



Metaphysical Territory

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In this essay I explore the metaphysical nature of landscape as manifestation of force, which I contend takes both figurative and non-figurative form through painting. From a philosophical perspective, as Elizabeth Grosz observes in relation to Gilles Deleuze, landscape is ‘that space revealed by sensation, which has no fixed coordinates but transforms and moves as a body passes through it’.¹ I suggest that the space of the north, through the painting event, is experienced as a transitory state in which sensation becomes landscape. The painter dissolves into the milieu and momentary fragments of vibratory force become the artwork itself.

As a point of departure I propose the notion that much contemporary representation of landscape is concerned with the sublime, which in broad terms reflects a gap between the artist’s imagination and representation, as evidenced in the 2008/9 touring exhibition *Enchanted Forest*², and in *the Wilderness*³ exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I argue that myth is a symptom of the sublime, and that it is often assigned meaning intended to confront reality and question the nature of the human psyche. In addressing the idea of myth in landscape, I propose that direct observation might enable the painter to

reveal and connect with this unknown metaphysical dimension – an arguably incommensurable force – by working directly on-site in response to the sensation of the country. This opens up the possibility for the imaginary to be experienced as actual, rather than virtual, and therefore, I suggest, rendered visible. Particularly in the context of the north, I speak of the incommensurable in terms of force and sensation, and use contemporary philosophy, notably that of Deleuze, to make sense of the landscape as a site of affect.

In order to elucidate myth and the metaphysical as actual rather than virtual, I refer to key exponents of the region and also briefly draw on the current collaborative printmaking project undertaken by Darwin-based printmaker Basil Hall in collaboration with Angus and Rose Cameron of Nomad Art Productions. The project is entitled *Djalkiri: We are standing on their names - Blue Mud Bay*, which began on-site in October 2009. Blue Mud Bay is the home of the Yithuwa Madarrpa people in Eastern Arnhem Land. This project involved Yolngu artists Djambawa Marawili, Marrerra Marawili, Liyawaday Marawili, Marrnyula Munungurr and Mulkun Wirrpanda, working alongside visiting artists Fiona Hall, John Wolseley, Jorg Schmeisser and Judy Watson, together with printmaker Basil Hall,



P21: Caroline Rannersberger, *Becoming cyclone*, 2010, pigment, beeswax, resin on cedar wood panels, 138 x 222cm (each panel 27.5 x 74cm; total 15 panels). Image courtesy the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney.¹

P22: 1/ Caroline Rannersberger, *Swamp beast stampede* 21 panel, 2008, printing and painting on paper, 150 x 770cm. Image courtesy the artist.

2/ Albrecht Dürer, *The Monstrous sow of Landser*, etching print, 1496.

P23: 1/ Visiting artists welcomed at a smoking ceremony by the Yilpara community at Blue Mud Bay, East Arnhem Land, October 2009. Photograph by Peter Eve.

2/ John Wolseley working on a compositional arrangement of objects he collected during the workshop at Blue Mud Bay in October 2009. Photograph by Peter Eve.

3/ Judy Watson discussing her proofs from the *Blue Mud Bay* project with printmaker Basil Hall, Darwin.

ethno-biologist Glenn Wightman, anthropologist Howard Morphy and photographer Peter Eve. As Angus Cameron recalls, 'together they camped, cooked, walked the country, shared stories and made art'.⁴

Through this project, I refer particularly to the direct relationship the artists Judy Watson and John Wolseley develop with the country of Blue Mud Bay.

