

IN THE WESTERN DISTRICT

The renowned landscape artist Guy Maestri was invited by the Friends of Hamilton Gallery to be Artist in Residence and to paint his interpretive impressions of the sweeping pastoral plains of Victoria's Western District. The Director of Hamilton Gallery Sarah Schmidt opened the doors of the Gallery and of the Southern Grampians Shire town to Guy.

From his base in inner city Sydney, from a cosmopolitan, coastal, capital city Guy Maestri embarks on a series of journeys into the disparate landscape areas of Australia; he goes bush. Both the inherent movement and explorative motion of these journeys and the road itself are recurring motifs in Guy's life and work and are reflected as such in his extensive body of work. Studio paintings of roadkill depicting brilliantly coloured native birds plucked from life before their time. There are paintings of roadfind too like a disheveled dilapidated Louis XVI fauteuil with the stuffing knocked out of it found by the side of the road. But then the Winner of the 2009 Archibald Prize for his portrait of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and the Winner of the 2013 New South Wales Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize packs up an easel and he travels.

From being set "on a path" at the old gold rush town of Hill End in the central tablelands of New South Wales in 2007 when his friends practically pushed Guy outdoors to paint, Guy has embraced painting "en plein air", painting alone in the bush in the open air. There have been journeys through the outback of central Australia, to the Tanami Desert where it was a "privilege and education" for Guy to spend time in Aboriginal communities and which elicited from him a volume of work of hundreds of small works on paper. The search for the essence of place on each of these painting voyages evokes a unique visual response to the disparate landscapes. Now it was time to visit the Western Volcanic Plains stretching from Geelong to Portland, the third largest volcanic plains in the world. This area of fertile soil, undulating pasture, of volcanoes, scoria cones and crater lakes is the landscape of Australia Felix discovered by Major Mitchell and depicted by Eugene von Guerard, Louis Buvelot and Thomas Clark. Arthur Streeton painted the Grampians and the Great Ocean Road coast later in the 1920s. What would be the impact of the Western District on Guy Maestri?"

Guy Maestri's over-riding impression of the Western District is that it is "open" and his work of it is imbued by this sense of vista, of openness, to display an expansive uplifting almost imperceptibly optimistic quality. So is it surprising that Guy's response was to go large?

After initial sketches and as his confidence increased Guy moved to larger canvases, painting on canvases approximately 2.5 metres by 2 metres, the largest he could fit in to his mobile studio on wheels, his van. Spending five to six hours outside a day painting, sometimes Guy joined 2 canvases together to form a more monumental diptych of a piece. Some of these canvases were reworked by Guy back at his temporary studio in Hamilton. At the Open Studio when Guy showcased his work to date and discussed locations and painting techniques with artists and all who were interested in art, the question was asked "Before the end of your stay, will three canvases be joined together to form a triptych?"

And then there were the trees, the 500 year old gum trees which have a statuesque dignity about them. As the plains are sparsely populated with trees it throws into highlight the form of each tree and imbues it with an individualistic character. The trees are arranged in the landscape as if they had been planted in the Gardenesque or Picturesque manner in a park. Of course Hans Heysen painted trees but from South Australia not the Western District, which is another country, another state. Guy has literally painted intense personal portraits of his red gums.

Another major tenet of Guy's response to the area was that it was "active" and this is reflected in the robust vitality of his work. The fertile volcanic soil is some of Australia's finest grazing land and the images that Guy has painted of bales of hay, of silos and of a hay wagon loaded with hay are abstract expressionistic shapes taken from working productive "active" farms. There is no haunting

melancholy here but indications of impending action. Even Guy's rendition of an abandoned railway bridge conveys not desolation but a sense of gentle decline, as if the bridge is nestling softly into the landscape and was placed there solely as a picturesque ruin to please the eye and form part of Guy's composition.

Guy's roots are in large scale abstraction and the robust shapes of silos and hay bales proved ideal components for him to paint. Guy draws on shapes and blocks, crafting them in a muscular spacial fashion to create a sense of arrangement that perfectly encapsulates both the object itself and its ineffable essence. The suggestive simplification resonates in the mind and we know exactly what we are looking at because we have seen it before.

With Guy, the paint itself is always of intense importance, almost as important as the image. Guy's paintings of the Western District are in oil on linen with impasto surfaces, the paint being applied so lavishly and richly at times that it may take up to two years to dry. When viewed at the Open Studio, the table holding Guy's paints resembled not so much the table of an artist as that of a d-i-y enthusiast with implements that would have been more at home in a handyman's shed.

Yet it is in this compelling use of colour that Guy's arresting strength lies to convey the essence of area. "He's got it, he's got the colours" was a much heard refrain at the Gallery from those who are grounded in and deeply attached to this area. Yes there are vague reminiscences of Streeton's palette but how could there be otherwise when these two top class painters are painting a similar locale? Guy's colours are mesmerising. Even the greens, and green is always the hardest colour.

Then there is the "light". In the Western District there is a certain sort of light in the late afternoon and early evening before twilight arrives that infuses the landscape with a certain hue. It was in this moment of mellow delight that Guy added the top layer to his plein air paintings, the highlights and the shadows. The drawing towards the close of painting after hours in the field coincided with the best part of the day and the thickness of paint produced the immediacy of finishing a fresco.

Since his early years in country New South Wales Guy has been fascinated by the flora of place and as an interested ecologist he identified this afternoon light and pondered its origins. Is it the reflection of the sun on the rich volcanic soil, the plants that grow there, the seeds that disseminate in the air? With Guy, what you get is no mere surface depiction but an image understanding its ecology. He does his research. Whatever it is, Guy has encapsulated this overwhelming sense of serenity in his works of practically Turner-esque pre-Impressionist luminosity. Walking into the massed exhibition of Guy's paintings the overriding impact is palpable and almost overwhelming and is like taking a walk through a rural realm.

Helen Annett, 2016