the Western world feels intuitively a lack of something in life. This is due, directly to the creation of an artificial environment from which nature has been excluded to the greatest possible extent.\(^\text{19}\)

The myth of irreconcilable incompatibility is underpinned by the erroneous, romanticised notion that the Aboriginal population, as the original inhabitants, are the only people capable of living in some sort of harmonious relationship with this land. This tendency accompanies the simplistic position of treating Indigenous people as homogenous, which denies the reality of a complex, heterogeneous intermixing of people where a multitude of differences exist within and between each group and whose relationship to place is determined by their individual and collective circumstances.\(^\text{20}\)

One consequence of blanket generalisations, as David Tacey points out, is that “rather than understanding Aboriginals as a complex people, we reduce them to a single archetype, which can so rapidly turn into an imprisoning stereotype.”\(^\text{21}\)

The perpetuation of this homogenising, de-individualising attitude is a primary barrier to solving the innumerable dehumanising problems that continue to be inflicted upon Indigenous people since the arrival of The First Fleet.

This is the background against which my visual and theoretical research is tested, not in isolation from society, its history and its culture nor the values it entertains. In the following chapter, through examining the changes in Australia since Britain claimed possession, I am aiming to place the paintings from these periods in some meaningful historical context while establishing their conceptual and stylistic links with my own work. As Virginia Spate reminds me I am a ‘beneficiary of the British creation of Australia,’\(^\text{22}\) and failure to explore this period would be to ignore its intrinsic significance within Reconnection.

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Chapter 3

Antipodean Extraction

The spatial organization of the country is a story of the occupation of the land and the changing use of the land...any set of spatial features is an amalgam of theory, myth and reality, sprinkled with the collective symbolism which, however accurate or inaccurate, sometimes exerts an influence on practical affairs.¹

12  George Baxter (after William Westall) Cape Wilberforce, Australia, 1802 1837 oil colour print

To Form a Distant Colony

As unique manifestations of our parents’ genetic intermixing, existing in a spatio-temporal state of consciousness, our individual perceptive, contemplative and active characteristics are directly influenced by our experience of the

physical, mental, social and cultural aspects of our environment. We operate in a vital state of constant engagement with our immediate surrounds at sensory, emotional and intellectual levels, mediated by memory and leavened through sleep. The individuality that defines us and any creativity we may possess and express is the result of our response to the totality of these conditions.

In my case, starting life in post-World War II Australia meant navigating through the British-derived constructs of my society in order to establish my own values. The works in Reconnection have been created in response to my particular experience of that evolving culture which, as Butler points out, “is not something timeless and unchanging but is contingent, context-bound, transformable, coming about in response to particular circumstances and needs.”

The voyages of Lieutenant James Cook (1728-1779) in the HMS Endeavour, and his consequent claiming of the eastern portion of continental Australia for Great Britain in 1770, were essentially carried out for scientific purposes and it was to take another seventeen years for British governments to find any justifiable use for this newly purloined territory. The complex agendas leading to the establishment of a colony in Australia were essentially threefold: the need for a strategic military presence in the Pacific region; the need for somewhere to house and punish the overflow of prisoners created by the British judicial system and the opportunity for profit through the exploitation of the natural resources contained within this new acquisition.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey argues convincingly and at length in The Tyranny of Distance that the major reasons for the establishment of the earliest British settlements were underpinned by strategic, military concerns. The country’s physical location, relative to the prevailing trade winds, meant that it was in an ideal position to protect British trade interests in the region. There also presented an opportunity for the exploitation of native timbers for the masts and struts of naval and merchant ships while the cultivation of flax and hemp would

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2 Rex Butler, Radical Revisionism, 8.
provide a reliable source of sailcloth and rope for the British fleet.\textsuperscript{4} Guaranteed supply of such materials was vital at a time when Britain was at war with France and had lost its North American colonies in the War of Independence while Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and French trading interests, with State support and military backing, were pushing into the Western Pacific and Eastern Asia. Even though these ventures turned out to be failures\textsuperscript{5} their prospects of success were instrumental in the establishment of the early colonial settlements.

In addition to strategic considerations, at this time Britain's prisons were full beyond capacity and this remote new territory offered a possible, though expensive, solution to this overcrowding problem. In order to offset the establishment and operating costs of such a distant penal colony it was felt that the transported convict population itself would have to be economically productive.\textsuperscript{6} Although a major problem in their own right, it was the convicts who provided the solution to the inter-related difficulties. It was they who would provide the labour force necessary for the establishment of the infrastructure of the new colony.

British authorities and entrepreneurial business interests also felt that there was potential financial gain in as-yet undiscovered resources within these lands. To realise these opportunities, it was reasoned, the prison population, once their official tasks and sentences were completed could be commandeered as the cheap labour force needed to build the self-sustaining new colony of free settlers and speculators.

\textsuperscript{4} Geoffrey Blainey, \textit{The Tyranny of Distance}, 27-33.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 18.
Colonising the Unknown

Thus the idea of establishing a penal colony at Port Jackson was seen to be a practical solution to this loosely knit trio of interrelated problems. In 1787 the first convict transportation fleet of eleven vessels was assembled in Portsmouth harbour. Setting sail into the virtually unknown with its crew of four hundred and human cargo of a little over a thousand, made up of convicts, militia, administrators and their families, it arrived at its final destination Port Jackson, eight months later in January 1788.

When looking at the earliest period of British settlement I believe that it is vitally important to try and appreciate that everything encountered by these convicts, their gaolers and administrators was foreign to them. They were indeed strangers in a very strange land of which they had neither knowledge nor experience.

Scotsman, Thomas Watling (c.1758-1833), was Australia’s first academically-trained, rather than naval-trained, artist. He was also a convicted forger who docked at the fledgling colony in chains in 1792. In *Letters from an Exile*, written a few years into his stay, he confirms a widely held view of the tedious, repetitive, uniformly dull vistas with which he was confronted declaiming that, “the air, the sky, the land are objects entirely different from all that a Briton has been accustomed to see before.” The need to come to grips with the massive differences of this place was to pre-occupy successive waves of migrants and many generations of Australian-born permanent residents to come.

For the first white settlers there were few reliable, preparatory descriptions and images of their future homeland and its contents. The most up-to-date were contained in Joseph Banks’ (1743-1820) and Daniel Solander’s (1733-1782)

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scientific reports from their 1770 voyage with Cook. In 1773 the artist Sydney Parkinson’s (1745-1771) collection of papers, drawings and natural history studies from that same voyage were published as *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*.\(^\text{10}\) These documents, though extensive, had been gathered over a short period of time and limited number of places, but at least they replaced the pervasive fictions contained in contemporary popular notions of *Terra Australis Incognita*.

Until this time, ideas of this largely mythically-conceived ‘Antipodes’ were imaginative mixtures of wild fantasy tempered by observed fact. As Ross Gibson points out in *The Diminishing Paradise*, images and descriptions were often invented and published without any first-hand authorial experience. Popular works like John Callander’s *Terra Australis Cognita*, 1766, were largely based on hearsay and conjecture, combined with the appropriation and manipulation of earlier writings such as those of the Spaniards, de Brosses and Queros.\(^\text{11}\) However, even the most up to date scientific reports which replaced these fantasies were to be of only limited value when confronting the conditions of this antipodean world.

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\(^\text{10}\) Rex and Thea Rienits, *Early Artists of Australia*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963), 11.

Detached, abstract decisions regarding the fate of the new colony were made many thousands of kilometres away in London while the energies of the colonisers were being spent on the laborious physical tasks involved in establishing the nascent settlement. As William Lines points out at that time, “civilisation and nature were considered to be deeply antithetical” and the new colony was to be established through the domination of its bizarre nature and subjugation of the original inhabitants.

For the foreigners this was an incredibly harsh, unforgiving new world of unpredictable dangers and privations; a country which geographer Joseph Powell points out was not easily loved, where “the first colonists were committed to the country before they came to understand it.” During the initial phase of occupation the settlers were completely dependent on their transported supplies and the natural resources of their newly claimed, though scarcely understood land. The near-fatal failure of their first horticultural and agricultural endeavours clearly demonstrated the necessity to adapt quickly to their new environment or perish.

A dependent relationship with the land was forced upon them but from this imposition a deepening sense of connection was to develop for some, albeit over many generations. As Geoffrey Searle points out, We must give full weight to the strangeness of the Australian environment in the eyes of the migrants – the immensity of the continent, its aridity, its sameness, its haggardness, the silence of the bush, the unfamiliarity of the night sky...So much of the content of nineteenth century Australian history is the story of coming to terms with the environment, of migrants and their children beginning to understand what they were doing here, of recognising and accepting themselves as Australians, of beginning to feel at home.

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12 Watkin Tench, 63-64.
14 Joseph Powell, Australian Place Australian Time, 24.
15 Geoffrey Blainey, The Tyranny of Distance, 42-43.
Beyond the Mountains the Squatters Run

The crossing of the Great Dividing Range in 1813 by George Evans (1780–1852), after initial inroads had been made by Gregory Blaxland (1778-1853), William Lawson (1774-1850) and William Charles Wentworth (1790-1872) revealed vast natural resources to the west. However, in comparison with the material riches held within, these western vistas seemed even duller than the uniform sameness with which the eastern coastal band of scrub and forest was perceived. Joseph Powell believes that the eastern fringe became more favourably regarded when compared with this “massive monotony”17. In 1817 the explorer John Oxley expressed the popular view that “a variety of wretchedness is at all times preferable to one unvarying cause of pain and distress.”18

But economics, not aesthetics, were driving expansion which soon saw rapid growth in the number of grazing enterprises and fabulous wealth for the squatter pastoralists who operated them. A major contributing factor to their profitability was the fact that these lands had been claimed without cost, except to the displaced Aboriginals who have never stopped paying. In Australian Pastoral, Jeanette Hoorn states that

for a substantial part of the nation’s history, pastoralism was the driving force of exploration and settlement and the primary producer of wealth. In order to understand the pastoral ideal in Australian painting, the great pastoral settlement of the country must also be taken into account.19

Unlike the colonisation of North America that of Australia was not undertaken against an agrarian philosophical and practical backdrop but was a product of the Industrial Revolution and shaped by the politics and economics that drove it. Since the beginning of transportation the majority of immigrants had lived in

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17 Joseph Powell, Australian Place Australian Time, 24.
18 John Oxley, “Journals of Two Expeditions to the Interior of NSW...1817-18, 1820) in Australian Place Australian Time, 24.
cities and towns and it was here that growth was most rapid as a result of pastoral prosperity. Economic growth with an expanding mercantile class created demand and opportunity for professional services as well as skilled trades-people and labour. By the early 1820s the lure of untapped profit, together with an effective official advertising campaign, saw free settlers outnumber the convict population.

Lost Knowledge of the People who Were Not Here

But there were major negative consequences from the take-over and occupation of these lands by the colonisers. Apart from the accelerating pace of environmental degradation that has accompanied the expansion of settlement and exploitation of natural resources, the most instantaneous and longest lasting legacy has been the complete disconnection, displacement and forced removal of Aboriginal peoples from their own lands.

Without any knowledge of Indigenous cultures and their particular forms of land occupation, and with no desire to attain this knowledge, the colonial powers

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21 Painted only twenty years after the first settlement Eyre’s painting shows a group of Aboriginals gathered around a smoking fire in the left foreground, already nearly squeezed out of the picture, in all senses of the term.
created the legal myth of *terra nullius* which declared the country un-owned, if not unoccupied. As Veronica Strang points out regarding the early colonists attitude,

Finding little in the way of technology or material culture, they failed to discern the complex relationship that the local inhabitants maintained with their environment. It was, in any case, more convenient to frame the place as “virgin land” which would clearly benefit from the imposition of their ‘civilizing’ culture.²²

The great convenience and support this myth provided was that it justified the colonial powers doing exactly as they wished. Comforted by the lie that the continent was un-owned, it was therefore apparently theirs for the taking without conscience or responsibility. The results of this attitude have been devastating for both the environment and the Aboriginal people who had to wait until the referendum of 1967 for their actual existence to be officially recognised in the national census. However, by entertaining the fiction of *terra nullius* and denying legitimacy to the Aboriginal peoples’ particular relationship with their land the colonists were precluded from any chance of gaining meaningful knowledge from those that had dwelt within it for millennia.

²² Veronica Strang, “Moon Shadows – Aboriginal and European Heroes in an Australian Landscape,” in Landscape, Memory and History – anthropological perspectives, Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern, eds. (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 110. The myth of *terra nullius* persisted for two hundred years until 1992 when prior ownership by its Indigenous inhabitants was finally officially, recognised in the ‘Mabo Decision’ of the High Court of Australia.
For the non-Indigenous population and the environment the greatest upheaval was caused by the country’s first mineral boom in 1851, when Victoria’s population trebled from 80,000 to 250,000 in just three years following the discovery of gold. The boom has never really ceased with every mineral and ore being torn from the ground with scant regard for consequences, (other than the immediate impact on the Gross Domestic Product). But in the 1850s it was not just the economic impact, nor the numerical increase in population that was to be of major significance but the fact that migrants had come from many nations of the globe, bringing with them different values from different cultures, sowing the seeds of a more independent mindset amongst the colonists.23

Prior to this huge influx of migrants, Australia was already one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with forty percent of its population living in the six main ports of Sydney, Melbourne, Geelong, Launceston, Hobart and Adelaide and fifty percent in towns and villages.24 It was to these economic centres that the fortune-hunters gravitated after the gold was gone. In parallel with this migration the proportion of ‘native-born’ colonists was also increasing to the point where, by the end of the nineteenth century, they formed three

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24 Geoffrey Blainey, The Tyranny of Distance, 136.
quarters of the total population of nearly four million. While the first century of colonisation had seen many changes larger ones were soon to be enacted.

**Common Denominators**

In *The Creative Spirit in Australia*, Geoffrey Serle points out many complexities and subtleties existing within the colonising process that were fundamental in shaping the particular nature of the future federated Commonwealth. He observes that

> the Australian colonies inherited and reproduced British law, parliamentary government...the British version of Christianity, prevailing ideas in economics, politics, education and culture.. Almost every institution and voluntary organisation was recreated – friendly societies, trade unions, mechanic’s institutes, temperance societies, savings banks, and innumerable others. (However), there were also major discontinuities which indicate the speedy triumph of secular liberalism; the rapid exclusion of both conservative-aristocratic and church-dominated structures in society."^{25}

As early as 1794 the Surgeon-General, John White (1757-1832) was expressing a desire that measures be put in place regarding the colony that would, “very soon make it in a great degree independent of the mother country”^{26}, (even though he had earlier referred to Australia as “a country and place so forbidding and hateful so as only to merit execration and curses.”)^{27} It was to take over a hundred years for his wish to be partially fulfilled.

The enlarging, diversifying population that was maturing through the second half of the nineteenth century was also developing an independent, nationalist sentiment which found visual expression of its ideals in the form of the rural landscape, (which I examine in the following chapter). Towards the end of the century this surge in national identity, rather than an identity based on colonial affiliation, combined with complex political, economic and bureaucratic inter-

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^{27} Ibid., 38.
colonial considerations and resulted in the federation of the formerly separate colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. As Robinson has assessed,

Among the factors which seem always to have been present in modern federations are; a desire to be independent of foreign powers and a realization that only through union could independence be secured; a hope of economic advantage from union; some political association of the communities concerned prior to the federal union; geographical neighbourhood; and similarity of political institutions...all these prerequisites were present in Australia.

