

## *Painted Landscape: Whispering the Flame*

An exhibition by Paula Payne April 2019

In Joan Lindsay's famous novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the Australian bush landscape is an enigmatic space where time is suspended. Past, present and future don't exist. They are subsumed by eternity. Human subjects—schoolgirls—perform conventional social actions that barely leave a trace on the surface of the earth. Alongside the land's mystery, solidity and endurance, their behaviour appears surreal. Through its symbolic and spiritual power, the earth strangely absorbs and vanishes them. The metaphysical potency of the natural world is at its most concentrated in the ancient geological forms. In amongst the rocky outcrops on the climb up Mount Macedon, a portal of energy beckons the girls away.

The European-derived tradition of Australian landscape—in film, art, literature and in our national mythology—is always framed in terms of anxieties and threats. Not only in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, but in the disappearance of baby Azaria, the lost child in the bush of Frederick McCubbin, Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*, the flattening of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy, and the fires and floods that regularly ravage this land. Even *Mad Max* tells us that when human civilisation ends, it will exit via the Australian landscape. Our country is the setting for the end of the world.

Paula Payne's art works explore the existing capacity for unease, fear and disquiet within Australian landscape traditions. But she chooses to work against the colonial and twentieth century narratives that pit vulnerable human subjects against the strength, terror and relentless hardships of nature. Instead, her work shows it is the natural world that is at risk. And far from seeing the earth as a monolith—potent, solid and enduring—she reveals it is obscured, fragmented, unstable and tenuous. Unlike the dominant White Australian landscape narrative, in her work, human beings are not separated from the land and overshadowed by its power. We are entwined with it; it provides our bedrock and our life support.

The exhibition *Painted landscape: whispering the flame* spans medium to large-scale paintings displayed alongside selectively-coloured found plant forms. The main body of work was produced as part of Paula Payne's ongoing doctoral research in Fine Art. It is supplemented by studies made *en plein air* while in residence at the Tweed Regional Gallery and Margaret Olley Art Centre in Northern New South Wales earlier this year.

Payne's images reveal glimpses of geological forms, other topographical features, plant motifs, built structures and some ambiguous shapes we suspect may even be human body parts. Western landscape traditions (including, for example, the modes of picturesque, realist, impressionist, romantic and sublime) have limited capacity to express the shifts that

climate change causes in the natural environment. Some of these focus on the cyclical aspect of nature, depicting a single season through climatic indicators (for example, scenes of trees bare in the Winter or under blossom in the Spring) or cultural ones (like Autumn crop harvests). But climate change disrupts these seasonal cycles. The artist needs to look outside of these landscape codes and find a different means to express changes in nature that are erratic and jarring rather than predictable and recurrent.

Even the symbolist approach to landscape—focused as it is on profound and subjective meanings communicated through the natural world—is too obsessed with conveying spiritual intensity to lend itself to this purpose. And while romantic and sublime landscape painters know how to sing out the drama of majestic landscapes and the cataclysm of short-lived weather effects, their vocabulary would be overkill for an artist like Paula Payne who chooses to depict slow and subtle environmental transitions that elicit human foreboding.

Instead, the artist has had to reach past the historical limitation of the landscape genre and feel out her own unique visual grammar for expressing unease. She uses partial abstractions to achieve this. Her depictions of the environment don't describe spaces that are logical, continual or seamless. She employs a collage-like strategy of fragmentation and layering. Some sections on her canvases are painterly monochrome areas of colour that appear parallel with the picture plane, while other parts are fragments of figuration. Where these segments meet one another, they create deliberate ruptures across the pictorial field. This acknowledges the landscape genre as a careful construction based on conventions and codes. Two of the works even take the form of diptychs wherein the vertical break between one panel and the other enacts a tear in the picture plane. The breaches and fissures give symbolic expression to disruptions, jolts and slippages in the physical world. Sometimes the artist pushes this abstraction to the extreme: an entire or partial surface is striped by alternating vertical colour bands. The striping motif—one colour strobing after another—acts as a cipher for the concept of change, alternation and flux. Irregular stripes are a pure expression of the abstract concept of 'variability'.

Linear perspective doesn't really appear. And there is no flat ground to provide a stable base in these landscapes—because rising sea levels guarantee no firm topography. There's rarely anything resembling a horizon line, except in some of her *plein air* painting studies from the Tweed. But even then, Payne tilts up the horizontal topography towards the viewer as if the ground is climbing up the painting's surface.

