TERRA INCOGNITA
THE SUBLIME, THE UNCANNY AND NOSTALGIA IN PAINTING
THE LANDSCAPE AUSTRALIAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper is written in four parts: Melancholy and the Colonial in Australia, The Sublime with Aspects of the Picturesque, The Strange – Freud’s “Unheimlich”, the Uncanny, and a journal on my travel through Central Australia, quoted in the body of the main text. In an attempt to clarify my experience with the landscape, these traditional western philosophical concepts and more recent theory, I explore how they continue to shape Australian identity, my painting practices and that of other Australian artists.

My argument was concerned with the above aspects, which to me appeared more pertinent than others, mostly because of their disjuncture. However, further investigation, especially in my work, allowed me to see the links between them and how the ‘unheimlich’ and sublime correlate. Consequently I began by looking at these theories in a broad fashion so as to elucidate early Australian tendencies toward romantic painting beginning with the work of John Glover, thus setting a backdrop for more specific observation. Additional investigation went into the Sublime, Romanticism, Nostalgia and “Unheimlich”. Using automatism expounded in Surrealism, I have attempted to refine spiritual and psychological aspects in my landscape painting. Russel Drysdale, Tim Storrier, John Olsen and Mandy Martin reveal different responses to the landscape in Australia.

A field trip to Central Australia has illuminated my work in theory and practice by challenging any romantic notions about the “homeliness” of our country and exploring the “unheimlich” and sublime found in the centre of Australia. Italic journal excerpts and photographs throughout the paper help to link my practical and written work with direct experiences on the land and enable a connection with personal philosophies. While also writing on landscape as metaphor with the Australian psyche, simultaneously connected and disconnected, both “unheimlich” and sublime I sought to grasp the idea of being comfortably displaced here.

Experimentation with my painting, with colour and format while letting automatism dictate line and composition, allowing research, writing and photography to enter my psyche and the canvas are methods that I have employed to gain a better understanding of my own work within broader cultural and historical contexts.
INTRODUCTION

Throughout Australia’s Anglo history, artists have explored landscape and its connection with the Australian psyche using romantic notions of the Sublime to evoke a yearning for the homeland. This romantic idiom was employed to make a hostile land seem palatable even though it was neither predictable nor familiar. Australia was, and still is, Ptolemy’s “Terra Incognita”. When the uncanny is used in conjunction with the Sublime it heightens one’s innate experience and response; combined they evoke particularly strong intrinsic emotional reactions. The Sublime has been discussed as mostly a phenomenon related to, or of, something or someone (Edmund Burke); or the emotional response gleaned from the experience of the above (Immanuel Kant). I am inclined towards the later belief. Sigmund Freud explained the “unheimlich” as the unfamiliar; however, more recent theory has placed the “unheimlich” into a contemporary context and wider understanding as unhomely or strange.

Landscape painting is particularly useful when an artist wishes to explore the link between the interior and exterior. Artists use the landscape to tap into the national psyche where the dualities of the “Australian landscape perfectly embodies the tension that exists in Australian life between…” ‘toughness and sensitivity’, ‘harshness and sophistication’.”¹ The application of these kinds of dualities is often symbolic. Heightened colour and exaggerated form are symbolically used in my own work to enable reconciliation between a European heritage and a wild untamed land. Tim Storrier’s sublime depiction of the land and its sky brings us closer to the reality of our own mortality by reminding us of the fiery vastness, scale and danger of the land. Fig. h Mandy Martin’s paintings, fig. g, envelope us in the awesome spectacle of earth; beautiful, horrific and timeless, and the colonial Conrad Martin’s sublime skies and grand vistas break from the early settler’s voyeuristic view of this country painted in the tradition of the picturesque, he later explored a more honest experience of this land ripe with movement, light and danger.

