

Australian Landscape Art: The Quest For Identity and Place

Talk by Kelvin Auld, 9 April 2017, Sydney Unitarian Church

Landscape art in Australia is based on identifiable imagery, symbolism and techniques. Feelings of identity, belonging and attachment to place are socially constructed through landscape art. This can be seen in both Indigenous and European inspired landscape art.

Indigenous Art

Australian Indigenous art is the oldest continuous tradition of art in the world and includes rock painting, dot painting, rock engraving, bark paintings, carvings, sculptures, and weaving and string art.

Indigenous art usually has a mythological theme relating to the dreamtime.

“The Dreamtime is the Aboriginal understanding of the world, of its creation, and it's great stories. The Dreamtime is the beginning of knowledge, from which came the laws of existence. For survival these laws must be observed. The Dreaming world was the old time of the Ancestor Beings”.

Ref: aboriginalart.com.au/culture/dreamtime2.html

Cultural Significance of Land

Aboriginal Elders say, “The Land is Us”.

Connection to the land is at once spiritual, physical and cultural. Indigenous law and spirituality are interwoven with the land, people and creation and this forms their culture and collective identity.

Aboriginal law and life originates in and is governed by the land. The connection to the land gives indigenous people their identity and sense of belonging.

Landscape art celebrates the connection between people and their land.

Indigenous Landscape Art

Australian Indigenous culture produced a genre of aerial landscape art often titled simply “Country”. It is a type of map-like, bird’s eye view of the landscape using symbolic images and often relates to a dreamtime story.

In the past the common media used were rock, sand or body paint but the tradition is continued today in paint on canvas called “Dot Paintings”.

Dreamtime stories, when shown from a bird’s eye perspective follows the lay of the land as created by ancestral beings in their journey or during creation.

A good example of landscape art is a “Dot Painting” by Timmy Payungka Tjapangarti. “Untitled” 1989.

