

Sense of Place
2003



JAMES H YUNCKEN

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Sense of Place

A Note from the Artist

The Method

When I see a landscape exhibition I usually think of the artist going to some place to paint, sketch or take photographs for use as source materials. There are lots of ways to go about it, but in each case the point is a reference to 'the real thing'. Centuries of artistic wisdom dictate that this is necessary in order to do your subject justice. Failure to heed this wisdom usually shows up as gaps in our knowledge: over simplifications, missing details, lifelessness and just plain old mistakes.

Wisdom or not my landscapes are made up, complete fabrications in every last detail. They are not visions that appeared in my head and that I then transferred to the canvas. It is precisely that sort of active projection that leads to the pitfalls mentioned.

These paintings were constructed according to a process that relies on the passive, but more discerning power of recognition. That's precisely what's operating when you see that something's not right even though you might not be able to say what it is.

If it looks wrong, change it! Sort of natural selection applied to painting. The creative act thereby lies in inventing the sort of accidents that will lead to a successful result: in this case something that resembles reality and satisfies formal painting considerations of composition, etc. To that end the process at a conscious level is more concerned with these things than with issues of message or meaning.

At the outset the end result is unknown and can remain so well into the process. What comes out, however, is anything but arbitrary. It seems to be a sort of amalgam, a patching together of what one 'knows' - passively, is familiar with and something else, something of one's own that imprints on the work as a matter of course.

I have used the words 'Self-generated' in the titles of works as a reminder that these places are not real in any literal sense. The word 'Sense' in the title of the exhibition is intended in the more 'innate' meaning of that word.

The Meaning

So much for the method, what about this 'imprint'? How to read these paintings? 'Oils is oils' and 'landscapes is landscapes', but these ones are fabrications in every last detail. As I worked on them I had very grave doubts. Fanciful pictures of 'Austraya': trying to give the appearance of reality while studiously avoiding referring to the real thing seemed foolish, absurd, pointless. Looking at the paintings now it is hard to imagine just how bad they sometimes were along the way and why in the beginning I tried so desperately to counsel myself against the endeavour. I seriously considered giving up.

I listened to the radio as I painted. Matters of importance were discussed by people of consequence who all seemed to know things and be certain of their points of view. Meanwhile I tried to paint what I didn't know and to what purpose? I couldn't even make it clear to myself let alone anyone else. At least the radio distracted me from the temptation to exert the type of mental interference that only seems to get in the way of this painting process. (Think if you had to verbalise every action and consideration involved in driving a car.)

I was exasperated, but I couldn't or wouldn't let go. And then slowly things began to coalesce, to make sense, get easier, finally become easy. Slowly it dawned on me that the 'pictures of Austraya', were really 'pitchers of Australia'.

The Dialogue

The dialogues that accompany each reproduction in this catalogue are the result of conversations, exchange of e-mails between Stephanie Green and myself. They are a distillation of our attempts to draw water from these 'pitchers'. As such they only represent **a way** to look at these works.

For the most part they try to base themselves concretely on the image and not depart too wildly from it. Sometimes such departures do occur: in visions of non-existent sailing ships or men going to Gallipoli. For me, parallel with pleasure, pride and enjoyment there is, beneath these surfaces, a smouldering rage at the present state of our nation. In Stephanie's writings I detect a different emphasis, the issues arising have a different accent.

Pleasure and pain of suffering are companions in art as they are in life. If these works are truly vessels they will bring these ingredients in a way similar to the age old form that we are accustomed to in the theatre: at once distance and involvement. Personal reflection in the object of another's creation. Constrained by it the viewer is nevertheless free to find their own meaning.

JAMES YUNCKEN

From Within: A Dialogue between Stephanie Green and James Yuncken

It's strange to me that these 'fabricated' landscape paintings seem so naturalistic. When I first looked at these works they appeared to me to be observed representations of Australian country we know so well. They look and feel very familiar. So I assumed that you were painting 'real' memories from inside your head, taken from trips you'd made into those areas in the past. But when I talked to you about how you work, I realised that the familiarity I experience before these works comes from somewhere and something else. In part, it comes from my own inner landscape of projected vision and experience. In part it comes from the fact that what I know and call the Australian landscape is in itself a fabrication of immense geographical proportions. To appropriate Paul Carter's well-known analogy, these works evoke the 'lie' of the Australian landscape: a network of overlapping created and disrupted meanings about ourselves and our belonging on this continent.

For me these paintings capture familiar feelings of emptiness and longing about the country where we live. These scenes - paddocks, trees, water-holes, open fields - are all marked by signs of human habitation, but no humans are present and there seems no evidence that they will ever return.

