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Unsettling landscape in Australia

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ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.'

Signed 

Date 9/12/2020

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the Dharawal people, the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which I conducted this research, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. I also wish to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the traditional owners and custodians of the land the University of NSW has been built. I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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nature

can

swirl

like

a falling

leaf

sometimes

turning to

butterfly

or bereft on the ground

turning to

dust

Ali Cobby Eckermann[1]

1 From verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (Eckermann 2012, P. 6).

Abstract

This research uses artist case studies to orient the complexities of visual representation of land in Australia and to contribute to contemporary discussion of landscape painting.

Through this research I consider how particular painting methodologies and pictorial representation of landscape using the medium of oil paint can work to deconstruct landscape traditions. This paper will explore the contemporary practices of artists working in the genre of landscape, and how these practices and methodologies can work to change landscape traditions.

My non-indigeneity, my gender, age and sexual orientation are all markers that inform my spatial experience, the way I relate to nature and irrevocably the way I paint land. My relationship to painting land was, at the commencement of this research, challenged after a significantly moving and unsettling encounter with the literary text *Ruby Moonlight* (Magabala Books 2012) written by Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha woman Ali Cobby Eckermann. This literary text functions to collapse my knowing of these spaces I have grown up in and around and heighten awareness of my limited and oriented gaze. It calls to attention my position and simultaneously disrupts this position. *Ruby Moonlight* propelled me to consider how my painting practice can work to disrupt a fixed position, how I can make landscape paintings in Australia that speak to the unsettling duality of these spaces and how my work can contribute to unsettling the historical landscape narrative.

To provide context for the reader and signify the importance of the text to this research, a single poem excerpt from *Ruby Moonlight* will precede each chapter of the paper. This research focuses on the position of unsettlement to look at the implicit colonial politics located in landscape painting in Australia.

The concept of unsettlement is drawn upon in this paper as both a theoretical and methodological framework, through which to confront and critique colonial artistic assumptions and historical frames and lenses operating in the practice of landscape painting in Australia. This research specifically looks at studio methodologies that focus on creating unsettling viewing situations for audiences that scatter, disrupt or dissipate the passive observer gaze, in order to unsettle the landscape narrative.

In the practical component of this research, Ali Cobby Eckermann's verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* is used as a mechanism to generate drawing and painting, and to explore the capacity to disrupt or unsettle the Western visual language and pictorial systems that my practice simultaneously engages with and emerges from.

Silence

the ambiance of the morning is ruined
the stench of death fills the air
love will exist here no more

a young woman sits like rock
staring at her husband and mother
their bodies turned tombstone

arid eyes slit with sand
tears will no longer flow
life is doomed to drought

scrape the images from your eyes
scrape emotion from your heart
never tell a soul

on the setting sun
she turns to the shadows
oh kumuna oh kumunari

kumuna – bereavement names for deceased male family members
kumunari –bereavement names for deceased female family members

Ali Cobby Eckermann[2]

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2 From verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (Eckermann 2012, P. 11).

Chapter 1: Introduction

Landscape painting in Australia is wrought with a turbulent history. Built on a long history of art practices, traditions and theories of representing space and place, landscape painting and its manipulation has been deployed since colonisation, as a strategy to naturalise the settler presence (Mitchell 2002, p. 156). Paul Carter (1987, p. 128) says that landscape painting and the picturesque have been a device used to disguise and to order facts in a way that enables the work of colonialism. Painting landscape in Australia in 2020 comes with implicit complications tied to the genre's history and a relationship to colonialism and imperialism. There are intersecting social and cultural implications arising from the act of painting landscape and a loaded responsibility that comes with any representation of it.[3]

In contemporary Australia, the genre of landscape painting and use of the term 'landscape' when describing the practice, is being reclaimed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists alike. The genre is inevitably tied to its history of an objectified record of the land and an assertion of power. The historical understanding of the term 'landscape' is no longer apt to capture the depth and breadth of the practice, particularly in Indigenous circles. Within this paper, I continue to use the term 'landscape', however a distinction needs to be made between a historical and a contemporary meaning of the term to reflect its changing definition. A contemporary reading of the term refers to the immense scope of practice in the genre – a vastly different field of practice than the 'landscape painting' of a couple of decades ago. Today the genre is far more fluid and cannot be tightly defined.

3 There is a large body of theoretical work in this area including Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2002); *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., edited by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002]); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Expanding the Geographical Imagination* (London: Blackwell, 1996); and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); DeLue, Rachael Ziady, and James Elkins, eds. *Landscape Theory*. Vol. 6, The Art Seminar. New York: Routledge, 2008; Warnke, Martin. *Political Landscape: The Art History of Nature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. Andrews, Malcolm. *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford History of Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Within this paper, and for the purposes of contextualising my practice, the term 'landscape' refers to the pictorial representation of the more inclusive, fluid and contemporary evocation of and response to the feeling of being in the natural environment through pictorial means.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales' Wynne prize for Australian landscape painting can be a useful way of mapping the artistic evolution of the landscape genre in Australian painting. First awarded in 1897, it is Australia's oldest prize and is awarded annually to 'the Australian artist producing the best landscape painting of Australian scenery in oils or watercolours, or, for best production of figure sculpture by an Australian artist' (Wynne 1984 cited in Toft et al. 2010). This long history provides a barometer of evolution of the genre in Australia. The prize is also a clear example of the marked change in terms of what the Art Gallery of NSW board of trustees has recognised and valued in terms of landscape painting.

The increasing inclusion of Indigenous voices in this space is a clear example of the different non-Western pictorial systems that are contributing to the genre today, revolutionising the understanding of landscape painting, and that have been doing so for a number of years.

From information made publicly available by the Art Gallery of NSW website (AGNSW n.d.), it appears that between 1897 and 2015, the Wynne Prize has been awarded to two Indigenous artists: Gloria Petyarre (winner 1999) and George Ward Tjungurrayi (winner 2004). The recent history of the prize has seen a significant shift in the valuing and recognition of Indigenous and Aboriginal voices in this space, with the Wynne Prize awarded to an Aboriginal artist or collective every year since 2016: Sylvia Ken (2019), Yukultji Napangati (2018), Betty Kuntiwa Pumani (2017), and Ken Family Collaborative (2016).

More can be understood of the changing genre, constituted by the Art Gallery of NSW if, rather than focusing on the winners, we consider the exhibitions of selected finalists in the last decade, and the steadily climbing Aboriginal and Indigenous artist representation among the finalists in recent years. In 2016, 3 works out of 24 finalists selected for the Wynne Prize were Indigenous landscape artists. In 2017, 15 of 42 finalists – more than a third – were Indigenous landscape artists. In

2018, 18 of 46 finalists selected for the Wynne Prize were Indigenous landscape artists. The comparatively high Indigenous and Aboriginal representation in the Wynne Prize 2017 and 2018 was paired with devoting the central exhibition space to these Indigenous finalists in the prize, and relocating the prestigious Archibald Prize to the side galleries. This hierarchical repositioning seems to indicate a curatorial intent to make a significant comment on the place of landscape painting and the contemporary voices in this genre producing powerful work. In 2019 the domination of the Wynne prize by Indigenous and Aboriginal artists, with a record of 15 of 29 Wynne Prize finalists or 51% , reflects the diverse painting practices and depictions of the natural environment in contemporary Australian painting and a curatorial intent to value and recognise this diversity.

In Australia, outside of major art prizes painting is an area that has not been given a lot of institutional focus in recent years. Within the last 14 years the only major institutional exhibition dedicated to contemporary Australian painting was Painting. More Painting, presented by ACCA in 2016. Prior to this exhibition the last major contemporary painting exhibition was Tarrawarra Biennial 2006: Parallel Lives – Australian Painting Today in 2006, a decade earlier, at Tarrawarra Museum of Art (Delany 2016 cited in Stephens 2016, para. 3).

Painting. More Painting was presented in two chapters across ACCA's four exhibition spaces and examined the role of painting as a critical practice and the perception of painting in contemporary discourse. The exhibition explored a range of artistic practice that considers the history of painting and the dialogues that exist between contemporary painters (ACCA 2016a).

In order to gain an understanding of landscape practice as it is situated within the canon of painting and as it is perceived within critical and contemporary discourse, it is useful to survey a set of painters representing and depicting landscape who had work included in this curated overview of contemporary Australian painting. The surveyed artists below employ a range of approaches, techniques and methodologies to challenge and unsettle historical frames situated within the painting canon and contribute to contemporary discussion of landscape representations in Australia.

David Jolly is part of a long tradition of painters whose source material is found in analogue and digitally generated photography. *Before history as poem or mythic chant 2* (2009–10) draws on the specificity of time and place. A photographic still taken from Jolly's life is translated and altered through the act of painting the image onto glass (figure 1). Jolly's technique results in the painting being read through the flat, screen-like surface. There is a subtle feeling of unease created through the viewing situation in that the recognisable landscape is perceived back to front (Bryant 2016).

