

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 jackeroo 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 jackeroo 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.

² Ibid p.8

³ Anne Loxley, *A Sydney Artist, Tim Storrier*, p. 23.

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 to 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.

PART 1

MELANCHOLY AND THE COLONIAL IN AUSTRALIA

“To be an Australian artist is to be an apple fallen farther from the tree than most.”⁵

Cultural cringes which stemmed from Australia’s “convict stain” and isolation urged later colonial society to pride itself on a new kind of national nostalgia for the homeland in England. This exaggerated a cultural cringe towards the Antipodeans who were perceived as lacking cultural eloquence. Paintings of the land around this time, 1800-1850s, began quite naively stylized and graphic with little emotional content because they were used as curiosities describing the new land and its habitants. The first artists came to Australia to record what was found on the new and strange continent, paintings of plant species and the indigenous people were favoured as evidence of a land habitable. **Fig. b.**



Fig. b John Glover, *The River Nile, Van Dieman's Land, from Mr. Glover's farm*, 1837,
oil on canvas, 76.4x114.6cm.

⁵ Juliana Engberg, 'A Weird Melancholy', *Venice Biennale 2005 essay series*, pg. 4

Export of these factual paintings was a useful educating tool for those back home. Bernard Smith regards that;

Britain's growing mastery of the high seas and the desire for a life of adventure all helped to attract many young artists to engage upon long voyages ... (sometimes) they gained a paid position as a topographical or landscape artist to a scientific expedition.⁶

Later, with a burgeoning sophistication of society, landscape painting became more complex. Light playing with trees and foliage, or droplets of rain evidenced the liveliness of the land, especially in the pastoral. This kind of work is remanent of an idealization, of sunny days and a lush earth full of goodness for people who were planning to emigrate, while in reality, people coming off the boats were often greeted with a strange wilderness. Yet only two years later Conrad Martens in *View from Neutral Bay*, 1857/8 **fig. c.** provided a more accurate observation of this country during a time when artists began a shift from the coastal to interior or outback paintings.



Fig. c Conrad Martens, *View from Neutral Bay*, 1857/8,
watercolour, gouache, pencil and varnish on cardboard, 45.1x 65.2cm.

⁶ Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting, 1788-1970*, p.8



Fig. d William Turner, *Steamer in a Snowstorm*, 1842,
oil on canvas, 91.5x122cm.

He shows the rough unrelenting nature of the weather here, the mud, gloominess and often depressive nature in the land. He more accurately presents the kind of experience one might encounter upon arrival in the mid 19th Century. Although Martens painting is the kind of sublime romanticism, which can be seen in JMW Turner's work *Steamer in a Snowstorm*, 1842, painted 15 years prior in England. Neutral Bay is given the same treatment and is blanketed with wild and awe-inspiring weather, challenging machine, animal and man. Turner and Martens both show the unpredictable forces of the ocean and sky to create awe in earth's spectacle and as euphemism for the force of an awesome new technology. Marten's painting, however, is explicit in revealing a hankering for the sophistication of an older culture whose mechanical technology displays a progressing sophisticated society. "In Australia... artists identified with the loneliness-it was a kind of melancholy, transference of yearning for the past, for the homeland."⁷

⁷ Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.56 (from a quote from Marcus Clark, in the preface of *Poems of the late Lindsay Gordon*, Melbourne, 1880.

Marten's atmospheric light beaming from the heavens infer a godly presence coming from above as found in the arcadian painting by the French artist Claude Lorrain (*Landscape with Sacrifice to Apollo*, 1662) where a romantic soft light dramatised the land and made it more affecting. Yet, the dead gnarly tree in the foreground of Marten's painting indicates the duality between desire and reality, with decay on the land showing a yearning for something ethereal while acknowledging the truth of the land here.

There is a small pond where arcadia has set foot nestled in a cranny with water lilies and other idyllic flora and fauna such as native finches, but also acacias reminding that this is an ancient place, ancient and idyllic. Emily Reuter 10/1/07



Fig. e Emily Reuter, *Uluru Arcadia*, digital photograph, 2007

Landscape painting and the need to portray an idyllic vista occurred in the later part of Colonization, and the use of the Sublime was rare though imposing a nostalgic remnant of the mother country was looked upon favourably. The hostility of a savage land must have made it almost unbearable to fathom making a home here, especially coming from “rolling meadows” of velvety green; and so the rough land of extreme weather was coated in nostalgia, apparently improving palatability. Landscape painting during the Colonization of Australia was made with a necessity to document a wild new land and procure propaganda in order to sell the colony. Colonial painting consequently was fraught with the hang-ups and styles of the homeland: According to Robert Dixon,

Macquarie who arrived in 1810 to take up his appointment as Governor of Australia, created the civic apparatus and leadership necessary to transform the colony into a significant settlement. He even gathered ‘about him a circle of poets, painters and architects who would turn Sydney into a second Rome rising at the antipodes.’⁸

Nearly 90 years later, Russel Drysdale’s *Desolation* (1945) **fig. k.** shows no sense of melancholy. Finally by the 1940s, we came to understand that the land was, in its difficulty, fruitful if one was willing to come to terms with its complexity and sometimes extraordinary flora and fauna. The combination of entrenched nostalgia while attempting to create a new home creates a propensity towards the “unheimlich”. Nostalgia is borne from colonial attitudes while the strange and “unheimlich” is from the notion of settler. John Glover managed to combine all the above elements in *Launceston and the River Tamar*, c.1832, **fig. f.**



Fig.f John Glover, *Launceston and the River Tamar*, circa 1832,
oil on canvas, 95 x 136.5 x 11.5cm. framed

⁸ Robert Dixon, *The Course of Empire and Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788- 1860*, Pg.25.

The thing that hits you almost immediately when you leave any city to the wide-open places of the outback is the endless sky. White clouds seem to billow on forever and you begin to get a true sense of the vastness of the country. Emily Reuter 9/1/07

Billowing pastel mountains and fluffy white clouds afford a definite romanticism of the land and nostalgia for the homeland, especially with tiny decorative birds in the softly curved branches of the trees. In Ian McLean's *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* he considers that;

Glovers' Tasmanian paintings (are) typical of early colonial art in that they depict a fractured space. However Glover smooths over this fractured space by creating a double discourse in which the binary structure of the semiology is split into two different sets of pictures, rather than being represented in all the same picture.⁹

Splitting the content of the work allows for a deeper analysing and understanding by comparison, it aids in crystallizing individual elements. The awesome scale of subject makes it sublime; however, an attempt to elevate the Australian land to a European one is somewhat condescending. The kind of shadow cast in the canopy of trees and the way in which they frame the picture is reminiscent of European motifs and technique. By using trees to symbolically frame the piece he defines it as a picture, placing it in context as interpretation and not the real thing, while Glover was a notable painter able to provide a reminder of the homeland for the new homesick Australian, his landscape painting is framed; the landscape is not framed, it is continuous. According to Mclean, he "did see and paint the details of Australian scenery with an empirical accuracy. This was his training. However as in his English paintings, the detail also delineated a moral purpose consistent with the picturesque aesthetic that framed Glovers' art."¹⁰ While he attempted to portray the trees as strange, he found that the curves were still reminiscent of European ones that gently snake upward. A few gnarly fingers attribute a kind of harsh Australianism.