In one sense, the slightly ghostly feel of this exhibition relates to the historical attitude with which non-Indigenous Australians have been taught to regard the land in which they live: with a mix of affection, fear, estrangement, romance, exploitation, loneliness, neglect, attempted conquest and aggression. In another sense, these are paintings about Psyche. The land figures absence and longing. The object of desire is present but unseen. There is a stillness that suggests anticipation: waiting for Eros to arrive.

STEPHANIE GREEN

Self-generated Landscape No 1: Familiar

SG: I've been here before. I feel these very bumps and clods, those tussocks and hollows. Sheep-scarred land. I've walked against the wind that churns the clouds in this sky. So much energy and movement, even the solid earth seems mobile and alive. Palette marks, mere textures, dabs and rows of paint capture this place - so vivid.

JY: Everyone knows this place. Our country, core of our hearts, wide and brown, horizons far, paddocks are thirsty.

The land is not thirsty, hungry, or greedy but pays us back threefold always and in perpetuity. A magic pudding: eat your fill, it never runs out, but be wary of thieves.

From here men went to Gallipoli ...

SG: What can we call 'ours'? Joy in the moment of the image, so recognisable with its open paddock, rich textures and tumultuous sky. Yet I also feel the shadow of my despair. I hear my grandfather's axe echoing across this landscape, an echo that is more than a century old. In that sound rings the narcissism of colonisation. The magic pudding: we've behaved all this time as if the land were an everlasting, always generous mother, however much we took. But the land is vulnerable, needs care. Never take the last bite, drink the last drop.

oil on canvas 86.5 x 86.5 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 2: Open Country

SG: At this moment everything is possible, open country shaped and balanced by overlapping curves. The rise and fall of hills, overarching sky, a trail of leaves floating above and curves always turning, turning away.

JY: Space and the fresh, clear, scented air. A lullaby of happy feelings muffle any awareness of transformation, generations of industry, quietly continuing. This track its outward sign. This moment ours.

SG: The scene seems so tranquil. Every pleasure, every journey can begin from here. Harmonious artifice of nature: this landscape hewn by farmers and labourers who toiled for generations in a slow fever of destruction.

oil on gesso board 76 x 61 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 3: Dam

SG: Depth, light and darkness. I step into the pool. Water touches more than my skin. My heart bathes in cool magic. I lift my limbs, move my body. Water surges and spills onto earth, freed from unwilling stillness and containment.

JY: Sunburnt country. Water's scarce. Farmers build dams. Non-natives need water to survive, to prosper and bear good fruit.

Hot and dry, now and again inundations: water spills from the heavens and in stillness the earth brings forth.

SG: The coursing of the life force captured, dammed up and held to nurture arid ground. This dam, is an artefact of human intervention. Absent of human figures. A body of water, natural occurrence, but this ... perfectly rounded.

Pool of unconscious, depth of desire never fully knowable. Blue play of light on dark surfaces, flood of life.

oil on canvas 92 x 92 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 4: Trees on the Horizon

SG: Sometimes, there's a moment when everything seems clear. Bright skies, all parts of the picture balanced. The top of the rise brushed with green, full of promise. Shall we drink from our flasks, share our food?

JY: Summer with a sky blue enough to swim in. A patch of lush green. Lie on your back, soak up the warmth and stillness. If every day could be like this! The life we want but somehow never quite manage to achieve. How lucky would we be?

SG: Mixed feelings. Something is missing. This paddock feels abandoned.

Relaxed summer day, red earth, warm and inviting. If only we had time! Can you imagine children running across the grass? The fat peace of an afternoon stretched under a tree?

oil on gesso board 76 x 61 cm





Self-generated Landscape No 5: Beyond Vision

SG: Sturdy tree trunks, triangular shapes rising dark and solid, growing slender and mobile as leaves and branches dissolve into sky. A hint of Cézanne, revised. Magic of Psyche.

JY: Unruly bush ... like us. Patches cleared - stuff left lying.

Yes, Cézanne! Structure is high on my list, but observation, I only observed the canvas. Many times I plastered background over foreground. Would he take exception to that?

SG: Structure? Fascinating that your paintings are so abstract in their initial conception. Shape, structure, the balancing of elements. Whereas I always want to find out what the story is, who's talking, what they're saying, what's going on. In this work I love the way technical elements come together. They retain their formalism here, in ways not so obvious in the other works, but still hold the image together strongly. The illusion of the real is here more painterly, more about the process of painting - how, for example, the trees belong to the road. You say you are not an observer, but you have observed closely with the eye of the mind in way that the viewer can follow.

Self-generated Landscape No 6: Windbreak

SG: So many camping holidays I've sat on logs with others around a fire, singing, toasting marshmallows and sharing stories. The warmth of these memories, the sounds of birds at sunset, the bush at night are part of our campfire mythology.

