

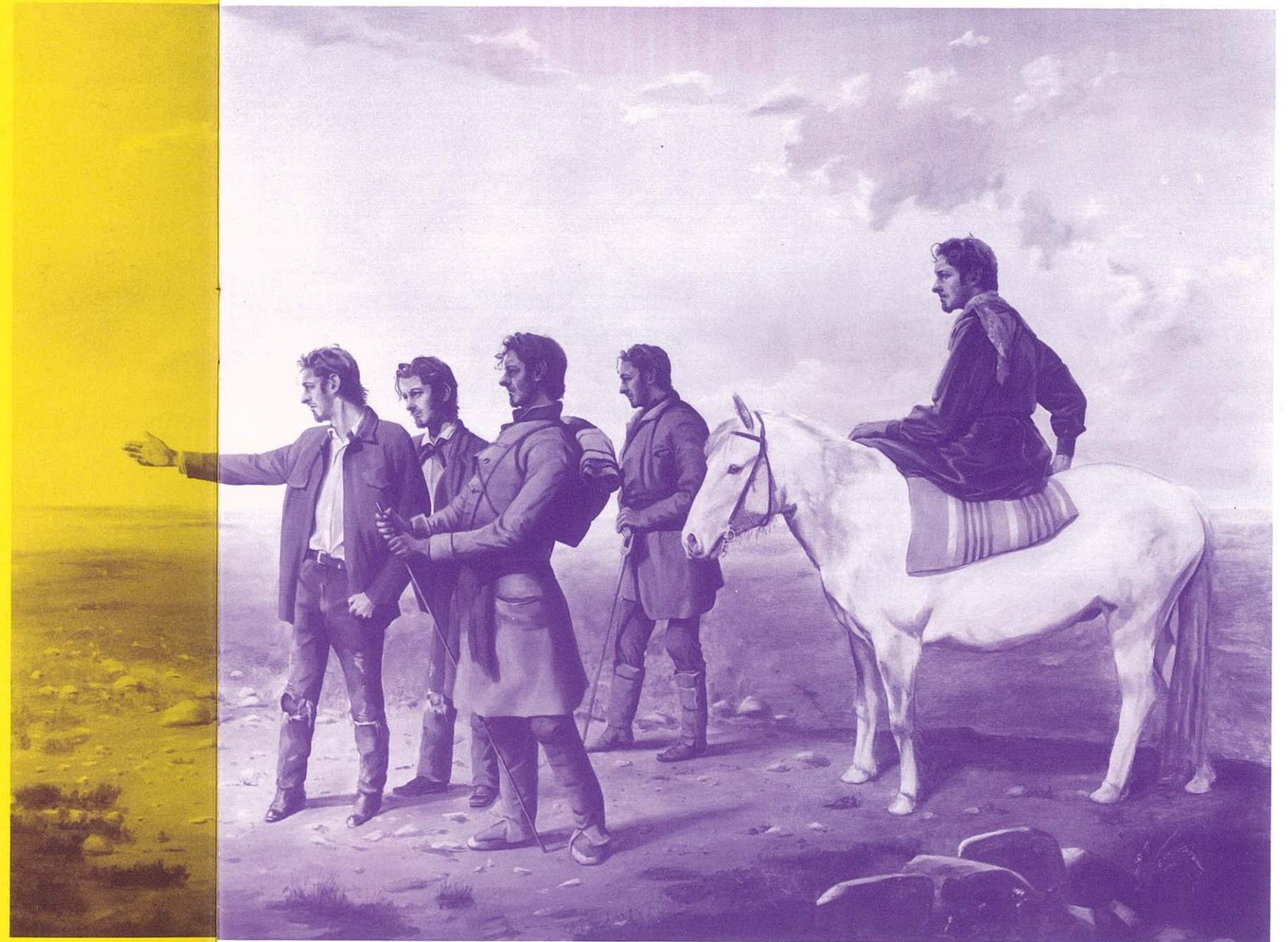


Claiming.

An Installation

of Paintings by

Stephen Bush.



(3) *Plains of promise* (1990)

oil on canvas, 150.0 x 200.0 cm, collection, the artist

Contents.

- 3 **Introduction: Naomi Cass**
- 4 **Claiming: Naomi Cass**
- 8 **Why Bush is not smiling: Kevin Murray**
- 10 **Carnival Time: Juliana Engberg**
- 12 **Biography**

Published by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, affiliated with Monash University.

February 1991
Edition 1500
ISBN 0 947220 04 6
Copyright: The Authors

This catalogue is published in conjunction with an exhibition of Stephen Bush paintings at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (February-March 1991) and the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia (April 1991). A related exhibition of the artist's work will be presented at The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, U.S.A., (September 1991 – January 1992)

Exhibition Curator (Melbourne): Naomi Cass

Photographer: Terence Bogue, Melbourne

Catalogue Design: Xtension / TH

Director, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne:
Jenepher Duncan

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art is assisted by the Victorian Ministry for the Arts and the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council.