By working directly on site in the remote north of Australia, I suggest that myth and the incommensurable are not only represented, they are in fact directly experienced, and as a result can be rendered visible in the form of painting. Myth as a site of incommensurability abounds and is real. It is visible and palpable. It builds the link between the imaginary landscape of the virtual and the experienced landscape of the actual. It is the world of traditional Indigenous painters, a metaphysical space in which, according to curator Margie West, commenting on the work of West Arnhem painter Wamud Namok AO, spirits exist 'not just as metaphysical notions but as palpable manifestations in the material world'. This is a world where the artist up until his recent passing called out to spirits and acknowledged their presence as he walked through his country, Kabulwarnamyo: '[...] I can see you all, I can see you here in my country, you Wakkewakken [legless honey spirits]'.⁵

Given the difference between representation of myth in Western landscape painting and metaphysical presence in traditional Indigenous painting, it would seem there is a gap in how myth is experienced and represented. In general terms, the latter experiences myth as lived reality and therefore experiences force directly, whilst the former creates an imaginary world in an attempt to grasp what lies beyond clear vision. The concept of the unknown dimension in a global sense is referred to by contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who in his keynote lecture at the 2009 Making Sense conference held at the University of Cambridge, identified a need to 'rediscover, in an as yet unknown mode, what those who lived in myths knew in a totally different mode: there is a universal communication and participation of beings, that is to say of bodies in the world'.⁶

I therefore ask to what extent can myth and the metaphysical, as a philosophical concern in the contemporary Western world of landscape painting, express the incommensurable as a real experience rather than as a virtual concept? In asking this, I concede that, to borrow the words of art historian Sasha Grishin in relation to John Wolseley's practice, this line of thought might at times seem 'eccentric and bordering on the abyss of mysticism'.⁷

However in acknowledging this, I also emphasise the significance of mysticism in traditional Indigenous painting in opening out contemporary painting practices towards metaphysical concepts beyond European paradigms of landscape painting. In doing so, I call for a direct approach to landscape painting and, like Christopher Allen commenting on the *Wilderness* exhibition, I believe that 'to make landscapes, you have to look at a world beyond your own uncomfortable yet exquisite interstices'; you have to convey a sense of that 'ontological recognition of being that is the experience of nature'.⁸

Working directly on-site, I sense that force arises from sensation as if emerging from within a gap of incommensurability. Within this gap I sense a fusion



between imaginary vision and the physical experience of direct observation: the space between the virtual and the actual. It seems as if the metaphysical relationship between the land and the artwork and the painter dissolves into one continuum. As Deleuze says in relation to writing, in the middle, between things:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) [the painting/artwork] and a field of subjectivity (the author) [the artist]. Rather ... connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book [a painting] has no sequel, nor the world as its object, nor one or several authors as its subject.⁹

In the tropical north, I suggest that this space is fluid. The tripartite division between the painter, the painting and the painted almost dissolves like an endless cycle of humidity into rain into monsoon into cyclone into chaos. This is somewhat like the eerie silence inside the eye of the cyclone, or an open expanse of oceanic force beyond navigational safety, perhaps similar to the experience endured by Ian Fairweather on his raft journey from Darwin to Timor in 1952.¹⁰ Force also seems to dissolve into a continuum in the timeless expanse of the stone country, where the rock itself seems to resonate like the vibratory tones of the didgeridoo. Indeed John Firth-Smith during an artist camp in the eighties,¹¹ once declared: 'the whole of the Kakadu landscape looks the way a didgeridoo sounds.'¹²

In the north when working directly on-site, I often sense that worlds and existence itself merge like the warped continuum of a Möbius strip circle, twisted yet conjoined between the imaginary and the actual.¹³ This sense of intermingled space might also be understood through the work of John Wolseley, who, in the experiential process of making works towards his 2007 exhibition, set out 'to make a work conceived from the outside of the self', resulting in what then became a series of 'ventifacts'. By releasing and then collecting his paper in the landscape, Wolseley mused that 'these aerial texts may have dipped their wings to the buried ones below as they inscribe their own stories deep in the ground'.¹⁴ In his 2009/2010 work, *Sea wrack: Tide after Tide - Baniyala*, made as part of the Blue Mud Bay project in Arnhem Land, the resulting two-plate etching evolved similarly through Wolseley's 'frottage' system of passing the surfaces of his works across elements of the landscape, thus inviting the land to make its own mark beyond the direct hand of the artist. Cameron describes Wolseley's process:

