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The Australian Rangeland Society

NEW WORLDS FROM OLD; CORCORAN

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“New Worlds From Old” is an exhibition which I feel I willed into existence because I felt very strongly for some years that I would really like to see some of my favorite artists from the 19th alongside each other.. I have followed this exhibition since its genesis, having discussions at various points with Andrew Sayers and pouring over the story- boards comparing images from the United States and Australia. I was fortunate to see the exhibition at each of its venues in Australia and most recently, last September at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. I am delighted to see it here once again, the different venue and hanging revealing hidden truths about the works.....

It was seeing the exhibition here in the USA which really brought home to me the realisation that these paintings are all really about respective cultures defining themselves in large part through landscape. An Australian writer, Martin Flannery, last year posed the following rhetorical question in response to the Pauline Hanson disgrace, “What is it that Australians ultimately have in common? Landscape”. It was only when I drove through the mountains of Umbria, Italy that I understood that the backgrounds of Fra Angelica’s praedellas and Piera della Francesca frescoes, were actually landscape depictions. They were strange depictions to me but utterly familiar to those Umbrians who visited their own churches and saw such works hanging there. The realisation struck me driving up from Connecticut through the forests on the verge of Fall, past West Rock , New Haven, that I could suddenly see

*Frederic Edwin Church’s hand, his artistry if one likes, in “West Rock, New Haven” 1849,

I could see the peripateia, the break in the dramatic action or the act of intervention on the part of the artist. It is apparent that once one views the landscape Frederic Edwin Church was depicting, that it is a mimetic landscape but more than that it is loaded with meaning which to my eyes is not immediately apparent but may well have been more than apparent to someone of Church’s period or someone who lived in that region.

The same is true of course of the Australian material and I was discussing this with my husband as we drove through Hartford. He told me the thing that has always bothered him about

*Tom Roberts “ A Breakaway”

is, (and he is pastoralist with about 10,000 sheep), that he feels sure this painting must be an allegory for something which was occurring politically or locally at the time because Roberts’ should have known enough he feels, to realise that a stockman bringing sheep to water during a drought would halt them some kilometres from water and split them into smaller mobs. Also he would not bother, once they did get away and start to break, to try to block them because they are bound to slip around you.

Second settler Australians, as distinct from the first settlers, the aboriginal Australians who came 40,000 years ago, are acutely aware of their need to establish an identity and forge a spiritual connection with the land. Looking at how comparative cultures handled colonisation and their reading of their new land is a vital part of closing the chapter of history associated with imperialism and colonialism. I am also aware that this exhibition could really have been far more comparative because the art and experience of second colonists in Canada, Mexico and the Americas bears strong similarities. I was struck recently when I saw an exhibition of maps and vistas from the colonial period in Mexico city at the Franz Mayer Museum, that Jose Maria Velasco’s painting, “Valle de Mexico” of 1875 could well be

*Eugene von Guerard’s; “Tower Hill” of 1855

complete with the elliptical expanses of water cradled by volcanic landscapes, the high and distant horizon line and figures in the foreground, in the Australian image, aboriginals, shortly to become the victims of genocide and grass trees and other vegetation also on the point of disappearing. Obviously it bears strong parallel with

*Henry Cheever Pratt's "View from Maricopa Mountain near Rio Gila", 1855

with its exotic cacti and distant elliptical patches of green grasses and volcanic peaks.

The Romantic European sublime was actively transferred from Northern Europe to the United States and the work of the Luminists and the Hudson River School bore a direct link with Caspar David Friedrich and other Romantic artists. Similarly there are a few very significant artists who worked within that same sublime tradition in Australia. Unlike their United States counterparts, they were not as interested in Manifest Destiny largely because Australia did not have the capitalists and or the commissioning power. They were also questioning godliness, it seemed.

Eugene Von Guerard and Ludwig Becker two artists both represented in this exhibition, were both German and obviously had a working knowledge of the Northern European Romantic Sublime. Also both had contact with Skinner Prout who had met Charles Darwin when he came to Australia on the Beagle and due to that influence and that of the Melbourne Geological Society, they both of seem to show a more enquiring attitude towards and sympathetic view of their subjects and landscape, especially towards the aboriginals. Also both employed formal devices associated with the Romantic Sublime like shafts of light, elliptical forms, dramatic meteorological events;

* Metoer seen at River darling 10.35pm OCT.11 1860

depicts a scientific phenomenon but also artists like the educated and sensitive Ludwig Becker who died on the Burke and Wills expedition to the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1861, unlike the heroic style of the day as in

*Greig,E.J. 1862 Furthest north; Burke and Wills

* Becker, "Crossing the Terrick Terrick plains" August 29 1860, lacks that quality, in fact the whole parade seems quite strange.