Acknowledgments:

The generous financial assistance of ALLIANCE CAPITAL MANAGEMENT L.P. towards this catalogue and exhibition is gratefully acknowledged. The contribution of the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia to this publication is gratefully acknowledged. Ms Grazia Gunn, former director of A.C.C.A is recognised in particular for her initiation and guidance of this project. Mr John Stewart is similarly recognised for his support of this exhibition. The lenders, including Monash University Gallery are gratefully acknowledged. The spirited and constant assistance of Stephen Bush is acknowledged, as is the valued support of Jan Nelson. Stephen Bush is represented in Melbourne, Australia by Powell Street Gallery.

FRONT COVER

(1) *Return* (detail) (1989)
oil on canvas, 101.5 x 76.0 cm, collection, the artist

BACK COVER

(2) *The lure of Van Dieman's land* (detail) (1989)
oil on canvas, 101.5 x 91.0 cm, collection, the artist

Introduction.

Claiming – An installation of paintings by Stephen Bush alters the gallery: the exhibition spaces are sparsely hung and the walls painted in saturated dark colours. These paintings are not presented as precious objects, nor do they evidence a certain progression or development in the artist's work. The story of the artist's journey from art school to the present is not the objective here. The seductive vistas to ACCA's fine European gardens are obscured by rice paper to suppress any analogy between Stephen Bush paintings and nature.

Reminiscent of the touring "one picture" exhibitions popular in the United States during the mid 1800s, some spaces within the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art contain only one painting. Disenfranchised by the system of patronage, American artists of this earlier period initiated their own exhibitions and charged entrances fees. The public flocked to view one painting as an emblem of a new nationalist sentiment and identity. Bush enquires into such grand claims for landscape painting.

The viewer of this installation is enveloped by a colour discordant with the paintings and invited to participate in the spectacle of a tableau peopled by many Stephen Bushes. You are invited to focus your attention and locate your own point of view within one constructed frame of reference.

The Loti Smorgon Gallery of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art further challenges a neutral, elevated presentation. Sparsely hung, the paintings are interleaved by quickly executed, tonal paintings: Stephen is both the artist and the workman. His skill is used for easel painting and its opposite, decoration.

NAOMI CASS.

BY NAOMI CASS

Claiming.

Do you remember the first time you were told about the boy who cried wolf? I think I was standing looking into the barrel of a top loading washing machine. For me the cautionary tale had something to do with authenticity and that if my claim was truthful then there would always be a saviour, a *deus ex machina*. Except of course, for the boy who lost his arm to the spinning propeller.

I learned a lot about life and danger standing on a platform looking into the churning grey water listening to my mother whilst she did the washing. For Stephen Bush the tedium of farm life provided the occasion for listening.

The paintings of Stephen Bush are authentically made, true to materials, skilful if you wish. I am lured into the picture via this seemingly effortless technical dexterity, almost inappropriate for a contemporary artist, almost anachronistic for a contemporary artist.

These paintings though, cry wolf. Their truth to materials and to the look of authentic history painting is only a decoy.

In fact, the action therein is always deceptive; the landscape is knowingly a construct, identity is askew and origin, location and history are fakes, even frauds.

There is danger here. Not danger in the land as one would expect from the subject of Australian landscape painting, but danger in the representation of the land, danger in its idealisation and simple-minded romanticism. Such virtuoso painting, such old world technique signifies a most interesting point of view. Painting is in the service of ideas, not expression or heroism, and landscape makes a space for the culturally constructed individual, rather than promoting nationalism or personal aggrandisement.

Please note the repetition of passages within a single landscape and across numbers of works. Be warned, there is no veracity to life or procedure. Their source is photography, other art, non art, not nature. Please enjoy feelings of disappointment in the failure of art's verisimilitude to nature.

Various genres are recalled here, with varying degrees of truth or seriousness: the tableau, sepia photograph, nineteenth-century travel post card, anthropological photograph, propaganda poster, 1950s advertising. These slide together, not in pronouncement of the artist's invention but as repertoire.

Bush uses pre-modern American art like parents use the cautionary tale, as a vehicle to convey a complex message. Like the fable, the tableau permits the viewer to apprehend and locate some moral rather than being berated by the message.