JY: This is just the sort of spot workers might look for, with a couple of ready made benches, a tree to sit under and boil the billy while tucking away morning tea or some lunch. The talk: maybe chewing over the weekend's footy, the weather, the talk-back, a bit of ribbing, nothing too serious. And if it blows there's the windbreak – for what it's worth.

SG: But the fallen log is also part of that emptiness in our hearts. The scars of excess clearing, the abandonment of native forests and animals. The logs, lonely and abandoned, so far apart that we would have to shout. No fireplace here around which to gather. As the trees leave the land, the spirit dies.

oil on canvas 66 x 37.5 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 7: Trail

SG: Animal trail through this earthy expanse. Memories of packed grey-pink earth, the rasp of dry tussocks against the flank of the ute. Waving lines, uneven textures and open yellow paddocks, lean of leaves. The new generation is planting again, a late-learned reparation ...

JY: A chill wind blowing in the weak wintry sun. Expect the odd shower.

Hoof-worn tired beauty, eroded to discordant harmony, the land supports us all. Nearby scraggly trees prosper on scrubby green hills. A curious accord, this picture, the bounty we enjoy.

SG: You write of chill winds, winter sun, rain in the distance. I too see the bleak beauty of pink earth, held together by sparse grasses. Gigantic austerity of sky. The windbreak provides little protection. How can the land withstand our need?

oil on gesso board 76 x 61 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 8: Outcrop

SG: Alpine rocks, saplings struggling out of pale brown land. Trace the ridge.
Follow the high line of country, curving, rising towards the place beyond the horizon.
A gully softened by the last green of rain, shadows. We hesitate to descend and explore.

JY: Struggle among the rocks. Where the horizon begins, the farmland stretches out.
Imagine paddock after flat paddock. In between, old bushland, the river gully slopes
away, untouched - careless debris aside, spared interference by it's steep and stony slopes.
Cultivation and civilisation disappear from view, never far though. Treasure trove,
adventure playground, sometimes haunted.

SG: This difficult country offers the promise of wild plants and animals, survivors of
hard times. Bushwalkers might come here or teenagers escaping parents on a Saturday
night.

A high point to be reached, a patch to climb. A place between.

oil on gesso board 76 x 61 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 9: From Within

SG: Stand of trees, frame within a frame. The eye always moving through, beyond and back again. Path opens onto rocky terrain. Do we linger or trust the open plains? Safety of the hidden or following the lie of the land?

JY: A little rocky peak invites the chance of vista, panorama, unlocking space and distance: sun-warmed rocks, risk of chill wind. The sun dances through leaves and branches of this cosy enclosure, writing oracles at our feet only to be erased by passing clouds.

SG: I'm standing within the forest of the soul, the embrace of trees, protective wood, tempted to give up the effort of the journey. Yet I'm drawn outward, to the sunlit rocks. High country. Yes, sometimes it's necessary to find height and distance - the long view of things. In some Indigenous cultures there are rocks and mountains one is not permitted to climb. Perhaps that is the wisdom of knowing that we cannot know and see everything that lies before us. Even at the vantage point, patterns and obstacles can elude or deceive us. Yet we seem bound to try.

oil on gesso board 81 x 61 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 10: Plantation Forest Road

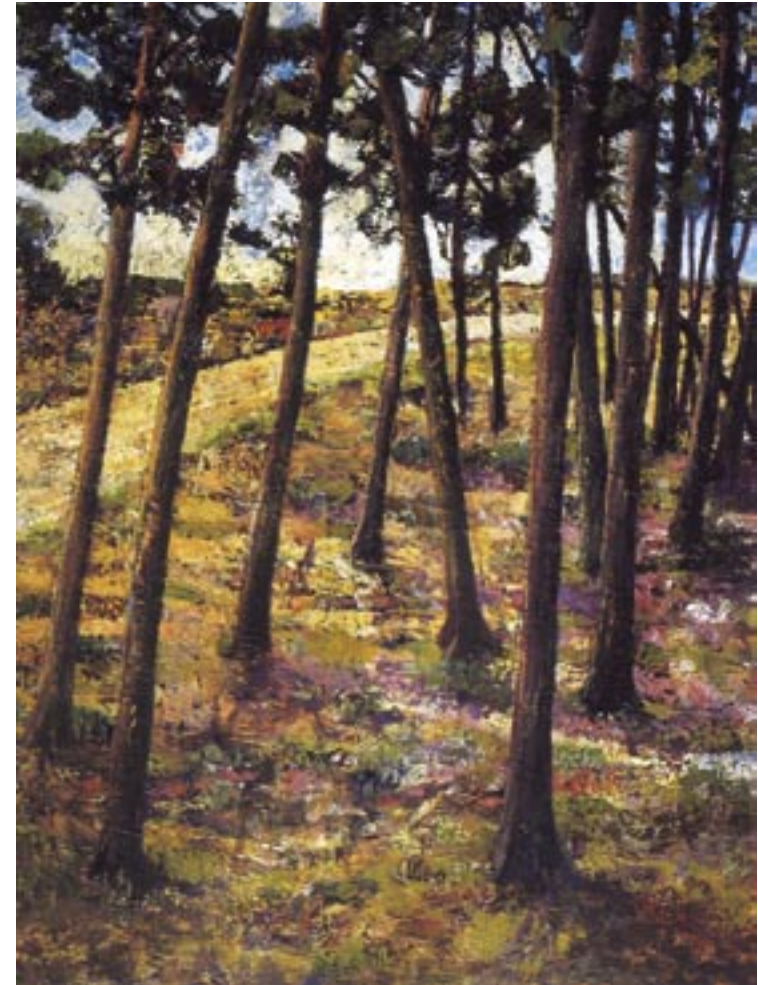
SG: Forest bordered by sunlit road. A temple of darkness, lingering, a hesitation.
We don't know where the road will go - fear of losing direction. The coldness of shadow.

