

Directions in Australian Landscape Painting – Towards the Post-Western?

David Hume

What follows is the edited text of a talk given as part of the Artist Talks Program in the Adelaide Festival Fringe of 2004

This talk presents a personal view based on my experiences and observations of Australian landscape painting, and may, I hope form part of a dialogue that will help this genre to flourish. I believe that landscape painting is a profoundly important branch of the visual arts, as it can help us to understand our past, and can also provide direction for key decisions of the future – so many of which are tied to the land, and how it should be used. An art that strives to offer some fresh ideas and promote discussion in these areas is a valuable thing.

My earliest memory of Australian art is a piece of colonial art; a drawing of the head of a kangaroo that decorated the bowl of the outside lavatory of my boyhood home. The head of this kangaroo, which gazed imperiously from the porcelain, was labelled *The Commonwealth*, but this drawing, despite the hopes for nationhood that it offered, looked nothing like a kangaroo, and this is something that has struck me about much colonial art; there is a struggle to come to terms with an unfamiliar landscape, its difficult vegetation and its strange animals.

The purpose of much of this early painting was to make a record of, and to excite interest in, a bountiful land of opportunity, ripe for settlement, whose fecundity begged to be tapped by the colonist bold enough to do so. These are paintings of the high vista; views from the top of a hill from which the boundless pastures of the future may be seen.

After a time, the painters of the Heidelberg School did manage to capture the light and vegetation of Australia, and showed us scenes of tree felling, droving, settlement, and the privations of attractive young settler families who battled a beautiful but unforgiving land. They showed us a myth of the bush that even then was created for the appreciation of a predominantly urban, eastern seaboard audience.

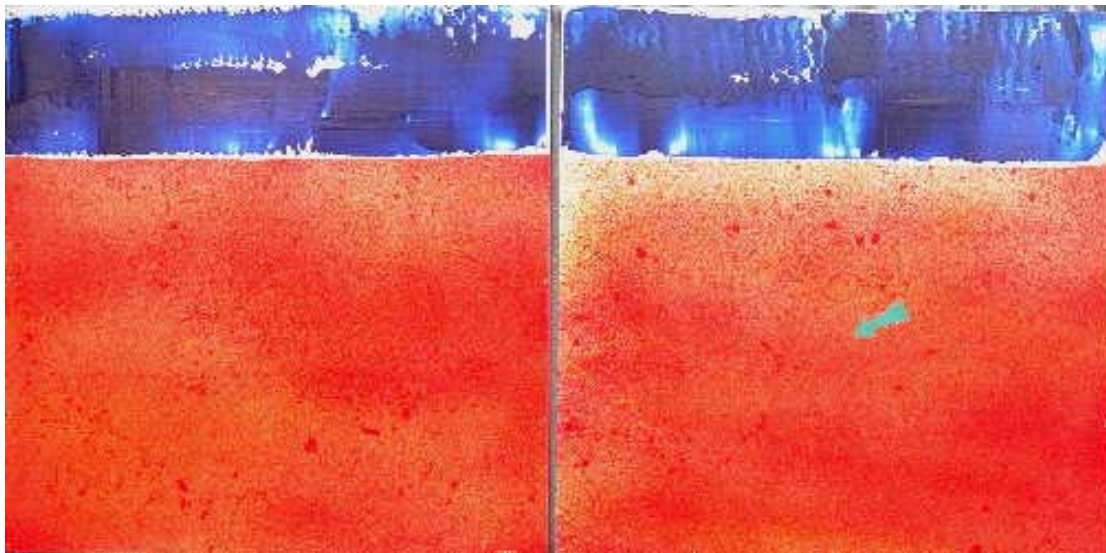
Sidney Nolan showed us Burke and Wills, lost in a trackless and desolate land, the *terra nullius* of Patrick White's *Voss*. It seemed that there was a duty to carve into this land, to mine it, to clear it, to dam its rivers in order to give life and form to that which was void.

The vantage point of our paintings grew higher. In 1949 Nolan showed us the MacDonnell ranges from the air – and it was appropriate that he did so too, for the light aircraft had replaced the horse and camel as the vehicle of discovery; just as Lang Hancock had replaced John McDouall Stuart. John Olsen has since used a freer aerial perspective, allowing the viewer to meander over the surface of the work. Not that there is anything peculiarly Australian about encouraging a viewer to float above and along a painting; David Hockney discusses it at length in relation to some of his works and is quite open about his appropriation of the idea from Chinese scrolls.



