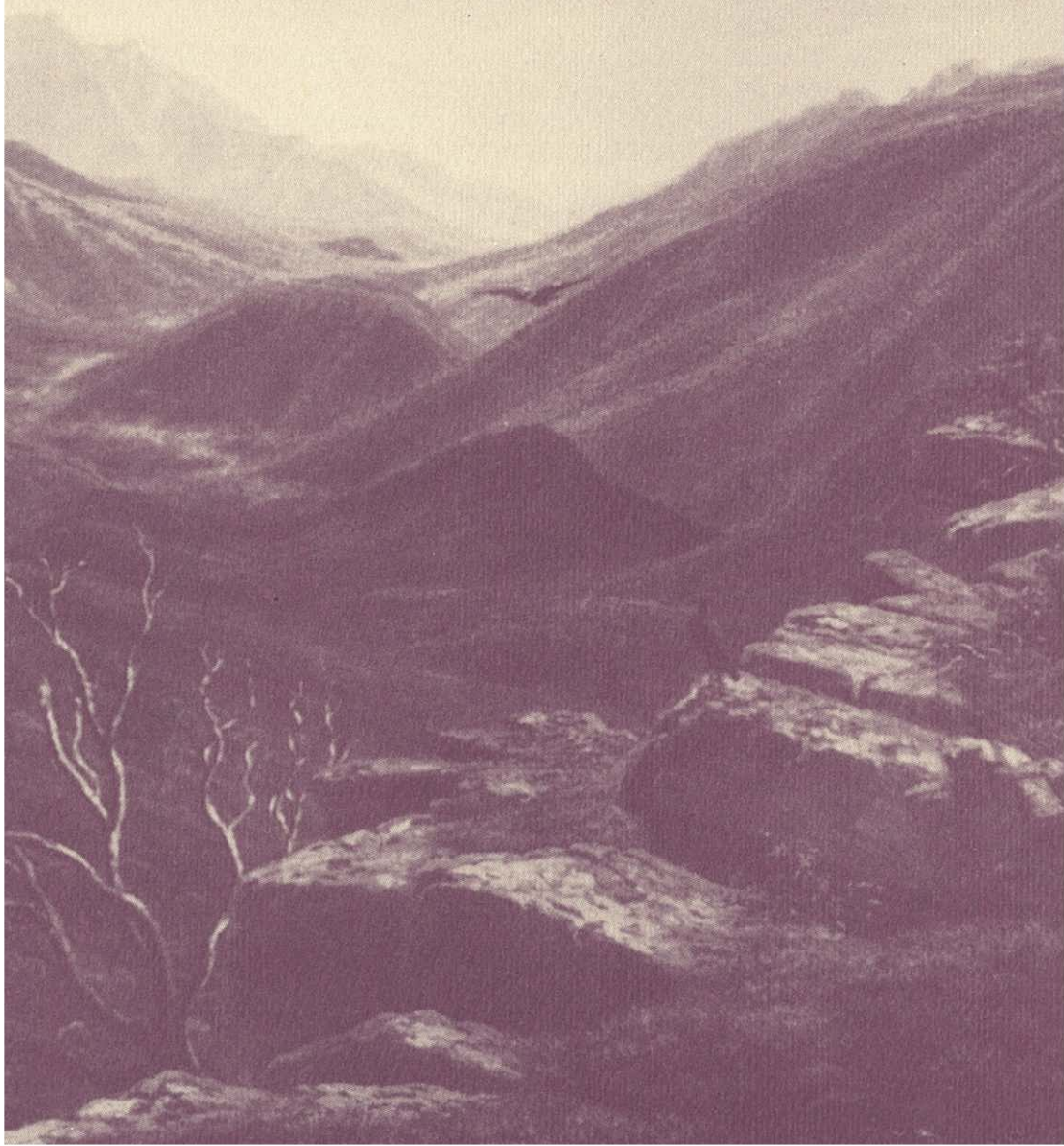


'How Much Beauty Can I Stand?'



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CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Errata

p.3 *Tower Hill* (a mountain range painted by
Von Guérard in 1855).

p.8 Eugen Von Guérard
1852, arrived in Melbourne.

Introduction

When Eugen Von Guérard painted *Head of the Mitta Mitta River, eagle's view of the mountain* in 1879, he sought not only to render the scene with topographical accuracy, but to express what his nineteenth century vision saw as the inherently romantic qualities of the Australian landscape. Von Guérard's art, it has been said, is unique in Australian painting. He brought to Australia the seventeenth century traditions of Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorrain and transformed them and his German romantic inheritance through a response to the Australian landscape.