Towards an Independence

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, despite its newly established nationhood, Australia remained very much a very white part of the British Empire. Its collective thinking was essentially British in tandem with its

28 A personal connection I have with this period is through my paternal grandmother’s uncle, William Higgs (1862-1951) who was a Senator for Queensland in the first Federal Parliament and later became Federal Treasurer in the Hughes Government of 1915.

29 Robinson KW, Australian Place Australian Time, 240.

30 Campbell, Rosamund and Harvie, Phillipa. Banjo Patterson – a literary heritage. Sydney: Kevin Weldon Productions, 1992. AB ‘Banjo’ Patterson (1864-1941) travelled widely in pre-federated rural Australia gathering materials for his poems whose characters soon assumed mythic proportions amongst an increasingly nationalistic, largely urban readership for whom they symbolised the imagined qualities of a growing nation.
institutions. Australia’s willingness to actively participate in foreign wars, sending volunteer armies to distant countries outside its sphere of influence is testament to this fact. But the nation was to undergo fundamental changes in make-up and values during the second half of the century.

Although physically isolated and distant, Australia, even before satellite communications, has not been immune to changes in political thinking and action that have emanated from elsewhere. However, while Australia’s particular form of democracy has been evolving and developing, ideologies of the extreme right and extreme left have only been adopted and pursued by relatively small sectors of the society. No political party from the ideological poles has ever attained a majority at any representative level, civil war has never riven the community and levels of inter-racial conflict have been low, except for those which persist against the original inhabitants.

Since the end of World War II waves of migrants from the northern Mediterranean and greater Europe have flowed into this British outpost, As the ‘White Australia’ policy disintegrated in the late 1960s people from across Asia, the Middle East, Pacific Islands, northern and southern Africa, the Caucasus and Indian Sub-Continent, as well as Britain and Europe, have continued this migration, creating a complex nation one of ethnical and culturally diversity.

My own work has been strongly influenced by my ongoing exposure to the histories of Australia since European occupation and it is such links that form the basis of much of its pictorial and intellectual context. I agree with Arnold

31 The New Guard, an ultranationalist, vehemently anti-communist political group formed by the fascist Eric Campbell was possibly the most successful of all extreme political groups. Formed in the depression of 1931, and only lasting a few years, it boasted a peak membership of some fifty thousand which more than doubled the Communist Party of Australia’s highest membership. Campbell had been a business associate of my paternal grandfather’s through a company called Australian Soaps. As a businessman my grandfather was no doubt sympathetic to the anti-socialist thrust of the New Guard’s cause but Campbell was unable to convince him to join. As an act of defiance against the socialist Lang Labor Government, Guard member Francis deGroot breached security to cut the ribbon at the official opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It is probably due to my grandfather’s relationship with Campbell that my family came into possession of a piece of that ribbon, signed by deGroot and mounted with a photo of the infamous ribbon-cutting incident, which has now become part of the nation’s visual mythology. I believe the presence of this image, and the questions it generated, first alerted me to the existence of politics.
Berleant who asserts in *Living in the Landscape* that aesthetic evaluation is not isolated in the personal but is the result of an intertwining of the individual with complex social forces. He points out that

in engaging aesthetically with environment as with art, the knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes we have are largely social, cultural, and historical in origin...the personal is infused with the social.\(^{32}\)

If one is to reach some understanding of where my current work fits within the story and why the landscape has been the “most persuasive theme in Australian high culture”\(^{33}\) for so much of its history, then the shifting nature of its context, both in terms of production and reception, needs be addressed and the following chapter takes up this challenge.


\(^{33}\) Anne-Marie Willis; *Illusions of Identity—the art of nation*, (Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, 1993), 61.
Art histories are never innocent of wider political ideas concerning the constitution of society and cultural development. And of course paintings demand scrutiny; landscapes are indeed frequently illuminated by consideration of what they distort or disguise as well as what they reveal.\(^1\)

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**European Eyes**

The reasons why art is made and the purposes to which it is applied are ever-changing. At various times throughout Western history, art has been the servant of the church, state, corporations and science as well as the ruling classes, bourgeoisie and revolutionary proletariat. Visual imagery forms an integral component of mass media while art objects are traded as commodities in their own right. Art has been used as a vehicle for story-telling and the selling of objects, ideas and lifestyles. It has functioned as educator and moral elucidator,

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the disseminator of knowledge, dogma and propaganda. It has been the signifier of military achievement and political might while simultaneously operating as an object of personal contemplation and perhaps pleasure or revelation.

Through examining the history of the art of Australia during the two centuries of European occupation, it becomes apparent that painted representations of the landscape have occupied all these positions in varying degrees at different times. Thematic, stylistic or functional changes have rarely followed a direct, linear path or academic dictate, making notions of an Australian landscape ‘tradition’ or an Australian ‘school’ of landscape painting unsupportable. As Anne-Marie Willis points out,

> what is later named as a tradition of landscape painting, implying as that term does, a handing down from one generation to the next, a refining, a building upon, has been in fact much more fragmented and discontinuous and it is only a retrospective and selective ordering with hindsight that invents this as a tradition.²

From the time of Sydney Parkinson, who accompanied Lt. James Cook’s *Endeavour* voyage of 1770, the majority of trained artists who produced the visual record of the early colonial years were naval draughtsmen and natural history illustrators. But there were no professional artists in the First Fleet so visual records of these times are restricted to the few existing sketches and watercolour studies by keen amateur artists from the ranks of the ships’ company. These included future governors Captain John Hunter and Lieutenant Philip Gidley King, the surgeon-general John White, Lieutenant William Bradley (1757-1833), first officer, George Raper (1768/69-1797) and midshipman Henry Brewer (1739-1796). Their work was supplemented by that of lesser, or unknown practitioners.³

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Artists Chained and Free

The first academically trained artists to freely arrive in the colony were John Lewin (1770-1819) in 1800 and William Westall (1781-1850) a year later. However, the majority of professional artists arriving at Sydney Cove did so in chains: the forger Thomas Watling arrived in 1792, the burglar John Eyre (1771-after 1812) in 1801 and another forger, Joseph Lycett (1776-1828) did not disembark until 1814. While Watling strove for the picturesque,\(^4\) (13) the others tended to be topographical artists whose interest and function was to record the appearance of their new environment to satisfy the military and bureaucratic requirements of their gaoler-administrators. Their need was for closely observed, detailed illustrations of the progress of this outpost of Empire for dispatch to their lords and masters in the Admiralty and Whitehall.

Paul Carter sees these observational works of amateur and illustrative artists as “representing (if they represent anything) what the European eye cannot as yet enclose and possess”\(^5\) when in fact what they reveal is the extent of what was being enclosed of a continent already possessed. I also find it puzzling that Bernard Smith, in his highly influential *Place, Taste and Tradition* should say that “the work of John Eyre, Major Taylor and J.W Lewin in Australia shows close affinity with the English topographers”\(^6\) yet in fact English topographers is exactly what they were.

In *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Smith also proposes the idea that a cross-fertilisation of artistic practices resulted from a situation where “artists trained in art schools and academies worked side by side with nautical and scientific draughtsmen,”\(^7\) and from this proximity “their mode of perception

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\(^6\) Bernard Smith; *Place, Taste and Tradition*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1945, rev. 1979), 43-44.

became increasingly less dominated by Neo-Classical theories of art and increasingly more influenced by empirical habits of vision.”

In the case of John Lewin, it can be argued that the transition occurred in a different direction. He arrived in the colony in 1800 seeking to make a living from his art at a time when the total white population was only five thousand, of whom ninety percent were convicts. Prospects of major sales were thus not great but, thankfully, during the first four years of his stay he was supported by a commission to provide entomological specimens and natural history illustrations for Dru Drury (1725-1804), a noted collector in England. Lewin’s detailed, hand-coloured engravings of insects and birds formed the first illustrated books to be produced in the colony; *Prodromus Entomology* in 1805 and *Birds of New Holland* three years later. Under the patronage of Governor Macquarie, Lewin was to accompany an expedition into the Blue Mountains in 1815 which had a significant bearing on his work.

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8 Ibid. 59.
Robert Hughes sees Lewin’s work of this period as being the first to open out the landscape, releasing it from the strictures of Watling’s picturesque schema and considering Lewin was the first white artist to whom the wide, western vistas had been revealed I believe this to be quite a reasonable assertion. Bernard Smith feels Lewin is the first artist to show any real empathy with the unique qualities and character of the Australian bush, taking it beyond the topographical conventions in which he was trained. I believe this can be explained by seeing his work of this period as emerging from his first-hand interaction with this landscape after fifteen years of perceptual adjustment to antipodean reality, accompanied by a developing sense of place.

The forger Joseph Lycett, was a trained miniaturist and portrait painter who secured an early release shortly after his arrival but due to his recidivism, was back in chains within a year, extremely lucky not to have been executed. He received ten years hard labour at Newcastle, a sentence which could be considered doubly fortunate as the commandant, Captain James Wallis (c.1785-1858) was a keen amateur artist of relatively progressive humanity.

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Wallis recognised Lycett’s drafting talents and fully utilised them in planning his Hunter River penal colony. His paintings and drawings of the emergent settlement are an invaluable component of the visual, historical record of the city and for producing these images Wallis recommended his early pardon. Wallis also recommended his artistic talents to Governor Macquarie whose subsequent commissions established Lycett as the colony’s first official artist.

Lycett’s *Views in Australia and van Diemen’s Land*, published in England in 1824 and released as monthly instalments, were commissioned by Macquarie with the express purpose of attracting new settlers and investors to the colony. They were also used to create a favourable impression of proceedings with his immediate superior, Lord Bathurst, Secretary to the Colonies.

These works, reproduced as popular engravings, became heavily embellished advertisements designed to attract people and capital to the other side of the world. Christopher Allen sees Lycett’s paintings as displaying “the process of cutting a piece of land out of the domain of nature and imposing cultural order upon it,” while Jeanette Hoorn identifies it as a new framework in the use of visual language that presented Europeans as masters of a fertile land that had been ordered by them and in which they were able to experience leisure. It is this new image of white settlers in harmony with a bountiful nature that produced the first sustained pastoral imagery and, at the same time, the first images of private property.

By the 1830s, the new wealth of the ‘squattocracy’ had benefited a small number of artists through commissions for depictions of their newly ‘civilised’ estates. As Jeanette Hoorn points out most are without reference to prior occupation as, “the task of the painter of pastoral landscapes was to separate

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pastoralism from the forced occupation of the land."¹⁷ These paintings were made in celebration of British individuals’ triumph over this wild domain while simultaneously displaying the newfound status and wealth of the conquerors.

Even with their inherent biases and distortions such paintings remain as the visual record of humanly imposed changes on this country during this era. Without such commissioned work to support artists our early cultural development would also have been delayed, as the government and military that had formerly provided the majority of work for a very small number of artists were not interested in any such imagery.

Pastoral wealth and a prosperous mercantile and professional middle class were essential in providing the level of patronage necessary to support professional art making. However before the gold rush of 1851 the European population of all five colonies was only about four hundred thousand people, so any such support was limited. It was the growth in the overall population that created a market for popular engravings and limited employment opportunities for artists as illustrators in the popular press.

Professional Appearances

On rare occasions professional artists visited the colonies, such as the English painter Augustus Earle (1793-1838) who arrived in 1825. His intention was to capture “scenes of exotica never witnessed by European eyes”¹⁸ for the English market while supporting himself as a portraitist for the small, but growing elite of Sydney town. It was not until 1831 that the first artist of any stature was to voluntarily settle when John Glover (1767-1849), (20) migrated to Tasmania at the age of 63. While Earle’s landscapes were carefully observed settings for theatrical fantasies, Glover’s work was solidly seated in the idyllic, Arcadian, Neo-Classicism of the Frenchman, Claude Lorrain (1600-1682).

¹⁷ Ibid, 10.
¹⁸ Robert Hughes, The Art of Australia, 39.
Unlike earlier visiting artists, (with the exception of Lewin), Glover was able to adapt his European learning and seeing to his new environment, through observation and contemplation. What Ross Gibson says in relation to the writings of Thomas Watling could equally apply to Glover’s painting:

Initially, very little makes sense for the white community. But slowly, as each new metaphor is tried out and as each new metonymic ensemble is presented, the complex of European meanings comes to be altered. Gradually the normlessness gives way to adapted significance, and local phenomena begin to be perceived and comprehended in terms which are somehow specifically (which is not to say, essentially) Australian at the same time they are still sensible in European terms.\textsuperscript{19}

Ian Mclean says of Glover’s work “the Neo-Classical pastoralism of his art had…long been infused with a Romanticism that sought spiritual redemption in the sublime”\textsuperscript{20} and this particular combination of ingredients is recurrent through the ongoing history of Australian landscape depiction.

\textsuperscript{19} Ross Gibson; \textit{Thomas Watling: this prison this language} in Rex Butler; \textit{Radical Revisionism}, 125.

\textsuperscript{20} Ian Mclean; \textit{John Glover: the limits of redemption} in Rex Butler; \textit{Radical Revisionism}, 140.
The next artist of note to settle permanently in the colonies was the Englishman, Conrad Martens (1801-1878), who arrived in Sydney in 1835, as an accomplished painter of the romantic sublime, greatly influenced by J.M.W Turner (1775-1851). Martens combined an academic formalism with keen observation to produce a dynamism not seen in the works of earlier artists. As Willis notes:

> If Martens’ picture of Elizabeth Bay and other commissioned works of properties functioned to make things picturesquely familiar, he and other artists also produced imagery that registered the strange, the exotic, the wilderness, though these constructions of nature were not always concerned with the distinctively local, but deployed another European aesthetic category, this time the sublime, rather than the picturesque.  

While patronage continued to rise, events such as the depression of the 1840s forced artists, even of Martens stature, to travel inland to seek pastoral support. Thus there was the strongest economic imperative to produce works indicative of the grandiose pastoral ideal of their patrons but these paintings were also infused with the personal responses of the artists to a new environment.

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21 Anne-Marie Willis, *Illusions of Identity*, 70.
Robert Hughes believes, “the only landscapist of distinction between Martens and the Heidelberg School was…Abram Louis Buvelot.”

However, I believe that in paying scant attention to John Skinner Prout (1805-1876), he misses this English artist’s significance in terms of his early practice of painting *en plein air* and also the immediacy of his non-academic style during his eight years in the colonies from 1840.

![John Skinner Prout, *A Camping Site, Tasmania*, c. 1845, watercolour](image)

By making light the work of the Australian-born Charles Piguret (1836-1914), the Austrian, Eugene von Guerard (1811-1901) and Russian-born, European educated Nicholas Chevalier (1828-1902), Hughes needlessly denies their significance within the developing diversity of Australian landscape painting. It was work by these painters, as part of a displaced Western artistic tradition, to which later, native-born artists could refer and experience first-hand, while for future generations it became a focus of artistic rebellion.

von Guerard arrived in Australia in 1852, under the influence of great painters of the Romantic Sublime, such as Caspar David Freidrich (1774-1840), while Chevalier arrived three years later steeped in similar ideas from Europe. Both were keen painters of the bush and worked within it, despite their academic restraints. This was well before the Swiss, Louis Buvelot (1878-1943) arrived in 1865 bringing with him the influence of French landscape painting, deriving from Claude, and advocating the direct engagement of artists in their landscape. These European artists responded to their new environment with their

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established, ingrained techniques, influences and outlooks, but when their works are viewed in combination it can expand our appreciation of the times in which they were created.