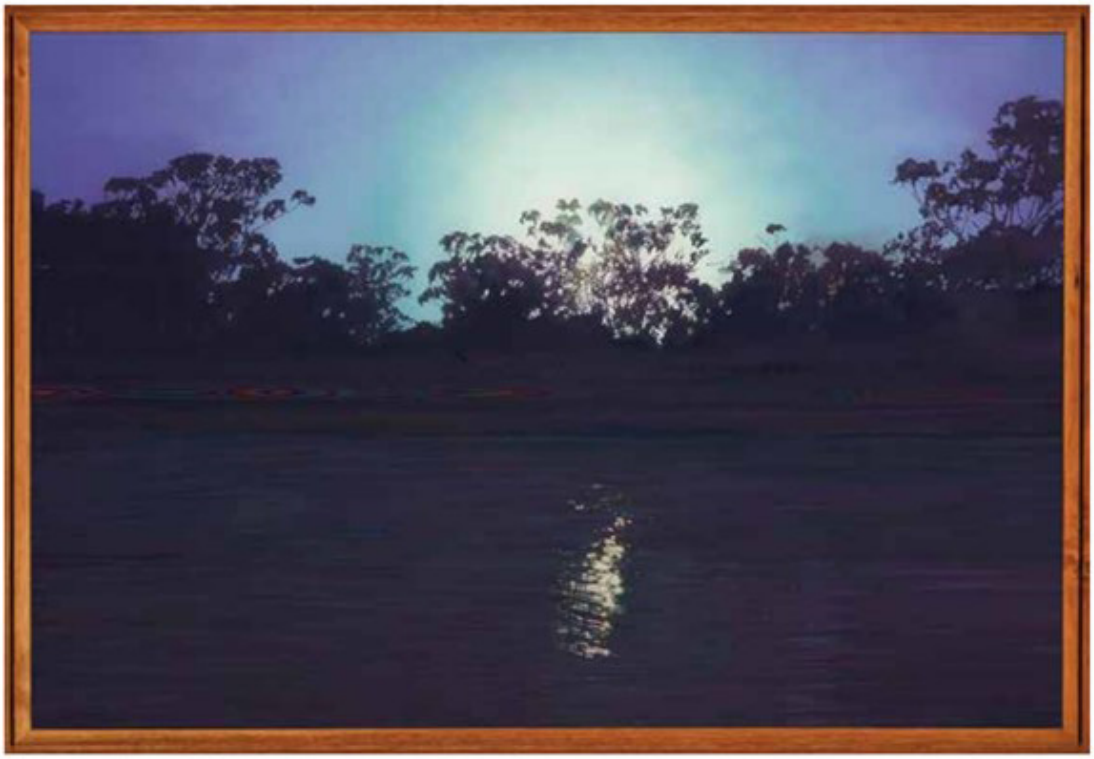

Figure 1. David Jolly *Before history as poem or mythic chant 2* 2009–10, oil on glass, 72 x 56 cm. Image source: https://content.acca.melbourne/uploads/2020/06/Painting.MorePainting-catalogue-lowres.pdf

Daniel Boyd's work confronts the Eurocentric perspectives and narratives embedded in Australia's colonial history. *Untitled (BFK)* (2015) is a monochromatic painting that depicts a waterfall near Giangurra, the coastal area of Boyd's childhood home (figure 2). Characteristic of Boyd's paintings, the image is veiled in transparent dots and the view of country is partial and incomplete, a visual metaphor for the recording of history (AGNSW 2014).

The dot structure invokes the visual power of his Indigenous heritage but also references the idea of pixels commonly found in print and digital media. This aspect underscores the historically grounded nature of his subject matter (Delany 2016 cited in ACCA 2016b, p. 91). Each dot is a transparent lens referencing the idea of the cultural lens. The dark space between the dots or information is an acknowledgment of our limited knowledge and memory of our interactions with the landscape over its entire history. The black 'acts as a metaphor for what binds information and matter' (Boyd 2016 cited in Phaidon 2016, para. 6).

Figure 2. Daniel Boyd *Untitled (BFK)* 2015, oil, charcoal and archival glue on polyester, 183.0 x 137.5 cm. Image source: https://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artwork/daniel-boyd-untitled-bfk-2015/31:4460

Ken Whisson's *Bush recollections with houses and faces* (2013–14) depicts a schematic composition of brightly coloured lines on a white ground, evoking the terrain of bush and sky through raw brushwork (figure 3). Dispersing familiar representations of the landscape within a field of colour and line, patches of vivid colour formulate optical tremors and a shimmering sense

of flux of the environment (AGNSW 2013). This rupturing of the image into parts creates a spatial agitation of colour and line and disperses multiple entry points across the picture plane.

Figure 3. Ken Whisson *Bush recollections with houses and faces* 2013–14, oil on linen, 120 x 100 cm. Image source: https://content.acca.melbourne/uploads/2020/06/Painting.MorePainting-catalogue-lowres.pdf

Wantili to Kinya (2013) created by Martumili artists Nora Wompi, Nora Nungabar and Baugai Whylouter, and completed in collaboration with younger artists from the same community, Marjorie Yates and Ngalangka Nola Taylor, documents through pictorial means, a journey from Wantili (near Parnngurr) to Kinya (near Kunawarritji) through both the physical and spiritual attributes of their ancestral country (figure 4). Topographic references are conceived as 'part of a broader investigation into the spiritual essence and sensual evocation of place' (Berlangier 2016 cited in ACCA 2016b, p. 148). As described by the Martumili artists, 'This painting shouldn't be read as a straight map of waterholes and sandhills, places. We don't join it up like white fellas might. We put it down the way we see it, feel it, know it and that's not in a straight line' (Martumili artists citied in ACCA 2016b, p. 148). The representation of country is through the shared act of painting and knowledge transfer, forming part of the larger conversation of

contemporary artists working to redefine and reclaim the historical understanding of landscape painting.

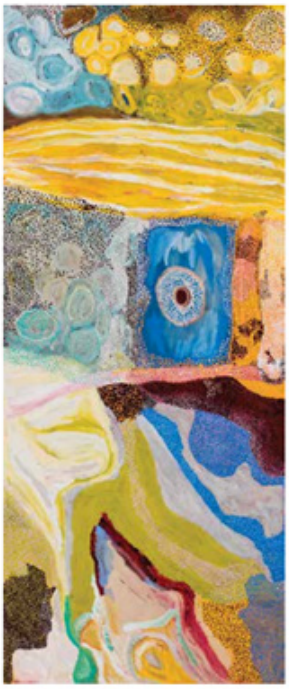

Figure 4. Martumili artists *Wantili to Kinya* 2013, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 300 x 125 cm. Image source: https://content.acca.melbourne/uploads/2020/06/Painting.MorePainting-catalogue-lowres.pdf

Another curated and institutional exhibition that helps chart contemporary and critical landscape practice in Australia is the exhibition partnership between the Art Gallery of NSW, Carriageworks and the MCA – The National: New Australian Art. Presented in three editions (2017, 2019 and 2021), the joint curatorial vision represents the latest ideas and forms in contemporary Australian art and offers an insight into how a current generation of curators are thinking about critical practice and the contemporary context.

The landscape, environmental destruction and a relationship to colonialism emerge as recurring and prevalent themes in both the 2017 and 2019 editions of The National. These themes are predominantly explored through new media and more contemporary forms of making. It is useful, however to explore the conceptual approach to landscape through looking at selected examples of landscape practice exhibited in The National, and the interesting ways that landscape as a contemporary genre is being critically addressed.

Figure 5. Taloi Havini, *Habitat* (still) 2017, multi-channel digital video, 10:40 mins. Image source: https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/taloi-havini/habitat/

Taloi Havini's 3-channel video installation *Habitat* (2017) looks at the landscape of Bougainville, where the Panguna copper mine operated (figure 5). Aerial footage of the mine surveys lush wetlands. The vibrant blue river shown against the green of the landscape is the copper residue leaking into the land and damaging it (AGNSW 2017a). The use of seductive colour in the video works to disarm and draw in the viewer, leading the viewer to reflect on and consider the damage the mine continues to have on the landscape and the contemporary experience of the area's Indigenous communities. On the ground, the camera focuses on people harvesting food, gold mining and living within the landscape. There is a sense within the work of the compromised landscape and the current challenges for people whose survival depends upon it (The National New Australian Art 2017a).

Gunybi Ganambarr's practice explores traditional material such as wood and natural pigments alongside new materials to represent and reflect on landscape.

Coastline of Grindall Bay (2016) features miny'tji – sacred clan patterns on wood identifiying the Dhalwangu saltwater estate of Garrapara (figure 6). The top of the work has been cut away to provide an aerial view of the body of water detailed within the miny'tji (The National: New Australian Art 2017).

Gapu (2017) is made of rubber from an old conveyor belt from a mine site built near the community. The rubber is incised with a sacred clan diamond design, firmly attached to place and representing the waters around Gängan known as Gulutji (figure 7). Use of the conveyor belt as a medium both employs materials derived from the land and poignantly comments on the changes wrought on country. The retrieval and reclaiming of these objects becomes symbolic for the land from which it was removed and the struggle to retain ownership of the land (AGNSW 2017b).