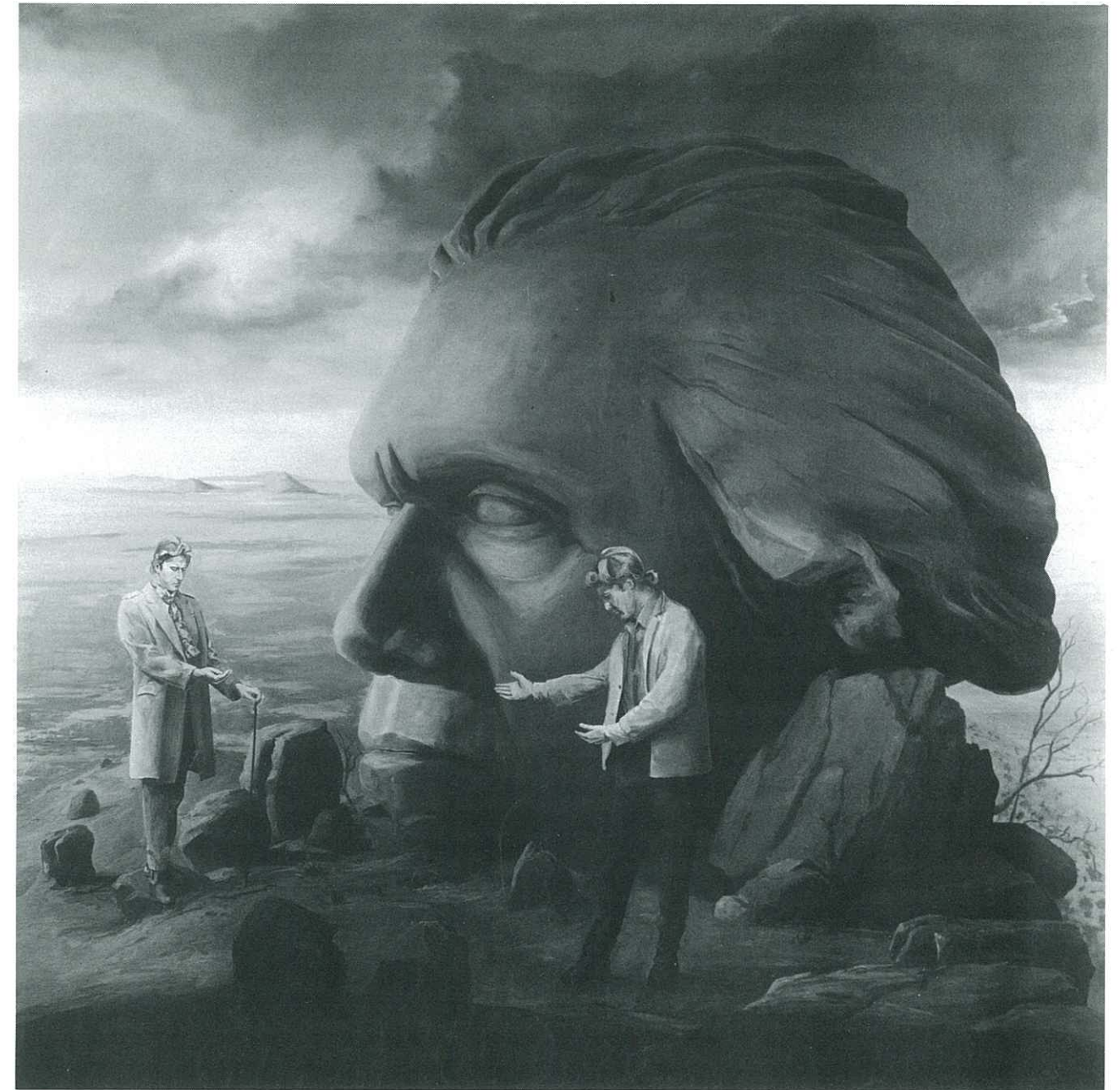
There is a period in American art which particularly appeals to Bush for its resonance as a fable. Like the narrative in one of his paintings, Bush presents the story of Frederick Church who, in the mid 1800s exhibited his *Twilight in the wilderness* (1860) to vast audiences as a "one picture" exhibition. This painting made a claim towards encapsulating the American spirit and liberating art from the confines of Europe. With Ruskin at heart, artists tried to make a space for their work outside the patronage of rich merchants and the strictures of their portraiture.

Artists exhibited their uncommissioned paintings, one work at a time and charged entrance fees. (There had been an earlier tradition of touring individual paintings of some grand European landscape exhibited in prefabricated rotundas.) Church moved towards touring elaborate dioramas augmenting a certain landscape with natural phenomena from that site to be viewed in conjunction with the painting and with binoculars.

The spectacle of banners down Broadway announcing one painting on view in Church's studio, rivalling for audience attention other authoritative cultural events, such as opera and theatre, is an appealing image for an Australian artist wondering about the place of visual art in contemporary society.