⁹ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Pg.40

¹⁰ Ibid Pg.39

Murray Bail in his novel *Eucalyptus* writes of the Eucalypt;

The gum tree has a pale ragged beauty. A single specimen can dominate an entire Australian hill. It's an egotistical tree. Standing apart it draws attention to its self and soaks up moisture and all signs of life, such as harmless weeds and grass, for a radius beyond its roots, at the same time giving little in the way of shade.¹¹

The Australian continent appears to behave like this; it “stands apart” while its habituated fringes “soak up moisture and all signs of [natural] life” in sprawling cities. Australian nostalgia and strangeness is intertwined with our colonial roots grown in a strange new land. Jill Kerr Conway writes that: “Europeans were puzzled by the climate and vegetation, because the native Eucalyptus trees were not deciduous.”¹²

We increasingly exchanged between the need for landscape to be about dry records and about an uplifting code of practices in the search for homeliness in a growing nation, uncertain though optimistic about a future with new mechanical technologies and further discoveries in Australia. Subsequently we moved from nostalgic reminiscing to the realities of the present allowing us to take stock of direct consequences relating to war and to a landscape as euphemism for war and environmental concerns. I think we are still at this stage of landscaping the Australian earth, especially given current trends in environmental strategy and a greater community awareness of climate changes, Australia's impact on the globe and the effect it is having on humanity in terms of the decline of food and the possible consequences of genetically modified crops. However, would it not be more beneficial to encapsulate the past as of ourselves and have a holistic view of the situation. Regardless, painting about the Australian landscape is always in spite of auxiliary concerns, about what it is to be Australian. Still today painters like Martin, **fig. g**, show a melancholy or Storrier, (**fig. h**), nostalgia, although for quite different reasons. Their rich ochres and red umbers are indicative of the fire built into this country and provide an illusion of warmth and survivability. Jill Kerr Conway's view was that “Utopian hopes of pastoral redemption in the Antipodes entertained many a settlers' mind and provided the first outlines of a nationalist methodology that was sustained well into the twentieth century.”¹³

¹¹ Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*, p.15

¹² Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain*, p. 6

¹³ Ibid Pg.34

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Fig. g Mandy Martin,
Home ground 2, 2004,
ocre, pigment and oil on linen,
150x 300cm.



Fig. h Tim Sorrier,
Evening Channel, 1997,
acrylic on canvas,
243.8x 304.8cm.

PART 2

THE SUBLIME AND ASPECTS OF THE PICTURESQUE

The Australian Land is referred to as unrelenting, terrifying, and awesomely dangerous yet steeped in the arcadia of the past, much still untouched, the colours are beautiful, subtle yet often intense. Here is a land that exists in the duality of death and beauty, in the sublime. Romantic only if we place our own predilection for nostalgia upon it.
Emily Reuter 11/1/07

When artists of the picturesque and the sublime contemplate the other for their own moral edification, they keep a respectful distance which never transgresses their own ethical standards. Indeed, picturesque artists draw the other into the realm of civilization, the synthetic space of their pictures being a means to pacify the other, not transgress their own morality.¹⁴

The Sublime was employed as an attempt to Europeanize the Australian landscape based on European painting principals of the 17th Century; “to produce what in William Gilpin’s terms ‘would look well in a picture’”¹⁵ Early Australian painting finds it understandably difficult to reconcile the two since there were still geographical discoveries to be made. Idyllic pastorals were not a feature until farming took place and the land was stripped of its offending growth, but the European vision of the picturesque still sat poorly with jagged rocks, gnarly trees and inhospitable terrain. “The prevalence of the picturesque in Australian art during the early colonial period is usually considered evidence of a colonial and European vision”.¹⁶ The attempt to join the tamed with the untamed provides an awkward disjunctive, the civilized becomes frivolous while the wild becomes inhospitable, the cultivated is homely while the wild unhomely and;

¹⁴ Pg.48 Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain*, p.48

¹⁵ Peter Bicknell, *Beauty, Horror and Immensity*, intro. ix

¹⁶ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Pg. 35

“what was strange and wild becomes increasingly familiarized and commodified [sic]. Uncultivated natural scenery is, as it were, domesticated...it is aesthetically colonized.”¹⁷ This is disconcerting when home is a land uncultivated. The Australian land is untameable; even in best circumstances tidying a wild child is mostly futile.

The picturesque is an ethical code of practises, a particular way to view a place, a narrow, non-expansive view of things, of polite edification; an ideal. The sublime does not preach an ideal because it is experienced so easily in natural surroundings. The most awe inspiring sublime is found in nature and can only be imitated in landscape painting, in photography, film and installation. They cannot reproduce the sight, sound and tactile feelings involved when surrounded by the landscape, the real experience cannot be fabricated with the nuances found in the original. For example, one cannot be cut with an image of a branch. The sublime in nature manipulates us with a *sense* of awe, dread, nausea and absolute joy. There is no nice or nasty; it is not a human construct therefore cannot be judged within those constraints. It is raw. Primal emotion is unconstructive however beauty, is a creation of human consciousness, a label to express the greatly pleasing. The Outback provided explorers with a truer view of the land, the untamed is ancient, barren red and scarred. Artists still paint the land in its in contrivable and immeasurable endlessness: “though the sublimity exceeds its own moral purpose to become a fully symbolic landscape that carries its meaning within, rather than wears it as signs to be read.”¹⁸

Fear of the terrible tends to strip away the delicate tissue of niceness and beauty, though niceness tends to lie easily with treachery thus becoming terrible. The sublime smothers beauty thus becoming fearful or terrible, with greater affect in guarding the primal urge for survival instinct, thus producing the most extreme emotions and provoking strong psychological associations.

¹⁷ Malcom Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, p. 129

¹⁸ Ibid Pg.45

One's instinct for survival is the most primal of urges and so as Edmund Burke states;

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime: that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.¹⁹

Sentimental emotion is easily confused with sublime emotion, which often exhibits little apparent reason or explanation, it is beyond one's ability to emulate or describe, attempting to do so can result in an anaemic representation, too often misleading. It is not things that are sublime, it is emotion which is sublime, though things can evoke sublime emotion; Zen, orgasm, death, birth, grief and even joy, depending on the intensity of experience, it needs to be all encompassing, enveloping, awesome and to drive out all other feelings at the time.