Becker and Piquenit seemed to use their painting as a way to search for a spiritual connectedness with their new land. Becker was old to be going on such a dangerous and demanding expedition and seemed to know his own death was likely. In Becker's watercolour, the camels and men toil through the heat of the night, Becker often painted on the back of his camel despite the long hours and hard work he was forced to endure. The camel assumes a biblical presence in this work and much writing of this time talks of the Nile, Gehenna and Paradise.

*P.E Warburton crossed th Great Sandy Desert in the North of Western Australia and he and his son nearly died of thirst, blindness and here Warburton is strapped to his camel worn out with starvation. Their Afghan guide died of a snake- bite and the son's health never recovered.

*Poor Horrocks,in 1846 painted by S.T. Gill, lying here dying after taking his gun out to take shot at a bird for his collection, misfiring when his camel trod on him causing the gun to discharge in his face.

*Border of the mud desert near desolation Camp, Becker was obviously interested in the effect of refraction caused by dust in the atmosphere, also the vast horizon causing elliptical distortions of the spaces. The camels become like a distant Gothic cathedral in the mirage on the horizon watched by the primitive dingo or Australian wild dog, strange demon birds, emus streak across the middle ground.

*Reconstructed Narrative: Strzelecki Desert

I imagined Becker struggling over the interminable red sand dunes and seeing in the distance in the mirage the stainless steel gas refinery with its sci-fi chimneys and weird emissions.

*Fata Morgana, the queen of the faeries, the queen of trick and illusion, lead many explorers on in a vain search for the allusive inland sea.

Sturt similarly when he laboured through the desert saw it as a search for the inland sea and running through his journals are references to the sea, "we were lonely as a ship at sea and as a navigator seeking land" 26 aug 1845

* alone, alone, all all alone

*Sturt's spiritual and real life quests strike strong resonances with Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; and once again, "No Voice but Oh! the silence sank like music on my heart"

The bitter disappointment discovering the horror vacui of the inland, the seemingly impassable barrier of the vast, dry salt or shallow mud expanses defeated many explorers and they joined the league of those who discovered nothing.

*EC Frome, "First view of the salt desert called lake Torrens" 1843 and ST Gill on the 1846 Horrocks expedition also encountering Lake Frome was expressed in the sublime, not only within the journals which now often seem the major legacy of many explorers, but often the imagery.

* FINI

*Oblivion Sadak in search of the waters of Oblivion, John Martin 1812

* Oblivion

The Spanish first exploring north into America heard myths that an inland sea existed and associated it with wealth and luxuries. Similarly in Australia Aboriginal Australians waded on the European explorers who little understood that the frame of reference the aboriginals cast when they talked of the inland sea was

*40,000 years old. Early Cretaceous map

* Lake Eyre

As late as 1861, the surveyor and explorer Mitchell believed he had discovered

*an Eldorado, a river leading to all the wealth of India and named it after Queen Victoria, it turned out later to be the

* Soon to be peopled by civilised inhabitants, my painting

*Barcoo which flows into the Cooper Creek, the same Creek where Burke and Wills were later to perish.

*Transcendent Failure in the secular realm leads to

* apotheosis at the national spiritual level, Ross Gibson

Australian exploration is often more a sum of explorers who found nothing and as Geoffrey Dutton wrote in his biography of Eyre, The hero as murderer, often the only bi-product of exploration was

*Impetuous vain glory

At least the Ludwig Becker left a sensitive and tangible legacy in his meticulous watercolours and notations. He used gum arabic to glaze them which would indicate that he maybe planned to work them up to larger paintings eventually which in my own way has been a task I have carried on in the past 8 years, revisiting his sites and painting from my drawings. His whole sense of order and of the importance of things changed, he painted a kangaroo tick and the sole of Dick, the aboriginal guide's foot with as much care as his beautiful painting of the absolute blank of his last camp. There was no depiction of false heroes or belief in Manifest Destiny.

* Koonenberri Range

*Goninberri ranges, in this version Becker depicts the range as a landscape within the conventions of European pictorialism but with new Australian colours and the rough, bare, foreground of the landscape as it really is, avoiding the conventional sinking European pastoral repoussoir .

*Morendo

His last camp

*Camp on the edge of the Earthy or mud plains 40 miles from Duroadoo 1861, Becker

similarly shuns all such conventions and captures the truly sublime bleakness

*Bulloo overflow

*The dingo fence- Maxi the grader driver

who maintains the fence, so hot the candles were bending in front of our eyes, we met the bloke patrolling the dingo fence on Boxing day and he had shot a dingo that morning but not actually seen anyone over Christmas. He said he went out there for solitude, but had not expected it to be quite so lonely!