John Wolseley engaged deeply and enigmatically with the rich coastal environment spending much time wandering, collecting and photographing. With an encyclopedic mind brimming full of ideas, experience and knowledge, he



generated images that float and breathe with the tides and seasons. Wolseley engages physically with the landscape and has developed a technique of drawing with the charcoaled extremities of burnt trees and ferns by dramatically rubbing paper against them in what he playfully describes as frottage.¹⁵

It would seem that Wolseley senses a force in the land which determines its own presence; perhaps an inherent presence of country before it does in fact become landscape. To this end, the country is liberated from its territory and becomes an artwork in its own right, beyond the constraints of form or composition as formal elements within the art making process. I believe this is how myth comes into being. Each shell, each feather, each mark leaves its trace of territory and reveals the process of becoming country before it becomes landscape. Beyond the imaginary, this country determines the look, the feel, the sensation of the artwork before the artist has yet conceived of its form: to an extent, this is the gaze looking at us, the yet unknown seeing us before we see it. Yet this gaze is far more real than imaginary. It is the force and the sensation of the land, putting itself on the surface of the artwork before the artist directly intervenes.

This experience takes place directly on-site in a location, which I suggest, challenges the painter to enter the abyss, the void, to lean into chaos and catastrophe, and to express that which cannot be seen; to render visible the invisible, an idea much deliberated by Deleuze and, in particular, by modernist painter Paul Klee as a fundamental quality of art.¹⁶ 'In art, and in painting, as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces [...] Paul Klee's famous formula – *Not to render the visible, but to render visible* – means nothing else.'¹⁷ Rendering such sensation visible makes it possible to

describe the experience inside the void; not the lack and trepidation in the face of the void, but the fullness of experience by traversing the potential chaos of the void. Such an aesthetic enables the painter, in a flight of fancy, to enter the void and to cross through, describing along the way the experience and sensation of the force.

In my practice sensation is often intangible: the breeze stirring, tidal rhythms, birdsong at dawn. Such sensation requires me to put aside subjective ideas and to enter an indeterminate zone where the painted, the breeze, the rhythm, the melody becomes something other than the figurative representation of white clouds or blue sky; of waves; of birds. The process of rendering the invisible visible requires me to allow the medium of paint to become sensation itself. The energy that exists between the painter and the painted can be extremely subtle, perceived at molecular level as a vibratory force, oscillating between perception and affect, between object and subject. As Grosz explains, sensations exist 'midway between subject and object, the point at which the one can convert into the other'. In this way, the sensation of a breeze, a movement or a sound can be momentarily expressed as a painting. The new artwork 'arrests, freezes forever, a look, a moment, [...] from the ever different chaos of temporal change, in the transitions between one percept and affect and the next'.¹⁸

Sensation can be rendered visible in a variety of incarnations, ranging from the calligraphic mark making of Fairweather to the randomly formed ventifacts created not so much by the hand of the artist, John Wolseley, but more by the forces of the landscape itself, also evident in the work of Judy Watson.¹⁹ Cameron describes her work:

Judy Watson brings to the project a powerful sense of enquiry, observation and political awareness. Her works are a tactile confluence of sea country, maps and text related to the recently successful Blue Mud Bay sea rights claim in the High Court of Australia. Through a potent expression of symbolism, history, identity and place, the works pay respect to the ancestors with imagery that is passionate and spiritual.²⁰

Watson's works made during the painting trip to Blue Mud Bay reflect the force of the ruling on the rights to tidal waters in the region. Assisted by Basil Hall, Watson brings this together with the sensibility of the local culture and the land itself by overlaying photographic excerpts from the legislation. In this way, text becomes myth, engraved into the land through a photographic etching process. Similarly, in earlier work, as observed by Sally Morgan and Tjalaminu Mia, through the loose rendering of pigment on the canvas, often placing the canvas directly on the ground and rubbing it to lift off memory of the earth's surface, Watson is able to suggest an 'aerial perspective of parched land, or a distant memory, perhaps even the materialisation of an emotion'.²¹ By working directly with natural elements and allowing their forces to largely determine the outcome, Watson is also able to bring forward the past and create a sense of ancestral presence. In responding to Indigenous issues arising from the direct location, Watson has brought forward a sense of her own personal journey, 'a unique expression of her feelings and perceptions relating to her country'.