23 Eugene von Guerard  *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges* 1857
oil on canvas 113.3 x 176.3

The Emergence of Culture

Hughes further laments that Australia was, “a hopeless cultural backwater”23 where “hardly one good painting was produced between the arrival of the First Fleet and the appearance of Tom Roberts at the end of the nineteenth century.”24 However, to think that this should be otherwise is perhaps to overestimate the occurrence of what is deemed ‘good’ painting in any society over any period. As colonial Australia is a construct of Regency Britain, I believe it is relevant to contextualise the artistic climate of the colony relative to that which existed in the mother country at the time, without being too distracted by artistic developments in continental Europe.

23 Ibid. 45.
24 Ibid. 35.
While the white population of Australia rose from zero to four million British painting was dominated by the work of Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), (both of whom died during the first years of settlement), along with William Blake (1757-1827), J.M.W Turner (1775-1851) and John Constable (1776-1837) who were the major practicing artists of the first half of the century.

During this century the population of Britain grew from ten to thirty million people and yet the most notable artists of lasting significance, practicing through the middle and latter part of this period are the Pre-Raphaelites; William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Danté Gabriel Rosetti (1828-1882), John Everett Millais (1829-1896) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898). This small cluster of domestic talent was supplemented by the American-born, French-trained painters, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and John Singer Sargent (1856-1928). Good art is not common and great art is rare.

In 1863, only twenty five years after the National Gallery, London was opened to the public and thirty four years before the Tate Gallery was bequeathed to the British people, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) was established as Australia’s first public gallery. At this time art writers were calling for public patronage of local artists and arts society exhibitions saw ever increasing representations of the Australian landscape.25 And yet, predictably, the early public gallery purchases were either English or European secular narratives, reflecting the tastes of a conservative, middle-class British establishment who found in them themes of high moral and educative value and civilising virtue for the masses.26

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Ironically, it was these same conservative forces that saw the opening of an art school in conjunction with the NGV four years later in 1867 which was to have the most dramatic, unforeseen consequences for painting in Australia. The Victorian-born Arthur Streeton and Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917) and their English-born friend Tom Roberts (1856-1931) all attended the gallery school where they came under the influence of von Guerard. However they were influenced to a much greater degree by Buvelot, who was teaching privately in Melbourne at the time, encouraging a close, intimate relationship between artist and their environment through the practice of painting *en plein air*. McCubbin summed up the group’s feelings when he said,

> where von Guerard and Chevalier went in search of mountains and waterfalls for their subjects, Buvelot interested himself in the life

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27 Tim Flannery, *The Explorers*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 19980), 278-287. von Guerard accompanied German scientist Georg von Neumayer’s expedition to Mt Kosciusko in 1862 and paintings such as *North-east View from the Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko*, 1863 were the result of his direct experience of the Australian bush, although his sensibility was cast in the mould of European Romanticism.
around him; he sympathized with it and painted it. There was no one before him to point out the way. He possessed therefore in himself the genius to catch and understand the salient living features of this country. In a sense he was a forerunner: All his pictures are reminiscent of Australian life as we know it.²⁸

From these mixed influences they, along with their English colleague Charles Conder (1868-1909), were to develop their own response to their environment and it was this ‘Heidelberg School’ which radically changed the direction of landscape painting at the end of the colonial era. Jay Appleton observes that

> the change of approach implicit in making experience the central theme was a prerequisite of further progress in understanding the aesthetic satisfaction which people find in their visible environment.²⁹

I believe the immediacy of the Heidelberg works is central to their ability to generate feelings of authenticity, albeit through a perceived familiarity, and it is this quality to which the population would relate at a time of growing national identity.

In this period of increasing social and political unity, Streeton, Roberts, McCubbin and Conder were attempting to establish a personal relationship with the natural world through their painting.\textsuperscript{30} Working from bush camps in and around Sydney Harbour and the fringes of Melbourne they produced paintings that resulted from their immediate experience of landscape, (27). These works came to be attributed with qualities seemingly embodying the essential elements of the new nation, and were adopted as visual metaphors for prevailing ideals and aspirations on the eve of Federation.

Ian Burn points out that this was a time in need of visual expression and these images satisfied, “a psychological need in relation to the idea of Australia.”\textsuperscript{31} But, as Anne-Marie Willis reminds us,

\textsuperscript{30} Jeanette Hoorn, \textit{Australian Pastoral}, 184.
\textsuperscript{31} Ian Burn; \textit{National Life and Landscapes - Australian painting 1900-1940}, 1990, (Sydney: Bay Books, 1990), 8.
artists have made images of places in Australia, in so doing bringing a variety of styles, agendas and purposes to their encounters with specific locales. Critics and historians have embellished such activity by marshalling a disparate range of imagery and artists into a retrospectively named nationalistic project of art that attempts to define the essence of nation.\(^{32}\)

While the actual places depicted by the artists were unknown to most viewers it was an imagined commonality that was their source of unity for, as Ross Gibson points out in *The Diminishing Paradise*, “now the land was shaping imaginations through the agency of lived experience.”\(^{33}\)

The popular and lasting appeal of the Heidelberg paintings, (despite some critical hostility),\(^{34}\) (88) is perhaps, in Kenneth Clark’s words, that they did “not simply look back to the past, but (had) some prophetic notion of the needs of the future,”\(^{35}\) while Terry Smith also points out that they enabled urban citizens,

to look at tracts of land which they do not own and see them, not as property, but Nature, to look with love, not covetous envy, with an

\(^{32}\) Anne-Marie Willis, *Illusions of Identity*, 89.


\(^{34}\) Geoffrey Serle, *The Creative Spirit in Australia*, 72.

eye for their peculiar beauty, not the exclusionary and exploitative system which shaped them, appreciating the traces of humanity on them not as the marks of ownership but as manifestations of a national essence.36

**Landscape in Shifting Focus**

During the colonial period the depiction of landscape was a truly disjointed affair. There were no lines of succession, no commonality of purpose or ideal, no unity of style or form and certainly no defined ‘tradition’. Between the works of Parkinson, Lycett, Lewin, Earle, Glover, Martens, Chevalier, von Guerard, Piguenit and the members of the Heidelberg school the only commonality is the focus on the landscape itself. Leonard Bell, in his essay *Augustus Earle – colonial eyes transformed*, clearly articulates the complexities that constitute the art of this first century saying,

pictorial representations could play primary roles in the knowledge acquisition necessary for ordering, controlling, making a place one’s own. But that is far from the complete picture...‘colonial eyes’ in a particular place and period could be diverse, multiple, contradictory, they could be subtly nuanced, questioning, inwardly, as well as outwardly, exploratory. Colonial pictures might not be, or only be, what they might immediately appear to be. They might not be fixed, singular, or unitary in meaning and effect, but fluid, polysemic, characterised by the co-existence of differing possibilities of meaning. They need to be looked at...as objects... that generate meanings in their own right; rather than looked over – ‘overlooked’ – primarily as symptoms, reflections, or illustrations of some ‘greater’ political, social, historical, ideological or philosophical forces or conditions.37

While the works of the Heidelberg painters signal the end of the colonial phase of Australia’s art history they are also reference points for all later landscapes. An overview of the shifting focus of landscape painting during the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first are the substance of the following chapter.

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36 Terry Smith, “Pictures of, Paintings as” in *Lying About the Landscape*, 33.
Chapter 5

Through a Shifting Gaze

The interpretation of landscape is, moreover vital to any cross-cultural art history, because the assertions concerning attachment and belonging that may be overt or implicit in sketches, paintings and prints are not always simple statements about who owns what. They often also depict or foreshadow change. This may be valued positively as progress, negatively as dispossession or environmental carnage, and perhaps even ambivalently as all of these.¹

David Davies  Grey Day, Templestowe c1893
oil on canvas on board 36.5 x 46.4 cm

Transitions in Identity and Perception

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the national population was primarily living in the cities and major towns, increasingly disconnected from the natural

environment. Substitutes for ‘the bush’ were window boxes, domestic gardens and grand, planned, public parklands, all dominated by imported botanical species. A link with past British heritage was established through nature. However, it was a foreign imposition on the local environment in conscious opposition to the native flora which receded into diminishing stands beyond the edge of cultivation, as had the original human population.

As Elizabeth Johns points out in *New Worlds from Old*, from the end of the eighteenth century

the city developed from being the headquarters for life lived on and from the land to being the productive centre itself (where) Nature in all its previous meanings seemed to become ancillary rather than fundamental to human enterprise.²

By this time the proportion of non-Indigenous people, for whom Australia was permanently home had reached eighty percent. However, their perception of Australia was essentially limited to urban exposures and interactions with the humanly constructed. This life was embellished and enriched in the popular press by romanticised, nationalistic stories and verse, from the likes of AB ‘Banjo’ Patterson³ and Henry Lawson⁴ of an ‘outback’ and its occupants rarely, if ever, experienced by the reader.

Johns suggests that urban people turned to depictions of landscape in order, “to compensate for this loss of sensory connection, to reconceptualise the meaning of nature, and to draw on it for substitute engagement with the physical world.”⁵ However, while the landscape could certainly act as a substitute for actual experience there could be no sense of loss for something never held and no memory of anything not experienced.

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⁵ Johns, *New Worlds from Old*, 23.
Draining the Reservoir for a Modernist Vision

In 1902 it was the conservative WC Pigue nit, not Streeton, Roberts, McCubbin or Conder, who was commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, (AGNSW, founded 1874) to produce a vision of Mount Kosciusko, stirring the fire of patriotic sentiment, aglow in the newly constituted nation. However, it is a mistake to think of such commissions as resulting solely from the restricted academic taste of gallery trustees as the NGV had already purchased Streeton’s *The Purple Noon’s Transparent Might* (1896) and the AGNSW had earlier bought his *Still Glides the Stream and Shall Forever Glide* (1890). It should be remembered that this was the contemporary art of its time so entry into the museum was more difficult than for works from an earlier period..

Conder had returned to England permanently in 1890 and the atmospheric romantic David Davies (1864-1939), (28) departed Australia in 1897, never to return. Streeton was absent from 1898 till 1924 and Roberts departed in 1903, staying away for twenty years. Other painters, who were later to play a central role in Australia, were also in Europe, immersed in the emerging modernism, learning the ideas and skills that were to establish their reputations. These
included John Russell (1858-1930), Rupert Bunny (1864-1947), Emmanuel Phillips-Fox (1865-1915), George Lambert (1873-1930), Max Meldrum (1875-1955) and Margaret Preston (1875-1963), (30). An extremely significant pool of artistic talent had leached from the national cultural reservoir over these two decades but the benefits of their first-hand exposure to and experience of the contemporary European art scene were to flow upon their return. It was their ideas and practices that became the foundation from which future artistic movements were to spring.

![Margaret Preston Flying over the Shoalhaven River](image)

30 Margaret Preston *Flying over the Shoalhaven River*

1942 oil on canvas 50.6 x 50.6 cm

While not many from this group were particularly concerned with landscape as subject or inspiration, the emerging modernism espoused by such returning cultural pioneers as Nora Simpson (1895-1974) and her expatriate Italian teacher, Dattilo Rubbo (1870-1955) in the second decade of the century were to be a driving force in the work of the next generation of artists. In 1926 The Contemporary Group was founded in Sydney by George Lambert and Thea Procter (1879-1966) expressly for the encouragement and promotion of the modern and avant-garde but Modernism was not something that was quickly accepted in the general community.
From such influences, with an awareness of Surrealist and Expressionist painting of the inter-war years, artists like Russell Drysdale (1912-1981), Albert Tucker (1914-1999), Sidney Nolan (1917-1992), Arthur Boyd (1920-1999) and Clifton Pugh (1924-1990) were to take a figurative modernism and infuse it with the Australian bush which was to become the stage-set for performances of home-grown and classical legends and universal mythologies. This area of a home grown mythology had been explored by Sydney Long (1871-1955) since the late eighteen hundreds through his Art Nouveau fantasies populated with dancing brolgas and naked classical nymphs frolicking amongst the languid eucalypts.

In parallel with the work of the Heidelberg School painters, landscape painting was carried into the twentieth century by Long and the poetic romanticism of Walter Withers (1854-1914), (32) and English aestheticism of Jesse Jewhurst Hilder (1881-1916), while Hans Heysen (1877-1968) and Elioth Gruner (1882-1939) were soon to cut their own tracks through the pastoral landscape, winning the Wynne Prize sixteen times between them from 1904 to 1937. This prize has been awarded annually by the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales since 1897 for “the best landscape painting of Australian scenery,”6 charting the changing depiction and status of the landscape for over a century.7

6 Wynne Prize – terms and conditions  
7 Unfortunately the present trustees would seem ignorant of the terms and conditions
Gruner’s and Heysen’s paintings were often occupied by sheep and cattle, symbolic of the pastoral industry’s underpinning of national wealth, along with the fencing and buildings as concrete evidence of ‘civilizing’, human endeavour. However, like Streeton, their gaze could often be focussed on the unpopulated landscape, a place described by Ian Burn as “the fertile, worked countryside without workers (where) the new vision of the landscape found its embodiment in a ‘pure’ landscape icon.”

Despite these claims of iconic purity, the major governing the prize they administer. In 2010 it was awarded to Sam Leach for his modified copy of Boatmen Moored on the Shore of an Italian Lake, (1668) by minor seventeenth century Dutch artist, Adam Pijnacker, a work having nothing to do with ‘Australian scenery’ in any shape, form or concept.

8 Ian Burn, National Life and Landscapes. (Sydney: Bay Books, 1991), 79.
effect of these unpopulated images is to draw the viewer into the landscape. It is now the viewer who occupies the space in a newly configured relationship.

While these depictions of open, natural spaces are infused with a sense of awe and respect for the unknown and the inexplicable, they do not possess any sense of terror or dread as one would find in European Romanticism’s confrontation with the sublime. They are personal, humble, accessible communions with an ancient world, sometimes scarred and mutilated by our collective presence, (33). Through the carnage of the First World War, the Spanish Flu epidemic, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the Great Depression and the increasing polarisation of domestic politics these paintings, while appropriated by different groups as instruments of political ideology, can be seen as points of reconnection with nature: silent responses to the seemingly limitless destructive capabilities possessed by human kind.
Another critical figure in landscape painting from the late 1930s to the late 1950s was Albert Namatjira (1902-1959), whose vibrant watercolour depictions of the country of his own Aranda people were the first by an Aboriginal artist to receive wide public recognition and be granted national significance, while Namatjira himself became something of a national celebrity. At a time when foreign notions of Modernism were slowly entering Australian culture Namatjira’s paintings (like Heysen’s) were accessible and popular with a broad, conservative public audience.

Revisionism, Wars and Beyond

When contemporary writers looking at the inter-war period, such as Jeanette Hoorn,⁹ seek to align Heysen’s work with German National Socialism, and Juliette Peers¹⁰ posits Australian nationalists as forerunners of Al Queda, it would seem that historical revisionism has become invention. The true effects of German National Socialism were soon to be felt with the advent of the Second World War in 1939, just a few years after the Great Depression and

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only two decades after ‘the war to end all wars’. Once again young Australians volunteered, fought and died on distant battlegrounds for the interests and values of the British Empire of which they were an indivisible part, in mind and fact. These six years of destruction and barbarity ended with the prospect of global nuclear annihilation which, of course, directly influenced the artists who lived through it and profoundly altered their relationship with their own landscape and their representation of it.