JY: Exotic timbers, a foreign plantation. It works like this: The grower selects and culls, selects and culls again. Eventually the tall straight trunks are harvested, the ground made ready for another cycle. Everything produced is used.

You could easily lose yourself in this sameness. Off road: private property, disorientation, unnatural uniformity. On road: occasional wanderers, timber workers.

SG: What is the poetics of sameness? A rhythm of repetition, sun light scudding between tree trunks in punctuated lines. Cold plantation shadow, vegetative cuckoos sucking up the fertility of the ground until nothing else will grow. False value, our land, our people.

oil on board 81 x 61 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 11: Joy

SG: Water begets water, tears beget tears. The path leads to an unexpected aqua abundance. The joy of sea, sharp and fresh. The squeak and slip of sand and at last the splash of the first step beyond dryness.

The drying leaves of late summer, surrounding curve of hill darkens at sunset. A sudden coolness and the season changes, almost before we have noticed.

JY: There the sea the horizon and the world beyond. A green and shady path. This place once pristine, timeless. Imagine what it was like before the path.

Then ships appear, noise of the men shouting, dropping anchor, furling sails.

Now the holiday sound of footsteps, hats, towels, sunglasses, retracing from this beautiful and secluded spot.

SG: The joy of discovery. We can be only ourselves, curious, playful, greedy. Ancient and modern, always looking to the ocean for news and pleasure, adventure and opportunity. How strange a ship must have looked arriving on our sea shores.

oil on canvas 102 x 81 cm



Self-generated Landscape No 12: Tree

SG: Night falls in a strange homecoming. A storm brewing in the distance? Moonlight whitens leaves, bright movement in darkness. This tree invites you closer. End and beginning: life, knowledge, self, mystery of the other. It grows out of country, heals and restores life, signalling water.

JY: Electric horizon, cool moonlight funks the brain, lights through the branches, a cold inner glow. A slight shudder. Attention! Somewhere in the distance, drama, forces of nature on the march, irresistible, fascinating. Bravely behold the terrible beauty from our distance.

SG: Dynamic destiny. We cannot see what lies before us but this tree comes up out of the dark, pulsing with energy like a warning. Self and country. The energy of the universe charges through dancing leaves, sending shafts of life into the ground. If Psyche can ever come close to her desired Eros, then it's at this moment, when the super-electric dreams of night can bring her to a vision of her desiring self.

oil on board 53.5 x 30 cm



James H Yuncken

ABOUT THE ARTIST

- 1954 Born Melbourne, Australia
- 1986 Began studying drawing privately with Christopher Croft of the Graphic Investigation Department, Canberra School of Art
- 1990 Began to work full-time as an artist

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 'Presence/Absence', SPAN Galleries
- 1999 'Non-objective Representations', *Galerie helengory*
- 1997 'First Steps' Exhibition, *Galerie helengory*
- 1995 Studio Exhibition of Landscape Paintings, Smith Street Studio
- 1992 'Figurative' with Les Peterson and Tanya Myshkin, Studio One Gallery, Canberra
- 1990 Solo exhibition Dorette's Bistro, Canberra
- 1989 Solo exhibition Dorette's Bistro, Canberra

Stephanie Green

ABOUT THE WRITER

Stephanie Green completed a doctorate in English at the University of Western Australia in 1997. Stephanie has worked as an academic, arts administrator and widely published freelance writer of fiction, non-fiction and poetry in academic journals, newspapers and literary magazines. She has won prizes both for her academic teaching and her creative writing, including The Age Short Story Award. She has worked as Education and Acting Manager at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia. She now works for Freemantle Arts Centre Press and lectures for the University of Western Australia Extension Program.