

ANITA TRAVERSO GALLERY

Opening Speech *Of Remnant Tracts*

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I have known Ewen for some years now since I came to work at the University of Ballarat and certainly known of his work prior to that. And although I have just met Melissa tonight I am immediately struck by the connection between these two artists on a number of levels. They have been working at the Horsham campus of the University for some years Melissa teaching photography and Ewen, visual arts more broadly including painting and drawing. So I am very honoured to be asked to make some opening comments. *Of remnant tracts* brings together two artists whose passion for the land in the north west of Victoria, the Wimmera, is palpable, and whose expression of that passion although very different in the media and form is united in an aesthetic that reaches beyond the immediately visible to the allusive and alluring.

You may be tuning in to the weekly episode on the ABC of *The Art of Australia* presented by the august Edmund Capon. In the last episode Capon dealt with the fundamental shifts that occurred in the art of Sydney Nolan when he was stationed in north-western Victoria with the Australian Army during the second world war. The impact of being, as he explains - "surrounded by flat dry farming country, its endless skies pierced only by grain silos" was immediate and powerful. Nolan sought to create an innovative response to the wide, flat expanses of the Wimmera and the rest is history.

Now much of *The Art of Australia* is a sort of Art History 101 – the sort of basic Australian Art History, which is fairly well established in terms of the narrative of the main stream. However, what I particularly like about the series are the connections that Capon makes between the chronological highlights of Australian Art and contemporary art practice. The series was obviously filmed some time ago but the producers missed an opportunity here because this exhibition would have provided a wonderful example of both the continuity of those ideas and the realisation of a shared vocabulary. There is also, across time and generations, the same passion for place, the character of the land itself and sense of wonderment and delight in the aesthetics of the landscape.

The other significant link that these artists share with Nolan is the deep appreciation of Australian Aboriginal artists. Nolan would later comment that it is the Aborigines who are the great Australian artists, possibly in recognition of the expression of their spiritual connection to the land and their view of the land in non-western terms, that is without the proverbial horizon, foreground and background - painting country with an aerial viewpoint.

The works in this exhibition have a dialectical engagement with these influences and sources of inspiration. The aerial view of the landscape made possible for us today in ways that Australian Aborigines intuited in centuries past is realised in the photographic works of Melissa Powell. These photographs represent enigmatic, frequently poetic views of the land. Works such as *Another Mile of Silence* show the vast tracts of land nuanced in colour and tone by man-made marks, perhaps a one could say the scarring, of agricultural activity. These fields are punctuated only by the structures that facilitate man's domestic life – yet man himself is absent. The silence that comes from that absence resonates across the vast space. That sense of vastness is everywhere about us particularly in works such as *The Giving Tree* which initially conveys a sense that we are dealing with a human scale but translates, on closer viewing, to a confluence of marks, tracks, in a field of yellow and brown.

Utilising other media Ewen Ross similarly responds to the land in evocative ways drawing on the factual and geographic to elicit the aesthetic and the spiritual. The very materiality of Ewen's work utilises the density and fabric of plywood,

which is specially prepared, inscribed and embossed to create the forms of the land. As Ewen comments these forms tell a narrative of the land itself, a narrative that is both timeless and timely. By this I mean the access to the essence, the spirit as it were, of the land that comes from its formation and evolution and timely because, as we gain knowledge of the changes that we have wrought on the landscape it is now even more important to recognise the beauty and fragility of the land.

People here will know Ewen's work and the scope and breadth of his previous exhibitions. Throughout the years you will have seen the continued exploration of texture – the sense is created that the surface has a very tactile quality and that by very careful looking the layers beneath the surface can be perceived. It is those layers that reward contemplation and reveal more information lurking below. It seems misplaced to call the ply that Ewen works on a "support" in the normal sense of the word. Ewen engraves into the ply, burning through and into the layers, then adds to the layers by laminating an additional 2-ply layer. The paint adds to this, further building up layers of information on the surface and, as Ewen himself explains, moves an image from the factual to the visceral. *West Wail* triptych and *Ormiston Creek* triptych, for example track the creeks and winding furrows of the landscape but also immerse the viewer in a vision of land and air, where beginning and end merge and the earth is abstracted and shaped by the aesthetics of colour and tone, line and mark, form and formlessness.

This is a wonderful exhibition and if we now, like Edmund Capon, could bring together the art historical, the geographical understanding of the landscape, the context of time and place, and the keen awareness of Aboriginal art and culture – bring it all together here through the wonders of television – Ewen Ross's works and Melissa Powell's works would be a testament to the continuity of that rich vein in Australian art dealing with land, its forms, its connection with identity, and its essence in both aesthetic and spiritual terms.

So it is with great pleasure that I congratulate both of the artists here tonight, Ewen Ross and Melissa Powell, and declare the exhibition, *Of Remnant Tracts*, formally open.