I suggest, somewhat like the methods Watson uses, in order to experience the force of the elements and how they impact on the painting process, as Deleuze observes,

'to get the motif, that is to say the percept', it is sometimes 'necessary to lie down on the earth, like the painter does'. It is also necessary to lean into the wind, to sense the direction of the clouds, to feel the rhythmic waves as they move across the sandy ocean bed, and to bring these sensations into the milieu of painting. Thus the painter traverses both the surface of the painting and the matter of the cosmos itself, intuitively allowing a certain process to unfold of its own accord. As Deleuze says, 'the artist is a seer, a becomer'.²²

As a journey into my own ancestry I explore myth and metaphysics and draw on a range of references, including Albrecht Dürer's *Monstrous Sow of Landser* (1496), as a metaphor for force and territorialisation. Similarly I use a chimera fish image taken from a 15th century map by Cornelius de Jode, *Nova Guinea Forma & Situs* (1593), to give form to the trepidation I feel when exposed to the unknown elements, perhaps not dissimilar to the anxiety experienced by early explorers some 400 years ago. I piece together a phantasmagoric narrative; a metaphysical representation of space and an exploration of my own heritage as myth. In the epic landscape of *Swamp Beast Stampede 21 panel* (2008), Dürer's *Monstrous Sow* stampedes through the stone country of Arnhem Land as multiple, present-day feral boars, traversing country as they territorialise and deterritorialise space.²³ Similarly, in *Becoming Cyclone* (2010) I respond to the direct force of pending chaos, of the yet unknown, of the incommensurability of the void. I am on the edge of the system, and experience its force directly, like giant helicopter blades revolving in a radius of hundreds of kilometres, each time circling back to my home with a deluge of tropical rain, signaling its force and tempestuous nature. I feel the weight, I sense the force of pre-cyclonic winds shoving anvils of empty promises across the vast horizon, withholding rains for months of oppression, until it arrives with a vengeance. As I paint, I lean closer into the wind. My brush moves across the surface of the artwork as if propelled by the clouds. Pigment pools at the base of my brush, bearing down on the paper with uncontrollable atmospheric force.

Watson, in conversation with ABC presenter Virginia Trioli on the subject of lithography, reflects on the way in which atmospheric force acts directly on the image she creates on the stone: 'It's pooling water and floating tusche, which is a greasy medium, into the wash, and then, as it reticulates or dries, it leaves behind these beautiful lines, almost like the tide going out'.²⁴ The process is somewhat similar for Wolseley. In his 2007 catalogue, he observes:

As the pools dried over several hours, spidery reticulations and watermarks recorded the gradual evaporation of the liquid. As the sun dried the pools of colour the pigment in suspension thickened and began to cake and crack – for all the world in the way mud does on a dry waterhole.²⁵

To bring together the broad-reaching framework of art, myth and philosophy as landscape painting, I turn to the words of French philosopher François Zourabichvili as I once again find myself painting sensation in the remote north of Australia:

The landscape is an inner experience rather than the occasion of an echo; not the redundancy of lived experience, but the very element of a 'passage of life'. The landscape

does not return me to myself: it involves me in a becoming where the subjection is no longer coextensive with itself, where the subjective form is inadequate when faced with the unformedness of becoming.²⁶

I begin to pull my diagrammatic marks/sketched coordinates together. I battle against the wind which has already blown my paper across the beach several times today. I realise that I can only begin to paint the landscape when I feel I have become it in every cell of my being. I hold the three panels of my work together with metal clamps. I wonder if this process has brought me closer to country; closer to the void in between the virtual, imagined and the actual, the real. I wonder if by piecing the panels together I am rendering visible some sense of the force I have experienced here today. On our way back to our campsite, as we cross the salt plains between the mangrove swamps, my thoughts wander to Cézanne, and I know I can never freeze-frame the sensation of being here. I can only hope to become a form of visual consciousness of the country, in which 'the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness'.²⁷