Gary Catalano observes that for artists such as Drysdale, Tucker, Nolan and Arthur Boyd it was from the desert that “an alien and hostile landscape gradually replaced the pastoral paradise as the ruling image of Australia.”\(^\text{11}\) The pastoral was left in the safe and sensitive hands of Lloyd Rees (1895-1988), while for this new generation of war-weary, the landscape became the setting for dislocated psychological self-examination and confrontation with the impact of white society on itself, the land and the displaced Indigenous population. Their modernist, landscapes hover in a surreal\(^\text{12}\) realm of archetypal symbolism where the occupants of the remote and isolated defiantly assert their right to be in a land that is at best indifferent, and often hostile to their presence. \(^\text{13}\)


\(^{12}\) James Gleeson (1915-2008) was the painter of this generation who maintained a formal Surrealist practice throughout the twentieth century with coastal landscapes often acting as the inspirational setting for his psychological interrogations.

\(^{13}\) S. Rowley, “Incidents of the Bush” in *Lying about the Landscape*, Geoffrey Levitus, ed. (Sydney: Craftsman House), 27. Rowley makes the observation regarding the central character of Henry Lawson’s poem, *The Bush Undertaker* that could equally apply to the unheralded occupants of Drysdale’s outback; “The Bush Undertaker should not be read as a study of madness. Rather he is
After the war came a new wave of migration with greatly increased numbers from Western and Central Europe. As always, the vast majority settled in the major cities and this further concentrated the experience and expression of Modernism within an urban paradigm.\textsuperscript{14}

Boyd, Tucker and Nolan had all come into contact with the work of Polish émigré artist, Yosl Bergner and the Russian, Danila Vassilieff, plus home-grown

\begin{flushright}
\textbf{Russell Drysdale} \textit{The Cricketers} 1948
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
oil on composition board 76.2 x 101.6 cm
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\begin{flushright}
\textbf{Sidney Nolan} \textit{Perished} 1949
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\begin{flushright}
oil and enamel on composition board 91.0 x 122.0 cm
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represented as ‘weird’ and ‘eccentric’, but strangely at one with his environment...From the point of view of conventional society, such a character seems incomprehensible, mad and lost because they have become part of the natural order rather than its master”.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{14} Jeanette Hoorn, \textit{Australian Pastoral}, 246-248.
expressionists like Noel Counihan (1913-1986). The figurative, expressionistic paintings of these urban artists, dealing with contemporary anxieties and neuroses seemed unconscious of nature at large but Boyd, Tucker and Nolan were to take these concerns and graft them into the land, (37).

In their paintings the landscape has become the fixed reference point; the timeless witness to our endless folly. As Geoffrey Smith points out, with specific regard to Nolan’s work from central Australia; “the landscape is familiar and alien, everywhere and nowhere, specific and generic, individual and universal.”15

Arthur Boyd's metaphorical and psychological portrayals of an aggressive, hostile Australian bushland as the site of equally aggressive inter-racial conflict and neuroses were the first attempts by a white artist to address these submerged or erased aspects of European occupation. His paintings emerged

from transported Biblical narratives, (38) now sited in an antipodean wasteland; modern myths growing from mediated memories of the ancient where Albert Tucker’s fossilised ‘everyman’ dwells in the middle of nowhere.\footnote{For contemporary expatriate New Zealand painter, Euan MacLeod (b.1956) this image of ‘everyman’ dragging the burden of his existence, Job-like through the desert is a recurring motif and can find its antecedent in E.C Frome’s First View of the Salt Desert, 1843, (39)\footnote{Graeme Sullivan, Seeing Australia. (Sydney: Piper Press, 1994), 51.}}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure.png}
\caption{E.C Frome First View of the Salt Desert – called Lake Torrens 1843 watercolour on paper 20.6 x 27.2 cm}
\end{figure}

\textit{Landscape after Modernism}

In concert with the plurality of an emerging postmodernism, the barren, unpopulated heart of the country continued to be engaged by artists as a non-distracting setting for ideas, histories and narratives. Academic, Graeme Sullivan notes the diversity of practices emerging during the 1960s and 1970s; “with the focus on concepts, ideas and processes, works were performed, installed, documented, dispersed, concealed or presented in a bewildering array of situations and sites.”\footnote{Graeme Sullivan, Seeing Australia. (Sydney: Piper Press, 1994), 51.} However not one of these new forms of artistic expression was to replace any existing form.
The landscape-focused paintings of such diverse artists as John Perceval (1923-2000), Clifton Pugh, Fred Williams (1927-1982), John Olsen (b.1928) and Robert Juniper (b.1929) continued into the 1980s, unabated and undistracted by ‘sideshows’ that were soon to become the main event.

These artists were joined by Elwyn Lynn’s (1917-1997) absorption into the substance of his experience and the materiality of his work, (45) combined with a highly developed sensory awareness and an inseparable sense of connection with nature. This elemental materiality is also at the centre of Michael Johnson’s paintings which, through their unavoidable presence, forced the landscape back into public attention during the 1990s along with the work of such painters as Elizabeth Cummings (b.1934), (42) and Janet Dawson (b.1935), (10).
Into the twenty first century these artists have been joined in the landscape by
the next generation of diverse practitioners like Angus Nivison (b.1953), New
Zealand expatriot, Euan MacLeod (b.1956), John R Walker (b.1957), (43) and
Philip Wolfhagen (b.1963). A context for my own work has developed through
my exposure to their paintings in combination with my lived experience of much
of the country they have portrayed. Despite the different ways in which they
view their world, and their work, it is the land itself that has continued as the
point of connection for them, fixing to place regardless of time where life is
experienced at a most fundamental level.

That painting itself, and landscape painting in particular, has lost significance in
the post-modern discourse, if not in the minds of the people who make it and
view it, can be partially explained by the fact that, “increasingly, art criticism
became discourse about words rather than looking at pictures.”\(^{18}\) However it is
also true that a parallel change in the appreciation of landscape was occurring,
as Geoffrey Levitus identified

\[\text{landscape is generally seen as a conservative subject, lacking}
\text{contemporaneousness...Does this represent an intellectualising of}\]

\(^{18}\) Peter Beilharz, “Imagining the Antipodes” in Radical Revisionism, Rex Butler ed. 67.
artmaking that considers the landscape, the natural physical environment, how we live in it and respond to it, as irrelevant to such issues? Are we so far removed from a real sensory, physiological sense of place that we can’t relate to those artists who do attempt to deal with it, or treat them as dealing with a quaint physical ‘other’, whose enormous diversity is glossed over and ignored? If so then somehow we are missing the point.\(^\text{19}\)

Since the first British colonisers settled at Sydney Cove the course of landscape representation and the purposes to which it has been co-opted have constantly changed. The only constant has been the land itself, as place, site, setting, symbol or motif. While technology has accelerated geometrically and the human population has exploded it has been the landscape that has survived, albeit ever-altered. It is like that of DW Meinig’s which “lies utterly beyond science, holding meanings which link us as individual souls and psyches to an ineffable and infinite world.”\(^\text{20}\)

The paintings that make up the series within *Reconnection* explore the land and individual and collective relationships to it while also visually interrogating the depiction of this place as both a point of connection and site of disconnection. In these preceding chapters I have been attempting to establish the historical, political, economic, social, cultural and artistic context in which my work has evolved. In the next chapter I deal with contemporary academic and institutional issues that have been relevant to the research.
Chapter 6

Research Through Making

After a long period of taking nature for granted, predicting its demise and even using postmodern sophistry to deny its existence, in the new century we are rediscovering the connection between humans and nature...Contemporary artworks are springing from a poignant sense of natural beauty that is implicitly bound both to a feeling of deep connection to place and to a sense of imminent threat of an expiring timeline.¹

Authorship and the Art Object

In the previous chapters, I have been conducting an exploration of the landscapes of my life’s experience. Some of these encounters have been direct personal engagements with the environment while others have been experienced through ever-changing painterly depictions of the Australian land

¹ Margaret Osborne, Australian Beauty, artlink 28, 2, 25.
since European occupation. From this interweaving of historical, political, environmental, social, psychological, economic, personal, familial and cultural influences I have reached the same conclusion regarding our dualistic, adversarial, modernist mindset as Christopher Tunnard where,

it is thus absurd to think any longer of the natural versus the man-made in terms of environmental values, any more than it is necessary to think of antagonism between the past and the present, which ideally should merge into the consciousness of man.²

It is through the medium of painting and the substance of paint that I have attempted to visually express this interconnectivity, but of course this has not been pursued in an artistic vacuum, separate from contemporary discourse and practice.

Regardless of the influences to which an artist is subjected throughout the creative process and regardless of the different sets of influences to which a viewer of that work has been subjected the only necessary point of connection between them is the art object, perceived in the mind via sensory transmission of stimuli through the eyes to the brain. The eminent Scottish philosopher

² Christopher Tunnard, A World with a View – an enquiry into the nature of scenic values, (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1978), 185.
Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) observed that at a personal level, “no custom, education, or example could ever give us perceptions distinct from those of the senses which we had the use of before” and this still holds true. It is in art that lie the possibilities for the communication of those shared, universal perceptions, for as Denis Dutton states,

the universality of art and artistic behaviours, their spontaneous appearance everywhere across the globe and through recorded human history, and the fact that in most cases they can be easily recognized as artistic across cultures suggest that they derive from a natural, innate source: a universal human psychology.

It is important to understand, as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) pointed out some years after Hutcheson, that the ‘common sense’ that allows communication to occur, should be seen as ‘common feeling’ and not ‘common understanding’. However, a maker is required to access this sensus communis through the transformation of ideas and substances into material art objects.

Rex Butler, (after Foucault, Derrida and Barthes) sees no validity in the notion of authorial intent stating that,

just as the meaning of a work of art lies not in any intention of its maker but in how it is received by its spectator, so it is to be found not in the past when it was produced but in the present where it is encountered.”

However, against this view I find myself aligned with Paul Crowther who sees such thinking as degrading the conceptual link between art making and the art object where,

in contextualist terms, production is understood as a composite phenomenon emergent from a broader field of signification. Within this, the process of making is reduced to a function of its component

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5 I. Kant, “The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement”, in Aschenbrenner and Isenberg 190.
‘signifying practices’ rather than understood as a unifying activity which directs those practices. The upshot is that what is distinctive to the making and meaning of visual images per se is either repressed or distorted. It is recreated as the academic consumer’s disembodied fantasy image of what making is supposed to be about.\(^7\)

While the intent of the maker and the reception of the spectator may be quite different, regardless of interpretation, art only assumes its forms by intent, not as accident. Through a maker’s ability to imbue their art with what Kant termed ‘aesthetic ideas,’ that work may have the ability to connect with people. As Frank Sibley points out; “aesthetic perception is necessary for aesthetic judgement and is impossible without a direct encounter with the artwork.”\(^8\)

Much of the denial of the relevance, or existence of an aesthetic dimension of art since the 1970s arises from a failure to understand this aesthetic dimension as an intrinsic and defining quality of art which is at the basis of its communicative powers. That ‘aesthetics’ has now been re-admitted to the art discourse\(^9\) can only make art richer, for without an aesthetic dimension that which is being discussed is not art but something else.

These paintings are not directed by prescribed theories, nor do they attempt to answer imagined problems of someone else’s posing. As Dennis Dutton, (after Kant) reminds us a work of art


is not an answer to a problem out in the world but an object of contemplation in the theatre of the imagination that makes up its own problems and supplies its own solutions.\(^{10}\)

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\(^{10}\) Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, 229.
This body of paintings has been produced in an often anaesthetic cultural atmosphere where, as Peter Beilharz points out, the art discourse within theoretical and critical circles since the 1980s has been focussed on words and not on art itself.11 The ramifications of this perverse situation were amplified by 2010 Man-Booker Prize winning British novelist Howard Jacobson (b.1942) who said

the reason the capitulation of contemporary art to language is such a sorrowful event all round is that it is such a demoralised language to which the visual arts have succumbed: language which has no memory of the human voice; language which has no fondness for conversation and no patience for persuasion; language which inheres in no place and is sanctified by no human usage; language which is deaf to its own music and blind to its own shapeliness...language which dislikes itself almost as much as it dislikes art.12

For decades there has been an institutional shift toward ‘new media’, performance and installation art. However, such media-specific focus in times of postmodern plurality denies an expanding artistic field. Even Clement Greenberg, the champion of high Modernism, understood that

to hold that one kind of art must invariably be superior or inferior to another kind means to judge before experiencing; and the whole

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history of art is there to demonstrate the futility of rules of preference laid down beforehand: the impossibility, that is, of anticipating the outcome of aesthetic experience. 13

From their experiential inception the paintings of *Reconnection* have emerged through the vagaries of conflicting theories and ideas. So as not to be distracted or diverted during this research project I have often travelled back to my source material to reconnect with the central subject. In the spring of 2007 I made an extensive field trip up the east coast of Australia as far north as Rockhampton, Queensland and then west to Winton, at the edge of the Simpson Desert, an area almost submerged in both history and myth. This trip, which I relate in the following chapter not only affirmed the position I had taken since the beginning but also provided much of the inspiration and visual material from which the later paintings were to develop.

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Chapter 7

1770 and Winton – History and Myth

A lot of the time it is aloof, that country, but at the same time I very rarely find it threatening. There are times out there when you feel that, though your strand is separate, it is also mysteriously interwoven and moves in and out of a more extended weave. It may sound strange, but you feel you are woven by it.¹

Perspective in the Landscape

In September 2007, toward the end of the first year of my research, I travelled up the east coast of Australia to ‘The Town of 1770’² in Queensland and from there to Winton in the far west. The purpose of this field trip was to observe, examine and record the changes in the landscape; its variety, its forms, its composition, colours and textures and in so doing re-assess my paintings in relation to the country, if not actual location, from which they had grown.

² ‘The Town of 1770’, (as it is officially designated, perhaps to avoid an imagined confusion with the year of 1770), lies midway between Bundaberg and Gladstone. It received this official name in 1936 in commemoration of the HMS Endeavour’s landing.
From time to time I feel it necessary to get out of the humanly constructed city where I live in order to regaining some personal sense of perspective. This place, Newcastle is built from reconstructed earth, vulcanised rock and reconfigured trees on footings floating on coal and heavy industry. As with many other people it is only by physically getting away from its overwhelming presence am I able to reconnect with nature and restore some balance to my being.

Once the local beach provided such a reconnective opportunity; a place where one’s all but naked body became the elemental nexus of air, earth, fire and water. This experience has now also become somewhat detached, with the horizon scarred by a frozen procession of red and black ships, their vast holds waiting to be filled with coal. Thankfully we can still access the forests close-by where one can re-engage with that which is beyond our own making.

1770

The Town of 1770 Is situated less than one degree south of the Tropic of Capricorn and has the most northerly surf beaches on the coast, while to its east Lady Musgrave Island marks the southern extremity of the Great Barrier Reef. It was a significant destination for historic, geographic and environmental reasons and also I was not familiar with it, never having travelled so far north by land. In my position as a stranger I was attempting to reach some vague understanding of how the newness of everything encountered by the earliest
European visitors may have been perceived as they intersected with the unknown.

