

Fleurieu Prize 2016 lecture by Dr Margot Osborne
Towards an Antipodean aesthetic of nature and landscape

The other night I was dipping into Professor Sasha Grishin's doorstep reference book *Australian Art: A History*. I bought it from the Art Gallery bookshop last week and was looking into it to help build an art historical argument on Australian landscape art over the past half-century. It's a terrific if occasionally flawed account of Australian art and makes great reading in terms of putting the current moment in some kind of perspective. By accident I came upon this quote on art prizes in the 1950s:

Press reporting of the prizes was similar to that of any sporting fixture – with its competitors, judges, winners and losers – and the artists were at the mercy of the judges and the press.

Generally prizes claimed an increasing importance in artists' biographies, a bit like ribbons on a prize merino... (p. 351)

Well, after a lull in the latter part of the last century, prizes are back, and nothing much had changed.

The Fleurieu Prize is a very prestigious and valuable prize but it is still a competition. It is not a curated survey but a selective prize exhibition of short-listed finalists – limited to those who entered and also by the short-listing process of the selectors.

By its very nature it is not comprehensive as an indicator of current tendencies and it is not possible to make definitive generalisations. On the other hand, the quasi-openness of the selective competitive

process results in a more random grouping than would come from rigorous curatorial vision, and this sometimes throws up interesting juxtapositions and revelations. In particular, this version of the Fleurieu Prize contains a fascinating mix of up and coming young guns, working within the funded not for profit sector, and respected more senior artists who often don't make it into public galleries, pursuing their careers largely through the private gallery network. As an intrepid commentator, observer of Australian art over the past few decades and newly fledged art historian, I am prepared to go out on a limb and discuss some markers of current tendencies – both amongst artists and selectors.

This iteration of the Fleurieu Prize looks markedly different, not only to its predecessors but to that other big landscape prize exhibition, the Wynne Prize at the AGNSW. It is more edgy, more provocative. Why? Because, on the face of it at least, it seems that quite a few of the artworks are not the product of the artists' engagement with actual Australian landscapes and nature, but rather are fictive and artificial landscapes, where the concept of landscape has been mediated and reconstructed through various metaphorical and ideological filters.

I'm going to try to tease out some of the implications of these tendencies, but by a somewhat roundabout route. So bear with me for the moment while I sketch in the background to my philosophical position.

My interest as a curator and writer in approaches by Australian artists to representation of the natural landscape of this continent has always been closely tied to ideas around sense of place. In particular I have focussed on articulating how a particular beauty arises from organic abstraction and the artist's skilled material embodiment of a sense of connection between self (or mind) and the natural environment. A related concern has been the hypothesis arising from theorists like the late Denis Dutton that there are shared bio-aesthetic sensibilities in the abstracted organic languages of both indigenous and non-indigenous artists, and the connection between our awareness of ourselves as part of nature with our sense of mortality of all living things.

These pre-occupations culminated in my curating the exhibition *Abstract Nature*, which was presented by the Samstag Museum in 2010. Intertwined metaphors of place in the artworks in that exhibition were:

- The land is not empty (*terra incognita* rather than *terra nullius*)
- Fragility and resilience
- Beauty and immanent meaning
- Memory embedded in landscape

At the time I wrote that threats of environmental catastrophe, global warming and species annihilation are a reminder that we are mortal, biological creatures, dependent on our living ecosystem, Earth. Aesthetic qualities of exemplary skill, grace and beauty in highly resolved artworks and crafted objects evoke a metaphorical resonance with the beauty, fragility and resilience of the natural

environment. Contemporary art works 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 - the finite time for remaining natural resources compared to the infinity of time past, and of this ancient continent. This sense of loss is balanced by qualities of resilience and renewal.

In the intervening years this consciousness amongst both artists and wider the community has become even more acute. Works responding to Australia nature, as evidenced in this exhibition frequently have an elegiac sadness.

I'm now in the process of taking these formative ideas a stage further with some meditations on the aesthetic points of difference that distinguish contemporary Australian landscapes.

A key moment for gaining an art historical perspective of the evolution of the landscape genre within the context of post-war modernism in Australia came in 2013 with the exhibition *Australia* presented at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in association with the National Gallery of Australia. I was fascinated by the overwhelmingly negative and condescending reception given by British critics to Australian landscape art in the exhibition. My feeling at the time was that the British critics simply didn't get it. Even a respected critic like Waldemar Januszczak who up to that point I had admired, was virulently dismissive of the art, labelling Aboriginal paintings as 'tourist tat' and comparing the John Olsen painting, *Sydney Sun*, 1965 to a 'cascade of diarrhoea'.

