

EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE

Anna Johnson, Sydney, 2012

Landscape is the central medium of the impossible. This must be the reason that Cezanne painted Mont Saint Victoire over and over in his dogged meticulous assault. The scale of landscape, the physical solidity and the mass is impossible to compress into two dimensions. The impression, the stain left on the eye by the view, is forced into a creative distortion, a magnificent reduction of the whole. Unlike cartography or wide-angle photography or even satellite surveillance, which all lend an illusion of possession, the act of representing the spatial reality of nature in paint remains a stubborn entity. The scene continues where the canvas ends and the mutability of light and the illusion of perspective only serve to loosen our grasp. The experience of the landscape in Australian painting contains some of these knots of impenetrable dissatisfaction even though we have been led to believe the terrain is simple to recognise and easy to celebrate as an epic scene or a signature palette.

A shorthand in terms of spectrum has been developed for the different zones of a huge terrain. The coast is green. The centre is red and the sky, harbours, rivers and lakes are every shade of violet and blue. Such conventions have given rise to an artificial sense of the familiar. By virtue of landscape painting dominating most other genres in Australian art we have internalised a Fairweather mangrove or a Williams outcrop as the 'actual' terrain. Abstractions of the most famous landmarks as oddly the reality of the Australian outback has been made more famous by paintings than photography. We know the bush as much from a Russell Drysdale one horse town in red ochre as we do from a completely psychedelic rendering by James Gleeson. Most of us have to admit it doesn't matter where the line melts from fact into hallucination, we'll never go there.

Expeditions to the desert used to be mediated to the general population by the journals of explorers. So many of these smacked of pain and futility. If a lingering reluctance to probe our interior (for curiosity or even leisure) persists it might owe to the hard tales etched into our history. Who would follow Sturt with his long boat dragged by a dray across the rocks and sand searching for an inland sea? The compulsion to see Australia is limited by the perception that there is 'nothing out there', a fact upheld by the physical size of the central desert and a general ignorance about what this terrain contains. In this century we no longer look to explorers to mediate, furnish or satisfy our ambivalence, fears or vague curiosity about the bush and outback. This role instead falls to writers and artists and each generation brings a very different view. Some painters interrogate one landscape over and over and make it their griffe. Guy Maestri is not on this trajectory. A passionate ecologist with a dispassionate relationship to media, his connection to the Australian scene is not literal. He doesn't pretend to forge an integral or iconic image by connecting with the land. If anything his most successful paintings convey a vague discomfort, a very real sense of not belonging at all and instead simply watching the scene in a state of apprehension, static wonderment and doubt.

When Maestri drove into the Tanami desert his initial impression was one of emptiness and monotonous grandeur. For a coast dweller the desert represents a confronting lack of shelter and almost zero sanctuary. For a painter there is equally nowhere to hide. The pictorial conventions offered by furrows of foliage, cloud and shadow, hillocks, valleys and glades all seem evinced by an earth that seems to erupt with a violent enormity of scale and smother with its dinosaur hum of silence. Nothing leads to nowhere, as the artist puts it: "you drive for eleven hours just to get the beginning of where you might be going which all looks the same to start with". Maestri describes his encounters with the Central desert as simultaneously 'completely alien' and 'overwhelmingly familiar'. His response was to create hundreds of small works on paper, tracking the enormity into smaller fragments. The drawings were not preparatory; no paintings were based on them. And instead they may have operated as a journal, providing a map to an environment the artist was slow to relate to.