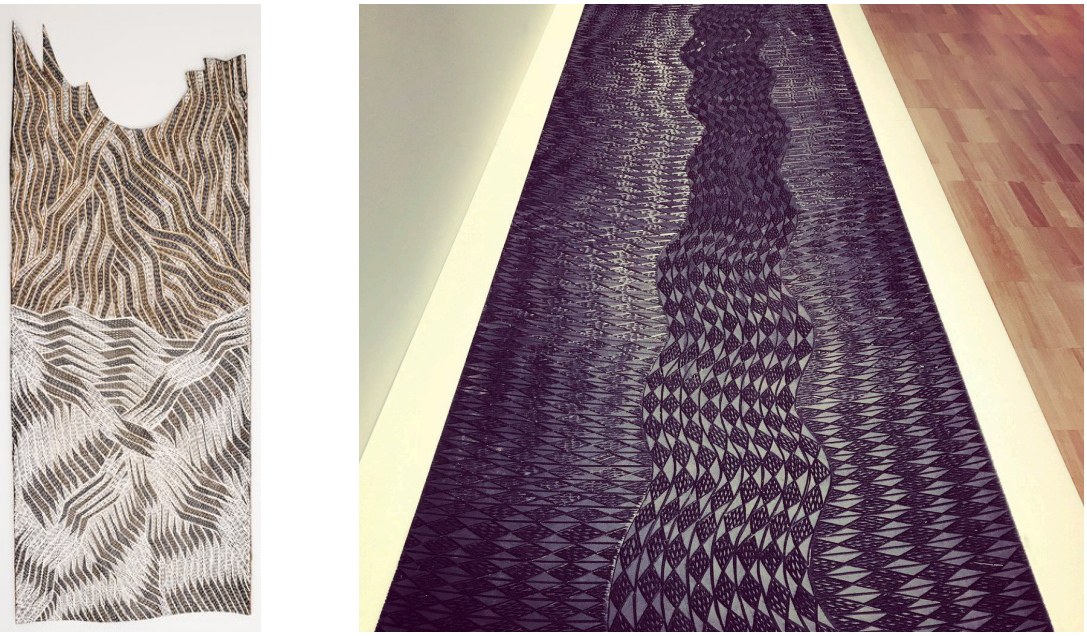

Figure 6. Gunybi *Ganambarr Coastline of Grindall Bay* 2016, natural pigments and sand on incised bark, 112 x 43cm. Image source: https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/386.2016/

Figure 7. Gunybi Ganambarr *Gapu* 2017, incised rubber (conveyor belt), 344 x 92 cm. Image source: https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/gunybi-ganambarr/coastline-of-grindall-bay

Yhonnie Scarce's installation *Death Zephyr* (2019) marks the destruction of the land in the Maralinga region of South Australia in the 1950s and 60s through nuclear testing carried out by the British and Australian governments (figure 8). The work is composed of 2000 glass forms that hang from the ceiling to form a cloud of suspended glass objects through the gallery space. The glass forms are based on the long bush yam, bush food found in the Maralinga region of South Australia

poisoned by the testing. The installation form is based on a photograph of the nuclear test cloud at Maralinga, drifting across the landscape as it dispersed after the explosion (The National New Australian Art 2017b). This aesthetically beautiful installation works to unsettle the audience as it hovers, suspended above the viewer to take the monumental form of a dispersing atomic cloud.

Figure 8. Yhonnie Scarce *Death Zephyr* 2009, hand-blown glass yams, nylon and steel armature, dimensions variable. Image source: https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/14.2017.a-c/

Daisy Japulija's painting *Billabongs* (2018) shown in figure 9, is a detail of a large-scale untitled installation of acrylic paintings (figure 10) made by Daisy Japulija, Sonia Kurarra, Tjigila Nada Rawlins and Ms Uhl, four female artists in Fitzroy Crossing. The painting installation depicts a collective vision of the colours and rhythms of country that the women were born on. This installation presents eight large paintings on perspex sheets that hang from the ceiling, challenging perceptions of

landscape painting (The National New Australian Art 2019a).

Figure 9. Daisy Japulija *Billabongs* 2018, acrylic on perspex. Image source: https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/daisy-japulija/billabongs/

Figure 10. Daisy Japulija, Sonia Kurarra, Tjigila Nada Rawlins, Ms Uhl *Untitled* (installation view) 2019 dimensions variable. Image source: https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/daisy-japulija/billabongs/

Peta Clancy's photographic installation of Australian landscapes in the series *Undercurrent* (2018–2019) document an unmarked, underwater massacre site on Dja Dja Wurrung country. Clancy's factitious and unsettling photomurals subtly push against expectations of landscape photography.

Within the installation, landscape photographs are layered on top of one another – framed photographs are overlaid on top of landscapes murals that wrap around the walls, made up of layered images of the same site. In the photographs, landscape imagery tips in and out of focus, the water and the sky are often inverted or depicted as a mirror image or reflection. (The National New Australian Art 2019b). Many of the photographed images are manual collages, with a photograph taken through part of a physical photograph of the same site, splicing layered documentation together and splitting the image. The scattering and

multiple scenes of the single site references the impossibility of being able to depict and document the history of the site (Clark 2019).

Figure 11. Peta Clancy *Undercurrent* 2018–2019, photomurals, inkjet pigment prints, dimensions variable. Image source: https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/peta-clancy/undercurrent/

In order to locate a position for my work and to understand how the landscape genre is seen and represented in the larger art world, it is useful to look at both critical surveys of contemporary Australian art – The National and Painting. More Painting – and the way the landscape genre is represented.

Landscape painting is prevalent and an ongoing practice in contemporary Australia, however, as mentioned previously, outside of landscape painting prizes and painting survey exhibitions in Australia, landscape painting is under represented in contemporary institutional exhibitions, particularly landscape painting that has ties to Western pictorial systems based in perspective, objectivity, foreground and background. In contemporary curating, it is necessary to account for the particular subjectivity of any given curator, however this suggests

that for some, painting the landscape is no longer considered relevant as a contemporary practice. This raises the question of whether there is a stigma attached to landscape painting, that is fixed in a particular historical narrative and unable to add to the critical discussion of landscape happening in other contemporary art fields such as installation, performance and video works.

My research examines how contemporary landscape painting can contribute to the contemporary discussion of landscape, the environment and its vulnerability in a century of climate change.[4] This research takes a post-colonial lens to consider landscape painting in Australia and its critical and contemporary discourse in current culture. The paper explores approaches that undermine, unsettle or change landscape painting practice or contribute to the ways in which contemporary painters are being critical of the historical landscape genre. The research seeks to prove the connection between 'fractured painting', the fractured histories of landscape and the concealed geopolitical power structures that accrue to the landscape.

4 The 2020 Australian black summer fires brought to the centre of public consciousness our immersion in landscape, the vulnerability of landscape in view of climate change and connection to our environment.

Birds

senses shattered by loss
she staggers to follow birdsong
trust nature

chirping red-browed finches lead to water
ringneck parrots place berries in her path
trust nature

honeyeaters flit the route to sweet grevillea
owls nest in her eyes
trust nature

pied butcher birds lay trinkets in her path
grey fantails flutter a soft revival
trust nature

apostle birds flicker on the edge of her eyes
emus on the horizon stand like arrows
trust nature

the woman turns
follows the emu

Ali Cobby Eckermann[5]

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5 From verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (Eckermann 2012, P. 13).

Chapter 2: Methodology

My work is both inclusive of and a departure from Western art histories and traditions. I grew up in Sydney's south between the Royal National Park and Woronora Reserve. A relationship with land and an empathetic response to nature has been a prominent feature of my childhood and continues to be important in my adult life. My identity has been constructed and shaped through these spaces.

My art school training in painting at the National Art School set the foundation for my language in paint. In my Honours year, I won a travelling scholarship to Europe where I was drawn to and influenced by the formal and painterly qualities of French Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism. Formal and visual parallels can be also be drawn between my pictorial methods and techniques of representing landscape and twentieth century Australian painters such as Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, tying my practice to the historical consciousness of Australian landscape painting.

My relationship to painting land was challenged at the commencement of this research after a significantly moving and unsettling encounter with the literary text *Ruby Moonlight* (2012) written by Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha woman Ali Cobby Eckermann. *Ruby Moonlight* is a compelling verse novel set in remote South Australia in the 1880s, exploring the 'broader ideas about colonialism's hierarchies and power structures, and its lingering historical impact on the first peoples of this country, on language, and on the landscape itself' (Holland-Batt 2013, p. 4). In the moment of first reading this work sitting in the landscape at Grays Point sand flats, Eckermann's poetry had a profound impact on my experience of place and propelled me to negotiate new terrain in my work on both an emotional and intellectual level. This reading threw into high relief the historical brutality of these spaces I intimately know, the limitation of my gaze and my orientated and problematised position as a non-Indigenous Australian, ultimately shaping the course of this research.

Ruby Moonlight (2012) allows a powerful form of access to the history of Aboriginal dispossession in Australia and the consequential loss of culture and identity. The verse novel draws on aspects of Eckermann's

experiences and family background as a way of addressing wider social, cultural, political and historical issues in Australia. Evocative descriptions of the Australian landscape provide a vivid backdrop to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's interaction with the natural world and with one another. The poetry explores conflicting concepts of love and compassion alongside dispossession and violence. Nature, wonderfully observed and exquisitely felt, rubs up against the very broken and brutal aspects of our world. The empathetic characterisations of the dual protagonists – Ruby, a young Aboriginal woman who survived the massacre of her family, and Jack, an Irish trapper – dismantle our assumptions. The work challenges any inclination to see individual and collective identities as fixed.

Reading this work propelled me to consider how my painting practice can also work to disrupt a fixed position; how I can make landscape paintings in Australia that speak to the unsettling duality of the landscape and how my work can contribute to unsettling Australia's historical landscape narrative.

The poetry works on constructing a form of identification not based on sameness and similarity, but on distance and difference between subject and reader. For non-Indigenous Australians, the dispossessions and violence of colonialism lies well outside of personal experience. Eckermann's poetry recognises both the absence of colonial experience in her readers and how complicated an identification with colonialism might be. This is a powerful work in that it confirms non-Indigenous Australians' difference and otherness of experience from that of Indigenous Australians' experience, yet it reveals the shared reverberations of Australian colonialism to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian's alike.

Reading Eckermann's poetry allowed me to connect with another set of experiences of land that fall well outside of my own. The poetry's disturbance of my understanding of place initiated an interest in exploring the capacity of my practice to disrupt or unsettle the Western visual language and pictorial systems that my practice engages with and emerges from. I use the poetry as a mechanism to approach painting and imbue the pictures with different meanings. The repetitive practice of my initial pen line drawings made almost daily in the locale of Grays

Point sand flats is a framework that allowed me to enter the mode of painting.

The pen line drawings (figure 12) operate in the studio as an underlying structure of the painting. The monochromatic drawings work against conventions of picturesque views. I make the drawings have a vertical format, have a high horizon line and reject colour in relation to spatial perspective. The drawings instead work towards a compression of marks and of space to embed disquieting notations on the conventional sights they represent. The drawings are the only references taken back to the studio to make the paintings. I don't take photographs of the landscapes I paint as I consider this to inhibit the mode of seeing generated through the reading and the drawing.