Poetry, painting and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself...The satisfaction has been commonly attributed, first, to the comfort we receive in considering that so melancholy a story is no more than a fiction; and, next, to the contemplation of our own freedom from the evils which we see represented.²⁰

My painting is not the natural truth because it does not come with a entirely affecting sensation of nature other than the visual. Even though it may excite visceral or psychological responses it is obviously fictitious, thus softening its aggression, which lies in constant movement and rapid change. The earth never stops, she is wholly organic and constantly influenced by the external just as all organic creatures are; and while we are relieved to not experience abject pain or horror one can sympathise with these sensations because our experience has told of similar kinds of existence, sometimes we even empathise. With time, sophistication and a sense of familiarity; we are able to explore a sublime less consumable than beauty, this inevitably counters the original Sublime anyway. As Burke notes,

“To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary.”²¹

¹⁹ Edmund Burke, *On Taste On the Sublime and Beautiful Reflections on the French Revolution A Letter to a Noble Lord With Introduction and Notes*, pp.35/36.

²⁰ Ibid p.40

²¹ Ibid, p.50

Romanticism in Australia sits well within the picturesque as a movement relying on nostalgia and melancholy for another land and our knowledge of our roots that come from an understanding of white or immigrant Australians, the Other. Because of this the picturesque sits uncomfortably with a contemporary Australian psyche, it is old fashioned and does not acknowledge independent political, social and creative movements in this country. The sublime, which reared up from the settler's notion of the almighty and awesome found in this country, is more conducive to the notion of an Australia who has always been culturally diverse and the civilization of a country based on the work of various ethnic groups. Therefore it is beneficial to encompass the Other into Australian landscape painting, rendering a more honest depiction of an often harsh and cruel land and encompassing the multifarious nature of our nation.

The 'sublime' in mass culture is used for affect rather than a tool for gaining higher or deeper insight into ourselves in our environment. Sensation is concrete, it is tangible and reliable, truth no longer matters and it is soluble. So rather than the Sublime fashioned with elements such as eternity, infinity and the terrible which Burke arrives at, today's 'sublime' can be a label for anything evoking any more than an ordinary emotion or sensation. However the Sublime in its true sense, as Malcom Andrews says; "eludes the impulse to consume...it is pictorially unframeable, and it cannot be framed in words. The Sublime is that which we cannot appropriate, if only because we cannot discern any boundaries."²² Lifestyle and planetary changes evolving from technology provide one constant though, change and unrest. Notions of eternity and infinity are used to show the constant, a continuous existence, the constant of mind, of space and time. Infinity and eternity are always important elements because they facilitate our drive for survival, for continuance.

Immanuel Kant's interest in the Sublime lay with fixed humanity, that is all people "share the same faculties-including taste linked with a common morality (and thus) the post-modern relativists have tossed him out".²³ Hence Kant today is seen as irrelevant by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe even though he believes the Sublime can no longer be found in nature but is now only found in culture. When discussing Barnett Newman's work he describes a post-modern Kantian Sublime that "is no longer available"²⁴ because it is

²² Malcom Andrews, op cit. P.142

²³ Jeremy Gilbert- Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, p. IX, introduction.

²⁴ Ibid p.51

conversant with nature. This argument is linear and narrow; it omits natural phenomena including the changing natural responses one has with the Sublime, which are to be found in experience not in objects. Our faculty experiences the Sublime in both nature and culture, though the culture would have to be outside our normal realm of experience, perhaps our experience of the Other, of the 'unheimlich'. Gilbert-Rolfe continues on Newman by stating that in Francois Lyotard's criticism of Burke's;

“over- ‘surrealist’ description of the sublime work...Newman judged surrealism to be over-reliant on a pre-romantic or romantic approach to indeterminacy. Thus when he seeks sublimating in the here and now he breaks with the eloquence of romantic art but does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible.”²⁵

Attempts to express the inexpressible experience have been a constant effort since the first cave paintings, expression does not replicate our experience of something, it depicts the optical, visceral or emotional experience. It is difficult to replicate the Sublime since it is the awesome and unknown which sublimates the occasion. The inexpressible image lies in the unknown but it alone does not heighten one's experience, it does not bring one into the Sublime which is truly inexplicable. The inexpressible is defined as such in symbols that we do not understand, in experience we do not understand, it does not necessarily function to lift us from ourselves, from the id, from the fundamental I and its associations. Abstraction and surreal techniques are ways in which I attempt to contrive the experience of the Sublime, to imitate the sensation of it. However, the man-made visual image can only be a contrived interpretation of the Sublime experience, originally found in nature. Therefore it becomes a secondary experience. Nature is a fundamental expression of the Sublime, art is an expression of the experience of nature. As Kant rightly says, “Consequently it is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective judgement is occupied, and not the object, that is to be called sublime.”²⁶

²⁵ Ibid p.55

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of judgement*, p.89

The large scale of my painting is integral to the Sublime affect that it encourages:

Painterly verisimilitude on a colossal scale was one of the great innovations of the Panorama...One important constituent of the Burkean, sensationalist Sublime is the power of the spectacle wholly to occupy the mind and senses so as to exclude anything else. As John Dennis put it, the Sublime ‘commits a pleasing rape upon the very soul’.²⁷

Expansiveness and limitlessness facilitate the sublime in expression, artists or writers from Glover to Brett Whiteley, Burke to Lyotard’s ‘scapeland’ where “Deserts, mountains and plains, ruins, oceans and skies enjoy a privileged status in landscape painting, rather as though they were by definition without any destiny”²⁸ give us the sense of Sublime without the original experience. Unfortunately one can only allude to undefined space when using an art object to express it because the encompassing space beyond ourselves and our solar system by our concept even with attempts to measure and contain it enclose us, we are enclosed by space. It is impossible to express that which we do not know. Though there are the “little sensations” that Cezanne speaks of, the sensation of leaving oneself behind. We have a tendency to collect things to put our lives into scale, a kind within our control, global capitalism as an example facilitates this extraordinary hunter/gatherer faculty to an extent where the bridge between those with money and those without ergo things is constantly becoming wider and more obvious.

Painting defines, it categorises by describing and it tells us how or what to imagine, it shapes and forms what we think and because our individual psyche is somewhat unique, the most Sublime fear or elation, renders us alone in our imaginary worlds. Burke accurately remarks that “indeed the ideas of pain, and, above all, of death, are so very affecting, that while we remain in the presence of whatever is supposed to have the power of inflicting either, it is impossible to be perfectly free from terror.”²⁹ Terror of and in the unknown motivates the innate primeval instinct for survival; we are original animals. We are creatures who mate and who kill over differences and for a perceived survival. The sublime has a tap on terror especially because it is always powerful for the reason that it evokes the primal, unhindered and basic emotion.

²⁷ Malcom Andrews, op. cit. p.140

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Lyotard Reader*, p.213.