This journey was one of several Maestri took into the bush over two years of travelling and painting. And each terrain created subtly different work. The works from the Tanami desert were deliberate exercises in simplicity. A reply in part to the story telling process of indigenous painting, Maestri was impressed by the rough immediacy of painting in desert communities and he applied (if not the mythology) then definitely the speed of local style to his work. And so, a magnificent ridge (in a painting like "Mount Wedge 3") becomes as abbreviated as a child's drawing of a breaking wave. An eternity of scrub is indicated by a scumble of lines and colour is anti-literal, the sage green belly in the body of a desert landscape could infer the dry grass beneath your feet or miles and miles of raw vista. The confusion of scale gives the sense that the only way to maintain purchase on an endless horizon is to collapse perspective altogether. Indirectly the very distinct relationship to time engaged by the elders of this landscape bears some relation on this merge of perception between near and far. As Maestri tells it: "When we drove through the Tanami the community elders who were hosting us pointed out many landmarks that told important stories but these stories were not mapped clearly, they could have happened in dreamtime, ancestral time or real time. No one asked. It remained unclear."

The outback at Mutawintji was something else again, set on the precipice between far western N.S.W. and central Australia this is the territory of Burke and Wills and a far more fertile desert landscape studded with wildflowers, gorges and snaking river tributaries. The challenge for an artist here was in fact all of the many signposts to the sublime: violet sunsets, red river gums, sparkling waterfalls, bush arcadia. To avoid the re-creation of picture post cards Maestri cleaved into the scene with thick paint and a high Modernist abbreviation created by striated colour applied straight from the tube to the canvas or sliced on with a rapid brush or swiping palette knife. These work seem wetter, literally, but also more graphic and geometrically violent. Many were painted in the studio simply because materials were impossible to transport so deep into the bush and because Maestri had no intention of painting "portraits of trees and rocks". As an artist who began in large-scale abstraction, the foundation of most of his works is rooted within compositional dynamics, a matter of paint first and subject second. This is especially true of the Mutawintji landscapes where the dramatic rock formations and gushing streams of water ("Fall No.6") seem to owe as much to Hans Hoffman and Clifford Still as they do to Tom Roberts.

In a spirit of ongoing experimentation this new collection of paintings also includes works created on an easel in the landscape. Those rendered around the riverbanks near Hill End bear the humid intimacy where rocks meet water with deep shadow and trees drain the sky of light. The compositions Maestri created in this terrain are more immediate, compressing the view without a liberating strip of sky, and the prevailing feels like a cold dusk. It's an atmosphere that seems uncomfortably close. And this sensation increases when small forest and river scenes are studded together in inverted duets. Playing with the idea of a reflection in a body of water, the small double canvases throw up different facets of the same view: hazy, abstracted, simplified or roughed up into cruder tones. It's in these small works (such as "Pool No.2") that the conventions of landscape get thrown about, the sky falling in the river bed, the mountain diving beneath the clouds, tree-tops forming root networks, and horizon be damned.

Modern landscape painting has to interrogate classical conventions, or at the very least toy with them to retain traction. The challenge of painting a scene considered traditionally beautiful (like a meadow in a butter commercial) is to shatter the potential for the merely pleasing image. The Southern Highlands of N.S.W. is exactly the sort of pastoral that soothed a colonial eye and continues to represent rural Australia in the general imagination. Maestri's response to such sodden turf is to use the bare canvas to indicate light, bodies of water and sky (in works such as "Burrawang No. 2" and "Burrawang No.3") and, unlike Constable, the paint is thick, fast, raw and impatient. The vertical scale of these works creates a static feeling, more like a painting from a blurred photograph and the distance between the viewer and the scene is uniform in each image, creating a formality and random sense of sequence. These works owe something to European art but not in the classical sense. There is some element of detachment at play here, like a Richter portrait, that obstructs the strong chance of kitsch evoked by familiar scenes. In this vein the palette Maestri utilises is cold, almost muddy, anti-lyrical: A grunge alternative to Watteau's glade or Frederick McCubbin's hazy gum forests. Paint, on the central palette of his studio, has mounted up and grown dirty, like our memory of the 'real bush' and the painter seems reluctant to bathe each stilted scene in faithful tones. "Green," says this artist, "is the hardest thing. Green is bloody impossible." But of course we accept this as given. Landscape, is also inherently impossible. And that is why it will always pose a taunting challenge to painting and remain critical in every sense.