Figure 12. Selection of pen drawings from one of my 2019 sketchbooks.

I am not driven to paint an objectified record of the land, landmarks or to render a landscape scene. When I enter the studio, I am interested in what the medium of paint can bring to extend the drawing explorations of visual unsettlement through the construction of the paintings. The

formal quality of painted line embedded in the paintings seeks to represent the break and the schism between the feeling of a place and the history of a place. While the pen drawings are black and white and made rapidly, the studio works explore the interaction of colour and fragmented mark in a slow and sustained manner, as they are worked and reworked over months. This process is illustrated in a series of photographs of work in progress (figures 13–14).

Figure 13. Nicole Kelly *To the birds* (work in process) 2019, from the *Ribbon of river* series, oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm.

Figure 14. Nicole Kelly *Ruby's cloud (work in process)* 2019, from the *Ribbon of river* series, oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm.

The serial nature of the drawings and the paintings draws from the formal quality of *Ruby Moonlight* (2012) in which short poems, each to a single page and individually titled, fit together to make a novel (illustrated in figure 15). These short works, while seemingly

complete within themselves, work together to form a complete whole. The paintings in the Ribbon of river series, similarly, are worked as individual vertical panels but conceived as a whole. Each holds the story of the others, alongside their own, impacted and shaped by the others in their making. Figure 16 illustrates the simultaneous working progress of nine panels of *Ribbon of river* in September 2019.

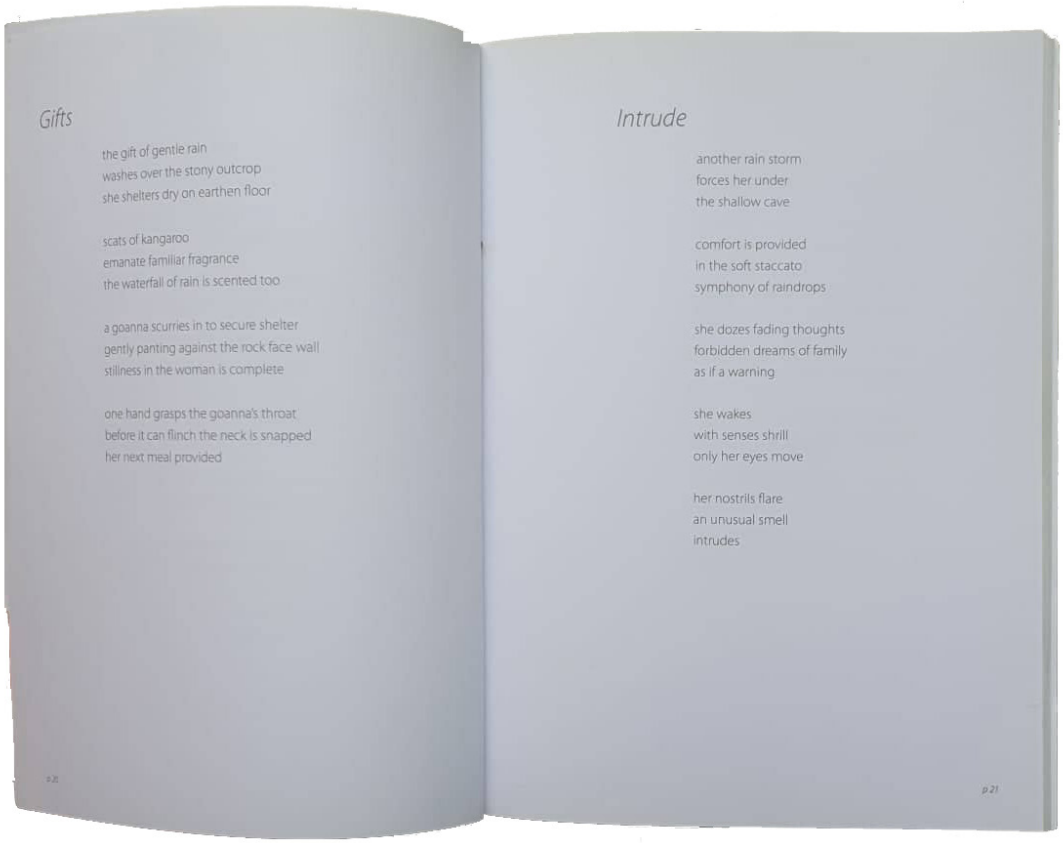

Figure 15. Photograph of two pages of verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (Eckermann 2012, pp. 20-21).

Figure 16. Work in progress photographs from the *Ribbon of river* series, September 2019.

The series of paintings Ribbon of river, 2019 also references Nolan's Riverbend I (1964) (figure 17) in the nine-panel format, subject matter of the river and similarly avoids a purely diagrammatic representation of landscape whilst still prioritising formal and pictorial concerns. These references directly connect my work with the historical consciousness of Australian landscape painting and Western art histories and traditions. My work however, simultaneously aims to confront the Eurocentric perspectives and narratives embedded in the

tradition and employs differing techniques to disrupt the picture plane.

Figure 17. Sidney Nolan *Riverbend I* 1964–65, oil on board, nine panels 152.5 x 122 cm each. Image source: https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=44008

In *The Road To Botany Bay* (1987) Carter introduces the idea of 'spatial history', challenging the presumption that land is a static stage within which history unfolds. His exploration of the history of the mapping and narrative description of Australia, identifies the shifting configurations of the land through texts, images, graphing and charting. I translate Carter's notion of mapping spaces over existing spaces and writing over earlier histories into a formal element in the making of my paintings. I put down a coloured ground (a coloured surface applied to the canvas prior to beginning painting) using active, visible brush marks and working it in large overlapping shapes of subtly altered colour. I overlay this with a structure or framework of painted line, and then embed this structure with dense layers of marks, illustrated in figure 18.

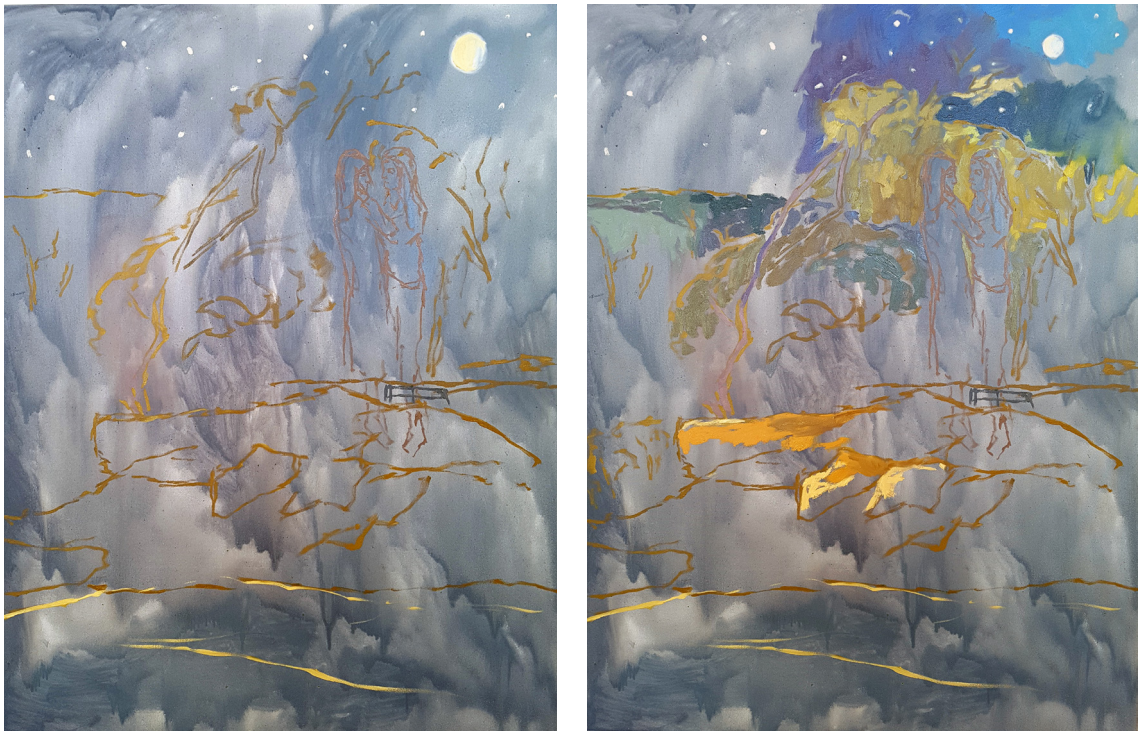

Figure 18. Nicole Kelly *By night, of night* (work in progress) 2019, from the *Ribbon of river* series, oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm.

The paintings expose the making process through revealing layers of the material accumulation of paint. I employ this layered mark making to point towards an expanse of time. In and through making the work I question what histories are held in the landscape? How does my own history operate in the making of the paintings? What lies present but unseen in the landscape? What remains? In the process of painting, I erase, physically scrub, scrape and wipe out with a pallet knife or rag or bury under layered paint earlier histories of the work (figure 19). I am interested in what emerges out of the raw frenzy of scrubbing, scraping and loading over with a new mark. The various stages of *Night dance* (from the *Ribbon of river* series) (2019) illustrated in figure 20, show the linear framework of a figure mapped out and then buried in the painting. This concealment is both a process of working and a metaphor for concealed history embedded in the land.

Figure 19. Nicole Kelly *Half hidden* 2019 (from the Ribbon of river series), oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm. Progress photographs showing erasure in bottom left corner.

Figure 20. Nicole Kelly *Night dance* 2019 (from the *Ribbon of river* series), oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm. Progress photographs showing figure buried under marks in bottom right corner.