²⁹ Edmund Burke, op. cit. p.55

Terror, even when “sugar-coated”, is still by its own quality terrifying and in that lays its power. Burke remarks “We are rational creatures”, that personal gratification should be of “secondary consideration” to the rational.³⁰ However, the problem with rationality is that it omits terror’s tendency to be absorbed subconsciously, rather we tend to justify ourselves and our actions with reason. This also alleviates the possibility of fear; fear of disorder, chaos and the unknown. However what really happens with discarded ideas and objects that haven’t fulfilled our rationality? They enter the subconscious to fuel our fantasy or daemons, to fuel that which we attempt to embrace or reject, to fuel our familiar or fear. So we use apparently rational ideology to wage war with the irrational. Emotion is often confused among sentient creatures. Pleasure may become painful or pain may become pleasurable, any sublime emotion is potentially confused with its equal opposite, it has no reason or explanation, it is beyond one’s ability to describe or imitate as the emotion overwhelms and eradicates the ability for any analysis except after the experience resulting in a vicarious experience, attempting to do so results in an anaemic representation. What happens when you combine pleasure and displeasure? The sensation then becomes confusing; does one heighten the other or visa versa? There is a conflict between the two, between that which is deemed good and evil, between dualities. This is at the very fundamental core of our own psyche that is the dualism hidden in our subconscious informing motivation. Burke states that, “to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary.”³¹ However, like faery tales, the most heinous crimes are elucidated with fantasy, it makes them more palatable, consumable and therefore understandable. A piece that is wholly abstracted apart from a small aspect of realism can be shocking in its discovery and association with the abstract or terrible, the unfamiliar.

Contorting and dissecting the human figure in my painting and reinterpreting it as landscape allows me to explore the world of terror with the human form, however the discomfort felt in viewing the work while familiar in a vicarious sense is rendered inhuman (unfamiliar) thus terrible. The use of attractive colours though complementary (colours opposite on the spectrum) allows a desire to look at the work and a symbolic juxtaposition not analogous. While references to animals again dehumanises the body and brings the earth or sky to the realm of animals, especially the boar or pig who are introduced species, thus symbolic of the destruction of the Australian landscape. While

³⁰ Ibid p.89

³¹ Ibid p.50

this seems premeditated the work is executed with the use of automatism, there are no preliminary drawings or sketches, only a blank canvas and random photos taken while travelling from Sydney to Darwin. This allows for a less contrived composition and more direct response to memory of the land that I've passed through. "A pure judgement upon the sublime must, however, have no purpose of the object as its determining ground if it is to be aesthetical and not mixed up with any judgement of understanding or reason."³² Kant has previously shown that "aesthetical" means "subjectively and not objectively determined"³³ and so knowing what my painting is *about* is of secondary import to the reaction that it might induce; "the Sublime, with its emphasis on obscurity, vacuity and indeterminacy, destabilizes and disorients: in terms of landscape art it seeks to represent less the objects that strike the viewer."³⁴



Fig. i Emily Reuter, *Northern Vertichasm*, digital photograph, 2007

³² Immanuel Kant, op. cit. p.91

³³ Ibid, p.89

³⁴ Malcom Andrews, op. cit. p.147

PART 3

THE UNCANNY AND STRANGE “UNHEIMLICH”

*The moss and cadmium brush is scruffy and the pthalo, cobalt and titanium sky provide an awesome contrast, if it were not for the sky one could be mistaken for thinking the complimentary palette of this earth was really Mars or some other foreign world. **Emily Reuter 11/1/07***



Fig. j

Emily Reuter, *Mars*, digital photograph, 2007

Freud coined “unheimlich” as a “psychological phenomenon” which not only separates but articulates the familiar from the unfamiliar and thus are linked by their duality; the familiar (family) is comfortable and so is deceitful because it disregards unsavoury aspects of our psychology. The “unheimlich” or uncanny in the landscape relates to that which was familiar but is now strange; it is associated with identity, (sacred) site and the nation. Australian artists painting the landscape continue to grapple with the sense of place and belonging. Portraying the land as euphemism allows us to develop a sense of individual place and communicate social concerns. We are a nation of exiled or in exile from our place of birth, whether we are the Aboriginal or of original settler stock or have chosen to plant our feet upon this terra incognita, we are unmistakably a country of

dispossessed people. Many nations are built upon unknown soil, usually via conflict, but it is in an awkward position that we are placed when instead of a heroic victory over one's apparent enemy that our legacy is steeped in penal settlement, first populated with the uncivilized from the motherland. The uncivilized Australian heritage, where this country's first ports and centres for trade were built by convicts, furthers the nation's sense of isolation and strangeness. Nostalgically reminiscing for the homeliness of the motherland when the motherland has by tyranny of distance become the Other, while the proximate new home is created by the social Other (the criminal element) creates a further dislocation of not only sensibilities but also place and familiarity.

However, we are continually redefining ourselves as a nation through a multi-cultural identity while attempting to embrace Aboriginal land rights and native spiritual needs, where "indigenous [sic] claims for the sacred have become crucial to the ways in which modern Australians are redefining their relationships with place."³⁵ When something of spiritual importance is strange and inexplicable it becomes sacred, when placed on the land the space becomes uncanny. The unfamiliar can then adopt some kind of uncanny familiarity when visited regularly for ritual; it is strange and familiar at once. An uncanny familiarity comes from close acquaintance with something unfamiliar, unrecognizable or strange and though our acquaintance with the land does not necessitate an understanding of its intrinsic nature a sense of strangeness or the *unheimlich* prevails because she constantly surprises us with new things and experiences. While early explorers feared the "unheimlich", the jackaroo or traveller in Australia revels in the Other found in isolation, indeed the notion of travelling outside one's comfort zone provides a sense of freedom in the isolation found in new territory, both physically and psychologically. Identity rooted in alienation allows us to develop a psyche apart from other nations. It frees us up to express ourselves apart from others individually and independently "which is typical of both modernism and the empire aesthetic, [who] expressed an ideology of identity that found redemption in the other, in difference and alienation."³⁶

³⁵ J.M. Powell, *Revisiting the Australian Experience: Transmillennial Conjurations*, p.4

³⁶ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, p.47

Obscurity in Australian landscape painting has often revealed itself in a kind of horrific and surreal manner especially after the Second World War. Russel Drysdale's *Desolation* (1945) (**fig.h**) exaggerates an ominous sky and the figurative in the disjointed limb of a tree as metaphor for the futility of war. He shows how sun and dirt transform things in the vastly continuous land.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig.k Russel Drysdale, *Walls of China*,
oil on composition board, 1945, 76.2x 101.6cm.

Drysdale infused the Australian landscape with elements of grandeur, mystery and tragedy. In such paintings the artist developed an understanding of the extreme hardship of outback life which influenced much of his subsequent imagery.³⁷

Drysdale painted this among others while camped at Lake Mungo. The stump is heavily embedded in the earth's foreground denoting it has been there indefinitely, it is worn in place. It is the land; it is the nature of society in chaos and policy gone wrong. It is the stump of despair, of a country whose history is tainted with a convict birth and a war in present.

³⁷ Keith Newman, 'An artist's journey into Australia's "lost world"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 December 1944, p. 5.

