

## LANGSCAPES\*

**Peter Daverington**  
**Alex Gibson**  
**Bernhard Sachs**

**Curated by Kirsten Rann**

**June 27 – July 18, 2009**

This exhibition takes the viewer through place, space and time; from the colonial to the post-colonial, or post-modern, to the 'altermodern'<sup>1</sup>. Unusually, however, the basis of this journey is reliant on strategies one normally associates with the production and viewing of the 'pictorial' than those deployed in the environmental/experiential practices one is more likely to see at Conical, though relationships to the space are consciously included.

Initially, and intentionally, the works could appear to belong to nationalistic discourses in which many an attempt has been made to define 'Australian Art'. More often than not, these have centred on descriptions/depictions of 'The Australian Landscape': from tales of the heroic deaths of Burke and Wills to stories like Patrick White's *Voss* – who all perished in the vastness of the Australian landscape – and from romantic paintings by artists like Louis Buvelot, Tom Roberts, Eugene Von Guerard and Hans Heyson to the more cerebral, modernist representations by Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker and so on. Such works form the basis of a canon, an historically developed hierarchy that legitimizes a particular historical narrative but which is ultimately – particularly for a colony, such as Australia – a defence of necessity, and for which culture provides a powerful sanction.

Developed at the beginning of the 21st century, however, a time of expansive 'global' awareness through travel, migration and the ease of access to information and communication, the works in this exhibition attempt to open the possibility for new forms of representation by using Landscape as a language with which to seduce, critique and entertain the viewer while also questioning, subverting or repudiating the canon to provoke new narratives.

Hence the title, *LANGSCAPE*, a combination of the two words – language and landscape – found in James Joyce's novel *Finnegan's Wake*<sup>2</sup>; a writer who attempts to escape and subvert dictatorial and authoritative modes during the British-Irish conflict – from both sides – Joyce writes "in the English language and also against the English language" to force "the reader to pay attention to the various genealogies of words and their functions..."<sup>3</sup>

Operating on a similar level, these artists' works play with and against the tradition of Landscape. While two 'quote', or 'appropriate', iconic 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings respectively, forcing the viewer to 'pay attention to the various genealogies of (the paintings) and their functions' at the time of production, others avoid the canon and are produced from the artists' own resources, forging new relations between multiple formats of expression and communication.

"A refusal of the canon is not a repudiation of order; it is a repudiation of a coercive order."<sup>4</sup>

This articulates the methodology underpinning Sachs' work *Mytho-Poetic Federation Painting: Tower Hill – Renunciation Project towards Aesthetic Cleansing – Colour Theory* 2001. We were supposed to be celebrating 100 years of 'Federation' in 2001, but it was a dark year for Australians and our international identity, particularly after Tampa, the "children overboard", the refusal to say "sorry" to our indigenous inhabitants and the brutal treatment of refugees in detention centres. As Sachs has said: "Federation Centenary monumentalised national disgrace"<sup>5</sup>. His reference to Eugene von Guerard's *Tower Hill* 1855, a sanctioned cultural (and colonial) icon, was an action against this; the gridded sheets of A4 paper are hand-painted in brown pigments – labelled with traditional or made-up names, such as "Sheryl White" or "Red Oxide of Koroit", a form of (post) "colonial sarcasm"<sup>6</sup> – to resemble human excrement, referencing a triple act of 'smearing': his own (painting) technique is aligned with that of the protesting IRA prisoners detained in H-Block of Long Kesh Prison in Northern Ireland plus the Howard governments' 'smear' campaign towards boat people. Articles on all of these issues form part of the work.

Daverington's *Ascending into the Light – After Hans Heysen* 2009, references Hans Heyson's *Droving into the Light* 1914-1921. Interestingly, in opposition to the damage rendered on the landscape by human action, Daverington removes drover and sheep and inserts a series of ascending/descending mirrored shards at the base of the work. This intensifies the viewers' perception of tall, strong trees and landscape as they are doubled through reflection. While on the one hand this is a celebration of nature, the reflective, fragmented shards present nature as it is increasingly observed – in, or as, the virtual. Daverington's use of the word *Ascending* in his title also gives it a religious overtone; replacing drover and sheep (a symbol of 'man' conquering nature) with the fragmented mirrored shards could also serve to shatter Heyson's religious attitude towards Australian light and undermine the romantic nationalism attributed to this particular work.

His *Imprisoned Landscape* 2008, on the other hand, presents a generic romantic landscape trapped inside interlocking elements of a gridded, architectural structure. This refers to the way that land is not only being imposed upon but destroyed by development, and, ultimately, architecture (also implied in the above work). These structural elements also act like a window, or a screen, referencing the way we increasingly interact with the land, which is objectified and 'consumed' – as entertainment – through car, bus or train windows or a television or computer screen (and hence his reference to an autocad-like aesthetic in both works). But it could also reference a framed work in a gallery, and thence – as the notion of it being 'imprisoned' implies – his work also critiques the objectification of landscape in art...

Gibson's DVD, *The Absence of an Horizon* 2009, not complete at the time of writing, contains virtual 3D models of Conical – from inside and out. In the latter, a fictional Conical is surrounded by an empty, imaginary urban 'landscape' that disappears into an horizon and becomes sky. As we observe the building, with clouds passing overhead, the contemplative nature of the work subtly undermines our thoughts. Lacking a geographical location, it creates a psychological space; though it looks 'real', there is no reality, or reference, behind it. But does it matter? Similar to Daverington's generic *Imprisoned landscape*, it presents a possible world, one viewed through a screen. Ultimately, however, it is a mathematical space; like *Second Life* and other 3D virtual worlds, it is "100% culture"<sup>7</sup>. While this exposes the notion of 'landscape' as a conceptual construct, it opens the possibility for understanding our existence in another space-time continuum.

So, if we begin with Sachs' 2001 painting installation and shift across the gallery to Daverington's paintings and then to Gibson's 2009 DVD, we travel through (s)p(l)ace and time – from the post-colonial to the altermodern, as defined by Bourriaud: "Altermodern art is .. read as a hypertext; artists translate and transcode information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history. This gives rise to practices which might be referred to as 'time-specific', in response to the 'site-specific' work of the 1960s... Our universe becomes a territory all dimensions of which may be travelled both in time and space."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Altermodern Manifesto*, Tate Triennale 2009 [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm) <sup>2</sup> Joyce, James, *Finnegan's Wake*, Penguin Classics, Great Britain, 2000, p.595 <sup>3</sup> Deane, Seamus, Introduction to *Finnegan's Wake*, *ibid.*, p. viii <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. xiii <sup>5</sup> Sachs, Bernhard, see 'Afterword' on 2001 Ocular Lab media release (on wall near his work) <sup>6</sup> Sachs, Bernhard, discussion with the author, May 2009 <sup>7</sup> Gibson, Alex, discussion with the author, June 2009 <sup>8</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Altermodern Manifesto*, Tate Triennale 2009, [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm)

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