As mentioned above, the first marks I make on the canvases are the coloured grounds painted across the entire surface of the canvas with visible brush marks. These marks are made patent in final stages of the painting, through the slips and cracks of overlaid marks. Figure 21 illustrates the influence of the colour ground beneath the layers of paint, working to throw the applied marks into high relief. This technique is used to create a visual divide between these layers of history in the painting. The truncated marks used to build up the paintings work to break the image and the pictorial traditions of landscape.

Figure 21. Nicole Kelly *Lone cloud* 2020, oil on polyester, 121 x 167 cm. Progress photographs showing overlaid marks on coloured ground.

The paintings each began within the confinement of a border, a visual cue that referenced the limitations of my gaze, my particular history and spatial orientation. Midway through the process of painting the tape delineating the border was removed, allowing marks to spill out of this containment and work to break the confined, framed landscape, illustrated in Figure 22.

Figure 22. Nicole Kelly *Between earth and sky* 2019 (from the *Ribbon of river* series), oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm. Progress photographs showing delineated boarder and further working to expand beyond this frame.

There is a sadness, darkness and heaviness to our landscape and history, but these places also offer something sacred and precious. This dual aspect of landscape drives the fractured paintings. Marks collide, overlap and shatter apart, however colour vibrates across the picture plane drawing the viewer in through the allurement of surface beauty. Imagery within the paintings reflects day turning to night, oversized birds and figures and the moon in various cycles. Rain falls and clouds clear. Weather is a trope for time, intended to invoke a sense of the multiple, overlapping, and interwoven perspectives of history, of our past and present, shaping our shared landscape.

In this research I draw together case studies of three Australian artists and particular contemporary representations of landscape and studio methodologies that deconstruct landscape traditions and question colonial artistic assumptions to contribute to contemporary discussion of landscape representations in Australia.

Tempo

sunrise

days pass

sunset

leaves transmute

weeks pass

shifting stars

sunshine softens

months pass

the air cools

winter returns

Ali Cobby Eckermann[6]

6 From verse novel Ruby Moonlight (Eckermann 2012, p. 36).

Chapter 3: Case Studies

In order to contextualise my practice within the genre of landscape, it is useful to explore the work of Joan Ross, Fiona Lowry and Danie Mellor. Despite differing in their aesthetics and approaches to making images, and differentiating factors such as cultural background, geographical location and individual experience of landscape, these artists all use particular representations of landscape and studio methodologies that deconstruct landscape traditions and relate to the concept of unsettlement. Ross, Lowry and Mellor each draw from traditional Western art making approaches within the landscape genre. The three artists also use an element of camouflage in their work to carry subversive content. Each draws in viewers through the allurement of surface beauty to then challenge and unsettle historical frames and lenses, question colonial artistic assumptions and to contribute to contemporary discussion of landscape representations in Australia.

Joan Ross is an established artist working in Sydney across the platforms of video animation, print, painting, sculpture and installation. I am particularly interested in Ross's conceptual approach, in which she very closely critiques the historical landscape genre and politics behind visual constructions.

Ross uses remediated images of colonial landscape works in her video animations to interrogate the history of the genre and the destructive legacy of colonialism in Australia (Munro n.d). Her works point out the way these appropriated images actually reveal the politics of the time that disempowered certain populations and subjugated the land under colonial rule.

Ross's aesthetic combines historical landscape paintings such as those of colonial painters John Glover, Joseph Lycett and English artist Thomas Gainsborough with a fluorescent colour palette of contemporary hi-vis workwear. There is a familiarity to the works through the recognisable paintings that form the stage or backdrop to the animations. Ross's alterations take a colourful palette and employ disarming humour through her colonial protagonists who shuffle awkwardly across their colonial landscape as can be seen in the work *Touching other people's butterflies* (2013), shown in figure 23. These

comical often absurd alterations guide the viewer through discomforting themes, encouraging a rethink of the impact of colonisation, imperialism, racism, consumerism and our disposable culture (Turner Galleries 2014).

Figure 23. Joan Ross *Touching other people's butterflies* (video still) 2013. Image source: https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2015.7/

Ross's studio methodologies and the formal quality of her works are very distinct from mine, however the conceptual approach is quite similar. Both practices work to scrutinise the ways that politics is implicit in the image making of the landscape genre.

Within Ross's animations, the colonial paintings are literally cut into, pulled apart, drawn over, rearranged and reconstructed to visually disrupt the paintings. Cloaked in humour, colour and pleasing landscape imagery, this act of disruption, breaking and repurposing is also an act of breaking the landscape narrative. This breaking calls to attention colonial artistic assumptions, directing the viewer's attention to colonialism, power structures and prejudices that continue to exist in contemporary Australia.

My work does not remediate images of historical landscape painting, however it does draw on traditional landscape motifs, references and techniques of constructing space, particularly those of Australian twentieth century landscape painting. Although I employ a different

technique to Joan Ross, I am, like Ross, engaged in the act of breaking. The technique of using broken, truncated brush marks visually disturbs and breaks apart the traditional landscape motifs that the work simultaneously draws upon. Landscape imagery is disrupted and deconstructed in the physical making of my paintings through broken marks, exposing areas of ground, and negative space that creates pictorial slippages. Figure 24 illustrates a close up of these slippages and the gaps in the image that act as a metaphor for the cracks in the landscape tradition and historical landscape narrative.

Figure 24. Nicole Kelly *Ruby's cloud* (detail) 2019 (from the *Ribbon of river* series) oil on polyester 107 x 84 cm.

Deeply critical of the colonial history of Australia, Ross uses open narratives and disruptive chronologies to re-vision nineteenth-century European aesthetics (ACMI 2019). Her works combine visual elements from a variety of early colonial Australian paintings and contemporary life to re-conceptualise, problematise and unsettle our relationship to both. Discussing her relationship to land as a non-Indigenous Australian, Ross comments:

> One of the reasons that I make the work that I do is that I'm very aware, and I don't think you can be anywhere in Australia and not be aware, that we're on Indigenous land. And I'm constantly aware of the colonial influence, and the disjunction between that and nature (Ross 2017 cited in AGNSW 2017c, para. 3).

At the end of the animation *I give you a mountain* (2018) illustrated in figure 25, a colonial man tries to give another man a mountain, and with that gesture everything disintegrates. Ross's figures break apart and dissolve like sand into the landscape and finally vanish. This work interrogates ownership and asks 'how can we own a mountain'? (Bett Gallery 2019).

Figure 25. Joan Ross *I give you a mountain* (video still) 2018. Image source: https://joanross.com.au/I-give-you-a-mountain-Video-animation-2018

This idea of all things – figures, animals and landscape – slipping and dissolving in an attempt to grasp, contain and own is also explored in my work, particularly in the construction of the image. My paintings read undeniably as landscapes when viewed from a distance. However, as the viewer draws closer to the painting, looks closer into these spaces, the image dissolves and falls apart, as illustrated in figure 24.

These representations of landscape are not able to be held, contained

or fixed by the viewers gaze. The action of the viewer drawing closer to the work, causes the image to break. This continuously failing image points to the human impact on and destruction of the environment and questions how to recalibrate human relationship with nature.

The figurative elements and narratives in my work have no sense of definitive completeness. As Ross's figures awkwardly and stiffly shuffle around their landscapes, my figures also often have an awkward or slightly offbeat relationship with their surroundings. The figures are slightly too large for the landscape they attempt to fit into, such as the moth in *In light* (2019) (from the *Ribbon of river* series) illustrated in figure 26, and the two embracing figures in *By night, of night* (2019) (from the *Ribbon of river* series) illustrated in figure 27, who are given no ground on which to stand. This offbeat relationship emphasises a disconnect and is a marker of intrusion upon the environment.

Figure 26. Nicole Kelly *In light* (from the *Ribbon of river* series) 2019, oil on polyester, 107 x 84cm.

Figure 27. Nicole Kelly *By night, of night* (from *the Ribbon of river* series) 2019, oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm.

The human figures introduced into the landscapes are executed in the same palette and mark making style as their surroundings, causing the figures to dissolve and merge with and into the landscape. In the scale and placement however, this merging is defied – they sit outside of these spaces and do not quite fit. This is intended to imbue the paintings with a subtle friction.

In *The claiming of things* (2012), Ross reimagines the work of colonial painter John Glover (figure 28). Glover's landscape painting *The bath of Diana, Van Diemen's Land* (1837) is used as a backdrop or stage for Ross's interventions. Land is depicted as a witnessing presence, one which observes all the trespassing and defacement, in silence. A fluorescent picket fence works to divide the landscape through its centre, drawing boundaries in a witnessing landscape to lock Aboriginal people out of their country (MCA 2012).

A colonial couple are shown inspecting and then vandalising their new landscape, using a can of spray paint. For the remainder of the animation, Indigenous peoples sit under a tree in the left foreground, highlighting an ongoing physical presence within this constructed colonial landscape and bearing witness to the slow destruction of their country.

Figure 28. Joan Ross *The Claiming of Things* (video still) 2012. Image source: https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2015.6/

Ross uses colour as a key visual device to disrupt, jar and unsettle the image. The use of fluorescent yellow symbolises colonisation and intrusion, highlighting an incompatibility between the colonisers and the landscapes they occupy. (Munro n.d).

The coloured ground exposed throughout my paintings similarly operates to disrupt or jar the image. The visual device of the coloured ground exposed through the marks of applied paint, works to throw these applied marks into high relief. This technique is used to create a visual divide between these layers of history in the painting.

In Lone Cloud (2019) a purple-red ground emerges in areas of negative space as holes in the image that resemble bruised or open wounds, symbolic of the open wounds of Australia's history (figure 29). The

colour choice for this ground throws overlaid marks into high relief, in a contrasted, stark and fractured manner.

Figure 29. Nicole Kelly *Lone cloud* 2020, oil on polyester, 121 x 167 cm.