1770 and its near neighbour, Agnes Water, are part of the traditional lands of the Meerooni people and much of the area has remained unchanged since the *HMS Endeavour* made its second landing on continental Australia on May 24th, 1770. The major reasons for this lack of change lie in the poor quality of the local soils, which made them unsuitable for intensive agriculture, the often impassable dirt roads which were only sealed in 2001, and the designation of significant local areas as national park and environmental reserves.

The mangroves inhabit the tidal zone of neighbouring Eurimbula National Park, while its she-oaks, paper barks, coastal eucalypts and scrub run to the sands of the bay. It was much this way when the *Endeavour* anchored over the night of the 23rd of May3 and the following morning a party including Cook, the botanist Joseph Banks, the Swedish naturalists Daniel Solander and Herman Sporing and the artist Sydney Parkinson went ashore on the southern point for one day of intense exploration.

Although finding evidence of recently occupied campsites they did not see any of the local inhabitants. The party took numerous botanical specimens, caught a few fish and managed to shoot a few birds including a local variety of bush turkey known as a bustard. In honour of the fine meal the seven kilogram dressed bird provided for the crew, Cook named this place Bustard Bay. Unfortunately there has not been a bustard sighted in the area for over forty years.

Cook noted in his journal that he found very little difference in the vegetation at Bustard Bay to that which he had found at Botany Bay, over one thousand

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3 Cook makes note in his journal of that date concerning an incident involving his clerk, “Mr Orton, having been drinking in the evening had his clothes cut off and also part of both his ears”. Cook regarded Midshipman Mafra, whom he thought “good for nothing,” as the most likely assailant but was unable to prove his guilt. It is believed that Mafra later changed his name to Matra before returning to Sydney Cove where the suburb of Matraville was later named after him.
kilometres south, despite the fact that his accompanying scientists had discovered and recorded at least eleven new plant species during their one day of discovery. This may be explained by the fact that many of the species they discovered such as native mint and indigo, stinkweed, creamy candles, mock orange, orchids, herbs, Burdekin plum and pea bush were small and invisible from the sea, absorbed into the grey-green regularity of the larger dominant foliage. The presence of Pandanus palms was one of the few vegetal indicators that one was entering the tropics.

Like Cook’s journal notes, my own observations during this trip by land, (invoking memories of an earlier trip by sea) led me to the conclusion that the eastern coast of Australia, from HMS Endeavour’s first landing point at Botany Bay to that of its second stopover is similar and repetitive, producing a feeling of familiarity in areas previously unexperienced. There is the particular (and peculiar to foreign eyes) grey-green foliage of the hardy acacias, melaleucas, banksias and brittle eucalypts with their understorey of spiny, coarse, squat shrubs, anchored through the all but non-existent topsoil, sustained by hidden nutrients within the shales and sandstones of this ancient continent. These species give way to the leptospermum, atriplex and casuarina that thrive on the salty, sandy low spots and then to the pockets of tall eucalypt forest, where soil and rainfall allow. One follows the other, the repetition continues up the coast. Even the towns and the surrounding farmlands, cultivated on the rich alluvial
flats that embrace the many rivers that spill from the Great Dividing Range to the Pacific Ocean are largely predictable.

Some two hundred years after Cook’s landing the most obvious visible differences in the coastal landscape are, of course the result of European occupation. As one heads north along the coastal fringe the cleared land of dairy farming is replaced by that of bananas, macadamias and sugarcane. The fenced, row-cropped rectangles have been embossed on an irregular, fluid topographical system largely unresponsive to the imposition of such a grid.

The area around Agnes Water and neighbouring Miriam Vale was first claimed by squatters and selectors in 1847. As was the pattern through the whole process of colonisation, the opening up of the country to graziers and then farmers saw the establishment of villages and towns providing the services for their needs. Roads and tracks were soon made to link these towns to larger market places and ports. However, it was to take some decades before the railways were laid which not only provided the facility for the economic transportation of large volume bulk goods but also provided a human link to the larger centres. Such physical networks greatly reduced the isolation of these communities but they had to wait until 1986 to be connected to the telephone and electricity networks. The expansion of civil aviation and the emergence of tourism as a major industry, accompanied by the development of a holiday

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4 The Brisbane to Gladstone railway was completed in 1897 when Gladstone’s population was about 500 people. One hundred years later the population had risen to 27,000. In the sixty years since coal exports began in 1945 the tonnage of coal, minerals and agricultural produce exported through the port is in excess of 50 million tones per annum and rising.
resort culture have now changed these towns to a point that would have been unimaginable only forty years ago.

*Postcards and Big Things*

So many regional towns now appear as mere franchises of each other, possessed of no sense of particularity of place or purpose. One breaks from the subtleties of bushland to be visually assailed by the colour-enhanced barrage of advertising billboards and signage set against a residential backdrop of suburban blandness. It is the anonymity of these franchised towns that forms the basis for the digital series, *Postcard Anywhere*, which acts as a counterpoint to the paintings. Mobil, McDonalds, Suzuki, fish and chips, Shell, Ford, real estate, KFC, ATMs and TABs, Hungry Jack’s, motels, Pizza Hut, EZ Hydraulics and Toyota constantly repeat; chunks of imported, cloned consumerism that have now become the highway towns themselves.

The further one travels the more it appears the same. From Cardiff to Kempsey, to Coffs Harbour to Gympie and all points in-between and beyond one seems to have travelled far to get nowhere very different, while the sound baffles lining the freeways are painted with imaginary landscapes bearing no resemblance to the bushland whose presence they obscure.
Efforts by some individuals to counter this uniformity and assert some distinctive point of recognition for their locality often seem to be tropically induced eccentricities, (52). However, to achieve similar unique identities entire communities often resort to the erection of gigantic reproductions of dominant local products. Coffs Harbour has its Big Banana, Ballina its Big Prawn, (sun-bleached and faded, perhaps a sign of diminished fortune and relevance), Gympie is the home of a Big Pineapple and Miriam Vale a Big Crab, while in Rockhampton, from where I headed due west, there are enough Big Bulls to fill a small paddock.

Crossing the ranges through such towns as Dingo and Blackwater, one’s constant companions are the coal trains, some hundred trucks long, ceaselessly hauling their loads from the surrounding mines to the port of Gladstone and returning for refilling in a seemingly endless procession, which of course must end when the deposits have all been exhausted. The country then opens up towards Emerald, named not after the gemstone but the colour of its vast paddocks of sunflowers. It too has its “Big” item but this is unlike any other. Emerald possesses the world’s biggest reproduction of Vincent van Gogh’s ‘Sunflowers’, (53) some twenty-five metres high; a Dutch interior still-life dominating the rural Australian skyline in a most surreal fashion.
Further west lies the real gem country of Rubyvale and Sapphire where the tiny hamlet of Anakie, (pronounced ‘anarchy’) with a population of less than fifty people boasts a School of Arts and has The Big Sapphire, which like Ballina’s crab is sun-bleached and chalky, long devoid of any former sparkle. After rising and falling through the sparse vegetation of the bare and stony Drummond Range the gently undulating ‘downs country’ of Mitchell and Flinders Grass spreads to the horizon, a mainstay of the sheep and cattle industries since the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the discovery of artesian water saw them able to expand ever westward.

**Into the Land of Myth**

In the early 1890s mechanical shearing was replacing the use of hand shears to harvest the nation’s wool clip at a time when the economy was dropping into a major depression. In response to both these circumstances the station owners
attempted to cut shearer’s wages from twenty shillings per hundred sheep shorn to seventeen shillings. This act led to a general strike by shearers and shed-hands, which lasted four years from 1891 until 1895. It was a period of armed rioting and great civil disturbance, where numerous shearing sheds in the district were burnt down.

Still heading west in the 38°C mid-morning spring warmth, I stopped briefly in the town of Barcaldine where a little over a century earlier militant shearers organised a meeting held in the shade of an ancient ghost gum, (*eucalyptus papuana*), which became known as ‘The Tree of Knowledge’. This meeting, and the actions it precipitated, were to change the nature of organised labour and politics in Australia, and were instrumental in the formation of the Australian Labor Party.

As one travels further into the west one travels deeper into our history and national mythology into the town of Longreach. Here the Stockman’s Hall of Fame is situated, as a tribute to the pioneering European men and women who opened up this unforgiving country to pastoral exploitation through Aboriginal dispossession. It is also here that our once national airline, Qantas began its operations and a real Boeing 747 is permanently parked at the airport on edge of town and is the biggest monumental ‘Big’ thing encountered so far.

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5 At the time of my visit all that remained of the tree, and perhaps the knowledge, was a small plot of sand in which the tree used to grow. It had been wilfully poisoned. The corpse of the tree had been removed to Brisbane where, at a cost of some six million dollars, the timber of the cadaver was cut up and reconstituted into a sculptural version of the original which, in 2009 was repositioned in its original spot.
A further two hours drive north-west across the open red sweep of drought-ravaged plains, where the only green relief is provided by the introduced and unwanted ‘prickle bush,’ one reaches Winton, on the edge of what is known as ‘The Channel Country’.

The channels are an arterial network of tiny, interlinked streams that progressively join and enlarge then flow into the Diamantina River, which circles on itself before flowing south-west to Lake Eyre. It is only on rare occasions, (such as in 2010) that its destination is reached as flows are dependent on rainfall, which is scarce and the absorption along the watercourses and evaporation from the extreme heat usually curtail its journey. But flood it does on occasions, as was experienced at the original settlement of Pelican Waterhole in 1876, before the town was relocated to nearby higher ground where it was renamed Winton.

It was in this location, during the social upheaval of the early 1890s that AB ‘Banjo’ Patterson wrote the words to what has become our national song; “Waltzing Matilda”, which had its first public performance at the North Gregory

6 Patterson wrote Waltzing Matilda at ‘Dagworth Station’, whose woolshed had been burnt down in the riots, and the central character of the swagman is believed to have been based on a leading labour activist who had died on the neighbouring property, ‘Kyuna Station.’ The Brisbane Courier reported on the 4th of September 1894 that, “Information has been received at Winton that a man named Hoffmeister, a prominent unionist, was found dead
Hotel in Winton in 1895. The billabong in the poem is the nearby Combo Waterhole, one of the few sources of permanent or semi-permanent water scattered through the weave of channels, along with Corr, (55) and Cork Waterholes, to the south, all of which are shaded by Coolabah trees.

The landscape and climate around Winton are totally different to those of the property, Glenroy, on the South-Western Slopes of New South Wales where I had lived and worked for the majority of my adult life. However, there were unexpected connections between the two, mainly found in the names of the properties and the people. Tatong, Newhaven, Red Hill and Glenroy along with Cork and Corcoran are to be found in both locations, while one of the earliest settlers in the Winton district, John Costello still has direct descendants in my old neighbouring town of Boorowa, of which there is also a variant near Winton. That these two areas, so different in every way, should have been squatted and claimed by the same mix of Irish and English convicts and free settlers seems unified only by a common necessity to live from the land, regardless of its location.

But this journey was not only about reconnecting with aspects of the brief history of European occupation of this continent and the development of national myths and political institutions. This voyage was centrally about my connection with nature.

_Inland Sea_

The subtle variations of the flat plains from sand to soil, gravel to claypan and ironstone are accompanied by vegetal changes with the sweet grasses replaced by spinifex, nagoora burr and marthagi flea while the gidyea and other

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7 The present North Gregory Hotel occupies the same site as the four that burnt down before it. Like many timber hotels in the outback fire was a perennial problem, though usually caused by human negligence rather than the external forces of nature.
hardy acacias provide what little shade there is. Ironically, it was within this shade, a thousand kilometres from the coastal bay that bears its name, (but not its presence) that we finally saw a bustard.

![Bustard](image)

56 **Bustard** (west of Winton)
2007 digital photograph

From all this surrounding flatness the 'jump-ups' rise, russet mesa-like rock formations starkly overseeing the expanse with which they are surrounded.

![Jump-Up](image)

57 **Jump-Up** 2007 digital photograph

When standing on the fossil-strewn top of Mount Booka-Booka,\(^8\) (58) above the confluence of the Western River, Wokingham Creek and the Diamantina River or amongst the pink rounded tors of 'Rangeland'\(^9\) in the company of a basking rock python I realised, somewhat disconcertingly, that while I was walking on the top of a mountain I was at the bottom of an ancient sea. Feelings of timelessness paradoxically merge with thoughts of the constancy of change

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\(^8\) Mount Booka –Booka, (‘meeting place’) sits above the confluence of the Wokingham Creek with the Diamantina and Western Rivers and is the meeting place of the lands of the Guwa, Maiawali, Iningai and Yirandali people.

\(^9\) Much of the 2005 movie “The Proposition” was shot at this location.
while petrified trees, dinosaur tracks and fossils from tens of millions of years, ago are experienced nearby at Lark Quarry and Muttaburra.

Further west, between Middleton\textsuperscript{10} and Boulia the Min-Min lights can be seen by the fortunate few while everywhere the sun and moon keep constant silent vigil over the continuum of life.

For many of the people living in these remote areas the process of reconnection has been reversed. From a life of absolute isolation, and dependence on their natural environment, the arrival of radio, occasional mail and newspapers provided the only points of contact with the world beyond. With improved transport, satellite and computer technology they have been able to break from this isolation and connect with humankind and its activities. From this new position perhaps they are better able to reach a point of balance between the humanly devised and that which exists beyond our making.

\textsuperscript{10} Middleton, which consists of the pub, a couple of open sheds and some camel pens is midway between Winton and Boulia and was a central position in the search for Burke and Wills.
The penultimate leg of the trip was flying back to the east coast, gazing down on the flow of the landscape below, cut by the meandering paths of small rivers and creeks and inscribed with the grid of fence lines, powerlines, roads and railways marking our possession of it. But we do not possess it, we merely occupy it for a short period of time.

Make Believe

The next stop, Surfers Paradise, could not have provided greater contrast as a point of reconnection to the world of the humanly constructed. This is a place seemingly in a state of narcissistic denial regarding the rest of existence. Not only is it a city of theme parks, it is a theme park of a city, a human invention which has succeeded in creating an environment that is totally impersonal.
I was soon driving south, backtracking through the familiar, unconscious of the particular, quietly trying to assemble the disparate aspects of this journey into some meaningful whole.

The direct experience of traversing these landscapes that were formerly unknown to me, from coastal scrub, across the ranges and grasslands to the edge of the desert, reinforced the imagery I had developed in my studio and verified, or solidified ideas I had derived from earlier exposure to similar passages of country. As well as leading directly to the production of the Postcard Anywhere images it also helped clarify methods that I would pursue in expanding and refining ideas regarding the imprint of humankind upon the land in the next series of paintings.

Along with the initial series of abstract works, Intersection, the Imprint series (62) that I produced following this field trip made up my 2008 exhibition, ‘Reconnection – landscape beyond history and myth’, (Chapter 10).

I believe it important at this juncture to comment on the roles of the studio, both as the productive centre of my own practice and within the wider art-making field. All the physical processes and much of the intellectual activity involved in the creation of my paintings is carried out in the studio and it is its fluid nature that I will address in the next chapter11.

11 This is an edited version of the paper I delivered at the seminar; ‘Role of the Studio’ presented at Griffith University, Brisbane on 1st June 2010.
Chapter 8

Roles of the Studio

Informing theories and practices are found in the art studio (where) visual arts research has to be grounded in practices that come from art itself, especially inquiry that is studio based.¹

The Image of Studio

Among practicing artists the ideas and ideals contained in the word ‘studio’ will carry differing connotations depending on the nature of their individual practice. The mediums in which they work, the materials they employ and the scale and budget at which they operate all have significant bearing on the requirements of their physical workplaces.