The artist is far more interested in earth than sky. In many ancient languages, the name for human beings is synonymous with the word for 'earth'\* while the name for gods relates to the word for 'sky'. And Payne depicts humans embodied and embedded in the land that names them. This reveals the symbiosis between human beings and the environment that

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\* Linguistic research suggests 'earth' was *d<sup>h</sup>éǵhōm* and 'earth beings' *d<sup>h</sup>ǵ<sup>h</sup>mónes* in the language that was the common ancestor of all Indo-European languages. This became *ǵ<sup>h</sup>mónes*. And when spreading through Europe, it first became *hemō* (pl. *hemones*) then appears in Latin as *homō*. The Latin languages give us the Spanish *hombre*, French *homme*, Italian *uomo*, and Romanian *om*. The plural of *homō* is *hominēs*. And the adjectival form gives us *hūmānus* which is only a short step from the English language noun *human*.

provides their life-support. In one panel of the diptych *Fragment II*, we see part of a linear network that might represent human arteries, and on the other panel is a depiction of a branching structure that may be either a plant's inflorescence or the bronchi of a lung. The same work also features a softly faceted biological form. It could equally be a bodily organ, a flower bud, or a seed pod. In *Fragment I*, a motif appears to be simultaneously a leafy stem and a human rib cage. Elsewhere in the same painting is a reddish shape that may be an organ. A spleen or liver? Its surface is the colour of oxidised blood and a white lattice partly shrouds it; reminiscent of caul fat.

Even when pictorial elements overlap, this is not a device for expressing spatial depth. We don't know the scale of anything and can't be sure there is any fore, middle or background in Payne's treatment of space. A ring of white posts in one of the paintings appears to levitate. The laws of physics do not apply. A leaf or a seed pod is not necessarily larger or smaller than a tower. This is especially true of Payne's ongoing series *Architecture for Unknown Worlds* wherein solidly modelled structures are portrayed in front of, or behind, thin linear elements. Some shapes are assertively tangible and others are tentative. In the early images within this series, flimsy architectural depictions of famous seed banks seem to float. They appear as hopeful but feeble attempts to hold off doomsday's reckoning. In all the paintings, the ghostly linear elements suggest something that is barely beginning to materialise, or already in retreat. These thin drawings aren't part of the same physical realm as Payne's chunky, solid and faceted forms. And none of them follows the rules of Euclidian geometry.

But their function in the paintings was never to articulate three-dimensional space. They are there to interact with one another allegorically. They represent concepts like words side-by-side in a sentence; they symbolise elements like motifs side-by-side in a story. Glazed shrouds of colour may refer to atmospheric lighting effects. Red elements suggest heat and flame and global warming, as well as blood and organ meat. Blue sections might symbolise water, sky and ice, and hint at weather patterns—perhaps even melted glaciers or polar ice caps. Linear forms in the paintings may represent latitudinal or surveyors' lines, the ridges of geological forms or ley lines. But these are only vague possibilities. The colours and shapes are not tied firmly to literal referents. They may equally represent overlaid memories or half-formed glimpses and ideas. Veiled impressions may be views seen from behind a barrier—an image closed-off from the past, or an apparition of the future.

Alongside the paintings, Payne shows three-dimensional objects that began life as the cast-off inflorescences of the piccabeen palm (*archontophoenix cunninghamiana*), an Australian plant native to the wet subtropics. On the living plant, they form the stringy network that supports the bunched red fruits. After they drop, these desiccated forms appear strangely like three-dimensional drawings. On the palm, they hang down from a stem, typically branching out wider near the top and wicking to a point below. But when they are turned upside down we suddenly see in their shape the upthrust of a tongue of flame. The artist painted parts of the piccabeen bits in red aerosol. An additional few, she sprayed black. These dried plants are already flammable but their red and black colouring encourages us to project onto them images of burning fires and the carbon aftermath.

Combustion is one means by which greenhouse emissions and global warming occurs and this connection underlies the artist's choice of sub-title for the exhibition: *whispering the flame*. Whispering something into being is a kind of cajoling. And this is an apt metaphor for how Paula Payne slowly coaxes from her materials a unique visual language for expressing climate change. But whispering can originate in uncanny and otherworldly voices that slow-stir anxiety and madness in us. The constant whispering of escalating climate fears is an incitement to insanity; the mood of these art works is quiet and disquiet.

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