While my work does not depict in literal terms the impact of colonialism on the land and on Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples in Australia, it does explore a visual disruption to the picture plane and to the image, unsettling traditional pictorial methods of landscape painting and calling into question our relationship to land and our relationship to history. The elements of landscape – rocks, trees, bush – are depicted as a layered site of history and memory, a witnessing presence. The paintings expose the history of the layered paint to suggest a repository of memory and an accumulation of layered time. Where Ross's works pull apart and reconstruct colonial paintings, my pictures visually break the image through their construction, to create a visual analogy for the destructive legacy of colonialism in Australia.

Fiona Lowry is a Sydney-based artist recognised for her diffused contemporary renderings of conventional landscape and figure

painting. Lowry continues to work within the traditions of painting landscape, taking a very representational approach, however her hazy visual language works to deconstruct the traditional mechanisms of constructing space. I am interested in these specific studio methodologies and techniques of disrupting the spatial field and how this works to trouble the narrative of landscape painting.

Lowry's airbrush technique of blur and focus depicts the Australian bush as ambiguous and disorientating. Her landscapes encroach on the viewer, then recede with no clear depth. There is a feeling of being both in focus and out of focus simultaneously, forcing viewers to work (Craven 2014). Lowry's airbrush techniques dissipate perspective and stagger the point of focus across the picture plane, denying a single entry point, denying the convention of foreground and background, and unsettling the passive observer gaze, as can be seen in figure 30, *a silence* (2018).

Figure 30. Fiona Lowry *a silence* 2018, acrylic on canvas, 188 x 137.5 cm. Image source: https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/wynne/2018/30041/

I make pictures in a very different way and through different studio methodologies to Lowry, however I am similarly attempting to present disquieting viewing situations for the audience and to disorientate and unsettle the conventional landscape viewing experience. I also continue to paint landscape using traditional motifs, references and techniques of constructing a painting, however, in contrast to Lowry's soft and opaque techniques, I am interested in using techniques and methods that break the opacity and fixity of the picture plane in order to negate depth.

The two differing approaches can be contrasted by considering Lowry's painting *I act as the tongue for you* (2008) shown in figure 31 and my three pictures, *Reflected trees* (2019), *river of glass* (2019) and *Into the afternoon* (2019) shown in figure 32, all based on the Shoalhaven River landscape at the Boyd family property in Bundanon, NSW.

Figure 31. Fiona Lowry *I act as the tongue for you* 2008, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 220 cm. Image source: https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/fiona-lowry/

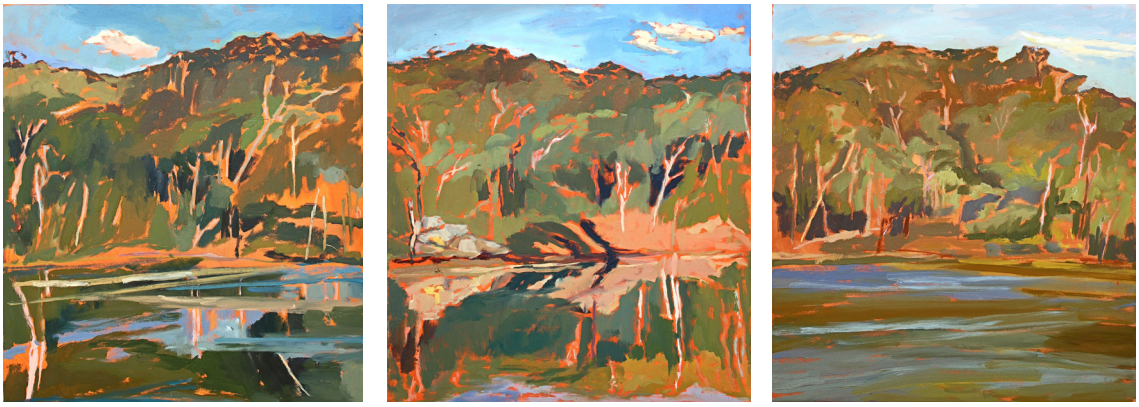

Figure 32. Nicole Kelly, Left to right: Reflected trees (2019); River of glass (2019); Into the afternoon (2019), oil on polyester, each 53.5 x 48.5 cm.

Compared to Lowry's pictures, my pictures are stark, and the image is broken into shards. As mentioned previously, my paintings are built up through isolated, truncated brush marks, and between these positive marks, holes of negative space emerge within the picture. These exposed areas of unrepresentative space allow slippages into environments, into spaces that can pull forward and push backwards, influenced by colour. The prominent ground colour introduced into my pictures, throws the overlaid marks into high relief in a contrasted, stark and splintered manner. This technique allows slippages of attention to different points in the painting, scattered across the picture plane, breaking the picture plane and refusing a single entry point. These exposures or slippages structurally dispel conventional perspective and, when thinking about the viewers relationship to landscape, as with Lowry's work, the eye of the viewer cannot stay still, the viewer cannot recede into depth or stand objectively opposite the vanishing point. Viewers must work to reconstruct the image, incessantly interrupted by receding and repelling spaces within the fractures.

Lowry creates a lingering sense of silence and stillness in her landscape paintings. Her work has a softness and beauty that simultaneously evokes impending doom or unease, a hovering disquiet (Capon 2014). Her pictures visualise the duality of the landscape as both an alluring and sinister place. Within the seductive, weightlessness of the ethereal application of paint, her works deceptively carry heavy content, often of an underlying violent nature, and preference sites coloured by a violence history:

> Historically, the landscape in Australia has always been animated with these hidden energies – harbouring criminals, bushrangers, serial killings and massacres of Australia's indigenous people – but it also holds a great beauty and I am interested in this duality, not just within the landscape but also within ourselves (Lowry 2014 cited in Craven 2014, para. 7).

Lost to nothing (2006) is a strange and alienated treescape, that reads like the negative of a colour photograph (figure 33). Physical danger pervades the beauty of the landscape and the pine trees in the painting appear stoic, silent observers. The imagery depicts radiata pines that grow in the Belanglo State Forest in NSW, the site where one of Australia's worst serial killers buried young backpackers he murdered between 1989 and 1993. For hundreds of years, forests like this one bore witness to massacres of Australia's Indigenous inhabitants.

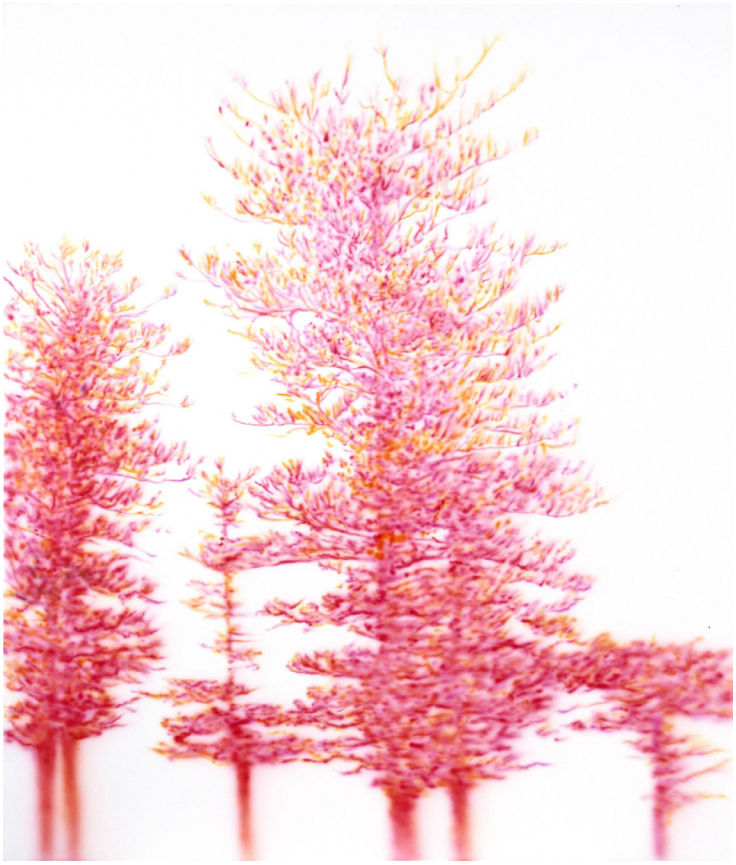

Figure 33. Fiona Lowry *Lost to nothing* 2006, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 198 x 167.5 cm. Image source: https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2007.1/

I am interested in Lowry's expression of landscape as a product of what we know, imagine and feel. The complicated visual experience Lowry creates is a blurred physiological space, irrevocably coloured by our knowledge of the terrible events that took place in these spaces.

Eckermann's verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (2012) amplified and translated some of the voices I hear, imagine and feel in the Grays Point landscape. There is little documented and accessible work on Aboriginal Australians in this area and lived experiences of colonisation, however it is estimated that what we now recognise as Grays Point and the Hacking River has been occupied by family groups since 6500BCE, and occupied by the Dharawal people for 2,500 years. A midden remains on site as well as engravings around the area. Being in this landscape evokes a self-consciousness, a sense of compassion, pain, fear and guilt. My visual representation of this landscape is an expression of knowledge, imagination and emotion.

Many of Lowry's paintings include anonymous figures placed in a range of uncertain scenarios in the landscape. The often naked figures in the work play out different scenarios that have a moral ambiguity that allows the viewers 'to take up a position rather than insisting on taking a particular one' (Lowry 2014 cited in Craven 2014, para. 13).