There is something puritanical and workmanlike, even Methodist about Bush's painting. The actors disrobe and go home, the set painters retire and the Orchestrator invents new scenes overnight. Tomorrow will be the same as yesterday. There is however something very sexy not only about Bush's restrained procedure but in the imagery he creates; some residual potency that lingers after the initial display. These works are arousing. The wolf is disguised as the granny and emergent sexuality is disguised as the wolf. These paintings cry wolf.

Bush also cries wolf about identity. *Lure of Van Dieman's land* (1989) (ill. 2) and *Return* (1989) (ill. 1) present Bush characteristically overdressed and worried, gesturing an enquiry to the viewer: what is the appropriate identity for Australian art now? In opulent costume reminiscent of Captain Cook, Bush



(4) *Claiming* (1989)

oil on canvas, 183.0 x 183.0 cm, collection the artist

makes a spectacle of himself. He stands upright before a gorgeous, fake Australian art landscape in *Lure of Van Dieman's land* and a fake classical ruin in *Return*. An excess of gesture and reference does not betray his puritanical purpose of questioning the construction of national identity in art.

Claiming (1989) (ill. 4) depicts two troubled Stephen Bush figures discovering, proclaiming around a larger than life sculpture of the Aboriginal artist, Albert Namatjira (1902-1959). This stone profile, a stereotype of pathos is couched within an arid tonal landscape and suggests a productive confusion between a miraculous natural phenomena, a found object, a Graeco-Roman ruin and a souvenir of our guilt.

Namatjira was taken from his parents as a child and placed with missionaries, as were large numbers of the Koori population. Later, Namatjira trained as a European artist and he achieved some recognition as a landscape artist in the mould of Hans Heysen. The ironic claim was that he was the first real Aboriginal artist. He was given token European rights and was one of the first to be given the right to drink alcohol. Aborigines were not given the right to vote until 1967. Namatjira's life was marked by access to both white and black Australia and a comfortable existence in neither.

Recently, identity is addressed by Bush as shifting and negotiable yet never random. Identity is a tableau of Stephen Bush rather than a portrait. (Let me tell you something curious. Bush repeats with chilling accuracy any feature of the natural world and yet he cannot paint himself the same way twice.)

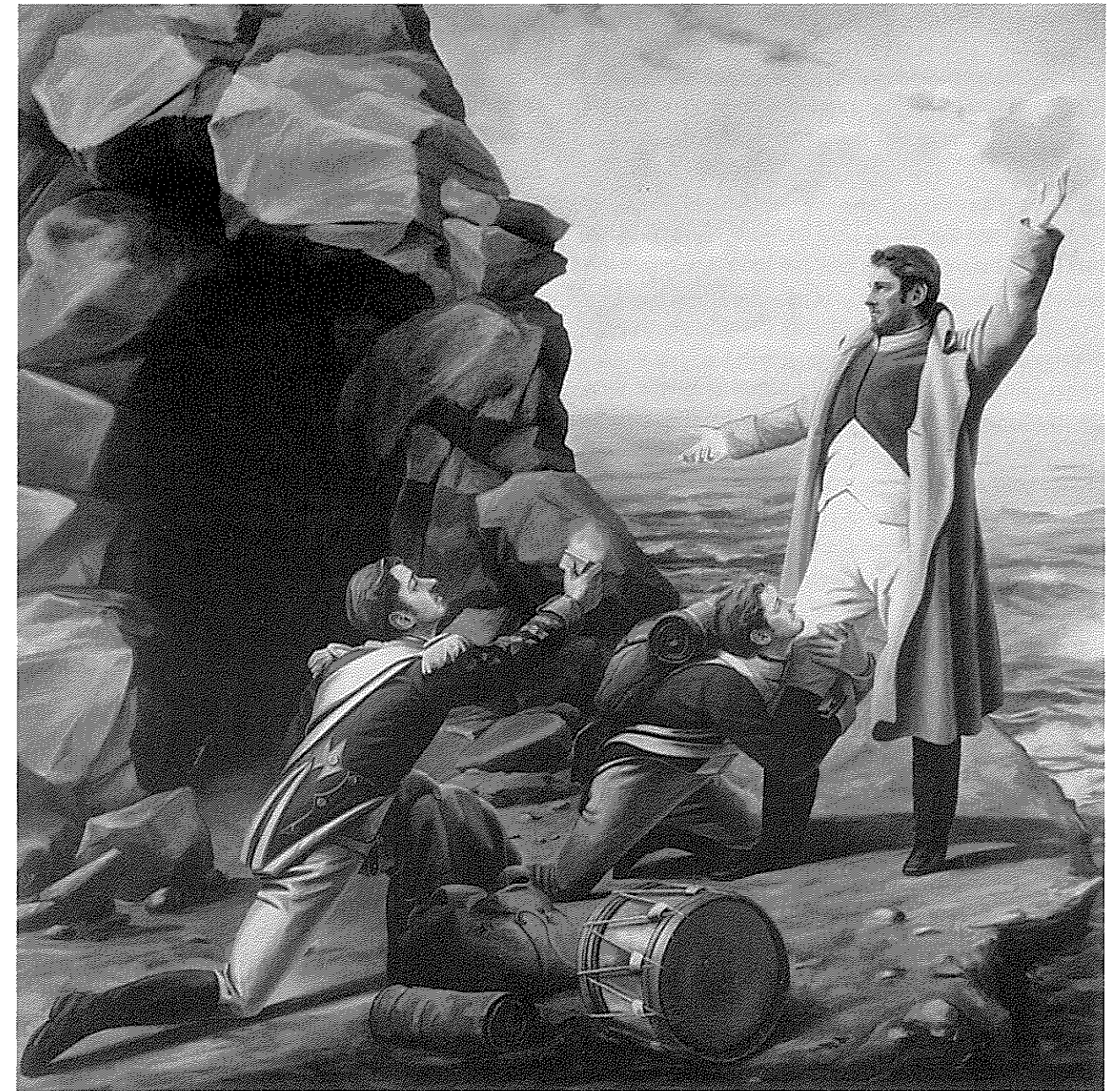
The artist as explorer, boundary breaker and hero is characteristic of Bush's work. However *This big in the afterlife*