For those not involved with art production the notion of ‘studio’ will carry other sets of thoughts and envisioned ideas. These ideas may be influenced by exposure to actual artists’ workplaces but more often they are the product of romanticised and mythologised portrayals. Such imaginings are created via Hollywood movies like Vincente Minelli’s *Lust for Life*, 1956, whose search for veracity is best illustrated by the casting of Russian-American Kirk Douglas in the lead role of ‘the brilliant but tortured artist’, Dutch master Vincent van Gogh.

To these depictions can be added literary descriptions in works like Christainya Rosetti’s, Pre-Raphaelite poem *In An Artist’s Studio* and Emile Zola’s *The Masterpiece* while in the contemporary Australian context R. Ian Lloyd and John McDonald\(^2\) create idiosyncratic photographic and verbal portraits of artists through studies of their studio spaces. From well before Jan Vermeer’s *The Artist’s Studio* of 1665, Gustave Courbet’s 1855 portrayal and Henri Matisse’s red version of 1911, and then through any number of every coloured studio since; the artist and their workplace have been constantly recurring subjects within the visual arts.

Commonly projected views of the studio tend to come from opposite ends of a narrow spectrum of imaginings. At one extreme a rat-infested garret where the unheralded masterpieces and scattered tools of painterly labour surround the starving, half-mad, male-genius-creator amidst the refuse of his pitiful existence. It is a damp, squalid, dark and confined space, illuminated only by the faltering light of a near-exhausted candle. At the purple end of this spectrum we have voluminous, orderly and opulent spaces, flooded with golden rays of heavenly sunlight where the court-appointed, court-anointed, (or contemporarily media-anointed), artist-as-celebrity conducts a never-ending soiree in celebration of their obviously apparent genius.

But, of course these extremes bear little resemblance to the everyday reality of artistic production. In this post-modern time of plurality and relativity the purpose and function of the artist’s studio shifts as quickly and frequently as the

changing nature of artistic practices demand. However, this has not required a huge adjustment, as historically the studio has always been the space or place of artistic creation and production, flexible enough to accommodate the needs and realities of differing artistic practices as they have evolved.

The Studio Un-Dead

This era in which we live and practice our art has also been described as; “post-museum, post-gallery or post-house-of-the-collector” and also “post-studio”.\(^3\) However, even cursory examination of the greater art world, as it exists, shows these prescriptive appellations to be little more than ill-founded projections; ‘headline-grabbers’ uttered for self-aggrandisement or undisclosed benefit to those who pronounce them.

The ‘death of the studio’ was dependent on the ‘death of painting’, the ‘death of drawing’, the ‘death of sculpture’, the ‘death of the image’, in fact the death or disappearance of the art-object, whatever its nature. But the art-object has not listened to these death threats and not only does it continue to live but it thrives and multiplies. Despite predictions to the contrary the dematerialisation of art has not occurred.

The premature and somewhat disingenuous death-notices for the studio have been proclaimed by such luminaries as Robert Smithson in the 1960s, Daniel Buren in the ‘70s and Richard Serra in the ‘80s, and still they continue. These artists felt a need to break free from the restrictions imposed on them by the traditional studio space and were also attempting to confront the plastic arts as they stood, perhaps to replace them with their own ‘new’ art forms. This was a matter of personal choice as to how, where and with what to work. The scale, materials and methods of their practice determined and demanded a move from

the conventional studio and into the countryside or steel fabricating factories where the work was now carried out.

However, despite their statements of replacement, the choice of these artists to work outside the confines of a traditional workshop-studio actually broadened the possibilities of art-making processes and production while also affecting the nature of their own practice. Regardless of what may have been said regarding the confining nature of studios, and the need to extinguish them, the conceptual and developmental work of their projects was often carried out in conventional studio environments, (though perhaps bearing closer resemblance to design, engineering or architectural offices), while at other times the planning and construction phases were carried out in situ.

The Studio as Factory

During the 1960s Andy Warhol rejected any quasi-prophetic view of the studio’s grim future. Instead he saw the opportunity for expanding art-making into art-business, where art-product was manufactured, not in a studio but in a factory. He was able to combine Walter Benjamin’s insight into the nature of reproduction with capitalist zeal to produce his art-product on low-tech, guild-like production lines in his factory-business. The marketing division held a premier position in the overall operation and through his understanding of the mind of the marketplace, Warhol was able to access and supply a new group of consumers, as well as the old with his work.

The art-consumables produced under Warhol’s direction and brand-name were available to a newly-wealthy group of potential art-purchasing patrons, along with the traditional art institutions and established collectors. His Factory’s exhaustive output was often viewed, reviewed, and promoted as if it were produced for popular consumption. This manufactured perception was founded

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4 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*
5 Davidts and Paice, *The Fall of the Studio.*
on the imagery he used from popular culture and the low-tech methods he employed. However, the Warhol factory-studio was always a business operation, producing cheaply made, extremely highly priced, exclusive art-commodities for consumption by a new field of international investors. The success of his operation has been incalculable.

Contemporary ‘international’ artists such as the Dane, Olafur Eliasson\(^6\) continue this brand-dominant, production-line method of art making and marketing, combining it in their offices and studio spaces with quasi-scientific notions of experimentation and research. Others, such as Jeff Koons, neglect the craftsmanship necessary for the making of art, choosing instead to become designers and directors, outsourcing all the production to artisan makers who, in turn, occupy their own studios.

**The Studio of Possibilities**

In recent decades the promotion of installation art, with emphasis on site-specific works, seems to have generated a belief that this type of art making is something new. Far from being new, site-specificity is one of the most ancient of all artistic considerations. The oldest works of art in existence, such as the cave paintings from Lascaux and those from northern and central Australia are site-specific. So too are the pyramids of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Central and South America. The sculpture, painting and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, the cathedrals throughout the Christian world, the mosques of Islam and the temples of every other religion are all inseparably bound to their site and setting. However, then as now, except for the cave-dwellers, much of the planning and development of the ideas that led to the production of the finished pieces would all have taken place in what we describe as studio-workshops, detached or on site, enclosed or *plein air*.

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With recent prominence given to site-specific practices comes a conviction, among certain decision makers that such works, along with video-art and performance pieces, are somehow inherently superior to other forms of existing practice. Such prescriptive thinking is severely limiting in a time Arthur Danto identifies as presenting “a field of possibilities and permissibilities in which nothing is necessary and nothing is obliged.” Each area of practice presents its own field of opportunity in the endlessly additive repertoire of art-making possibilities and a studio is where these possibilities are realised.

My own practice has involved ideas for site-specific constructions, such as Death Support, (64) above. While rooted in the land these non-interventionist virtual projects were developed on a computer at a desk. Along with other earlier computer generated images, these works are among the antecedents of Reconnection. Just as artists are influenced by the work of others so too their own work develops from earlier endeavours, seeking the clarification of ideas through the evolution of process.

The function of the studio has always occupied an indistinct position, being the shifting locus of ever changing practices. The application of changes in technologies to the thoughts and processes involved in art making creates the need for spaces with different attributes, as required by the nature of the

\footnotesize{Arthur C Danto, The Wake of Art, (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1998), 122.}
practice. Whether working individually or collectively, painters, sculptors, printmakers, 3D artists, photographers, video and performance artists all utilise workspaces with features specific to their needs. Graeme Sullivan observes that,

the contemporary artist these days is part theorist, performer, producer, installer, writer, entertainer and shaman, who creates in material, matter, media, text and time, all of which takes shape in real, simulated and virtual worlds.\(^8\)

For those who operate outdoors the studio can be wherever they choose. The practices of *plein air* painters, photographers and digital artists are all portable, even though many works are developed and finished within a studio’s walls.

*My Studio as Workplace*

Until I started the *Reconnection* research in February, 2007 at The University of Newcastle, I had never had a specific space reserved for art-contemplation and art-making activities. When I lived in the country the relatively small scale, and very low number of paintings I produced meant I could work at home in a corner of the sitting room. When I enrolled in art school in 2002, it was the first time I had access to studios dedicated to different areas of art-making and my needs in the fields of photography, digital media, collaborative projects, inter-active performance work and sculpture were all well catered for.

After a number of years concentrating on sculpture, installations and digital media I returned to painting as the central element of my practice. A dedicated studio became necessary and was to affect both my methods of working and many aspects of the work I was producing. I was allocated a space within a large shed close to the main art school building and although the light was poor, it was prone to flooding, was freezing in winter and sauna-like in summer, this place became the centre of my work’s conception as well as its production.

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\(^8\) Sullivan, Art Practice as Research, xvii.
result of working in a large space was the production of much larger paintings whose colour and tonal range were also to shift over time. Such changes were directly influenced by my immediate conditions such as the quality of available light and the volume of the space itself.

Good as it seemed at the time, this arrangement was not to last; as after settling-in a violent storm brought down a mature eucalyptus tree across the shed. Though no personal damage was done I had to move to a new studio within the main building itself and this space demanded a new set of adjustments, as not only was it comparatively small but I was forced to share it with another student.

I knew my fellow occupant from our short period in the old shed where there was plenty of space between us but this was life and work at much closer quarters. My initial feelings were reserved but it was soon apparent that the advantages of our new situation far outweighed any possessed by the old. The new space was light, dry and relatively warm or cool as desired and it was big enough. While the physical requirements of my practice were well met by this arrangement it was from unforeseen areas that many less tangible benefits have flowed.

Sharing a space demands a great deal of conscious consideration of one’s fellow occupant but it has also led to the sharing and exchange of ideas. The studio became a place for activating the discourse and considering points of view not encountered when working in isolation. It has also had wider benefits as our ‘open door’ policy stimulates and broadens areas of academic and artistic interaction through direct, informal connection between the differing groups that make up the Art School.

As my studio is in the undergraduate studio building and is close to the library and attendant academic and technical support it has become the focal point of my practice and my research. It is the place where the theoretical and practical aspects coalesce; where conception transfers into production and discourse
infuses output. When one is surrounded by work which is central to one’s research and practice, points of reference are never hard to find.

This is the position to which Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice refer in *The Fall of the Studio*. when looking at the transition of the function of the studio from a place of manual labour to one of intellectual labour. After Lucy Lippard and John Chandler’s “post studio” projections they identify the change in function and focus of the studio, gradually blurring the distinction between academic and artistic pursuits while embodying the “‘studious activity’ that permeates contemporary ways of making”.

Flexibility has always been a necessity and while artists continue to make art objects by any means, with any media, work places, called studios will continue to exist for the creation and production of these objects. The studio is not the unbound mind of the artist in which concepts are formed but it is the place where these ideas are developed and transformed into concrete reality. Studio characteristics will be as variable as the practices they accommodate and as there are no limits to practice in art there can be no limit on the nature of spaces in which art is conceived or produced.

In the following chapters I examine the ideas contained within each of the series and the creative processes involved in their realisation. The transitions between series are not rigid, but plastic and malleable. It is not a linear, chronological procession between the works but a matrix of interconnected possibilities.

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10 Ibid. 8.
Chapter 9

The Landscape in Paint

I realize that the energy of the atoms that reach us from the Sun is the source of all the rhythms of existence, and the very narrow band, the Spectrum is all we can ever hope to have to try and reach a small amount of the Rhythm and Relativity of the Universe with the substance of paint.1

Returning to Paint

In the previous chapters I have attempted to show how the paintings that form the Reconnection research project have been brought into being through the phases of conception, implementation and development from within a confluence of influences to form what I believe to be a coherent, unified corpus.

The stylistic differences between series are an integral component of my visual exploration of the depiction of landscape and also of the land depicted which interlink to form the whole. The creative processes driving my research have simultaneously formed the research itself while also being the result of that research in a self-generating moebius strip.

The landscape arguably serves as both site and metaphor for connection, disconnection and reconnection, expressed through the processes of painting. It is no longer the isolated botanical and zoological garden of the unpostulated, nor the once-wild land; conquered, tamed, fenced and fecund, transformed by the civilising ingenuity of Enlightenment invaders. Neither is it the emblem of the self-defined values of its non-Indigenous population. And yet, at the same time, it is aware of all these points of view, albeit mediated and re-weighted through experience and reflection.

These paintings explore aesthetic passages and pathways, attempting to present an expansive variety of closely interlinked modes of contemplation on a single theme. As Jay Appleton reiterates, [after the American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952)];

\[
\text{since there is an infinite variety of environmental conditions, there is also a possibility for aesthetic experience to take on innumerable forms, (opening up) possibilities for deriving aesthetic satisfaction as wide as the possibilities of human experience itself}^2
\]

The earth itself has become the point of contact with existence, the seemingly vacant landscape occupied only by the viewer. It is a world beyond sentiment and nostalgia which has been transformed into a “tactile, visual experiences of the landscape”\(^3\), as Ian Burn described the work of Fred Williams. These paintings have emerged from my experience of the country I know, if only a

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little, where I feel, as Gary Catalano observes, “a sense of belonging to the earth is something true of man in general, not peculiar to the Aborigines.”  

To add to an ever-expanding list of uncertainties I would like to think that my own studio works perhaps hold some comparable qualities with those of contemporary Tasmanian painter Philip Wolfhagen (b.1963), to whose work Peter Timms responded,

they transcend social, moral or political point-scoring to achieve their own kind of beauty – a clear-eyed, unsentimental appreciation of the environment as it really is, which frankly acknowledges the harm, both physical and conceptual, that has been inflicted upon it.  

Timms goes on to say that “such art has the capacity to change our accustomed ways of seeing nature and to help us toward a more nuanced understanding of our own place within it,” and if I could achieve this to some small degree I would regard my work as a success.

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5 Peter Timms, “Gatecrashing the Sublime” in Margaret Osborne, (ed), Australian Beauty, Artlink, 28, 2, 37.
After a number of years working with computer-generated imagery in 2007 I returned to the materiality of painting. Such de-coupling from the electricity grid was not some quixotic reactionary stand of luddite irrelevance, as we continue to multiply to a point well beyond that of twenty years ago when Albert Tucker saw us as, “a planetary plague (who) with an infinite arrogance and bottomless greed (has) declared war on every other form of life on this Planet.” 7 In responding to this situation I have employed a number of practices to assert an overtly physical presence within the work, distancing it from mesmeric digitization and returning to an intimate, experiential analogue world. The vehicle driving Reconnection is ultimately painting and paint, (65).

I would like to think that my paintings could also be considered as “...an affirmation of the vitality of the landscape as a contemporary idiom,” as Gary Dufour described the work of the late West Australian painter Howard Taylor (1918-2001). I believe this pronouncement could be equally applied to the work of Wolfhagen, William Robinson or Angus Nivison, (one of the very few notable Australian landscape painters who has spent the majority of their life living and working on the land). Not only are the works of these artists an affirmation of the legitimacy of the landscape as a contemporary idiom but in many ways they are an affirmation of the legitimacy of painting itself as a contemporary art practice.