¹ Catherine Lumby quoting Edmund Capon, “Tim Storrier; The Art of the Outsider”, p. 41
Australia as a nation only truly developed a sense of its independent cultural identity apart from Britain in the early 1970s. Television and film began to show the true nature of the average “Aussie”, actors had “fair dinkum” accents and did Australian things like playing footy and drinking beer. Admittedly there is nothing particularly Australian about these things but the average local thrived on the notion of a stereotype in this country. Max Gillies, Dad and Dave and particularly self-ordained Dame Edna Everage held a mirror to Australia, especially to the old guard with feet on “terra incognita” and heart still in the United Kingdom. While it is important to understand where we come from and to understand our short history so that we may move on from it, this has often resulted in the mythologising of historical facts and figures producing an unrealistic perception of the past, undermining the productive nature of our heritage. National myths bring some kind of awe and nostalgia; however, fables can too often be misleading. Ned Kelly for example, although bound as an outcast hero, would today simply be sent to jail. His myth persists because he was executed by the law (the Other), hence encouraging the typically Australian attitude that divides “us” and “them”. More importantly he was of another epoch and therefore nostalgia has had time to root itself into his story and the Australian psyche. The myth of the jackaroo as shown in the film *The Sundowners* nomadically working the land is far more conducive to the label of hero making a living with hard “yakka”. Unfortunately this does not entirely fulfil society’s need for a hero, the jackaroo is anonymous, he is a stranger, rarely glimpsed through the scrub; he is inconspicuous and likes it that way. Baz Lurmann’s film *Australia* (20th Century Fox, 2008) is indicative of Australia’s continuing need to believe in the hero, or anti-hero. Set in the 1930’s, the rough Australian rover takes an English aristocrat through the unrelenting terrain of the Northern Territory and the bombing of Darwin. This not only exaggerates the cultural differences between the two, it expounds the machismo hero quality of the Aussie bloke and the land, and its mythology. The contemporary Australian working the land is not so different; the modern hero is employed on some of the most remote land in the most extreme weather that this planet has to offer.
Globalization has allowed the customs and habitats of Earth’s communities and her heroes on the land to be understood as not a particularly provincial thing, nor particular to the Australian psyche and her identity. Identity is bound in the Other, we engage our personal identity with affiliation or sameness, however, individuality needs the faculty to separate and differentiate from that or who we measure ourselves. Sameness in society eradicates the need for comparison and improved understanding because it reinforces that which we already know, a knowledge not enhanced with new information gleaned from the Other.

However, the direct experience of specific landscapes and regions of this country can afford a real and personal understanding of those who have been and those who come to pass through this land. Australians have been afflicted by a cultural cringe brought on mostly by distance, time and isolation and as globalization dissolves some of these barriers we continue to allow the ghosts of past inform our national psyche. Nevertheless, the certainty of a land that is mostly inhospitable and unforgiving forces us to live on the periphery. Catherine Lumby says that “A wider world emanates style, brings benchmarks and a sense of exile; (while) proximate Australia seems monotonal, flat, its occupants utilitarian, too easily satisfied with externalities—all surface, no depth”2. Storrier’s sense of exile has stemmed from travel and shifts over the continent where he grappled “with such perennially Australian concerns as the remote Australian interior and the Australian landscape tradition as well as more universal concerns.”3 (Lumby). His travel overseas has also given him a sense of what it is to be Australian. I have found that my own travel around Asia has given me a great sense of difference from these proximate countries, yet more distant countries provide similar mores, a rather ubiquitous displacement for people of western descent in this country. Storrier’s themes of isolation and abandonment, fig. h, were evoked at “an early stage [when] he was attracted to the vast, arid areas of the country and to the feelings of isolation and mental space that these places engendered.”4 Early experiences of my grandfather’s farmland in Victoria, where new life and death expound the cycles of our earth and provided a playground in tree hollows and the arms of an old Grey Ghost shading cattle dogs, provided a similar consecutive sense of isolation and homeliness that Storrier describes.

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2 Ibid p.8
4 Debora Hart, *The Australian Context: Real and Imagined*, p.17
There is comfort and a sense of safety in the freedom felt in vast spaces that are familiar. Isolation bound in the “unheimlich”, in displacement and strangeness while feeling safe and at home on the land, gave me a great sense of synchronized freedom and foreboding. My paintings tend give a view of an idealised loss, where nature takes over and its essence, in fleshy orange are symbolically referenced as analogous of the link between people and the earth. They are about a western physical and psychological link with the Australian country using western techniques. The anamorphous forms are analogous, for my personal link and experience with the mercurial biology of the land as living organism; as developed in early childhood and reaffirmed in growing years. Through the use of the disquieting elements of the sublime and the “unheimlich” I am able to link western techniques with my experience of this southern land, Australia.

Fig. a   Emily Reuter, *Trasitus Confinium (Crossing the Border) (detail)*, 2009, oil on canvas, 5x 137x137cm.