The uncanny disconnects us from time and place. This occurs when we disassociate ourselves from points of reference in life that measure and act as grounding and place us within our immediate selves and environment. It also disassociates us from our memory if truly effective. Memory is measured by time, space and place; what was I doing when that happened, where was I, what was I thinking, what was I experiencing? These are the tools, markers and connectors that help us retrieve information which associates us with a moment. Provide an uncanny experience and our memory is temporarily fractured, our understanding of the experience becomes depersonalized and dissociative.

The Other as Julia Kristeva puts it is also a construct devised to separate and conquer “the Hegelian Negativity; which at the same time restored and systemized, unleashed and bound the power of the Other, against and within the consciousness of the Same.”³⁸ She remarks that this is indicative of German Nationalism and that Australia has used this kind of nationalism in an attempt to divide in order win over the Other that we identify with; in spite of growing multiculturalism and land rights. Time allows disjunctive theories such as this into the national psyche; it becomes systemized and accepted thereby uniting the Other with the Same. A central part of ourselves becomes them, and visa versa; it eradicates the us and them when that with which we pride ourselves makes us the same as them and they us, we are them, the Same is the Other.

With Freud indeed, foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself, and, without being restricted to madness, beauty, or faith anymore than to ethnicity or race, irrigated our very speaking-being, estranged by other logics, including heterogeneity of biology . . . Henceforth, we know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of the sole support that we can attempt to live with others.³⁹

As we grow our sense of separateness expands, early when we discover our larger environment we separate from our parents and later we learn that our home is the Other for others, we create the Other within ourselves fashioned by our experiences of the other or outer world. However, we internalise the Other very early because of our inability to separate the inner and outer worlds, the familiar and unfamiliar. In the western world we spend a lifetime trying to make sense of this conundrum, though in indigenous societies the Other is well expressed in ritual, shamanism and animism.

³⁸ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p.169

³⁹ Ibid p.170

These practices are connected with the earth and provide a sense of security in the land and its creatures that are a source of food and mythology enriching our human experience. This disturbance from the Other to the Self or Same acts similarly to the visually sublime alienating us from our normal experience, carrying us from ourselves in order to experience more of ourselves, to experience the awesome Other in ourselves. When nostalgia is added to the sublime it becomes romantic. It loses its edge and its Otherness because time has incurred a familiarity with the Other. Although the Romantic as a movement tends to ebb towards many aspects the surrealists themselves revered. Dreams, insanity, the spirit world, “the obscure forces of the *fatum*, and even animal psychology is related to the desire to grasp the strange, and by domesticating it, turn it into an integral component of the human. *Einführung* – an identifying harmony – with the strange and the different then became essential as the distinctive feature of the worthy, cultivated man.”⁴⁰ Time familiarizes us with the Other and when we understand our own Otherness we are identifying with others; foreigners, differing religions, politics, morality etcetera. This identification or close association with the Other renders it ineffectual. It is the Other which is sought by those who are nomadic or like to travel, the jackaroo and those “who sought solace in the other rather than the same, who thought not of home and origin, but of transcending both on whatever frontiers they could find.”⁴¹ There is a comfort in the Other when it encourages understanding, not only in ‘redemption in indifference and alienation’ but in the expansion and liberation from old worn beliefs and ideas to new revised ones. The uncanny provides a mirror so that we are able to see ourselves in a different light because as Gelder and Jacobs contest, it is “a structure in which sameness and difference embrace and refuse each other simultaneously”.⁴²

We navigate our mind as we do the landscape, moving from one place/idea to the other at will and automatically without will. Our mind is governed by memory as is our experience of the landscape. Memory changes the landscape with time, as time changes the landscape. Our memory of the land changes as we do; it is distorted so that when we return to that place our memory of it has changed, even though the internal and the psychological landscape is familiar. Vast emptiness and unfamiliarity occupy the majority of our mindscape as does much of the Australian continent, hence its unique

⁴⁰ Ibid pp. 180/181

⁴¹ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines...*, p.46

⁴² Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, p.42

role in the Aussie psyche. I paint a personal landscape with a sense of inhabiting the country both physically and psychically, a country that contains a residual memory which is physical and stems from cellular heritage, recollection and recognition. Thus,

for the most part we are a people of European stock, upon whom the traditions of European culture would normally sit quite comfortably, yet we live in a land whose physical constitution and geographical position sets it apart, and which demands enormous readjustments of those artists who seek to understand its essential nature.⁴³

Physically Australia is set apart from Europe, however, we are neighbouring Asia, thus it is imperative we reflect our geographical position honestly so that we are at liberty to maintain profitable relations with our neighbours; rather than simply a western country out of place in Australasian waters. We have institutions borrowed from our forbearers and contemporaries chiefly thanks to recent growing globalization; however the uniqueness pertinent in this country is related to the core of national identity, which gives us the ability to move freely, think freely and create freely. Politics and national agendas will not sustain the evolution of our species, integration with our environment is essential for our survival and this means shifting well valued systems of consciousness for example. Rather than separating from the Other it is beneficial to understand our otherness. There is a kind of integrity that comes from an honest interpretation of ones experience of our land and those upon it whether we are familiar or “unheimlich”. Paul Carter in *Lie of the Land* writes of the Aranda people in Central Australia and their skill to value the difference between the present and the past because;

Theirs is a wholly spatio-historical awareness – one reason why they can have but little use for our concept of history as chronology, our impatient urge to put things behind us. They have no need to flesh out the bare facts, to make up a story to represent what once occurred; for them, time is already ‘fat’, multiply in-folded in the present.⁴⁴

We are all of the past present and future. Identity is bound in not only our sense of history but sense of ourselves now and our dreams for the future. It is bound in how we see ourselves as a nation and the way we express ourselves as a nation to others.

⁴³ James Gleeson, *Australian Painters*,

⁴⁴ Paul Carter, *Lie of the Land*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p.78

Subconscious activity allows one to think more laterally and intuitively so that we may better understand ourselves and that we might choose what is right for us, not what should be right; exciting us into living for the things that truly represents our humanity.



Fig. m Emily Reuter, *Suillus Volatare (Pigs Fly)* (detail), 2007,
oil on canvas, 91.5x137.5+ 91.5x213cm.

The light in Australia is so bright it glares, it makes the landscape appear translucent and dramatises the effect of the sun's rising and setting. With the sky symbolizing infinity, and the stars randomly placed, not fixed according to our notion of order; with floating clouds in front of a regressing sky showing the vastness, the never-ending or in Brett Whiteley's world, "endlessnessism", one can explore the continuous vastness and unpredictability of the land and ourselves. The landscape is painted in many guises even with realism because it is mysterious, obscure and easily mythologized. It is vastly endless, both apparently flat and round but not a disk, both immense and minute, yet it exists regardless of time, in timelessness. We are not able to truly fathom its beginnings or its ending when it regularly reminds us of its and our own cycles of birth, life, death and birth again, of the infinite not finite, watch our earth closely and you will find that, as Gertrude Stein says, there are no straight lines in nature.