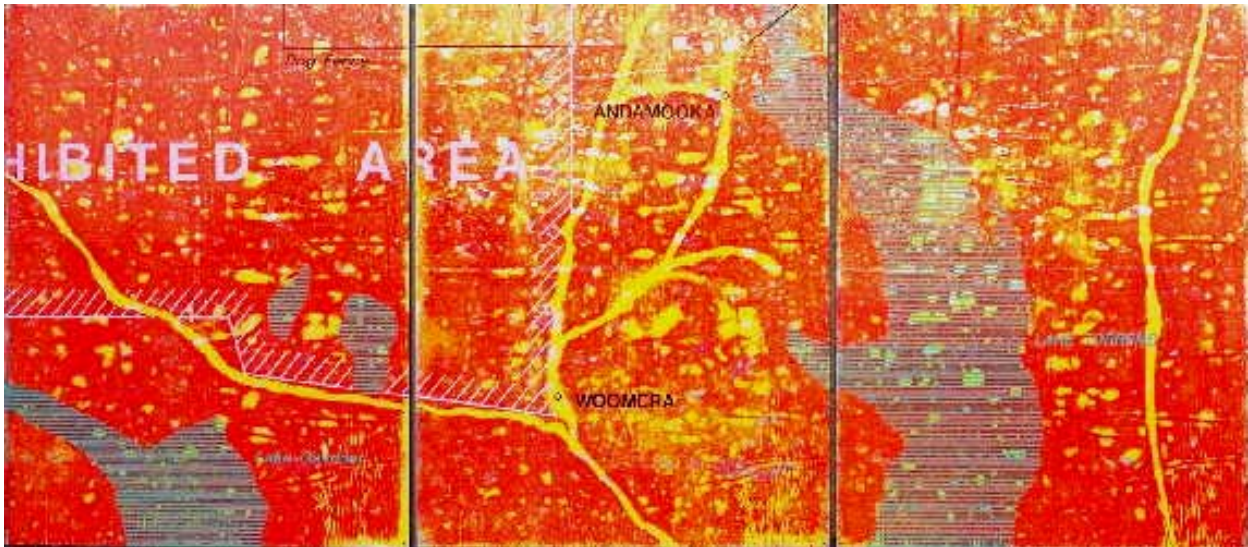
Postcards from the Rock #3 Acrylic on galvanised steel 21 panels, each 44x44cm 1997-2000

Questions of access and proprietorship are not simple. What could be more iconic, more quintessentially Australian than Uluru, the Rock? Yet when I visited this place it seemed set apart from the country around it. It appeared as a little pocket of international space – like West Berlin after the War – connected to the outside world by the flight path of a Jumbo Jet. Sydney, the Barrier Reef, and the Rock formed this tourist triangle. Fly in, fly out; and apart from the one morning when you climb it – white gloved, hand over hand up the chain – your feet need not even touch the soil.



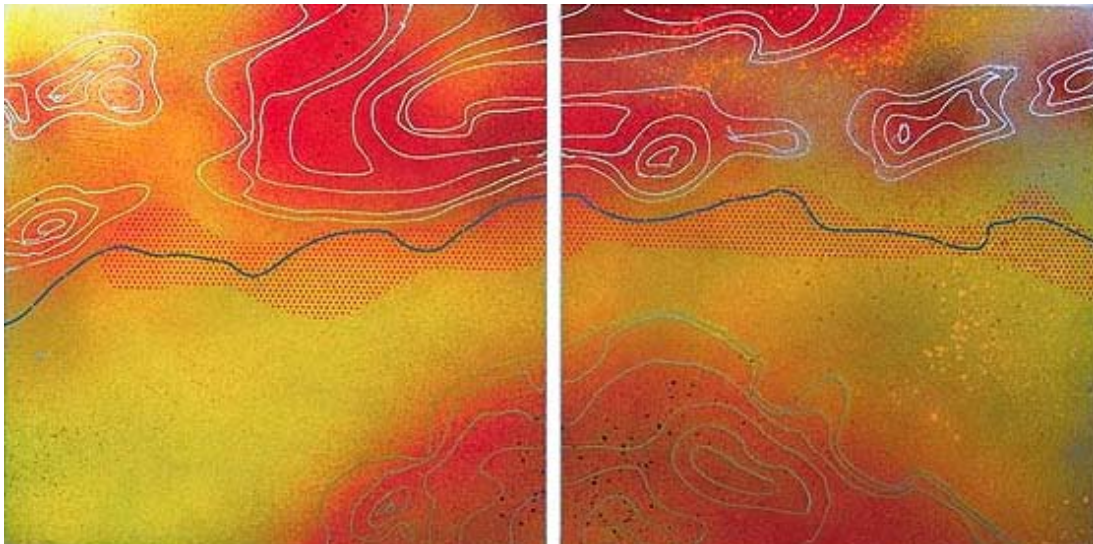
Looking For Opal Acrylic on galvanised steel 180cm x 90cm, 1997

Of course the real soil is all around us in the outback; the redness stretches to the horizon. This painting is called *Looking for Opal* and depicts Andamooka, near Woomera, where opal is the difference between land that will make your fortune and land that will claim your life. My grandfather told me stories of his visits there in the sixties, and when I went there myself in the nineties I still found it to be a magical place.