(1990) (ill. 5) claims references beyond the studio. Here the general, the patron, the owner, the artist, the leader, the actor, the president buys time in the afterlife through battle, victory, patronage or career. And art is a supremely effective way of extending one's hold on the more slippery and temporal aspects of identity.

Five Stephen Bushes contemplate the many options for action in *Plains of promise* (1990) (ill. 3). It's not that Stephen is on a road to nowhere, but that the future must be constructed and in order to do so, credence must be given to all the voices within. Some are bold, some are cantankerous, most are on foot and one in female clothing sits side-saddle and legless on horse-back. She/he does not lead but is certainly more composed and sees the furthest.

Finally, I notice a kindness or regard between the figures in Stephen Bush's work. If there isn't direct interaction between the figures then there is a kindness one might expect to observe in a resolved human being, the kindness of one part of oneself to another. A good place to start I would have thought in the task of constructing an identity, as a person, a male, an artist, an Australian.

There is no transcendent essence in the fraudulent landscapes of Stephen Bush, and neither is there a default on content. The viewer is held quietly in some identification within the tableau of these handsome works. There is a space for us to collude with Stephen Bush in crying wolf about life. In an unassuming way Bush makes claims beyond his own point of view.



(5) *This big in the afterlife* (1990)

oil on canvas, 183.0 x 183.0 cm, collection, the artist

Why Bush is Not Smiling.

In *Plains of promise* (1990) (ill. 3), five Stephen Bushes gaze to the left of the painting. It is a particularly ridiculous scene. Why then, do the Bushes look so serious? Even the woman Bush who sits side-saddle has a grave expression on her face. What is going on in this painting that resists its own humour?



For the purposes of analysis, I will employ three functions that form part of the world Bush's paintings inhabit: heroes, people and history:

HEROES stand on the stage of history before the people. Their gestures point towards the events that have been and will be. Heroes go between the people and the limitless horizon. Every hero is different. When heroes take the stage, people witness an epic drama.

PEOPLE sit before the stage of history watching the heroes. At times they may become restless of the drama and flow onto the stage to control the course of events themselves. People are all the same. When people take the stage, there is parody and carnival.

HISTORY provides the drama which the heroes act out before the people. History determines the horizons by which the drama begins and ends. In history, there is some purpose for action.

In 1989, 'people power' emerged in Eastern Europe to topple the heroes from the positions of authority. Hundreds and thousands of people gathered in Prague's Wenceslas Square; in unison the crowd shook its keys and deafened the communists. History marched towards democratisation and liberation of the world's people.



Bush puts people onto the stage of history. He paints their sameness. Man, woman or black, white, they are all the same Stephen Bush. People stand where heroes have been. The heroes would have been painted to distinguish themselves from others. With people, there is no need for this. People are like the grass that spreads through the plains.

Some might draw the comparison between Bush and contemporary American painters such as John Bowman, John Hull or Randy Dudley. They are painters who have similar

proportions of figure and landscape and whose manner reflects the classic style of historic genre painting. Where Bush is different from the Americans, however, is that rather than showing people in the margins of the action – in the backwaters of the cities, etc. – he places them in the centre of history.

Perhaps the most poignant representation of people in Bush's work is *This year's pontiac* (1988). Potatoes are highly demeaned objects: millions of potatoes are chopped, boiled, mashed and fried every day. Convoys of trucks carry huge boxes of extra light crisps. Hungry commuters carry paper buckets of hot chips whose smell pervades enclosed spaces. The whole of the free world feeds upon the potato. In a billion stomachs shreds of potato lie slowly dissolving. Surely, there is nothing more common than a potato.