*near Becker's grave (slide with goanna on post)

FLOOR TALK

The other artist I have a strong interest in and who employed the Romantic Sublime was Piguénit, however rather than bringing the Sublime from Europe, he was the first Australian born artist of note. The text in my work and the numbering is not only a reference to Ludwig Becker but also Piguénit, a common practice in its day but for me a tool to represent the human voice in my painting. The mere act of painting in its anachronistic form is of course a fundamental expression of the interaction of people with the landscape but the text is used to make particular reference to a period of colonial appropriation of that landscape not only through the Eurocentric practices of naming, mapping but the pictorial conventions employed to read that land.

W.C.Piguénit; Flood on the Darling, 1890 painted 1895

During the symposium on New Worlds from Old, at the NGA, we heard several different view points on Flood on the Darling , Andrew Sayers talked about the difference of a land with water and one without and described the open visual pathway into this canvas which he said makes it a landscape of contemplation.

Elisabeth Johns from the Wadsworth, talked about the destructive force of nature and compared it with Meeker's , The Land of Evangeline, 1874 canvas of lurking threat looking more like the Amazon, I imagine than Louisiana Bayou Country . The catalogue of course talks about the Swamp in 19th century art being redolent of Mournfulness

And indeed melancholy was a strong component in Australian landscape painting also but I really feel Piguénit's agenda was quite different to Beth and Andrew's readings; rather like my husband's reading of " The Breakaway" or my knowing that West Rock has a subtext not immediately obvious to me.

Besides being interested in the aesthetics of this work, the thing that really interests me about it, is that this is one of the few Australian works which like its United States counterparts is a political work dealing with Issues of National Identity and political advocacy. In fact very much like works made by Cole and Bierstadt who now are associated with the Manifest Destiny movement.

Other artists and writers were also tackling the same issues as Piguénit in the late 1890's; our most famous writer and poet, Henry Lawson had been commissioned to write for the Sydney morning herald around issues of the Shearer's strike and the Depression. He also wrote about the flood urging, "Let us irrigate" and as Tim Bonyhady who has also been over to talk in the States while New Worlds has been touring, pointed out in 1995, also in the SMH, Piguénit was one of many people calling for locks on the Darling and for irrigation to commence. A long drought had run from 1895 to 1903 and when the flood occurred, a strong lobby swung into action in NSW urging irrigation.

Gilbert Parker, writing in "Round the Compass in Australia", pub. 1892, said "I had been travelling with the Royal Commission whose duty it was to make inquiry into the question of Water conservation, the party consisted of J.B. Donkin, F.B. Gipps, the secretary, 2 reporter, a photographer (whom I assume must be have been Charles Bayliss) and they were embarked on the Paddle steamer "Florence Annie" for a 3 week journey down the Darling.

"Anyone who has seen this (the Flood) could understand better Heffner's picture Desolation, a flood of endless vista washing the feet of the colossi ;and overall ,a glowing amber tone. But this is Australia, and not Egypt and this is a new country, not an old one. Yet sitting alone in this groundless grassless forest, he who watches the scenery might fancy the Genius of the Land exclaiming upon its deformity: "Sent before my time into this breathing.world, scarce half made up"

Over the past 10 years I have been working as I told you in the first part of this talk, on ideas of the Inland Sea in Australia and essentially explorers' failed or thwarted visions which often were a close counterpart to the U.S. ethos of Manifest Destiny. In 1991 I had completed a series of works about Lake Mungo , when I read an article in one of the weekend magazines about how the whole Willandra lakes system and NW division was threatened environmentally by unregulated levee banks and pumping. The main culprits seemed to be cotton growers. Aboriginal elders and inhabitants of the region claimed that not only the ecology of the rivers was threatened but specifically, the redgums so integral to their own connection with that land.

I worked and researched around Narrabri , Wee Waa and Mooree and in my investigations I studied Piguénit's drawings in the Mitchell library and there in his thumbnail , yellowed sketches of Mt Gunderbooka ranges, Narrabri and the landscape between there and Bourke were the thumbnails for Flood on the Darling . They continue to inform my work now as do 'Flood on the Darling "and a number of other paintings Piguénit made of the Darling. I saw a Piguénit in a private collection, 3 years ago and whether my extreme interest or not prompted it, now it is on loan to the Sydney Club . It is a smaller painting and more direct than this and to my pleasure has Brolgas in the foreground, The clumps of Coolibah and redgum are closer to the front of the picture frame; I found it less grandiose than this painting, more about the environment than a grand social vision which is what this canvas represents to me now in the late 20th century. My husband's great grandfather was H.C. McMaster, chairman of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the NW division which later led to the

development of the Western Lands Board. When he wrote about the social and environmental problems of the N.W. division in 1890 he could have been writing about now. One difference is that now many people see floods as essential and restorative environmentally. Now people argue for environmental flows and the cotton lobby are fighting hard to have any credibility at all as they make the river run backwards with breaches of pumping regulations.