Lowry's exhibition The ties that bind, exhibited in 2018 at Martin Browne Contemporary, draws from the poem *Paradise Lost* by the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton (1608–1674). The paintings in this exhibition such as *i could tell you what i saw in you* (2010), shown in figure 34, are populated by stumbling and confused nude men and women as actors on the stage of the Australian landscape (Kubler 2018). The viewer cannot specifically grasp what is going on. It is unclear whether the protagonists are gathering one another up to safety or carrying each other to their doom. The ambiguous figurative relationships in Lowry's paintings, and the blurred and hazy construction of the spaces they inhabit, work to unsettle the viewer and work towards disrupting a fixed viewing position. Lowry says 'with these paintings I also wanted to consider the idea that a refusal to acknowledge the foundational trauma of the past creates confusing and distressing symptoms in the body politic' (Lowry 2018 cited in Kubler 2018, p. 2).

Figure 34. Fiona Lowry *i could tell you what i saw in you* 2010, acrylic on canvas, 213 x 167.5 cm. Image source: http://www.fionalowry.com.au/artwork_item.php?artwork=20200107085428&y=20190629114229

The figures in my paintings and their relationship to their surrounds, like Lowry's, are both from poetry and from knowledge of history in the Australian landscape. There is a similar ambiguity in my work, with the protagonists not clearly defined by or confined to a fixed identity. The figures in my pictures are, however, much smaller than many of those found in Lowry's work and are composed in more harmonious interactions with each other. Unlike the ominous relationships and interactions between figurative subjects in Lowry's work, as illustrated in figure 34, in my work it is their integration with the landscape that evokes a subtle unsurety or unease.

The all-female protagonists within my works intends to disrupt the tradition of figurative representation in the Western painting canon, where men act and women appear as objects of observation knowingly seen by both painter and audience (Berger 1972, p. 47). The relationship between women as protagonists in painting and the feminist perspective on colonial representation of women is another area of research that would make an interesting area of further exploration; however it is not the central area of this research topic.

Lowry's figures are treated as subjects, as active and vital participants in the story or image on the stage of the landscape. Within my paintings, the figures are treated as subject and the landscape is treated as subject; the two oscillate and shift to take up alternating subject positions. This positioning is explored differently across the nine canvases of *Ribbon of river* (2019) in the way the figures relate to or hold a position in the landscape. Some figures dissolve into and form a seamless position in the landscape, almost unnoticed. Others sit outside of the space, reject the space, or impose on the landscape they are part of. This alternation between being outside of, and dissolving into, visually explores existing hierarchies between humans and the landscape and our continued fractured relationships to the land.

In *By Night, of Night* (2019) two oversized female figures embrace one another slightly out of place in their landscape (figure 35). These figures are made clear by their coloured, lurid outlines against a blue and black night landscape. In this image, the anonymous protagonists defy perspectival norms, are oversized, weightless and unbalanced as if hovering off the ground that slips and dissolves beneath them.

Figure 35. Nicole Kelly *By night, of night* (from the *Ribbon of river* series) 2019, oil on polyester, 109.5 x 86.5 cm.

In *Lone Cloud* (2019) the two figures are solid, rigid and appear to be fixed in an eternal stillness, as if composed of the stone they sit beside (figure 29). A woman resting on a rock in *Between earth and sky* (2019) appears somewhat vulnerable, dissolving into her surroundings, under the bush that leans in on her in a visual subversion of human dominance over the landscape (figure 36). Here, the environment is centrally placed and the figure, at first glance unseen, takes a secondary position. The scale of the figure, the colour and painterly treatment of flesh and of rock melts the threshold between our materiality and the compressed layers of memory and history that lies in the land.

Figure 36. Nicole Kelly *Between earth and sky* (from the *Ribbon of river* series) 2019, oil on polyester, 109.5 x 86.5 cm.

Use of colour in both Lowry's pictures and in my pictures draws the viewer in and plays a particular role in camouflage to carry subversive content. Within Lowry's works the palette is mostly monochromatic as can be seen in the pastel pinks in *i could tell you what i saw in you* (2010), shown in figure 34. My work exhibits a full range colour palette, however both practices prioritise harmony and colour composition. Colour in this sense acts as a lure, providing a false sense of security to draw viewers in, and to subtly redirect or destabilise. As the viewer draws close to the surface of my works, the optical field shifts between positive and negative forms, the picture fractures and holes

become apparent in the image. The image as a whole is never able to be stabilised or complete, allowing feelings of disquiet and unease to emerge in the viewer. The pictures negate solidity, attempting to destabilise the viewer and create an air of uncertainty. Weighted skies press downwards to high horizon lines and slippery grounds down the bottom of the canvas create an unsure footing. This destabilisation attempts to deconstruct the traditional mechanisms of constructing space, and to trouble the historical narrative of landscape painting in Australia.

Danie Mellor is one of Australia's foremost artists shaping a contemporary visual narrative of Australian landscape. Mellor is of Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian heritage, a descendant of the Mamu, Ngagen and Ngajan people of the Atherton tablelands in north-east Queensland. His work explores intersecting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural perspectives and complicated narratives of Australia's colonial past to contribute a contemporary perspective on Australia's shared history, post-colonial identity and on landscape (MCA 2016).

Mellor's practice is diverse, spanning ceramics, printmaking, sculpture, mixed media, work on paper and object-based installation. I am interested in the particular studio methodologies and techniques Mellor uses in his 2-dimensional practice, specifically his early work on paper (2005-2012) and recent photography and how his particular methodologies work to interrogate post-settlement narratives.

The earlier period of Mellor's practice heavily references and incorporates a Western approach, using traditionally Western representational landscape motifs and mediums. The very particular Western device of a pathway in foregrounding features in many of Mellor's works such as *An Elysian city (of picturesque landscapes and memory)* (2010) shown in figure 37. His early work prioritises formal elements in his construction of an image – perspective, objectivity, contrast, foreground, background, composition and harmony – that Mellor describes as a type of conditioning coming from his art school training (The University of Queensland 2014, p. 6). Yet Mellor's pictures unsettle his viewer's perspective as carefully as he creates the image. The spatial shift his work creates is cultural and political.

Figure 37. Danie Mellor *An Elysian city (of picturesque landscapes and memory)* 2010, pastel, pencil and wash with glitter and Swarovski crystal on Saunders Waterford paper, 143 x 186 cm. Image source: https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=207242

As with Joan Ross, Mellor's early work uses reconstructed historical imagery and the visual device of color to symbolise colonisation and intrusion. Through differing perspectives and narratives, both artists are closely looking at and interrogating and destabilising the visual histories of landscape as a genre in painting.

Mellor's highly detailed works on paper have been dominated for over a decade by a pictorial focus on blue and white imagery, inspired by Spode-designed ceramic ware. For Mellor, this pictorial language, associated with adapted and commodified environments and with the 'exotic', is used as a means to represent the transformed country post colonisation. In an interview with curator Hetti Perkins (The University of Queensland 2014, p. 6), Mellor relays his inability to locate an Aboriginal language word for the colour blue 'almost like blue was not conceptualised. It was recognised through words for sky or water' (Mellor 2014, p. 8). In this way, blue indicates for Mellor a European footprint or gaze hitting the landscape and subduing it (Eccles 2015).

In contrast to Ross, Mellor's signification of colonisation through colour does not function to jar the visual field intermittently but, in a similar way to Lowry, pervades and consumes the picture plane. Within Mellor's work on paper, the field of blue is broken by the contrast of his local animals and figures depicted in full colour. This visual technique of using colour to pervade space and influence the landscape can be related to the emergence of the ground colour in my paintings, as it appears at various points across the picture plane. In a sense my technique is the inverse of his, as my single ground colour is mostly concealed by a full colour landscape, as illustrated in figure 38, *Ruby's cloud* (2019). Yet cracks emerge across the picture plane, and the effect is of colour seeping through to flood, influence and change the landscape.

Figure 38. Nicole Kelly *Ruby's cloud* (from the *Ribbon of river* series) 2019, oil on polyester, 109.5 x 86.5 cm.

In the highly detailed large-format drawing *Postcards from the edge (in search of living curiosities)* (2011), Mellor manipulates historical imagery of the colonial era to frame his own record of events (figure 39). Mellor does not depict real events, but a broad allegorical experience that depicts history unfolding as open narratives (McKenzie 2014). In his interpretation, Indigenous people and the environment are centrally

placed. Mellor depicts a dense blue and white rainforest, with roots and branches complicating space in the foreground and background. The figures are made clear as their full colour breaks the pervading blue of the landscape which is described by Chapman (2019, para. 4) as 'an affirmation of their survival against the odds'.

Figure 39. Danie Mellor *Postcards from the edge (in search of living curiosities)* 2011, mixed media on paper, 152.5 x 221.5 cm. Image source: https://tolarnogalleries.com/artists/danie-mellor/postcards-from-the-edge-in-search-of-living-curiosities/

As with the works of Lowry, Ross and my own, there is a seductive quality to Mellor's imagined and imaginary worlds that disarms viewers. Beyond the surface beauty of his blue and white pictures, his work deceptively carries content that exposes and probes the flaws in our accepted view of history and the narrative depicted in the traditional landscape painting genre.

There is a disorientation in Mellor's work that relates to the idea of unsettlement. The viewer is never really sure where they are located in the fantasy and mythology. The works invite viewers to stand in overlapping times and spaces, to see beneath the surface of things. The figures in their staging also operate as part of the frame, they are all looking at something. There is a sense of expectation, of waiting for

something to happen, which Mellor describes as ‘an invisible presence… created between us and them and what’s around them’ (Mellor et al. 2014, p. 11).

Figure 40. Danie Mellor *Bayi Minyjirral* 2013, pastel, pencil and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, nine panels, each 300x360 cm. Image source: https://tolarnogalleries.com/artists/danie-mellor/6/

Bayi Minyjirral (2013) depicts a dense and tangled blue and white rainforest with a contrasting golden ochre colour to depict clouds of butterflies and Indigenous inhabitants (figure 40). The composition is dominated by a fig tree adorned with hanging bicorneal baskets that contain skeletal remains of the inhabitants forebears (Eccles 2015, p. 33). The hidden details in the foliage, the figures, objects and animals work to formally create a sense of layering in the work, that invites viewers to search within the landscape. At the same time, two figures look out of the picture to challenge and return the viewer’s gaze, pushing us out of the space. In a similar way to Lowry, this technique of creating spaces in the painting to repel the viewer’s gaze, works to disrupt and unsettle the passive viewing related to historical landscape painting.