Yet Bush has elevated this lowly object beyond the status of small potato to that of royal pontiac. There they stand, imperiously solid on their own land like a band of stoic farmers. In their eyes you can see great wisdom and a little sadness. Bush has ennobled the potato. He has made the potato into a hero.



When people take control they have fun. They tear the clothes off the heroes and dance around in their fine regalia. Much of the world is already in control of the people. Tourists gather around the serious gestural moments of Western history smiling at the camera, playing the fool. People loot history. And they enjoy seeing themselves in the places of the rich and famous. They smile when they are being photographed next to cardboard cut-outs of political leaders. They wave maniacally to the television cameras from the sidelines of sporting events.

Why, then, is Bush not smiling? Isn't it possible to imagine the standing Bush in *This big in the afterlife* (1990) (ill. 5) with a beaming grin on his face? Or the travelling Bush in *Looking for a prospect* (1989) with a wry smile? Each mouth is firmly set in its place, defying the obvious humour behind the practice of a painter dressing up in fancy dress and placing himself throughout history. Why the poker face? What kind of hand is Bush playing?

Perhaps his paintings smile for him. The smile is a curve that tends away from the ground, against gravity. The clouds

sometimes smile in Bush's paintings. In *Looking for a prospect* the wry grin that should be on the traveller has been transposed into the distance, in the pink twist of cloud that dangles between sky, people, rock and ground. The very sour nude planted in the foreground of *The nature of bar painting* (1988) is held in an amused space by the tiny lumberjacks suspended in a different plane to the tree. Clearly there is some kind of return of the repressed occurring in Bush's paintings and this reinforces the essential nature of the smile in what the artist is doing. Yet it doesn't resolve the question of why this smile is repressed initially.

So why does Stephen Bush decide to play the straightman when the opportunity is there to plunder the seriousness of the genre for almost all that it is worth? Where does the restraining hand come from that leaves the shop windows unsmashed?

History repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce. According to the logic that Marx described in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Bush should be laughing. Taking on the costumes of another age, Bush is there to mock the distance of history by reproducing it in his own image. So what accounts for the serious demeanour of the mocker? Let me suggest three reasons:

First, Bush is concerned with the serious consequences of the history whose clothes he has donned. He is particularly

aware of the exploitative nature of the Western hero's military conquest of the landscape. This is not something to laugh about. Rather, the strategy is to lesson the authority of history by easefully reproducing its dramas without official license. Bush is seeking simply to wear history down by use – whereas mockery implicitly reinforces the authority of its object.

Second, to have the figure of Bush smiling changes the reference in the work to the self-aware cleverness of the artist. The smile would act as a flourish of the cape as the artist bows to the audience in appreciation of his own virtuosity. This would put Bush in the position of being an actor on the stage of history, rather than the people who momentarily take their place.

Third, Bush is registering misgivings about the supposed liberating potential of the people's triumph. Since the people's revolutions of the late eighties, we have witnessed the revival of militarism and nationalism. People by their nature cannot maintain their place on the stage: no organisation can emerge when everyone is the same. People will only stay long enough to have their photos taken and then they will quickly return to the comfort of their seats.

Bush has made the impossible possible: people hold their place on the stage of history. Either I am sad that this remains an impossibility, or I am hopeful that the possibility expressed in art might open other ways into the world.

BY JULIANA ENGBERG

Carnival Time.

Myth, Democracy and the Dirtfarmer

Has there ever been, in our collective and selective memories, a time that has so galvanized and brought into focus the disparity between history, reality, truth and the media? When the Gulf Crisis turned into a full blown Storm of War, and we were forced into partnership at breakfast and dinner, with prime-time, blow-by-blow coverage of events, we were given ringside seats to a spectacular display of hype and artillery show-off, designed to enthral, rather than inform, a captive audience. A masquerade.

Meditations on the notion of the historical spectacle created by this all pervasive system of 'truth, justice and the comics', are central to Stephen Bush's transvestite histories. These pictorial histories, with their quirky collection of dressed-up characters: Buffalo Bill, frontiersmen, mutant potatoes, and the constant presence of artist as mask, create a pageant of enquiry about the collective assumptions.

Bush interweaves a parable of the Wild West, the Land, popular culture and History to lay before us questions about the origins of truth. The ploys he manifests: the frame, the backdrop, the narrative, the archive, are the tools of both media and art history and the circus. They are most certainly the hallmark devices of the news editor as well as the history painter.

Bush co-opts the North American Wild West as a means by which Imperialisms can be excavated and exorcised in the earlier works like *Mythmaker* and *Dirtfarmer*. Questions about democracy and truth are ploughed in metamorphic fields of potatoes.