The six contemporary artists in this exhibition, four Australians and two international painters, do not look to landscapes of the recent past for inspiration in their art. They have more in common with that period which saw the beginnings of European art in Australia and the transplantation of the pictorial conventions of the 'picturesque' and the 'sublime' that was part of the acclimatization of European vision to the strangeness of the Antipodes.

Romantic notions found much to sustain them in the discovery of Australia's vast, unsullied and seemingly ageless wilderness inhabited by weird and unfamiliar forms of life which appeared to invert or transform the laws of nature. Colonial painters found in the country's primeval aspect a poetic source as potent as the antique ruins and monuments which inspired their counterparts in Europe.

There is, amongst the contemporary artists here, an instinctive empathy with the awesome beauty of the sublime and a recognition of grandeur and a sense of moment as being appropriate to the subject matter of landscape. And, for the Australian painters at least, there is an identification with the experience of cultural dislocation which marked the arrival of European settlement in this country and has to a significant extent marked the growth of our culture since.

What is distinctive about the contemporary landscape paintings presented in this exhibition is that none are based at all on a direct observation or

personal experience of nature, and it is this which, above all, distinguishes them from their predecessors and from conventional ideas of landscape painting. Rather than expressing their closeness to the natural environment, these urban based artists stake out their distance from it. They are more likely to derive inspiration from other paintings of nature, or reproductions of those paintings, than from the experience of actually looking at the landscape itself.

In the case of the Australian artists, this rejection of nature and 'plein airism' (painting out of doors) is tantamount to a heresy which takes to task the very type of landscape which in this country has been popularized and exalted as the unique source of an 'authentic' Australian vision. The integrity of such landscape painting is seen to reside in the way in which the very marks on the canvas correspond to the artist's direct, fresh and untainted response to the experience of landscape.

By contrast, the artists in this exhibition assert that vision is a product of 'culture' rather than 'nature'. Their awareness of nature comes almost entirely from its representations in culture and from the vast body of images which penetrates our consciousness interrupting the direct unmediated interaction between man and his environment. In the hands of these contemporary artists, landscape painting thus takes on a radical dimension which challenges the very notion of 'authentic' vision, thus rupturing the continuity of the landscape tradition in Australian art.

Once liberated from 'natural' vision and a direct engagement between man and nature, it is possible to delight in finding the most surprising references in the strangest of places. In the vista of Mt Kosciusko, Von Guérard fancied that he saw 'the most celebrated mountains of Greece'. Imants Tillers takes the vast and dramatic spectacle of Von Guérard's painting of 1864 and transforms it across time and geographic location, as if by a series of antipodean inversions, which are analogous to the processes by which German romanticism and the sentiments of classicism found root in Australian soil.

Generations later, Volker Tannert brings to Australia reference to Caspar David Friedrich (a contemporary of Von Guérard's, though the two are not likely to have met) in landscape paintings which explore the language of romanticism. The 'idea' of landscape, rather than its visual aspect is reduced to its most essential form, rocks, mountains, sky and soil in which any human element is dwarfed.

Tower Hill (a mountain range painted by Von Guérard in 1955) looms as an evocative and constant presence in Geoff Lowe's art. The painting is a startling example of how nature can be made to conform to culture. The region painted

by Von Guérard has recently been restored to its so called 'natural' state on the basis of its representation in Von Guérard's image. In Lowe's painting, the specific reference to a particular location becomes subsumed within an immensely poetic and haunting symbol of landscape as it exists across all time and all places.

CLARK'S MYRIORAMA (meaning a myriad of views) is an entertainment made popular in the nineteenth century containing views based on various seventeenth century Claudian and Dutch landscapes. Each of the panels is completely interchangeable, the combination presented in this exhibition being only one of the numerous vistas possible.

Amongst certain early observers of Australia, there was a notion of the Antipodean wilderness as being like an enchanted garden. To some it was evocative of the Dawn Of Time. In *Lavished Living*, Susan Norrie creates a mood of primeaval secrecy. The viewer is allowed to snatch a glimpse of Von Guérard's painting *Mt William From Mt Dryden* 1875 from within a cloistered and opulent interior space, the representation of a settler's hut, which resonates with a female presence.

Of all the painters in the exhibition. Thérèse Oulton places most faith in the painted spectacle, weaving into her superbly rendered and near abstract images a possible analogy between the fusion of the materials of painting and the alchemical production of meaning. These are landscapes built not from the indomitable forces of nature but from layers of cultural references gleaned from throughout the history of painting.