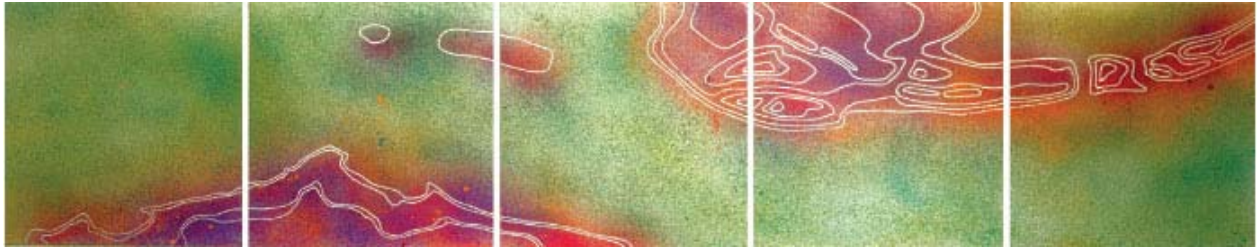
The Road to Andamooka Acrylic and cut vinyl on galvanised steel 270cm x 120cm 1996

Maps are tremendously dense ways of storing and transmitting information, they not only show the land, but give tantalising vignettes of the stories that go with it. *Dog Fence*, for example, is a prosaic term, but I'm sure there are whole lives bound up in it; and the *Prohibited Area* – an exclusion zone for rocket testing – is particularly rich in history.



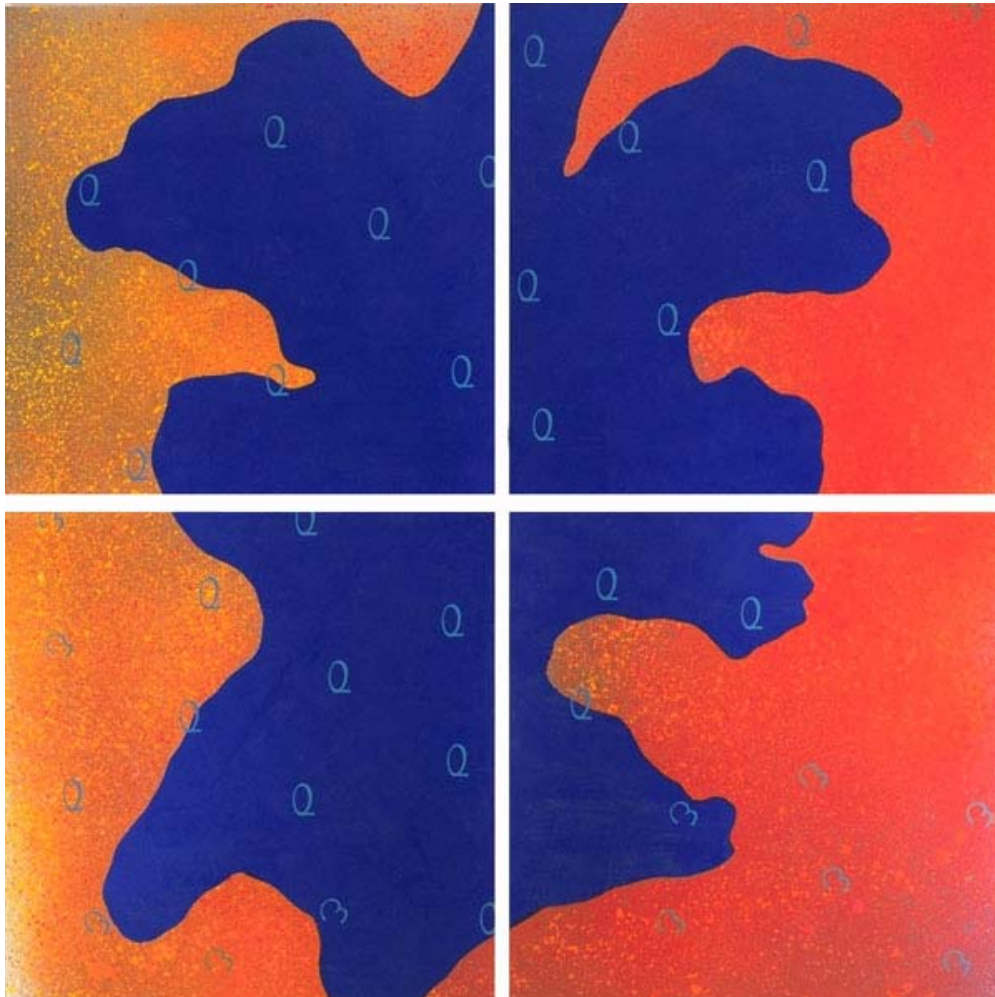
Red Rock Creek Acrylic and cut vinyl on two galvanised steel panels. Total size 180cm x 90cm 1998