It would appear that the Flood was an irresistible subject for Piguénit and quoting from the Tasmanian Museum and Art gallery catalogue of W.C. Piguénit,
“One of Piguénit’s nephews spent several years in the Darling country, suffering first from too little rain and then too much. During the drought of 1883-84, the station where he worked lost more than 90,000 sheep. During the floods of 1890, his property escaped inundation but the rain destroyed all his tobacco crop and most of his maize”

also Piguénit’s brother in law , Gerald Halligan, had just before the floods been surveying the Darling country in order to set up a water- conservation and irrigation system. Hence Piguénit became a strong advocate of water conservation and after making sketches of the floods in 1890 he returned to the subject in 1895 when he painted Flood on the Darling. He was really making a piece of strong political advocacy.

Possibly he was well aware of the part artists had played in the Manifest Destiny move in the U.S and saw this as a worthy cause for his art. Du Faur who had organised Piguénit’s earlier expedition to the Grose valley, also organised a trip to the U.S so Australian photographers could see what all the fuss over Manifest Destiny was about. They came back fairly unimpressed with the work but not with Yosemite Valley.

The NGA catalogue for new Worlds from old, quotes a strange definition of Flood on the Darling,, in the Daily Telegraph of the time, mentioning hills and mangroves which of course are not part of that landscape and also no signs of life, silent desolation. This is an attitude which has given rise to the idea that flood water is wasted water and a threat to man’s endeavours.

Our property 150kms NW of Bourke up near Hungerford, where you saw us having Christmas with the rest of the town, currently has 2 native title claims over it and one of them is clearly demonstrates aboriginal understanding of that land and how the second colonists failed to read that same landscape. This claim runs from Lightning Ridge to the east along all the red, high country. Around the Darling the flood plains are all the black soil and to move across it, even now, in the time of floods we go on the red land. This claim follows a route from Yantabulla just north west of our place, to ceremonial grounds at Mootawingie. The same place Becker paints in New Worlds from Old, called Mutwangie. Shaped stones imported into this landscape were used as markers through a landscape where direction is difficult to find. The surveyors followed no such reading of the land, carving it up across land-systems. Current day pastoralists are only now fully realizing how to manage to their benefit the cycle of dry and wet and red and black soil. Last year when the most recent big floods came down, we knew the water was a day or so away because first a deafening chorus of frogs started and the following day all the water birds started arriving. Once again not a scene of desolation as The article in the Daily Telegraph stated but of burgeoning life. Slowly the water started creeping across the property from the creeks and rivers. It travels faster underground than above and sudden gaping holes happen. One day everything is hot and dry, the next an inland sea. The thought of that water creeping imperceptibly forward, has broken a few good men!. The only way to see the advance is to put a stick in the ground and come back an hour or two later. A beautiful expanse of water like the one in Piguénit’s is deceptive because although it may only be a few centimetres deep, suddenly if you’re riding a motorbike through it or chasing stranded stock on foot , you can fall into a big hole or a raging stream.

The past few years I have been painting the NW division and its environmental mosaic. This resulted in a touring exhibition and publication; Tracts; Back O’ Bourke , an environmental project incorporating short stories, environmental and art essays. Flood on the Darling was a touch -stone for the project. Currently our group are working on a sequel; Watersheds; the Paroo to the Warrego in

which we are looking at the whole land system from the Carnarvon National Park in SW Queensland to the Darling in NSW. This year at the People in the Rangelands session of the International Rangelands Congress in Townsville, I will be talking about this painting there also because it exemplifies the relationship between the ecosystem and the social system in the historical context of second colonist agricultural colonisation.

I often think of my late friend Ian Burn who drowned battling the sea, who asked in a simple essay titled "What use is art history?"; all I can say is that this painting speaks to me besides which it is a wonderful work to contemplate .

Oh and 2 postscripts; in dialogue with Daniel Thomas, a revered Australian Art historian, Daniel said this was the first modernist painting in Australia, because the silver band of light across the horizon cuts the otherwise flattened picture plane created by the reflection of the sky in the water, in half. Incidentally John Rusling Meeker uses a silver band of light in his canvas also but still clings to the Poussinian repoussoir of the framing trees,

And my post script is that I think this was the first painting to accurately capture the immense red inland interior reflected in the clouds as we all see it now when we fly towards the coastline of Australia from Asia. Possibly this was more modernist than Daniel's silver stripe.