Mythmaker and *Dirtfarmer* expose most clearly the mediating experience of popular media which Bush combines with art historical foibles and references. The use of sepia, tonal painting evokes the historical document, photographic evidence, the news shot, the unfinished (therefore even more authentic..in process) portrait, the museum artifact and of course the television image which clarifies history in its making and re-telling over 20 prime-time minutes. And it probably refers in a stylistic way to artist and illustrator Frederick Remington, fabricator of the West and self-styled chronicler of events true and false. *Mythmaker* is a portrait of Buffalo Bill, the quintessential ring master.

It has been said of Cody that he was able to see an aspect of life in his own time as romantic and historic while making no

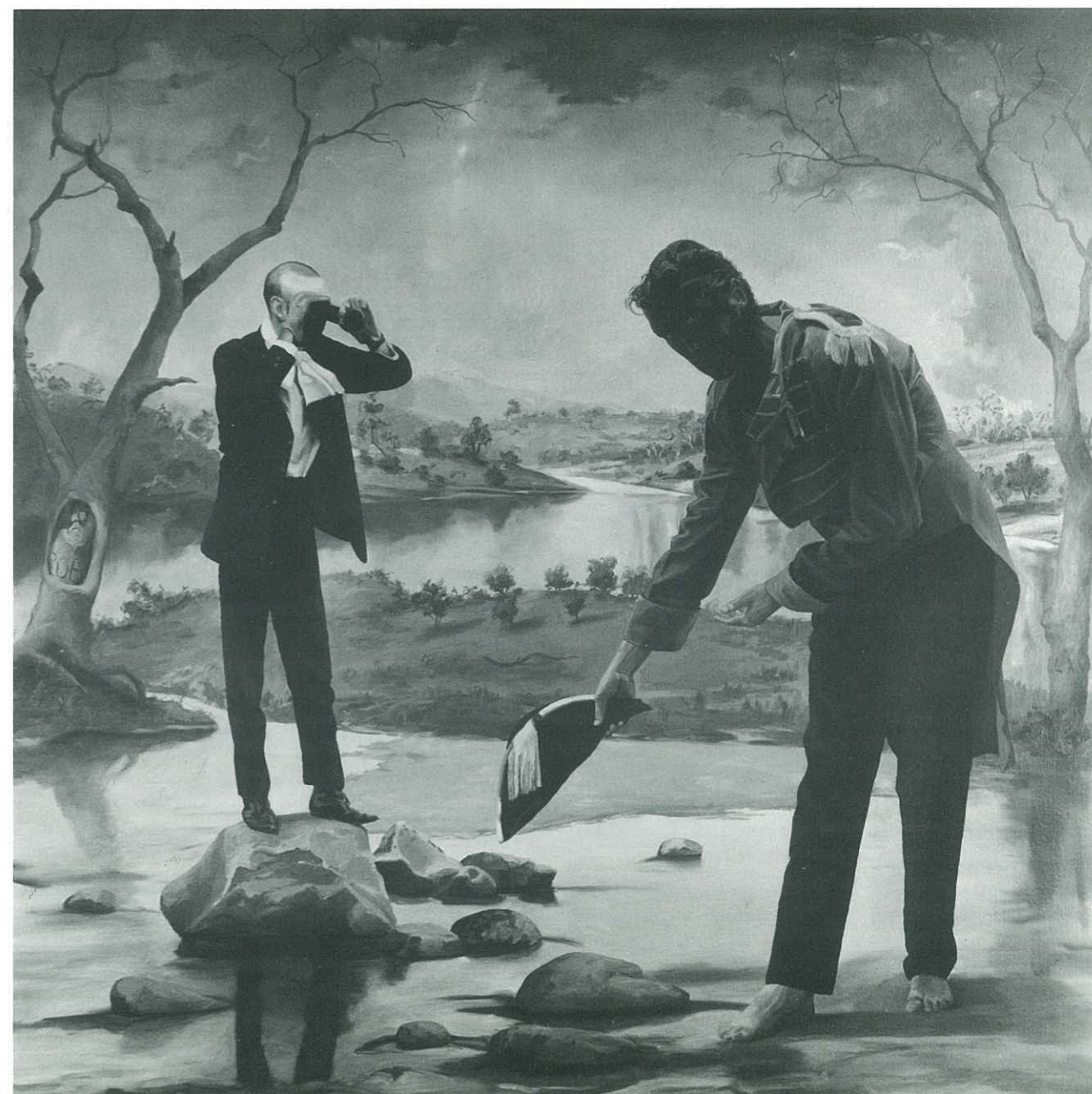
effort to authenticate this appreciation. Indeed Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, which had enormous impact on the imperial audience at Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1886 conjured up a reality that was entirely hinged upon the spectacular, the oddity and the invented. Sharp-shooters like 'Little Sure Shot' Annie Oakley, and the 'Rough Riders' provided Victorian England with their own Gulf media display. This was how the west was won. Chief Sitting Bull provided evidence of the tamed savage won over to another way.