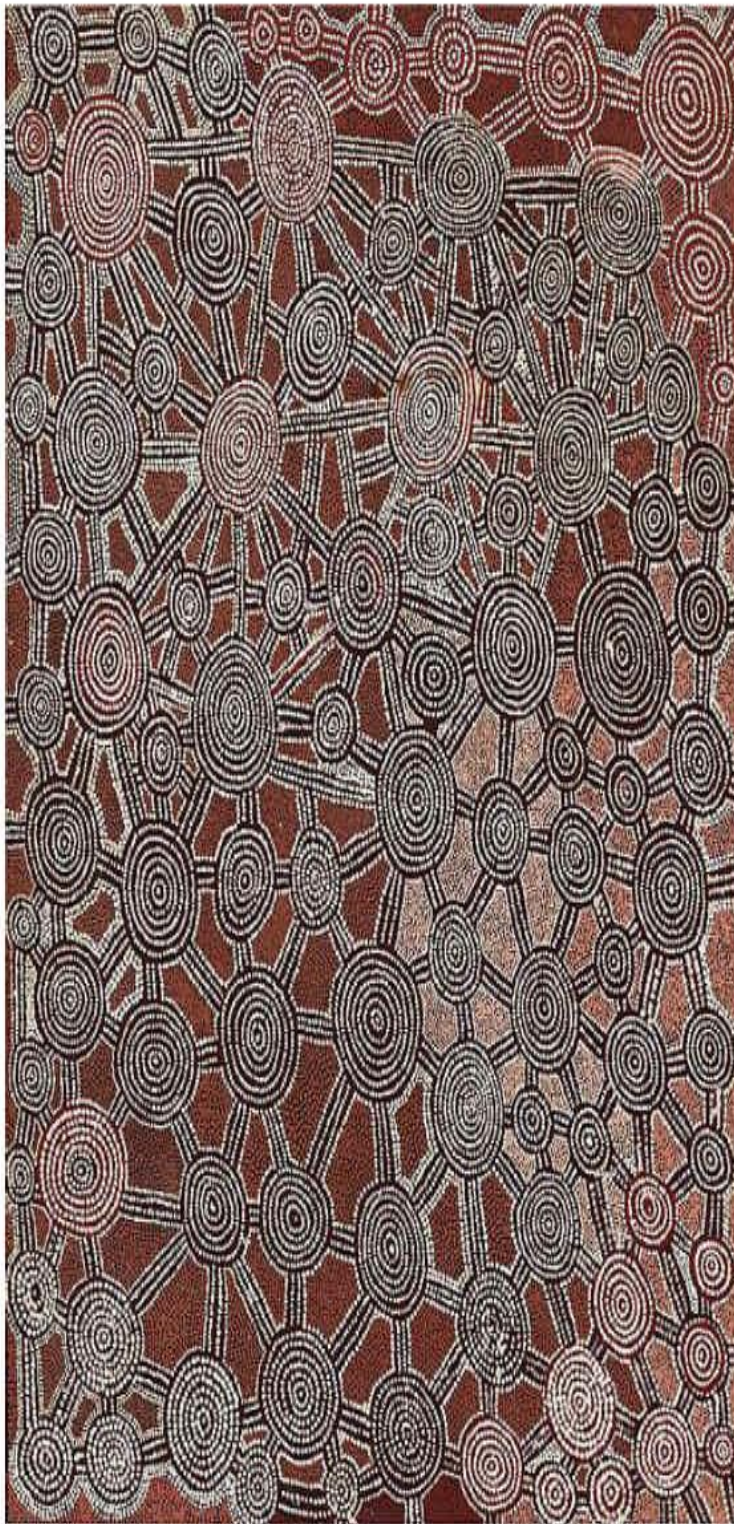


Figure 1: Timmy Payungka Tjapangarti's dot painting, *Untitled*, Kiwirrkura, Western Desert, Western Australia (1989). Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 183 x 122 cm.

European Landscape Traditions

As the European inspired landscape tradition developed in Australia from the early nineteenth century through to WW 1, artists sought to express regional characteristics of both landscapes and the identity of inhabitants as “types”. This is most clearly seen in painting where the characters of different regions, localities and districts were expressed. Early Colonial artists including Lycett and Glover used the colours, light, tones, drawing and painting techniques of Europe and Britain. They perceived the Australian environment through a European lens. Landscapes therefore looked more like those in Europe or Britain rather than the actual Australian landscape.

It wasn't until the Impressionists that landscapes began to visually reflect the actual Australian environment and landscapes as experienced by the locals.



Figure 2: Joseph Lycett's *Entrance to Sydney Harbour* (1824)

Source: Dixson Library, State Library of NSW – DL F82/16. Retrieved January 2013, from: http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/macquarie/artists/lycett/index.html.

Joseph Lycett (c.1774 – c.1825) was a portrait and miniature painter, active in Australia. Lycett specialised in topographical views of the major towns of

Australia, and some of its more dramatic landscapes. Although a convicted forger he was given a full pardon and returned to England.



Figure 3: John Glover's Natives on the Ouse River, Van Diemen's Land (1838),
Oil on canvas, 78.0 x 115.6 cm.

Source: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased with assistance from Mr and Mrs J K Bain, 1985. Retrieved January 2013, from:

<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/48.1985/>

© Art Gallery of NSW

Natives on the Ouse River, Van Diemen's Land (1838) is an idealized Utopian landscape *"informed by European notions of an Antipodean Arcadia, with Indigenous people living in a landscape unsullied by European contact."*

It is unlikely that the indigenous inhabitants of the Ouse River country - the Braylwnyer people were living in the area at that time.



Figure 4: Eugene von Guérard's Govett's Leap and Grose River Valley, Blue Mountains, New South Wales (1873), Oil on canvas, 68.5 x 106.4 cm.

Eugene von Guérard (17 November 1811 – 17 April 1901) was an Austrian-artist, who painted in Australia from 1852 until 1882. He was known for his finely detailed landscapes in the tradition of the Düsseldorf Academy of landscape painting. By the early 1860s von Guérard was recognised as the foremost landscape artist in the colonies.

He is best known for his sublime and picturesque wilderness paintings, which are remarkable for their awe-inspiring splendour, dramatic use of shadow and lighting and realistic detail. The scientific accuracy of his wilderness paintings, suggests that the artist may have been influenced by the early environmental theories of the natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt. His 'truthful representation' of nature was equally consistent with the realistic techniques taught by the Düsseldorf Academy.

In 1870 von Guerard was appointed the first Master of the School of Painting at the National Gallery of Victoria. Amongst his pupils were Frederick McCubbin and Tom Roberts. However, his the rigid adherence to grand picturesque subject matter and detailed realism that he taught gave way to the more informal and intimate style of the influential Heidelberg School in Victoria.

Australian Vernacular: The Heidelberg School

It was not until the emergence of the celebrated Heidelberg School that artists were able to capture something of the essence of the Australian landscape. Frederick McCubbin (Figure 5), Tom Roberts (Figure 6) and Arthur Streeton (Figure 7), idealised the Australian landscape and romanticised the bush tradition and the pioneer way of life. Their portrayal of the Australian landscape helped shape the country's national identity.