While I'm not a particular admirer of John Olsen's paintings, this seemed by any measure an unduly harsh judgement. Even Fred Williams' paintings were 'thick cowpats of minimalism' splattering the emptiness of the landscape. There was something going on here that went beyond the entrenched British condescension towards any pitiful cultural pretensions of its former colony in the Antipodes. My initial hypothesis was that there were fundamentally different ways of seeing at play. I first teased this out in a lecture at Kings College London coinciding with the end stages of the run of *Australia* at the Royal Academy.

In that lecture I argued that the European perception of beauty in landscapes and in landscape art originated, on the one hand, in the wild, primal sublime of forests and mountainous parts of Europe, the Lakes District, Scotland and Wales, and on the other, in the Arcadian ideal of picturesque, civilised, verdant pastoral landscapes of rolling hills, streams and manicured hedgerows of the home counties English countryside. The Art Gallery of South Australia holds several paintings by English artists that exemplify this approach to landscape – for instance the primal rugged landscapes of William Nicholson, John Minton and John Piper, and the idyllic Arcadian pastoral landscape of Laura Knight.

For the British, the arid Australian landscape holds the fascination of the hostile Other, with connotations of the expulsion from Eden, and the Wasteland. Both Nolan and Boyd, who found such success in

England, might be viewed within this template. [Refer for instance to Peter Fuller's 1986 essay on the *The Australian Scapegoat*.]

But that Australians and Australian artists might find beauty in the soft hues of the eucalypts, the ochres of the desert and the bleaching light of an antipodean sun, appears to be a bridge too far for the British imagination. I argued in that London lecture that there is a distinctively Australian sense of place, not only in the superficial sense of drawing on the patterns, tones and textures of our unique antipodean environment but also in the deeper sense of metaphors and allusions that draw on inherited cultural memory and personal memories of life experiences.

As British historian Simon Schama wrote, landscape is a work of the mind – 'its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock'. In Australia, landscape art has always been a means of engaging with the complexities of these layered memories and experiences.

It is interesting to find that in recent times it has been Australian writers rather than artists who are addressing these conceptions of an upside-down Antipodean aesthetic.

Author David Malouf recognised tensions specific to Australia between an inherited European culture and our natural environment, writing:

This has meant a greater tension for us between environment of place on the one hand, and on the other, all the complex associations of our inherited culture. We have our sensory life in one world, whose light and weather and topography shapes all that belongs to our physical being, while our culture, the larger part of what comes to us through language for example, and knowledge and training, derives from the other.

On a similar theme, Tim Winton in his book *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* published last year wrote:

I'm increasingly mindful of the degree to which geography, distance and weather have moulded my sensory palate, my imagination and expectations.'

His response to European landscape was more muted than he had expected:

'Being from a flat, dry continent I looked forward to the prospect of soaring alps and thundering rivers, lush valleys and fertile plains, and yet when I actually beheld them I was puzzled by how muted my responses were. My largely Eurocentric education had prepared me for a sense of recognition I did not feel and this was confounding. ... To someone from an austere landscape they often looked too cute; they were pretty, even saccharine. I had a nagging sensation I wasn't getting it.'

He wrote that the mark of humankind was everywhere so that the landscape was 'relentlessly denatured' ... a 'vista of almost unrelieved enclosure and domestication'. ... Even the blue sky was a different less potent blue – 'I was calibrated differently to a European'.

What the British might have seen at the Royal Academy exhibition was the evidence of this different calibration towards modern and contemporary landscape in Australia from the Second World War onwards in a lineage of artists. I'll briefly summarise this lineage here, but you can see all these works in the Australia catalogue and in Grishin's book (both available from the AGSA bookshop) and several are in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. Key works in this lineage are:

- Margaret Preston's *Aboriginal Landscape*, 1941 – AGSA collection – has a palette and stylisation influenced by Aboriginal art, an all over design with the horizon almost vanished, the messiness of the scraggly gums so different to European trees within a cultivated landscape
- The subdued earthy tonalities and expressive calligraphic brush marks of Tony Tuckson and Ian Fairweather in the 1960s
- The boundless, seamless, horizonless landscapes of Fred Williams from the 1960s and 1970s
- Tim Johnson's fusion in *Dewachen*, 1987, of the indigenous dot-painting and spiritual mysticism to convey a oneness of mind and landscape (his painting in the Fleurieu Prize Metamorphosis 2015 a continuation of these concerns over the past thirty or so years)

- Rosalie Gascoigne's *Monaro* 1989 with its rhythmic poetic embodiment of the seemingly infinite expanses of the landscape through a collage of slivers of softdrink crates.