I am interested in Mellor's use of open narrative to represent the transformation of the landscape through a visual allegorical experience. As with Fiona Lowry's works, the figure in Mellor's work plays a critical role in the picture plane. Unlike Lowry's figures, which often dominate the visual field, within Mellor's monumental works figures are depicted at a very small scale, emphasising their integration into the environment.

Red, White and Blue (2008) depicts three life-size kangaroo sculptures, made of real ears and back scratchers and fixed with a mosaic of shattered original Spode china (figure 41). This technique of breaking Spode china and reassembling to create mosaic skins is described by Mellor as breaking to create a shattered, dissembled narrative (The University of Queensland 2014, p. 11).

Figure 41. Danie Mellor *Red, White and Blue* 2008, mixed media, dimensions variable. Image source: https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/patterns-of-colonial-darkness-in-blue-willow-20140701-zsrrm.html

The act of breaking the image within my paintings intends, in a similar way to Mellor's sculpture, to dismantle the traditional landscape narrative. The way in which my pictures are constructed is an act of disordering. Through broken, truncated brushstrokes, imagery

is shattered and pieced back together into a tessellated mass. This technique is intended to visually disturb and break apart representation itself and distance the representation from realism. This approach, although available in modernity and postmodern painting, is employed in my painting to convey uncertainty, doubt, the provisional and unfinished. The process of painting can be perceived beneath the overlaid paint where I expose the ground colour and early layers of painting intermittently across the surface of the canvas.

Figure 42. Danie Mellor *The distance (envisioning Girrugarr)* 2017, Lambda print on metallic paper, 120 x 140 cm. Image source: https://www.art-almanac.com.au/polly-borland-ulrick-schubert-prize/mellor_danie_thedistanceenvisioninggirrugarr/

In his later photographic works, such as in *The distance (envisioning Girrugarr)* (2017) the figures take on the pervading blue of the environment (figure 42). Here, the figure of an Aboriginal man bearing ceremonial body paint is not immediately apparent. The threshold between figure and landscape blurs, and there is a sense that this man is deeply embedded into a cultural landscape.

My pictures also explore figurative elements and how they relate to their environment. Figure 43 illustrates a close-up view of the painting *Half hidden* (from the *Ribbon of river* series) (2019), where two horses

are just recognisable. Similarly, the threshold between animal and landscape is blurred with the horses resembling more painted mark than image, and almost more landscape than animal.

Figure 43. Nicole Kelly *Half hidden* (detail) 2019, (from the *Ribbon of river* series), oil on polyester, 107 x 84 cm

Mellor's approach, aesthetic and technique can be clearly contrasted with my own by considering Mellor's monumental nine-panel diasec mounted photographic work *Landstory* (2018) shown in figure 44, which takes Sidney Nolan's nine-panel work *Riverbend I* (1964) shown in figure 45 as a blueprint, and my own reimagining of the same work by Nolan, *Ribbon of river* (2019) shown in figure 46.

Figure 44. Danie Mellor *Landstory* 2018, diasec mounted chromogenic print on metallic photographic paper, nine panels, each 224 x 124cm. Image source: https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/danie-mellor-the-landspace-all-the-debils-are-here/

Figure 45. Sidney Nolan *Riverbend I* 1964–65, oil on board, nine panels, each 152.5 x 122 cm. Image source: http://www.theartmuseum.com.au/2017/07/08/sidney-nolan-riverbend/

Figure 46. Nicole Kelly *Ribbon of river* 2019, oil on polyester, nine panels, each 109.5 x 86.5 cm.

Mellor exhibited his *Landstory* at Torlarno Galleries in Melbourne in 2018, as I was part way through making the Ribbon of river series. Within the space of a year, both Mellor and I, despite differing gender, identity, heritage, and spatial positions independently chose

to reference Nolan's *Riverbend I*, echoing his nine-panel format and subject matter, the river bend.

At eleven meters long, Nolan's 9 panel *Riverbend I* marks a significant shift in Nolan's practice in creating a long cinematic element of time in painting. The sequence of panels enables the work to emerge through viewing several panels left to right, rather than being embraced in a single picture plane.

The approaches of Mellor and myself are inclusive of and a departure from, European art histories and traditions. Through a clear reference to Nolan, both directly connect with and acknowledge the historical consciousness of Australian landscape painting. Employing differing aesthetics, mediums and techniques, both approaches also work to create a collapse in time, and to bring to the surface cultural knowledge and the multiple strands of history, past and present, embedded within, and shaping our shared landscape.

Landstory (2018) combines Mellor's own photography of rainforest country, using an infrared photography technique to capture the landscape in a different light, using wavelengths that the human eye cannot see, combined with archival colonial photographic imagery from the same area. These techniques allow Mellor to explore ideas around the invisible, ancestral presence and spirituality (Mellor 2019 cited in National Gallery of Australia 2019).

As discussed above, *Ribbon of river* (2019) takes the subject of a river bend at Grays Point, close to where my studio is located, and draws from a deeply moving encounter with Ali Cobby Eckermann's verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (2012). *Ribbon of river* (2019) employs the traditional method of oil painting to explore what remains unseen yet embedded in our landscapes.

Unlike Mellor's smooth photographic surface, my paintings use layered mark making and a physicality of paint, to represent an expanse of layered time. Broken marks disrupt the picture plane, shattering the image of the landscape in the same act of making it.

Like Nolan's *Riverbend I* (1964) Mellor's nine vertical panels hang closely and tightly together as a unified whole. The pervading blue across all nine panels works to harmonise and integrate the panels. My nine paintings, similarly, are worked as individual vertical panels and conceived as a whole. However, unlike Mellor's *Landstory* (2018) and Nolan's *Riverbend I* (1964) the panels do not sit seamlessly or entirely harmoniously. Rather, they repel and push away from one another. This is created through the use of contrasting ground colours from one canvas to another. These shifts in grounds are erratic in colour and tone, ranging from soft yellow, pink and purple to deep blue and black. This colour jump interferes with the smooth transition from one panel to the next, complicating the viewing experience. The unity of the nine panels as a single whole is further complicated by the viewing situation, in the choice to hang the works spaced much further apart than Nolan's and Mellor's. As within the works themselves, this positioning enables gaps and breaks in the narrative to emerge.

Sunset

the old dancer

two young warriors

one lubra looking back

hurry against the skyline

the silhouettes of four

will not be seen

in this land again

for ninety years

in this country

there is sadness

in this sunset

a ruby moonlight

Ali Cobby Eckermann[7]

7 From the verse novel Ruby Moonlight (Eckermann 2012, p. 74).

Conclusion

Landscape painting as practice is prevalent in contemporary Australia, however, outside of major painting prizes and commercial representation, landscape painting is largely omitted from major curated and survey shows of contemporary practice. Although it is widely accepted that landscape as a subject is important to contemporary critical discussion of our relationship with the environment, there is a stigma attached to landscape painting – an assumption that the painting of landscape remains fixed within the genre's historical narrative.

This research makes the argument that landscape painting can function in a critical contemporary way and explore the changing concepts of the 'landscape' by adopting approaches concerned with unsettling the practice, changing the practice or contributing to the ways in which contemporary painters are being critical of the history of landscape painting. It is possible for painting practice using Western methods of constructing painting, to simultaneously work to destabilise historical assumptions about the genre of landscape painting and respond to the contemporary moment.

The theoretical component of this research is concerned with what we can learn from researching and analysing landscape practice that takes a critical lens to look at the implicit complications and responsibility of the artist working in the landscape genre in contemporary Australia. Focusing on the concept of 'unsettlement', this work considers particular methodologies and pictorial representations of landscape that work to deconstruct and unsettle landscape traditions and historical frames of landscape painting.

The practical component of this research explores studio methodologies and approaches to making images that deconstruct landscape painting traditions. Ali Cobby Eckermann's verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (2012) is used as a mechanism to approach drawing and painting, and to explore the capacity to disrupt or unsettle the Western visual language and pictorial systems that my practice simultaneously engages with and comes out of.

My paintings reference and incorporate a Western approach, using traditional Western methods, mediums, materials and formal concerns in the construction of an image. However, my work in the genre occupies a different spatial position and perspective and has an intention to trouble the existing narrative of landscape painting. The paintings engage in the act of breaking and disrupting the traditional landscape motifs that the work simultaneously draws upon. The works draw in the viewers through the allurement of surface beauty to subtly redirect attention, challenge historical frames and lenses, question colonial artistic assumptions and to contribute to critical and contemporary discussion of landscape representation in Australia.

In the year of Australia's 2020 Black Summer, a period of intense bushfires wiping out the land and country, taking animals, trees and lives in many parts of Australia, there was a rising swell of attachment, nostalgia and climate grief and a rising awareness of the generations of mistreatment and neglect of this land and it's waters. Collective grief and subsequent discussion about Indigenous land management versus settler colonial land practices forced many Australians to not only reconsider how precious and vulnerable the environment around us is, but also to consider how colonisation and endemic mismanagement continues to influence and change the landscape.

In a time when Australia is about to enter another bushfire season, and in view of climate change heavily impacted by colonisation and colonial practices, it is necessary to reflect on our relationship with the environment and on how we represent the continuing changing and sensitive relationships with the landscape. Critical landscape painting can occupy a place in the ongoing urgent question of how land is represented in Australia, and how through visual language, we can de-structure, dismantle, break, and disrupt what has been constructed to maintain colonisation, in order to confront the urgent reality we all face.

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