We will always have a need to commune with our natural surroundings, (though there are arguments our natural will become all man-made or constructed), the part of us which needs to connect with space and its natural occupants such as its animals also have a need to depict our experiences of them. Camels in Cambodia are sung to so they may connect with their newborn. Earth ritual is not “hippy”; it is practical. Ancient cave paintings executed by shamans clearly show that we are more like the creatures we consume and become in ritual. There is little distinction between consuming and being consumed, we are the earth and its living creatures and it is us, when we consume it becomes part of us as what we exude becomes part of the earth. My work addresses my own shamanic practice and experiences with the land but also a continued yearning for a sense of place, an understanding of external forces and a desire to connect or an attempt to escape a finite modern existence into the sublime which is a “globalism” [sic] quality. Rabbit skin glue allows a flesh-like quality to the canvas like the skin of a new corpse symbolic of the need to put some things to rest. The tension produced by the glue like that of a drum allows me to make precision cuts into the surface of the skin, akin to a surgeon dissecting its subject. There is a kind of sadistic play with flesh and surface; a play between the reality of matter and the fantasy of the immaterial or indefinable imagery, but also an attempt to cut below the surface of things, to find something deeper and more direct, and no less sublime or savage, visceral or “unheimlich” because it is these aspects of our psyche that link us with the land and all that is upon it. The whole gamut in macrocosm and microcosm is the future of human consciousness or at least to an extent where we are aware of our globalized technological evolvment *and* our primitivism.

A western connection with the land comes from the necessity of survival, usually through some kind of farming; it comes from a connection to place. This connection runs deeper than appreciating its beauty, although the beauty of a land helps us to form attachments to it and encourages one to take care of it. Connection with the land is about understanding its movements, its changing cycles and what happens when externalized nature and artifice affect it; this knowledge is a kind of primitivism. The Other in landscape painting comes from an understanding of alienation from the land, a lack of time spent with it, a lack of personal experience. Travelling from Adelaide to Alice Springs, with the Simpson Desert on the right and the Gibson on the left, I had a great sense of familiarity, of knowing the space, not unlike the sensation on the farm I had as a kid, I felt a connection and visceral pull into the desert, and this may be where

its death trap lay. Perhaps it is that “unheimlich” which feeds my sense of security; the “unheimlich” is fashioned into the “heimlich”. Michael Rolls argues that; “The harnessing of an Other... stands in opposition to the perceived flaws of Western cultures and societies... Imbricated with the construction of the Other (and in some ways inseparable from it) is the search for the primitive.”⁴⁷ The Australian experience is not wholly western anymore, our views of this country are becoming far more familial and while the land is strange (compared with others painted into history) it is certainly not empty nor alien.

Walking paths, flight paths, natural migration paths and the movement over the land; tracking the lines an animal or people and their path is akin to tracing memory and time. Here our corporeality connects with our psychology; we carry parts of place in memory. Footsteps, our tracks, are the markers reminding us where we have been, our movement on the land and through space continuous, movement, even with pauses, “To move over the ground is not simply... (an) impression left on the ground...” nor do “footsteps make a discontinuous line.”⁴⁸ Our journey through life is continuous; we continue to move through physical and metaphoric space until we die. The earth’s surface is curved in both microcosm and macrocosm whose horizon is not cluttered. Organisms on the land are curved by nature and of nature. When Paul Carter sites J.J. Gibson’s quote, (*The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*), he reiterates the need for a way to connect experience with philosophy, “The ecological approach to visual perception... begins with... connections between the hidden and unhidden surfaces.”⁴⁹ The hidden is akin to shadow or darkness and the unhidden to light, evil versus good and the ‘golden country’ versus our shady history. Noted by Bernard Smith and reiterated still today in mass marketing, in *The Golden Fleece*, *Sunkist*, *Sunurasia*, and the *ANZACS*, there is evidence of a need to identify with the sun and the optimism that it brings. This is especially pertinent since much of our “national myths [are] of failure rather than success: Ned Kelly, the swaggie in *Waltzing Matilda* - the real national anthem - who jumps into a billabong and drowns; Gallipoli.”⁵⁰ It is lucky for us that it is a natural feature of this country. Lucky we are in ‘the land of the living sun’ because I’d hate to be in the land of a dead one!

⁴⁷ Robert Zeller, *Litteroral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers*, p.93

⁴⁸ Paul Carter, op. cit. pp. 343 & 359.

⁴⁹ Ibid p. 303

⁵⁰ *The Great South Land, Terra Australis Incognita*, p.4

The sunset was the same golds, oranges and reds I'd seen earlier in the earth, however because the night sky is so dark due to remoteness, the sun glows even more vibrantly and the sky is soaked in liquid gold.

Emily Reuter 7/1/07



Fig. n **Emily Reuter, *Mercury Setting*, digital photograph, 2007**

There is a resonant memory of stormy weather waiting in the trenches, where murder is ordained; where hardship in the mines and making something productive from a barren wasteland is applauded, this sentiment will linger for our children. Streeton's, *Silvan Dam and Donna Buang, A.D.2000* (1940) was a premonition, a warning of that which is a possibility... Aldous Huxley rightly foresaw the call for a new way of executing our will for a better existence, "if all utopias seem attainable today, if modern life is about to achieve them, perhaps we should try to avoid them in order to recover a non-utopic society, less perfect and more free."⁵¹

⁵¹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p.117.

Aspiring for an ideal too often causes frustration and failure. Human nature is as it is. Ian McLean affirms that we need;

To reconstruct and imagine ourselves differently [and that the use of mirrors in Gordon Bennett's work] upturns (inverts) the generally accepted history of colonialism. [That] here the discourses of colonialism might be exceeded, the past and future renegotiated, and history rewritten.⁵²

In *Organic Conundrum*, 1996 I applied mirrors on the back of smaller canvases suspended from the ceiling; reflecting a shaded portion of the larger painting mounted on the wall. Shown at Ether Ohnitel gallery in Melbourne in 1996 I was able to force the viewer to re-evaluate a point of view, its reversed meaning and therefore displaced meaning and refract light or knowledge about what we see and what we perceive.



Fig. o

Emily Reuter, *Organic Conundrum*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 84x101.2cm+ suspended canvas 30x30cm; mirrored on reverse

The mirror creates a psychological fracturing of space; it dissolves preconceptions about our history, time and space. In my current work there is an attempt to reconcile the past with the present, the good with ugly and the sun with shadow. “Yet other associations account for the sublimity of extreme light or of sombre colours.”⁵³

⁵² Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, p.135

⁵³ Walter J. Hipple, *The Beautiful, The Sublime, and The Picturesque*, p.90.

Reconciling extremes causes a friction between the two, a dislocation and fracturing of context, it becomes sublime especially when the oppositions are forced to reside together. The two though sitting uncomfortably are dependent on one another for greater impact, a great euphemism for the nature versus nurture debate. “As long as Europeans have imagined a South Land, the outside influences on Australian society have been inherent to life here. In this sense, alien cultural factors must be counted definitively Australian.”⁵⁴ The use of European originated techniques such as Surreal automatism or pastiche recognises a heritage rich in innovative thought outside of any country in no way contravenes the innovations made here.