These are just a few of the great Australian works of landscape art in the exhibition *Australia* at the Royal Academy. It is depressing that we showed the British some of our greatest art and they simply couldn't see where we were coming from.

In view of this recalcitrance by the British in appreciating Australian landscape art it is ironic, not to say an unfortunate residue of cultural cringe, that a Londoner was invited to come to Adelaide to select the winner of the Fleurieu Prize.

The seismic cultural shifts of the 1990s with the flowering of the Aboriginal art movement were epitomised in a suite of great paintings in the Royal Academy *Australia* exhibition, especially Emily Kame Kngwarreye's *Big Yam Dreaming* 1995 (NGV), a massive 8 metre canvas of chaotically complex interwoven white on black linear designs.

In the last two decades of the century Aboriginal art was a revelation for non-indigenous Australian artists in expanding perceptions of interdependence between art, beauty and place. To put it another way, through Aboriginal art we saw afresh the beauty of the continent. Aboriginal art contributed, also, to a re-invigoration of organic abstraction by non-indigenous artists as a material creative language through which to embody an immersive connection between self and place.

Amongst those landscape works from the 21st century in the Royal Academy exhibition, it was Imants Tillers' *Shadow of the Hereafter*, 2007, from AGSA's collection, that ushers in some of the approaches to landscape in the current Fleurieu Prize exhibition.

In a 2001 interview with Ian North for *Artlink*, Tillers referred to the term 'post-Aboriginality' as a way of describing the condition of Australian art after Aboriginal art effectively became the mainstream. That is to say, the impact of Aboriginal art has forever altered the ways non-indigenous Australian artists view or embody the landscape in art. According to Tillers, this experience is particular to Australian art and gives it a unique regionally specific identity. He stated:

This is not to say that all art which follows will be necessarily 'post Aboriginal', but certainly that art which not only takes this Aboriginal art phenomenon into account but which also has been formed by it. This possibility is unique to our cultural situation here – unique to Australian artists.

'Imants Tillers and positive value: a conversation with Ian North', *Artlink* Vol.21 No.4, 2001, pp.37-38.

In *Shadow of the Hereafter*, 2007 Tillers distilled the complex associations of place, memory, beauty and mortality. Spread across a grid of 72 canvas boards, the layers of silvery grey, mauve and golden tones of the mountain landscape pay homage to Hans Heysen's painting *Land of the Oratunga* (1932) (also in the AGSA collection) but with allusions, also, to the assemblages of Rosalie Gasciogne.

Overlaid textual fragments conjure the immanent presence in the landscape of vanished Aboriginal culture and failed white settlements.

In this painting Tillers created an embodiment of connectivity between mind and place through accretions of inherited and lived memory. He writes:

But today no landscape can be immune to the layering of language, human thought, culture and history. So I've added a kind of 'poetics of ghosts' to my version of Heysen's original – the names of vanished white settlements and erased Aboriginal societies. Thus a stark but sublime topography is witness to not only the transience of human existence and the failure of the local, but also the futility of human endeavour.

(Catalogue for *Imants Tillers: In Two Minds*, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 7-30 September 2007)

Tillers' painting in the Fleurieu Prize, *World without end* is a further extension of his aesthetic approach in *Shadow of the Hereafter*. I am grateful to Paul Greenaway, whose gallery represents Imanta Tillers, for letting me know that the painting is the lower portion of a larger painting, *Avenue of Remembrance* created by Tillers as the basis for a commemorative tapestry, commissioned by the Australian War Memorial in 2014. Layered over the central image of the commemorative avenue of birch trees are Tillers' 'poetics of ghosts', in this instance these ghosts mingle recurrent phrases from Tillers' oeuvre like 'roll of the dice' with words from the letter from Sir Keith Murdoch to Prime Minister Andrew Fisher in 1915, credited with

helping to bring the Gallipoli campaign to an end. Fragments of text descend to the final line 'this walk of failure'.

As in the earlier painting, the landscape embodies memories of grief, death and futility. Tillers skilfully evokes this poetic metaphor of the palimpsest of memory in a complex layering of fragments within a shimmering painted surface of silver/grey and green with golden and pink highlights. Beauty, mortality and memory are intermingled with an ever-present dark undercurrent of the futility of human endeavour, the vagaries of chance - whether through our failed attempts to subdue the continent or the futility of war.