**Materials and Methods**

All the processes employed in making the Reconstruction paintings have been carried out on the panels themselves within my studio, (as explored in the previous chapter). None have used photographs as specific references nor have they been developed from preparatory sketches. They are inventions from the imagination; reconstituted memories forming new visions which hope to connect with the viewer. I agree with Graeme Sullivan that

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7 Sotheby’s; Albert Tucker – The Timeless Land, (Sydney: Second East Auction Holdings, 2010), 5.
by exploring ideas about what is real and what can be imagined, artists capture sensations that may often appear abstract, yet the images they create are visual clues that help people see connections with their own experiences.\textsuperscript{9}

Despite the stylistic particularities of each series there are a number of commonalities which serve to link them securely to each other. The scale and ratios of the supports were chosen with consideration of the human field of vision and the interrelationship of the works within a final exhibition context. I made them from glued and nailed timber and recycled cotton canvas. Palette knives were the main tools used for the application of either acrylic or oil paints and at times bristle brushes were used as well. This is the full extent of the technologies employed. This simplification of means and methods is part of my seeking to clarify and focus through the removal of extraneous diversions. There has been no attempt to enrich these works, so as to avoid their being viewed as luxurious objects of desire.

In all the paintings I have used a restricted colour palette consisting only of yellow and red ochres in combination with black and white\textsuperscript{10}. While emphasising the central position occupied by the land within this project this strategy was also adopted in response to Aldous Huxley’s (1894-1963) observation fifty years ago that “we have seen too much pure, bright colour at Woolworth’s to find it intrinsically transporting.”\textsuperscript{11} Since that time our constant exposure to artificial, super-saturated digital colour, in all electronic and print media, has led to our becoming desensitised to the fascination contained within the more nuanced hues of our natural surrounds and it is within such subtleties that I find most fascination.

\textsuperscript{9} Graeme Sullivan, \textit{Seeing Australia - views of artists and art writers.} (Sydney: Piper Press, 1994), 93.

\textsuperscript{10} In a number of the earlier works I also Naples Yellow but it was removed as the palette contracted into only earth pigments.

Rather than operating as a barrier to creative potentials my self-imposed restriction of colour palette reveals a seemingly limitless variety of colours, hues and tones. These do not mimic nature, but operate in sympathy with the subtle shifts of geography, vegetation, latitude, weather, energy and mood of the land where, as Vincent Serventy said “we can recapture the essential truth that man is not above nature but part of it.\(^{12}\) By returning to elemental basics I am seeking to anchor these paintings to the experience of the lived environment within the experience of art.

**Stylistic Variations**

When I returned to painting I adopted a number of stylistic responses, in attempting to expand the possibilities within a particular genre of painting. Unlike the commonly accepted, historical position of an artist being stylistically consistent and identifiable, (as observed by Konrad Fiedler (1841-1895),\(^{13}\)

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these paintings have focussed on one particular subject, the landscape, and visually interrogated it from a diverse range of stylistic positions.

Each of the series is an indicator of the endless variety of ways of experiencing landscape; of being in it, of looking at it, of connecting with it. They also act as visual references to the way landscape has been looked at and depicted by non-Indigenous Australian artists over the last two centuries. The paintings shift from seemingly representational views of rural vistas to somewhat expressionistic interpretations of this same land which has also been pared down to reductive, geometric abstract fields that seek to connect with the constant base energies of life.

Jay Appleton points out that “in the experience of landscape, then, it is not only unreasonable but also pointless to argue a clear-cut distinction between representational and abstract art”\(^{14}\) and in this project I have attempted to present a number of alternate bridges between the representational and abstraction. The champion of High Modernism, Clement Greenberg, (so often a rigidly dogmatic purist)\(^{15}\) understood the futility of such constructed opposition saying,

\[
\text{one fallacy usually gets answered by another; and so there are fanatics of abstract who turn the argument around and claim for the non-representational that same absolute, inherent and superior virtue which is otherwise attributed to the representational}^{16}
\]

Within this work I have also been trying to fracture the restrictive thinking entailed in terminology such as Romanticism and Classicism. Through a visual exploration of notions including the sublime and empirical, I have aimed to establish points of intersection between seemingly opposite positions. This indistinct space is not a purgatorial void but a meeting place where the delusional certainty offered by appearances is questioned and broken down.


Such questioning flows continuously through the series where the seemingly clear and delineated reveals itself to be nothing more than a visceral skin of paint.

These are pictures to look at as well as being pictures to look into and perhaps the viewer will be inclined to do both. They are reflexive responses to lived experience where the physical, sensual, emotional and intellectual areas involved in their creation are in constant flow, mixing and settling into their unique configurations from which to be remixed and reconstituted in different forms. As Sian Ede says, (after the findings of neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio),

our mental and physical processes are inextricably linked, our emotions and feelings underpinning all our thoughts and actions, so that all our responses, no matter how abstract or reasoned they seem, are bound up with our visceral, or genital, or hormonal systems, or the rhythms of our circulatory systems, in continual response to modifications caused by encounters in the environment…whether real or via artworks.

Chapter 10

‘Reconnection – landscape beyond history and myth’

Human art not only requires calculation of effects, it also needs an intention to create something you’re going to want to look at after you’ve finished.

69  Sidney Nolan  *Burke and Wills Expedition* - ‘Gray sick’  1949
oil and enamel on composition board 91.5 x 121.5 cm

The Exhibition

At the end of 2008 I exhibited ‘Reconnection – Landscape Beyond History and Myth’, (70, 76) at Newcastle Art Space. This was an opportune time to visually assess the cohesion of the project by presenting it in a professional gallery space at approximately the half way point of its development. In many ways this exhibition signalled the completion of the early phases of studio production

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where the series of loosely geometrical abstract paintings, *Intersections* had evolved into the second series, *Imprint*, which attempts to establish a visually coherent passage across the divide between representational and abstract forms. Adjustments to focus are made, while the gaze remains concentrated on our relationship with the land.

Reviewing the *Reconnection* exhibition, *Newcastle Herald* newspaper art critic Jill Stowell\(^3\) found that the paintings were “reinventing abstraction.” While this response was appreciated such lofty purpose as the reinvention of abstraction has never been my intent. However, the destruction of inhibiting attitudes which seek to repress artistic expression and interaction through the imposition of limiting structures has always been an objective.

The historical transition within the Western painting tradition from the realistic-representational to abstraction has given rise to an underlying, popular belief that this has occurred as the result of some logically determined pathway. But Dennis Dutton points out

\[\ldots\]

our aesthetic tastes and interests do not form a rational deductive system but look rather more like a haphazard concatenation of adaptations, extensions of adaptations, and vestigial attractions and preferences. They evolved to delight and captivate human eyes, ears

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\(^3\) Jill Stowell, *Newcastle Herald*, 29.11.2008
and minds – not to form a logical system or make life easy for aesthetic theorists.\footnote{Dennis Dutton, \textit{The Art Instinct}, 219.}

The paintings as a whole are the result of changing the direction of this flow, so that the representational is now extracted and reassembled from the abstract, while still encapsulating all the underpinning ideas of the original. Through this process of extraction and re-assembly a new body of work evolves and from that still another, and so it grows. There is no absence of logic in such directional changes as the resultant works are enriched by the preceding processes. While, at first thought, this may appear counterintuitive it should be remembered that there can be no prescribed paths, dictates or directives in the production of art, unless one believes there are ideal art forms created from defined theories or conventions.

\textit{Series I - Intersections}

The paintings of Series I, \textit{Intersections}, while being purposefully low-tech, actually evolved from my use of computers for image creation over the previous three or four years. Two series of digital prints I produced in 2006, \textit{Emanator}, (71) and \textit{Generator}, (72) were explorations of the application of Romantic and Classical ideas in depictions of the abstracted landscape and it is from these concerns and sensibilities, along with their compositional solutions that the early research developed.
The *Intersections* series attempts to convey the timeless energies that propel life beyond human will and in order that they may perhaps reveal and not obscure. I have stripped them of any specific references, reducing them to essentials but not to extinction. They represent the wavelengths of life; melodic, rhythmic compositions of colour and tone, in major and minor keys, structured around intervals, progressions, harmonies and discords. But these works are not music and exist without score or notation in a place where all is silence.

These paintings are concerned with edges; the meeting places between earth, wind, fire and water; the points of interconnection. They are records of time and geology, of the weather and its moods, temperature, climate, seasons past and those to come. They are the visualised, reconstituted energies of existence, reductive concentrations and distillations of the thoughts, memories and experiences of my life.
There is constant interplay between the works within each series. Paintings such as *Emission Target I*, (74) and *Emission Target II*, (75), while existing quite independently of each other combine for amplified effect. Together they emphasise the imposition of a rigid structure on a world of chaotic uncertainty while simultaneously showing the stripping away of such artificially imposed restraints, unleashing energies, mistakenly thought to be safely contained therein.

These paintings could be seen as being descendants, or offshoots, of American reductive abstraction from the 1950s, though devoid of notions of purity or the absolute. However while such influence is undoubtedly at play, my art practice is firmly rooted in the Australian land and in many ways is a consequence of the history of non-Indigenous Australian landscape painting.

**Series 2 - Imprint**

The field trip to Winton gave me confidence in the veracity and validity of the *Intersections* paintings and also became a source for the more representational imagery which started to emerge in the *Imprint* series. In these paintings I was trying to establish a visual relationship with the environment that had propagated the initial ideas while my specific focus was on the impressing of the whitefella’s mark upon the land and finding ways of depicting that mark and its consequences.
These deliberations led to a merging of the abstract linear patterning of *Intersections* with a ‘realistic’ landscape where the stripes now act as signifiers of human imposition. This marking alludes to the mines, roads and railway tracks, irrigation channels, telephone and power lines and pipelines for gas, oil and water. They are the grids of fences and furrows, signs of enclosure, possession and ownership delineated under the atmospheric layers of dust and smog radiating above the horizon. But aligned with these concerns these paintings are, as the German Expressionist Max Beckman said, “seeking for the bridge which leads from the visible to the invisible.”

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Indigenous Connections

The Intersection paintings could be seen to possess a formal relationship with some Indigenous painting, especially in relation to the focus on the land, the colour palette and design aspects but any such connections should not be given undue emphasis. Although I admire and feel an affinity with the work of many Indigenous painters such as Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri (1926–1998), Rover Thomas Joolama (c.1926–1998), (78) and Gloria Petyarre (c.1945) there is no particular Aboriginal artist that has had any direct influence on my practice.

![Rover Thomas Joolama - Railway Bridge, Katherine 1984](image)

The connections between my paintings and those of individual Indigenous artists are largely restricted to aspects of surface. I am familiar with much Aboriginal art and notions of place and belonging are common themes I share with many Indigenous painters. However my work is built from foundations, unsupported by what A.C Grayling refers to as, “a scaffolding of beliefs,”⁶ in any traditional or formal sense. While our colour palette may be similarly restricted and a high level of patterning has been employed the paintings are coming from totally different social, historical, cultural, aesthetic and personal sources. As Christopher Allen alerts non-Indigenous audiences:

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Aboriginal culture is not our culture – neither in the sense that we own it nor that we belong to it….the fact that we can appreciate the beauty of Aboriginal art is an immense testimony to the fraternity of the human race and to the power of art to reach deep into the heart, and to glimpse what lies beyond the limits of culture. But we should be aware of thinking that we understand aboriginal art in anything like the way we understand our own.\textsuperscript{7}.

\textit{Technology and Technical Influences}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Curve Air 2007} \\
acrylic on plywood 180.0 x 120.0 cm
\end{center}

Throughout the development of the earlier computer images I investigated the colour and optical theories developed by the great teachers Josef Albers (1888-1976) and Johannes Itten (1888-1967), whose technical influences I applied with those of the Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach\textsuperscript{8} (1838-1916). Mach’s theories of universal interconnectivity were greatly influential on Albert

\textsuperscript{7}Christopher Allen, \textit{Art in Australia – from colonization to postmodernism}. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 215.

\textsuperscript{8}AC Grayling, \textit{Ideas that Matter}, 273.

Mach’s Principle essentially stated that everything within the universe ultimately effects everything else in the universe. His integrated philosophy developed from Spinoza and in its turn influenced Albert Einstein, although the two were often in disagreement.
Einstein but it was his ‘Mach Bands’\(^9\) which I employed in works such as *Curved Air*, (79) shown above.

These sources provided technical reference points, not formulae, from which the early *Intersection* paintings were to take their visual form, though now embodied with an unapologetic and determined physical, painterly presence. Layers of earth-pigmented paint were built up in a multitude of permutations and combinations of red ochre, yellow ochre, black and white where suggestion of the greater colour spectrum was developed by adopting different strategies and techniques suggested in the work of those teachers.

While the digital images have their place and continue to inform my studio work the detached processes involved in their creation gave rise to a desire to return to the challenges contained within the materiality of paint and one’s sensory encounter with its physicality. The paintings were now becoming the physical as well as metaphoric site for reconnection, creating a different, more immediate and intimate forms of dialogue with the land.

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\(^9\) Mach Bands are optical illusions of apparent tonal gradients that occur between two abutting areas of pure tone.
Chapter 11

*Through Strangers’ Eyes and Dreamers’ and My Own*

In the experience of landscape, then, it is not only unreasonable but also pointless to argue a clear-cut distinction between representational and abstract art.¹

![Image of The Marks of Time 2010](80)

**Views of the Unknown – Before and Beyond**

Each subsequent group of paintings in *Reconnection* developed in a non-linear fashion, emerging through an entwined visual exploration of the landscape with the threads and fabrics teased out and rewoven into imagined cloths of paint.

Travelling from harmonious and lyrical abstraction into the realm of the seemingly depictive, specific landscapes, imprinted with the empiricist scar was not straightforward. My slow departure from timeless abstraction into an engagement with colonial landscape images and writings led to an exploration of strategies that might be useful in attempting to capture the strangeness of everything that befell the eyes of the early colonists; the undescribed, the unpostulated, the unknown.

One result of this exploration is that the paintings are devoid of human or animal presence or occupation, in order to intensify the connection between the viewer and the landscape, allowing the viewer to participate in it.

Meeting Place 2008
acrylic on board  65 x 75 cm

The first step I took in creating the new body of work was to remove the mark I had previously imposed on the land. In many ways these paintings are an attempt to ‘be aboriginal’, as Margaret Preston exhorted her fellow artists some eighty years ago. Terry Smith clearly points out that to ‘be aboriginal’, in this sense, means to “go to the source’, to remove all accumulated, civilized knowledge, to let the materials speak their truth.”\(^2\) It is through intense examination followed by such a stripping down to essence that I have sought to reach clarity of vision, just as a close examination and stripping down of the moral, political, religious, economic and philosophical frameworks within which I was brought up have led to the formation of my own value system.

Within these works I have sought to unencumber myself of any references that may distract from the aim of achieving a sense of a direct relationship with nature. I wanted to push back my vision into pre-colonial times when the Aboriginal people had been thinly spread for tens of thousands of years, treading lightly and leaving barely a trace of their presence upon the land, while buttressed against its harshness by complex all-accommodating belief systems. Since British occupation a little over two hundred years ago the same country

now supports over twenty two million people despite our neglect and abuse and it is only this same, finite piece of dirt that will sustain us into the future. As David Tacey points out regarding the fracturing of our inter-relationship with nature and our often arrogant hostility towards it,

after allowing ourselves to lose our vital connection with nature, we have made nature appear indifferent or malign. We cannot psychically and physically abuse nature on a grand scale and then expect it to nurture and protect us³.