Nowhere like in the great tracts of ancient country in remote northern Australia, where the land refuses to be silenced, is it possible to sense so acutely the physicality of country beyond form; beyond the figurative or the figural. This is the far north, where it is still possible to get lost in the madness of time beyond time, the sun bearing down with unrelenting rays of insufferable heat as it traverses country; where it is possible to suffocate under the sheer weight of ancient rock, drown in the pounding of infinitely returning waves and disappear in the lightness of being and the darkness of matter. ■

1. E. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth (The Wellek Library Lectures)*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, p.72.
2. Anushka Keey, 'The Enchanted Forest', *Artlink* 29, No. 2, 2009.
3. *Wilderness; Balnaves Contemporary: Painting*, at Art Gallery of NSW, 5 March to 23 May 2010; http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/current/wilderness_balnaves.
4. Personal email communication with Angus Cameron, 23 April 2010.
5. M West, 'Bardayal Nadjamerrek: Wild Honey Painter', *Art & Australia*, No. 46 Spring(1), 2008, pp. 120-125.
6. J-L. Nancy, 'Making Sense', keynote address for Making Sense conference, University of Cambridge, UK, 2009. This was the inaugural conference for the Making Sense movement, consolidated in collaboration with Yale University and the University of Paris.
7. Sasha Grishin, 'The Journeys of John Wolseley', *Art and Australia* 36, no. 1 (1998). Grishin is also the author of the monograph *John Wolseley: Landmarks II*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, 2008.
8. C. Allen, 'Eyes Wide Shut: *Wilderness: Balnaves Contemporary Painting*, Art Gallery of New South Wales', *The Australian*, 27 March 2010, p.12.
9. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, New York, 2008, p. 25.
10. The voyage of Fairweather is discussed in Chapter 10 of M. Bail, *Fairweather*, Murdoch Books, Sydney, 2009.
11. Under the guidance of Colin Jack-Hinton, the inaugural

camp took place in 1980. The camps continued throughout the 1980s as part of the Artist in the Field venture, recorded in D. Murray, *Artists in the Field: a Retrospective*, Darwin, Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, 2000.

12. Firth-Smith in G. Wilson, *John Firth-Smith: A Voyage That Never Ends*, Sydney, Craftsman House, Sydney, 2000, p. 105.
13. The Möbius strip is discussed by Deleuze as a continuum and a site of sense, in G. Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, Continuum, London, 2004, p. 141. It is a continuum created by joining a ribbon upon which two sides can be traversed from beginning to end without crossing over the edge.
14. John Wolseley, *Travelling West to Sunset Tank*, exhibition catalogue, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 2007.
15. Personal email communication with Angus Cameron, April 23 2010.
16. Paul Klee, 'Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar', from *Inward Vision* (1958), *Creative Credo* (1920), cited in A. Partington, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 402.
17. G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, p. 40.
18. This paragraph summarises observations by Elizabeth Grosz on forces of sensation and chaos in the process of becoming other, in Grosz, 2008: pp. 75-80.
19. From John Wolseley's essay, 'John Wolseley - Natural Selection: Mallee/Maquis (Celebrating the Bicentenary of Charles Darwin 1809 - 2009)', Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 2008. <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2008/10/16/157/> Ventifacts are referred to as sheets of paper, which, when released in the landscape 'had their own experience of the land; and the dark skeletal trees have conspired with wind, rain and sunlight to draw and mark them with strange calligraphies; and fold and curl them into a variety of sculptural forms'.
20. Written by Angus Cameron, received in personal email correspondence, 23 April 2010.
21. Tjalaminu Mia and Sally Morgan, 'Going Home to Country, Judy Watson', *Art and Australia* 41, no. 4, Winter (2004).
22. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 171.
23. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 180-181.
24. Virginia Trioli and Judy Watson, *Sunday Arts: Interview with Judy Watson*, ABC 1, 2006.
25. Wolseley, 2007.
26. François Zourabichvili in P. Patton (ed.), *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 196.
27. 'Cézanne's Doubt', 2008. Retrieved 26 February, 2009, from <http://faculty.uml.edu/rinnis/cezannedoubt.pdf>.

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