The influence of non-Anglo perspectives in a Post-Imperial Australia was reflected in Hossein Valamanesh's *Longing/Belonging*, 1997 – a Persian rug with an ash black hole burnt in its centre, with behind it a photographic image of the camp fire lit in the centre of the rug in a bush landscape. *Longing/belonging* is a quintessential embodiment of the post-imperial complexities of sense of place.

Hossein Valamanesh's wall installation *Swiss Landscape* in the Fleurieu Prize is both a contrast with his work *Longing/Belonging* in the *Australia* exhibition, and an exemplar of concerns around the death of nature that run through the exhibition. Miniature stylised mountain landscapes are painted on newspaper printed with Swiss share market index. The zig-zag mountain crags and chalet rooftops mimics stock market graphs. The newspapers themselves are the source of destruction of global forests. The landscapes of global economic forces have replaced the natural landscape.

There is a pervasive elegiac mood in other works in the Fleurieu that engage with the fragility and the resilience of nature.

- Master printmaker Ray Arnold in his multi-panel etching *Elsewhere world/Ghost* has composed an immensely delicate and immersive entanglement of scrubby branches and mountainside in a collage of fragmented vistas taking the eye from close up to the middle distance. The delicacy and complexity of his markings evokes the ravaged, ghostly beauty of the landscape.
- Janet Laurence in her ominously titled work, *Still stirring in the umwelt*, has created a magical yet immensely sad installation of layered translucent veils interwoven with skeletal remains of plants and animals.
- There is an imminent threat of species extinction arising from degraded natural environment evoked in Hayden Fowler's melancholic video *New World Order*.
- Tim Silver's rusted tree stumps act as memorials to destruction of the natural landscape
- Silversmith Julie Blyfield's delicately fabricated bundles of blackened silver leaves in her work *Second Nature* were inspired by charred leaves she found after fires on Kangaroo Island, while ceramicist Jeff Mincham was also inspired to commemorate bushfires near his home in the Adelaide Hills in his grouping of vessels *The Hill Walk 1 (After fire series)*.
- And of course it's hard to overlook the dominating presence of Andrew Browne's huge canvas depicting a despoiled and

degraded riverbank. Such scale seems out of proportion to the artistic impact of this rather unsubtle work.

Just as Margaret Preston portrayed the spindly, disorganised branches of gum trees in her *Aboriginal landscape*, 1941, so too the disorderly, scraggly quality of the bush landscape is a repeated motif, with the mess of entangled branches in Arnold's landscape echoed in the painterly patterns of sclerotic coastal vegetation in Nicholas Harding's painting, *Estuary*, and the dense grey entanglement of what might be swamp mangroves in Hayden Mannings video. There is a segue into the eerie and haunted qualities of the bush in William McKinnon's *Strange Country* and Richard Lewer's *Yowie!*

An immersive sense of being in the landscape rather than looking at it from middle distance is evidenced in the three semi abstract canvases by Philip Wolfhagen, Ildiko Kovacs and Aida Tomescu. These are artists who have built reputations for the beauty of their layered and tonally complex canvases. Each works from memory to convey an inner experience, as much as a visual representation.

It is particularly difficult to appreciate the tonal and textural subtlety of Wolfhagen's moody landscape as the gallery's dark grey walls soak up the light and dull the nuances. It took three visits for me to finally look at it in sufficient isolated focus for its beauties to emerge. The same is true of the paintings by Kovacs and Tomescu. In Kovacs painting, *Eye of the storm*, there are wondrous overlays of rhythmic linear patterns and shifting gradations of colour. The closer you look,

the more you see. There are affinities here with the rhythmic swirls of overlaid colour in Clare Belfrage's grouping of glass forms. In Tomescu's *Silver Princess*, her accumulations of globs of paint and gauged scrawls generate a sense of tempestuous movement and energy.

A contrasting tendency to these disorderly, immersive painterly landscapes is the miniature painted park scene, *Kumiko*, by Natasha Bieniek. Employing meticulous, almost microscopically fine brush marks, she portrays an orderly arcadia and sanctuary of manicured gardens and winding paths. It is symptomatic of a current trend towards retreat from the visible natural world and embrace of fiction, that is elsewhere dominant in the Fleurieu Prize, that she was awarded the 2015 Wynne Prize by the trustees of the AGNSW.