Like his nemesis Cody, Bush places romance and history one on top of the other in layers of meaning, each one codifying the next. For Cody, the process was to render the truth partisan and push the romance forward. For Bush it is an act of transparency – a type of X-ray vision which exposes the fractures under the costumes.

Bush's mutant – in the sense that they are enlarged beyond factual comprehension – potatoes inject a carnivalesque element into his programme. Operating as a parody of democracy – the eyes (ayes) have it – Bush's pontiacs allude to the dirtfarmer ethos which underlies our perpetual and paternalistic imperialism. The extent to which we believe in home-grown philosophies and planning for the future through cultivation, be it on home turf or foreign soil, is exposed as so much Rooseveltian rhetoric. Gross, deformed even, these potatoes take on a fascinating dimension of solidness. Like Buffalo Bill himself, *Roseanne*, or *America's Favourite Home Videos*, these potatoes become larger than life, somewhat deranged, until they force life to resemble them.

Bush renders these aberrant vegetables snap frozen, like his *Mythmaker*. These are the potatoes of a false democratic persistence, they are imperial hostages, cargo and ethnic artifacts. Like Cody, they are without authenticated origins. The potatoes, like many of the characters in Stephen Bush's work, are costumed for the pantomime of spectacle. They become the metaphors of a narrative which will force us to see past the rhetorical and art historical gestures in Bush's work. They push us to question whether our suspension of disbelief can sustain the knowledge of all our unauthenticated media accounts of history.

(New York, January, 1991)



(6) *The promise – the inevitable disappointment* (1989)

oil on canvas, 183.0 x 183.0 cm, J. L. Stewart collection

Biography.

Born 1958 Colac, Victoria
lives in Melbourne

1976 – 1979 Studied B.A. (Fine Art), Royal Melbourne Institute of
Technology

1984 Extended travel throughout the United States

1990 United States, brief visit

Stephen Bush has exhibited regularly in solo and group exhi-
bitions at Powell Street Gallery since 1982.

Selected Group Exhibitions.

1980 Cairns Purchase Award

1981 *Emerging Painters* R.M.I.T. Gallery, Melbourne

1985 *Contemporary Victorian Views*, Regional Touring Exhibition

1986 *Fears and Scruples*, University Gallery, The University of
Melbourne

1987 *Large Paintings From Artbank*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery,
Sydney

Quiddity, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne and Contem-
porary Art Centre of South Australia

1988 *Artisans: Collaboration/Installation* with Geoff Lowe,
George Paton Gallery, Melbourne

9X5 – The Wilderness Society Exhibition, Linden Gallery,
Melbourne

Stephen Bush and Janet Burchill, The Lewers Bequest and
Penrith Regional Art Gallery and 200 Gertrude Street Gallery

1990 *Artists Against Animal Experimentation*, Deutscher
Brunswick Street, Melbourne

Anonymous, West Melbourne

Selected Influences.

1958-1976 The farm, 'Pennyroyal', Western District, Victoria. The
Methodist Church

1976 Art School

Music: Captain Beefheart, Rose Maddox, Clifton Chenier, The
Seldom Scene, The Gun Club, Tom Verlaine, The Saints, The Go-
Betweens, Sacred Cowboys, The Moodists, R.E.M., The del
Fuegos, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, Replacements,
Camper van Beethoven.

Clothing: 14 Western Boots, 27 Western shirts, 4 Western belts

Selected Bibliography.

Naomi Cass, *Fears and Scruples* (Catalogue) University Gallery,
The University of Melbourne, 1986

Gary Catalano, 'Questioning Conventions' *The Age* 22 April 1987

Louise Neri, *Quiddity (A Still Life Exhibition)* (catalogue) 200
Gertrude Street Gallery 1987

Robert Rooney 'Into the essence of Quiddity' *The Australian* 4
July 1987

Peter Cripps *Stephen Bush and Janet Burchill* (catalogue) The
Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, 1988

Robert Rooney 'East is east and west is best', *The Australian* 17
September 1988

Brenda Ludeman, 'The monochrome paintings of Stephen Bush'
Art & Text, No.31, 1989

Juliana Engberg, 'Going Bush' *Agenda Magazine* No.9, December
1989

Collections.

Art Bank, Sydney; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne;
Warrnambool Art Gallery, Warrnambool; Vitrex Camden
Collection, Melbourne; Budget Transport Industries "Young
Australians" Collection, Melbourne; Footscray C.A.E., Footscray;
Monash University Collection; Australian National Gallery,
Canberra.

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
Melbourne.

Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia,
Adelaide.

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art,
Connecticut, USA.