Art today is nurtured in a climate of scepticism. It is no longer easy to believe in the 'sublime' or the utopias of beauty and truth. Nor indeed is it possible to believe in the nineteenth century view of landscape painting as an intermediary between man and god, a means of unravelling the mysteries of nature. But for these painters the choice of landscape as subject matter for their art involves a commitment to 'culture' over 'nature' as providing the more interesting direction for contemporary art.

SUE CRAMER, 1986.

List of Works

EUGEN VON GUÉRARD

1. *Head of the Mitta Mitta River, eagle's view of the mountains*, 1879.
Oil on millboard.
38.8 x 48.8cm
LaTrobe Collection,
State Library of Victoria,
Melbourne.

TONY CLARK

2. Sections from CLARK'S MYRIORAMA, 1985/86
Oil on canvas board.
Each panel 30.5 x 22.8cm
Courtesy of the artist.

GEOFF LOWE

3. *Tower Hill*, 1984
(with Tony Clark and Greg Page)
Alkyd resin, and oil and acrylic on linen and plaster.
Central panel 152 x 304cm
Four side panels 43 x 28cm
Side panel 96 x 26cm
Five lower panels 28 x 43cm
Collection, Warrnambool Art Gallery.
4. *Untitled*, 1985.
Acrylic on linen,
100 x 200cm
Courtesy of the artist.
5. *Untitled*, 1986
Acrylic on linen.
100 x 200cm
Courtesy of the artist.

SUSAN NORRIE

6. *Lavished Living*, 1983/84
Oil on plywood.
183 x 123cm
Private collection.

THÉRÈSE OULTON

7. *Chemical Wedding*, 1985
Oil on canvas.
230 x 210cm
Private Collection, Melbourne.
8. *Heresy*, 1985
Oil on canvas.
213 x 183cm
Private Collection, Melbourne.

VOLKER TANNERT

9. *Untitled*, 1985
Oil on paper.
80.5 x 60.5cm
Courtesy Christine Abrahams Gallery
10. *Untitled*, 1985
Oil on paper
80.5 x 60.5cm
Courtesy Christine Abrahams Gallery

IMANTS TILLERS

11. *Mt Analogue*, 1985
Acrylic and oil on 165 canvas boards.
280 x 572cm
Courtesy Yuill/Crowley Gallery

Biographies

TONY CLARK

Born, 1954, Canberra.
Studied 1972-75 Reading University (B.A. Hons.).
Has exhibited in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Warrnambool, Venice.
Lives in Melbourne.

GEOFF LOWE

Born 1952, Melbourne.
Studied Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology 1969-72.
Has exhibited in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra, Warrnambool,
Edinburgh.
Lives in Melbourne.

SUSAN NORRIE

Born 1953, Sydney.
Studied National Art School, East Sydney Technical College 1973,
Victorian College of the Arts (Diploma of Painting) 1974-76.
Has exhibited in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, New York.
Lives in Sydney.

THÉRÈSE OULTON

Born 1953, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England.
Studied 1979 St Martins School of Art, 1983 The Royal College of Art.
Has exhibited in London, Liverpool, Oxford, Birmingham and Germany.
Artist-in-Residence Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne 1985. Lives in
London.

VOLKER TANNERT

Born 1955 in the Ruhr district, Germany.
Studied Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf.
Has exhibited widely in Europe and in New York.
Artist-in-Residence Victoria College, Prahran Campus 1985.
Lives in Cologne, Germany and Italy.

IMANTS TILLERS

Born, 1950, Sydney.

Studied 1969-72 Sydney University (Architecture), Sydney. Has exhibited widely both in Australia and abroad including Brazil, New York, San Francisco, Paris, Venice.

Lives in Sydney.

EUGEN VON GUÉRARD

Born, 1811, Vienna.

Studied School of Art in Rome, Düsseldorf Kunstakademie.

1952, arrived in Melbourne.

1882, sailed for Europe.

1901, died.

Bibliography

CANDICE, BRUCE; *Eugen Von Guérard* (with an introduction by Daniel Thomas. Published by A.G.D.C. in conjunction with the Australian National Gallery, Canberra 1980.

BONYHADY, TIM; *Images in Opposition, Australian Landscape Painting 1801-1890* Oxford University Press, 1985.

SMITH, BERNARD; *European Vision In The South Pacific*, Harper & Row, Sydney. First published 1959.

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