Similarly, Alexander McKenzie in his painting *Tourist and traveller*, employs a virtuoso painting technique to create a too-perfect Disneyesque fantasy island that is a composite of idealised features. In her pigment ink print, *Le Vol 1*, Valerie Sparks recreates an impossibly idyllic composition of scenic beauty replete with all many of native creatures.

These works reflect the theme emerging in differing guises amongst the Fleurieu finalists, namely the tendency towards artificial and fictive landscapes as vehicles for conceptual concerns ranging across the new dawn of the anthropocene era, the post-human, the interpenetration of culture and nature, and the re-visualising of colonial history.

In the current iteration of the Fleurieu there is a provocative weighting towards this aspect of contemporary art practice in comparison to those artists already mentioned who are concerned with embodying a sense of place that responds to a connection with landscape or the natural environment arising from the artists' actual lived experiences. The thing that most concerns me about this tendency is the facile abandonment of engaging with the specificities of the Australian landscape as if it is a passé genre, while instead, artists are embracing a generic globalism, on the one hand, and on the other, the righteous evangelising of postcolonial critique.

We won't know who won the Wynne Prize at the AGNSW until tomorrow but it is worth noting that the list of 34 finalists includes six artists in common with the Fleurieu, including both Imants Tillers and the winner Tony Albert. However it also includes, firstly, a greater proportion of landscape paintings engaging semi-abstractly with actual rather than fictional Australian landscapes, and secondly (a notable absence in this Fleurieu) the Wynne has strong works by Central Desert indigenous artists. There are outstanding paintings by the Ken Family Collective, Yukultji Napangati and George Tjungunayi.

As Daniel Thomas wrote in the Australia exhibition catalogue, 'Today Australian Aboriginal culture and Australian nature have equal weight as signifiers of Australianness in art'. So it is interesting that in this iteration of the Fleurieu Prize there are no paintings from Central and Northern Australia. Most probably this is due to the lack of entries of sufficient quality, as there is a huge spectrum of

achievement from the best to the worst of Aboriginal paintings. I hope this is the reason, and not that the Aboriginal desert painting movement has been segregated as not sufficiently contemporary. In his book Sasha Grishin argues compellingly for a dialogue with Aboriginal art to be incorporated within the wider Australian art history rather than treated separately.

Of course, the whole point about the Fleurieu Prize is to establish its difference from the more established Wynne Prize, and this is being achieved by the provocative edge of so many works that challenge the very notion of landscape. So be it. The good news is that you can look at the works here and in the Wynne Prize online or in person in Sydney, and also those in the Waterhouse Prize and get a fairly good overview of the current state of Australian contemporary art addressing issues of landscape and nature.

This said, in the Fleurieu Prize there are three indubitably contemporary works by Australian art-school trained urban indigenous artists, including the winner Tony Albert. Danie Mellor's monumental drawing recreating the rainforests from a splicing together of multiple images; Brook Andrew's surrealist collage of found images from 19th century colonial exploration of a cave of stalactites looming over the waterfront; and Albert's ingenious tableau of playing cards featuring kitsch Aboriginal iconography - all share in common a post-colonial perspective, a resistance to typecasting, and distancing from the traditional indigenous approaches to landscape. Each is reconceiving Australian history through an indigenous perspective. Albert's panoramic wall

installation, *The hand you're dealt*, is a clever work with the intricately contrived re-purposing of found material reminiscent of Fiona Hall. He is a fast-rising artist at a moment in contemporary art practice where this group of young indigenous artists and others in their cohort are receiving an unprecedented level of attention. At a time when young up and coming Australian artists are increasingly seeking to make an impression in a global as well as national scenario, contemporary indigenous artists stand out as having an all-important point of difference.

There is no question that contemporary indigenous art is an important and even possibly the most important tendency of Australian art at the moment. But in terms of the more specific field of landscape, and the specific works in this current exhibition, in declaring his work a 'cultural landscape' Albert and the judges stretch elastic notions of landscape to breaking point. To give this work the award in a landscape exhibition is shifting the goal posts so far that there is no longer any defined field at all. Is this a good thing? I clearly don't think so. It risks devaluing those other works that do engage with landscape through an implicit statement that landscape as a genre is over, an anachronistic vestige of 20th century art history. There is a huge body of contemporary art that contradicts such an assumption. Landscape is a vibrant continuing tradition that constantly evolves to encompass new concerns. It is tied to insights into the unique particularities of Australian culture and nature. Artists will continue to seek to embody the importance of the connection between self and sense of place and the importance of landscape as a carrier of profound cultural meaning.