By using obscure form, indefinable imagery, intense colour, employing the Strange and the Sublime, informed by the landscape I am attempting to come to terms with the nostalgia that brings a nation to make choices as it does, to make choices in fear. Fear is notorious for paralysing the subject, for cutting off the basic ability to think outside the box; it renders us powerless, an invidious position to be in especially since most of us function better without it, yet we are unable to rid ourselves from fear and anxiety because we are paralysed. It is familiar. Thus by blurring the differences between the canny and the uncanny, the familiar and unfamiliar, between reality and the unreal, the waking and the nocturnal worlds, I am attempting to consecutively delineate and merge the divisions in thought regarding the nature of our nation, our home with our otherness. While “uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased”⁵⁵ it is possible to build an identity in being of the Other. A secondary characteristic in my work is the use of artifice, as metaphor for introduced ideas, flora, fauna and people in a changing land. “The presence of feral animals provides evidence of the productivity and therefore health of country.”⁵⁶ The landscape not only obscured in form but also obscured by artificial colour, the colour is close to that found in the Australian desert and its skies but tonally imprecise. Robert Zeller says that “Artifice neutralizes uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable and pleasurable.”⁵⁷ Artifice places the uncanny (as produced by the sublime and so forth) in the domain of man-made and therefore in the realm of ourselves, in the known as we presume to know ourselves. It creates a platform for human intervention.

⁵⁴ Gibson, *Uncanny Australia*, p.196.

⁵⁵ Julie Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p.188.

⁵⁶ Robert Zeller.op. cit. p.113

⁵⁷ Ibid p.187.

“Freud took pains to separate the uncanniness provoked by aesthetic experience from that which is sustained in reality; he most particularly stressed those works in which the uncanny effect is abolished because of the very fact that the entire world of the narrative is fictitious.”⁵⁸

The human task of producing landscape art imbues the work with humanity by proxy; apart from bits of DNA floating around, it is interpretative both for the artists and viewer, its influences and psychology are directly or indirectly influenced by proximate society in a ‘global’ world. I use rabbit skin glue not only to produce a human kind of skin tension as a primer it allows a natural skin colour as if it has been in the sun a few hours and it acts unwittingly as a preliminary surface which influences the placement of subsequent lines. I spent a lot of time as a child “on the farm”, learning from earth’s nature in her cycles of life and death, on occasions cruel and others forgiving. I also spent a lot of time with farmers who were the four closest natal men in my life, some of whom showed me a kind of natural order in farming the land; where rabbits and foxes strip the land and people strip them.



Fig. p

Emily Reuter, *Branded Land*, digital photograph, 2007

⁵⁸ Ibid p.187.

CONCLUSION

All continents have their own landscape unique and extraordinary and resonate with human consciousness bearing influence on society. Today more than ever it is important to see the differences so we are capable of addressing global issues with authority, enabling us to regard lateral thinkers in this country as valuable and useful tools to improve the way we think about education, health and business without offending international allies who we rely upon. Australia is now well equipped with science and research, with natural resources and an innate sense of optimism which enables the country to continue to produce original and opportune alternatives to the dehumanising structures in place such as globalisation, workplace reforms, GST, cuts on education, medical, old age, psychiatric facilities and so on. If Australia can continue its identity as the Other in these times of global social upheaval we might be able to stay the 'Lucky Country', not only for the Irish hang-up of inane larrikinism. Even though perhaps a cultural cringe has motivated us more than we would like to admit it is time to move on, to accept our history and to move beyond the kind of mentality where artists like Streeton "sought a transcendence which completely forgot the slaughter, destruction and melancholy of colonial history"⁵⁹

The nature of Australia's colonization will always place us in the uncanny, our western history at this point of time is irrevocable because not enough time has passed to create the kind of myths that are evocative of timelessness, and our white ancestors remember our grandparents' stories who remember theirs. Placed on this land by familial birth we are consecutively displaced given our arrival here was rather recent. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs refer to the guilt industry's inclination to make us either innocent or guilty, in the "Heimlich" or "Unheimlich", home or displaced. Are we guilty of the atrocities counted in our history and at many levels perpetuated or are we innocent in the remoteness of time. Are we "innocent ('out of place') and guilty ('in place') simultaneously."⁶⁰ Or is it not time to accept a very difficult history so that we may move towards creating an account apt for our postcolonial time, so that future generations can openly deal with issues not so bound in negative memories. Australia as a young country can still afford to look through "new eyes" so that originality usurps stereotypes and vision is not tainted but clear. Random psychological dislocation

⁵⁹ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, p.54.

⁶⁰ Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, p.24.

facilitated by the “unheimlich” in nature elucidates sublime emotion and sharpens the senses, like going to a new country for the first time. Existing as the outsider allows for objective observations and new memories to be constructed so as to recreate the self. Memory is akin to travelling in time, we travel through memory creating personal histories, myths, embellishments and distortions. Then why are we as a nation still defining ourselves? Juliana Engberg asks in her opening line to *A Weird Melancholy*. We are still painting the landscape as some kind of metaphor on the peculiarities that we live with in our nation, because Australians need to simultaneously embrace and let go of the past. While tapping into Australia’s harsh history is important the heroes and resulting bush stories allow us to connect with a slightly more romantic experience of the land. According to Mr. Powell;

If the Western model of civic identity is to endure, it must come to terms with that part of its “attachment” which is tied to imagined roots. Hence the need for assisting “integrated” habits of thinking to improve our historical-geographical purchase, so as to move forward from a cohesive base while reducing negatives and preserving our democratic institutions.⁶¹

Landscape painting is steeped in a history of identity and national pride. Australian artists have throughout our short history used the depiction of fundamental elements that impinge, connote and embody our perception of our wishes, our dreams and ourselves for the future. Of a land that not only feeds and homes us but nurtures our connection with her and weeps when we do not. Dr. Powell sites that there is “fresh evidence for plac rootedness, (and) it has to be admitted that in Australia a conjuring of the genius loci involves the type of transcendent discipline that works on and for the public imagination with or without rarefied academic inputs.”⁶² In other words we are still searching for a sense of ourselves within the global world. If we are to understand ourselves, as a western country we must embrace the Other, we must embrace the “unheimlich” and the landscape sublime is a great facilitator for that.

⁶¹ J.M.Powell, *Revisiting the Australian Experience*, p.7.

⁶² J.M. Powell, op. cit. pp.9/10.

APPENDIX

The subsequent journal describes my experience of parts of the Australian landscape. The route was the same as many who have travelled from Sydney to Darwin and many who will, and is therefore unchanged. However I approached this as an artist with the ammunition to view the land objectively and therefore, found myself defenceless against the sheer awesomeness of it. The protrusions from the ground, endless land and sky, illusory salt flats, ancient fossils, animal and machine carcasses – These were the constant reminders of life and death, of the “unheimlich” and the Sublime.