Series 3 and 4 - Of Times Before and Of Times Beyond

Series III, Of Time Before did not simply appear with the removal of geometric delineation from the ‘observed’ landscape. It was not a mere leftover or remnant of earlier contemplation or practice. This was a new body of work, which came about through quite a radical change in both my thinking and envisioning. New imaginings and forms of visualisation emerged from the earlier works which fused with fleeting mental images, conjured from descriptions I had been reading from the diary entries of early European explorers.⁴ In combination with my own memories of places, times, situations and events it was these descriptive narratives that provided a template which encapsulated all the elements which I felt were needed in order to help define my relationship with nature. The topographic, geological, aesthetic, geographic, emotional, meteorological, historic, spiritual and intellectual aspects, as described in these writings and experienced through my life provided the perceptual and conceptual foundations and materials from which I could construct the images.

On the 23rd of October 1824, after crossing the Murrumbidgee River east of Yass, the explorer, Hamilton Hume made the following diary entry: “After crossing the river and advancing a day’s journey or more, we found ourselves hemmed in by the mountains, and camped for two nights on the Narrengullen Meadows.” Three days later he wrote, “we were engaged in sending the carts and supplies across the Cooradigby River.” The Cooradigby is now known as the Goodradigby River and I am very familiar with this country. For about fifteen years during my childhood and early adolescence my family owned a property that ran from its banks, where we swam and fished, over the mountains where we rode our ponies to the western edge of the Narrengullen Meadows. At the edge of the plain, at the base of the hills is where the sheds and homestead were located and where Hume’s party had made their camp one hundred and forty years before in country very similar to that of Elioth Gruner’s painting, *On the Murrumbidgee*, (82) shown above. It is links such as these which were to act as catalysts for the new body of work.

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The oil paintings on paper that make up the series *Of Time Before*, (83) and *Of Time Beyond*, (73, 84) are presented as two grids, each being three images high by four across forming a ‘calendar’. Each painting represents one month in a season of three over a year of four seasons. The paintings flow from hot through mild to cold, from wet to dry, from abundance to drought. They travel from the coast across the ranges and slopes to the plains and deserts beyond, referring to time before we imposed ourselves upon this place, where occasional wisps of smoke are the only sign of possible human habitation, although they may be just the result of nature’s lightning strikes.
While all these paintings are composite inventions, and not observed depictions of any specific site or place, the elements from which they are configured are all gathered from my remembered experiences of the land. They possess nothing that is foreign to my experience but, “the landscape is familiar and alien, everywhere and nowhere, specific and generic, individual and universal”\(^6\), as Geoffrey Smith says of the paradoxes and ironies that have occupied Australian landscape painting since the nineteenth century. This situation we inhabit is an endless paradox as it expresses an essential truth of our position in an environment with which we must seek understanding and integration in order to survive. For this reason our landscape will be of continuing intrigue, continuing relevance and continuing symbolic potential.

The ‘calendar’ grid presentation of *Of Time Before* and *Of Time Beyond* engages with notions of specificity of time and place within generalities while entering the domain of American-based Russian artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid.\(^7\) Their *People’s Choice* project revealed that despite cultural and ethnic differences people, “around the world gravitate toward the same general type of pictorial representation: a landscape with trees and open areas, water, human figures and animals.”\(^8\) The results of this project led to the creation of their confrontational and controversial 1993 work *America’s Most Wanted*, a ‘painting by numbers’ collage consisting of re-assembled publicly polled ‘desirable elements’.

One conclusion from the Komar and Melamid’s research was that the majority of people relate most positively to the landscape, described by Denis Dutton above, with two fifths blue sky or water, and not a Modernist black square in sight. In light of this unanticipated and unwanted response, Arthur Danto argues that this outcome is the result of global visual contamination transported by the

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\(^7\) Komar and Melamid first came to attention in 1979 with their project that involved the broadening of the capitalist ethic into the area of spirituality, (an area seemingly thoroughly exploited by established religions) where their trade involved the buying and selling of souls.

proliferation of clichéd, stereotypical imagery contained in calendars. However, Dutton sees it in much clearer light, without any reliance on the wobbly crutch of cultural determinism when he notes that calendars – and the picture preference they reveal in completely independent cultures – tap into innate inclinations. This fundamental attraction to certain types of landscapes is not socially constructed but is present in human nature as an inheritance from the Pleistocene...The calendar industry has not conspired to influence taste but rather caters to pre-existing, pre-calendrical human preferences.

While the colour blue is completely absent from my work, and I hold no belief in the possibility of universal acceptance and understanding, it is into these pre-calendrical, timeless areas that I have positioned these paintings. The calendar represents the continuity of change and the imagery of times past is constantly engaged in dialogue across the ages with that of futures as yet unexperienced.

Series IV, Of Times Beyond can be seen as being a future reflected, an echo of the imagery in Series III Of Times Before. While these works comprise elements from the same implied place, what is now presented is an unpopulated projection of a possible future beyond our collective demise or permanent evacuation. These paintings again refer to the continuity of the months and the seasons, the coast and the inland, but what they expose is a continuity of irreversible change, much of it the result of human misbehaviour. The climate and weather, the rain, sun and frost, the grasses, rocks and trees are now without witness, remnant life forms, survivors of our short and destructive period on this planet.

Familiarity and Belonging

Another influential work from my own past practice is Contained Reality, 2005, (85), ostensibly a representational rendering of an observed view of the sea from

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10 Denis Dutton, The Art Instinct, 18.
a sandy beach. Like the paintings in the *Reconnection* series this work was an invention from my imagination but many viewers were certain that it was a specific location with which they were sure they were familiar. However, for different viewers it always seemed to be a different location, suggesting an innate desire amongst human beings for the reassurance provided by images of places which are familiar.

![Contained Reality 2005](image)

**Contained Reality 2005** charcoal on acrylic on plywood 180.0 x 600.0 cm

Through the viewer's own interaction with the paintings, through their own mediation, both unconscious and unwilled, the nondescript has become particular and the unexperienced familiar. Arnold Berleant explains this phenomenon when he observes that;

we often associate place with a location that has clear identity, one that is benign and congenial, which are qualities we value. Implicit here is a certain mutuality, a reciprocity of person and place, which gives us a sense of belonging.\(^\text{11}\)

Jay Appleton’s explanation of the desire for familiarity is based on his proposition that;

aesthetic satisfaction, experienced in the contemplation of landscape, stems from the spontaneous perception of landscape features which, in their shapes, colours, spatial arrangements and other visible attributes, act as sign-stimuli indicative of environmental conditions favourable to survival, whether they are favourable or not.\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) Jay Appleton *The Experience of Landscape*, 69.
There is an awareness of this ‘familiarity’ phenomenon running through Of Times Before and Of Times Beyond, and into the later series. However, there has been no conscious attempt to exploit this response, as by sustaining the use of a restricted earth palette combined with the imagery derived from experience there is no need – this transference occurs without volition. The identification of specific locations within these groups of paintings by the few people who have viewed them has convinced me of the veracity of this hypothesis along with truths contained within the paintings themselves. Berleant emphasises that, “place is the particular landscape we inhabit. It is local and immediate, our lived environment epistemology,” and it is with this place that I seek to connect.

Series 5 - Translocations and Explorations

The paintings that make up the fifth series of paintings, Translocations and Explorations make constant reference to depictions of the Australian landscape from colonial times to our own without attempting to imitate. They possess an awareness of the art of many painters from the nineteenth century like John Glover, Conrad Martens, Louis Buvelot and Hans Heysen, who visited, settled here and stayed along with Eugene von Guerard, Nicholas Chevalier and Charles Conder who were just passing through. Simultaneously they reference artists who were born here like Charles Piguenit, Fred McCubbin and Arthur Streeton. From the twentieth century Sidney Long and Sidney Nolan are acknowledged along with Michael Johnson while Philip Wolfhagen, Angus Nivison and Elisabeth Cummings carry the associations forward.
These paintings, like the two series preceding it, engage with the history of European occupation of Australia from different perspectives through the artistic depictions of its landscape. They allude to topographic concerns; to academic, classically inspired renderings of pastoral empiricism and romantic upsurges of emotion in the face of the sublime. They are Modernist stage-sets of dirt, rocks and scrub in which the nascent myths of a disparate people were to be invented, envisaged and enacted while occupying a Postmodern field of possibilities. It is through such linkages that all the works in the *Reconnection* series connect with the broad canon of western art.

While these works constantly reference much of the art from many artists that came before them they make no attempt to imitate or copy. They follow the belief, enunciated by Josef Albers when he said that, “to honour the masters
creatively is to compete with their attitude rather than with their results, to follow an artistic understanding of tradition – that is, to create, not to revive.”

Series 6 - Almost 9x5

Series VI, Almost 9x5 has the most obvious historical connections, with its direct reference to the Heidelberg School exhibition of 1889 at Buxton’s Gallery in Melbourne; 9x5 – Impression Exhibition, (88). The paintings in this series are the only ones which make any specific reference to former artists or specific art movements. It was these painters who challenged the dominant orthodoxy of the academy of their day. They helped change the public’s perception of what art could be despite being told what it should be. In their own time critics such as James Smith from the Argus newspaper in Melbourne found that “four fifths are a pain to the eye” but despite such perceived shortcomings these works engaged the public.

In this series of paintings I have not attempted to mimic or reproduce Heidelberg images any more than I have attempted to produce a ‘most wanted’ painting from Komar and Melamid’s formulations. The linkage is more to the

88 Charles Conder Dandenongs from Heidelberg 1889 oil on board 11.5 x 23.5 cm

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Commenting on their 9X5 Exhibition of Impressions, exhibition at Buxton’s Gallery, Melbourne in 1889 art critic James Smith of The Argus newspaper, declared, “four-fifths are a pain to the eye. Some of them look like faded pictures seen through several mediums of thick gauze; others suggest that a paint-pot has been accidentally upset over a panel nine inches by five; others resemble the first essays of a small boy who has just been apprenticed to a house painter; whilst not a few are as depressing as the incoherent images which float through the mind of a dyspeptic dreamer.”
spirit of the progenitors as their experiential position became coupled with my own

**Series 7 - No Trespass**

The notion of direct involvement with a totally foreign environment, which is integral to the series *Of Time Before, Of Time Beyond, Translocations and Explorations* and to a lesser extent, *Almost 9x5* continued as a vital consideration in the creation of Series VII, *No Trespass*. In this final series the former allusions to Classical, Romantic, Impressionist and certain Modernist streams have been subsumed by the Expressionistic tactility of the material of paint; knifed and plastered, pulled, scraped, built up over time and scratched-into revealing threads of evidence of earlier incarnations.

These works aim to be as abrasive as the unwelcoming and unforgiving bush from which they have emerged. They can be seen as defenders of place, which scratch and rip, which sting and tear at the flesh of the inattentive and judicious
alike while simultaneously seeking to seduce with their ‘un-natural’ beauty and promise of ultimate reward or redemption. They present formidable barriers but they are not impenetrable.

It is us that must accommodate the nature of our land through a practiced realisation of our indivisible connection with it. As the nineteenth century author Marcus Clarke\textsuperscript{15} wrote of this antipodean world;

Some see no beauty...but the dweller in the wilderness acknowledges the subtle charm of this fantastic land of monstrosities. He becomes familiar with the beauty of loneliness. Whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness he learns the language of the barren and the uncouth, and can read the hieroglyphs of the haggard gum trees, blown into odd shapes, distorted with the fierce hot winds, or cramped with cold nights, when the Southern Cross freezes in a cloudless sky\textsuperscript{16}

In many ways it is this experiential, unpolished language of the barren and the uncouth with which these paintings speak in their attempt to directly engage the viewer in a dialogue with their immediate being.

By concentrating on their materiality; their physical, temporal and sensual presence, in combination with the imagery they contain and the ideas that

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{15} One of the paintings in the No Trespass group is titled Rufus Dawes, named after the central character in Marcus Clarke’s \textit{For the Term of His Natural Life}.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Marcus Clarke, “Preface” to Adam Lindsay Gordon, “Sea Spray and Drift Smoke” in Geoffrey Serle, \textit{The Creative Spirit in Australia}, 18.
\end{itemize}
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propelled them I have sought to unambiguously establish an unavoidable, experiential connection between these paintings and the viewer. In these works I have endeavoured to establish a sense of continuity within the series and between them through the use of a consistent colour palette and motif, while the variation in scale serves to continuously alter this relationship, helping establish a sense of movement and flow through and between them, with their differing facets perceived from ever-shifting viewpoints.

Mary Rawlinson, in *The Art Seminar*, (paraphrasing Maurice Merleau-Ponty) says that a painting

mixes up all our categories – essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible, offering the imaginary texture of the real in its sensuous materiality and provokes ideas that are not the opposite of the sensible but its lining and depth.¹⁷

In the paintings within *No Trespass* I have attempted to express this complex mixing up in such a way that the works are open to the engagement of the viewer. In this endeavour I have been mindful of Elizabeth Prettejohn saying, (after Kant);

it is crucial that the aesthetic ideas are generated in the free play of imagination and understanding in the mind of a human artist, as well as stimulating an answering free play in the mind of the observer.\textsuperscript{18}

The works of No Trespass are the final elements of the Reconnection. They are landscapes of the imagination, energised with emotions, tempered through thought and judgement. As Kant also pointed out, “The imagination...is very powerful in creating another nature, as it were, out of the material that actual nature gives it”\textsuperscript{19} and such transformative processes have been constant throughout the Reconnection series.

Chapter 12

Conclusion

*In the recording of history pictures came before words, the artist before the writer... The invention of writing created a new means of telling these stories, but far from one superseding the other they became complimentary and have remained so ever since.*

I earlier referred the *Reconnection* research as resembling a moebius strip of which there is no defined beginning and thus no end and this also applies to the relationship between the paintings themselves. I have applied similar structures to the exegesis where, in exploring the complexities of our relationship with nature, at a personal and collective level I have also been exploring the complexities of the processes involved in the production of the artworks. In doing this I have been seeking to establish a number of inter-related contexts which together have informed my work from the global to the intimate, the cerebral to the sensory.

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In this work I have sought to establish points of commonality and continuity that link us to the natural world which prevailing Cartesian-Newtonian\(^2\) dualism has done its best to sever. Carlos Fuentes warned us that “the beatific faith in human perfectibility leads us to the great nightmares of our times”\(^3\) and this situation will continue until we radically re-evaluate our relationship with the rest of the natural world.

What I have attempted in this complete body of work, from within the confines of the cultural construct I inhabit, is to reflexively respond to all the inter-related ideas that have been explored through the processes of my research. This has been a visual enquiry which has questioned the possibilities for the materials and processes of the studio to act as points of engagement between an audience and nature.

*Reconnection* encompasses an expansive field of multi-positional perspectives and possibilities, in order to multiply potential points of connection between the viewer and the work and through the centrality of the landscape I have attempted to provide access to an audience who may find the paintings stimulating their awareness and igniting their own imaginations, thoughts and emotions.

Throughout *Reconnection – an Exploration of Australian Landscape Beyond History and Myth* I have tried to demonstrate that painting can act as a connective point in the exchange of ideas and emotions at a personal and general level and I believe that it is continuing belief in this possibility that drives its open-ended creation. However, the success of any such aspiration can only be judged by the audience for the completed work.

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\(^{2}\) The development of a postmodern ‘deep ecology’ philosophy, (including its inconsistencies, lack of a definitive paradigm and diversity of influences such as Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Leopold and Prigogine) as a counter to the destructive dominance of the anthropocentric ‘modernist’ philosophical position is critically evaluated in: Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness – from pre-history to the age of ecology*, (New Haven: Yale University Press,1991), 301-326.

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