Can the map be an aesthetic object? Emmanuel Kant writes of aesthetics in terms of a universal human response to the beauty found in nature. Can a map, the natural world represented by a human hand, be beautiful? If there is beauty in the natural world can we find beauty in the signs we use to mark out our world?



North of Red Rock Creek in the Build Acrylic on galvanised steel 90x450cm 2000

This painting is four and a half metres long. It invites the viewer to walk past it and along it; to embark on a journey of their own. And the view changes as you pass the painting; changing light causes changing reflections – an interplay between the metal support and the pigment. In this way I seek to mirror the changes we see in the land as we move over it.



Lake Argyle #2 Acrylic and cut vinyl on galvanised steel 180x180cm 2000

If we allow that a painting may invite us to journey in space, can we also invite a journey through time? This lake, Lake Argyle in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, is nine times the size of Sydney Harbour. It was formed in 1972 by damming the Ord River. It's a tiny little dam that has made this huge lake, and for what

purpose? Neither diamond mining nor irrigation provide satisfactory explanations. There was a lot of land flooded. I have left symbols for the trees, floating on the lake to mark the real trees beneath. An old homestead owned by the Durack family would have been covered too, but that was dismantled and rebuilt next to the dam wall.



Airfield #1 Acrylic on canvas 92cm x 92 cm 2001

As we journey over the land, flying in an aeroplane, the symbol of the airfield can provide a point of reference. It reminds us of our place of departure gouged into the land; a prerequisite for the plane to take us on our journey. We are not impartial observers who can travel through a place without changing it. The land has allowed us our journey and we should acknowledge the toll it takes.



Woomera #3 Acrylic on Galvanised Steel 225cm x 120 cm 2004

Woomera is to me a mythic place, which I first visited on my trips to Andamooka in 1996. It sits at the edge of the outback, on the border between the yellow land of the coast and the red land of the centre.

The town was borne of the Anglo-Australian Joint Project, laid out in 1948 as a base from which the threat of the Russia's growing nuclear capabilities could be met. The government of Britain felt that a nuclear deterrent was needed, and the British rockets that would carry these nuclear warheads were to be tested here.

I wanted to document this time, which seems in retrospect a simpler one than that in which we live today, but it should be remembered that it was also a time of great and real fear that nuclear calamity was imminent.

The small community here is also akin to an Atlantis – there is evidence here of skills and powers that are now lost. Australia at that time could design and build its own aeroplane from scratch, and was able even to build a satellite. This time has passed, and the recent time when Woomera housed a detention centre has also passed from this place that was built largely by post-war refugees. The next phase of its life may well be a nuclear dump, which seems a role that will have an impact on a geological time scale in a way that previous events have not.

The journeys I seek to mark in this work belong to indigenous Australians as well as non-indigenous. Because similarities between my work and Aboriginal work have been remarked, I have been particular in explaining, in a very Western way, the origins of what I have done. Perhaps because I grew up in the time of the Papunya Tula paintings of the 1980s and 1990s, I felt it important to be sure that my work did not misappropriate items that should be the exclusive domain of Aboriginal culture. I think that now we should be able to advance, with caution, beyond that time.

I see the desert areas of Australia as rich, vibrant and beautiful places, full of life and stories, and this is a view that is not now unusual. It is a view, also, that has developed along with our increasing awareness of the unique relationship that indigenous Australians have with their country. This is not the only source of these feelings – I certainly respect the love of the land that I have seen in non-indigenous people who live there, and I think this love should be celebrated – but to deny that this influence has come in part from our contact with Aboriginal culture would be to perpetrate another injustice.

So where to next? My use of the term *Post-Western* is somewhat whimsical, as I think we have too many 'Post' movements already. I do think, however, that the divisions of landscape painting into the rigid classifications of Western and Aboriginal is ripe for change. I hope that while painting in these established areas continues to flourish, there is also room at their edges for new work, in which ideas can be exchanged and new relationships can develop.