Prior to the journey I wrote in a diary:

“When painting illusory landscape it is very difficult to determine place since they [the paintings] often depict imaginary or psychological spaces. Hence I feel a great need to return to my own experiences of place on the land. My childhood experiences on [...the] farm – which are vivid - the acres of sunflowers whose turning faces (the sun worshipers) would fascinate me. Of living on the water in Manly or Newcastle. The bush in Eltham and the Blue Mountains with [their] own spirit and spirits... therefore it is necessary to reconnect with place – the place of dreaming, the place of isolation.”

December 2006

The journey gave me great resources retained in the visual, in the memory and spirit. My painting subsequently became freer; however, upon returning I felt the need to define them more as landscapes, to make the paint richer, the earth bigger and the sky wilder. The journey reiterated and further informed my understanding of the earth as a whole organism. The distances traversed gave me a sense of the endlessness that promotes an optimism, vast skies, endless horizons etcetera; particular to this country and its people. However, the obvious sense of remoteness gave me a particular sense of joy; the isolation severs one from claustrophobic urbanity, from air thick with ill health, and predictability. This further confirmed how easy it is to get physically and spiritually lost in Australia and how essential it is to embrace the unknown, certainly when one-third of the planet is farmed into manageable geometric portions; showing that the wild is in grave danger and that it is essential to embrace the “unheimlich” Terra Nullus, the stranger in ourselves.

PART 4

It was to do with a notion, a fragile, elusive idyll which ascribed to his childhood, perhaps to all childhoods, that one could lose oneself in a time freed from the clock and calendar, wander across countries which were simply Country, where distances were irrelevant, that one could journey, not only far, but deep, deep into a kind of enchantment of terrain, a suspension of time's passing, where the actual and the imagined were one. One could become almost like a random particle fired across space, nameless, unattached, characterised only by one's movement.⁶³

JOURNAL ON CENTRAL AUSTRALIA TOUR.... 5/1/07- 21/1/07

SYDNEY TO ALICE SPRINGS; 6/1/07 – 8/1/07

Hours from Sydney city the landscape gradually evolves so that the earth outside had changed from the natural bushland of NSW to a kind of orange ochre with scrub, especially around Broken Hill. The earth is almost a deep apricot colour of long flat areas with many sparse dotting of small sap and cadmium green shrubs, and the raw sienna Flinders Ranges in the background.

Only 1 or 2 hours over the South Australian border the landscape changes again to an even sparser red gold and flaxen colour grain where more trees have been sacrificed to farms. Closer to the Flinders Ranges they are red, almost as red as Uluru, but they are bathed in all kinds of atmospheric light so that at one moment they are a pale translucent mushroom pink, then suddenly the light shifts and you see the most iridescent glowing golds and oranges, with purple and cobalt shadows.

From Adelaide to Alice Springs things changed more dramatically. The sunset was the same golds, oranges and reds I'd seen earlier in the earth, however because the night sky is so dark due to remoteness, the sun glows even more vibrantly and the sky is soaked in liquid gold.

Approaching Alice Springs, the earth is red; it is the wet season so after rain earth is appearing even richer in colour. The red is attributed to iron oxides.

⁶³ Alan Gould *To the Burning City*, p276

3 DAY RED CENTRE SAFARI; 9/1/07 – 11/1/07

The thing that hits you almost immediately when you leave any city to the wide-open places of the outback is the endless sky. White clouds seem to billow on forever and you begin to get a true sense of the vastness of the country. Something particular to the Australian landscape is the arid red earth supporting an array of dead things. Even in the wet season camel, dog and other feral animal carcasses dotted the earth. At Ularu and Kata Tjuta the earth is brick red. The moss and cadmium brush is scruffy and the phalo, cobalt and titanium sky provide an awesome contrast, if it were not for the sky one could be mistaken for thinking the complimentary palette of this earth was really Mars or some other foreign world.

Kata Tjuta or the Olgas are a fascinating fecund rock with feminine curves and many a crevice. Larger than the linear streaked Ularu one cannot disregard the immensity of these awesome rocks, especially since they appear out of nowhere and grow increasingly bigger as we get closer to them. A solitary cloud in soft pinks, oranges and purples is billowing out above Ularu as if it has some agenda, as if it is trying to break out of itself so it might attack another ominous formation.

Uluru has deep lines running vertically where rain and time has etched its mark in it, black lines denote old mossy wear, burnt by the sun so newer algae may form. In other places it is as if some giant has pressed their finger -tips into the rock. There is a small pond where arcadia has set foot nestled in a cranny with water lilies an other idyllic flora and fauna such as native finches, but also acacias reminding that this is an ancient place, ancient and idyllic. Large holes in the rock once provided a home for the indigenous locals. There is a sense of the deeply unfathomable ancient spirit, but only when you take a walk by yourself are you able to imagine what it was like centuries ago.

The view from top of Kings Canyon with its unrelenting sheer 90 degree edges, an array of different rock kinds , water tracks, fossil sites and the most beautiful reds from deep cadmium yellows to burnt orange, alizarins and even red/violets with touches of burnt sienna and umber. Awesome were the views of receding canyon below us, apart from fear inspiring; there is some of the most untouched part of the world. It was clean, virgin and very dangerous. It was the epitome of euphemism.

The Australian Land is referred to as unrelenting, terrifying, and awesomely dangerous yet steeped in the arcadia of the past, much still untouched, the colours are beautiful, subtle yet often intense. Here is a land that exists in the duality of death and beauty, in the sublime. Romantic only if we place our own predilection for nostalgia upon it.

6-DAY ALICE TO DARWIN, 3 DAY KAKADU INC. 12/1-18/1/07

Once you hit as far in as Broken Hill the land doesn't change that dramatically to Alice, the earth gets redder and more barren.

The further north you go the plants become more archaic as if from the time of dinosaurs, and of course they are. Driving from the hot plate of the red centre to Kakadu the clouds begin to form, 40-degree heat but suddenly a flash of ice cold rain drowns out the heat and freezes us all, only for the heat to just as suddenly rise and begin to bake again. This is an occurrence which more frequently arises the further north one heads. In terms of landscape the areas like Kakadu and Litchfield are spectacular, they are lush with new green vegetation and the wild life, especially the birds are stunning however in terms of landscape and the Aussie psyche this one seemed to resemble little of the myth or harsh romanticising that I'd come used to.

The kind of sublime I was looking for I'd found in the monotonous flat land, in the badlands, in the desert that has its magic heavily steeped in the genocide of land, flora, fauna and homo - sapiens. Heavily steeped in an ancient history.

Darwin offered a different kind of sublime, one in the future. The blood red skies seemed to predict a kind of Armageddon, they, like the areas around the middle of our country were a reminder of things that have come and are yet to come. A barren centre and a top end which is bloody when you look up may seem depressingly evil and scary, but is also invigorating, it is organic, changing constantly, mercurial and very exciting.

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