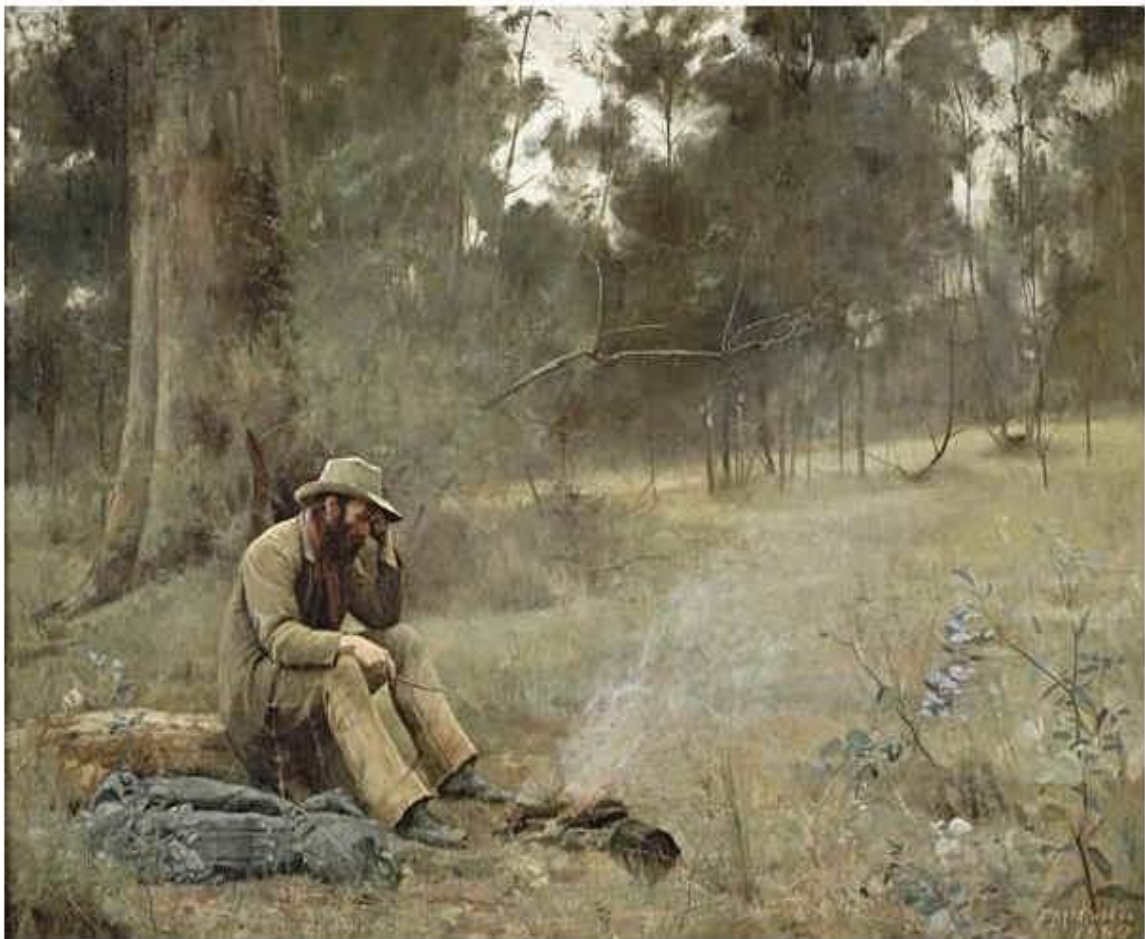


Figure 5: Frederick McCubbin's *Down on His Luck* (1889),
Oil on canvas, 145 x 183.3 x 14cm.

Down on His Luck painted by Australian artist Frederick McCubbin. It depicts a seemingly disheartened swagman, sitting by a campfire sadly brooding over his misfortune. According to an 1889 review, "*The face tells of hardships, keen and blighting in their influence, but there is a nonchalant and slightly cynical expression, which proclaims the absence of all self-pity ... McCubbin's*

picture is thoroughly Australian in spirit." The surrounding bush is painted in subdued tones, reflecting his sombre and contemplative mood.



Figure 6: Tom Roberts' *A Quiet Day on Darebin Creek* (1885), Oil on wood panel, 26.4 x 34.8 cm.

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The painting depicts an artist painting outdoors, placing him low down in the scene which has a high horizon. The use of subtle tonal colours captures the reflection of light in the waters of the creek.

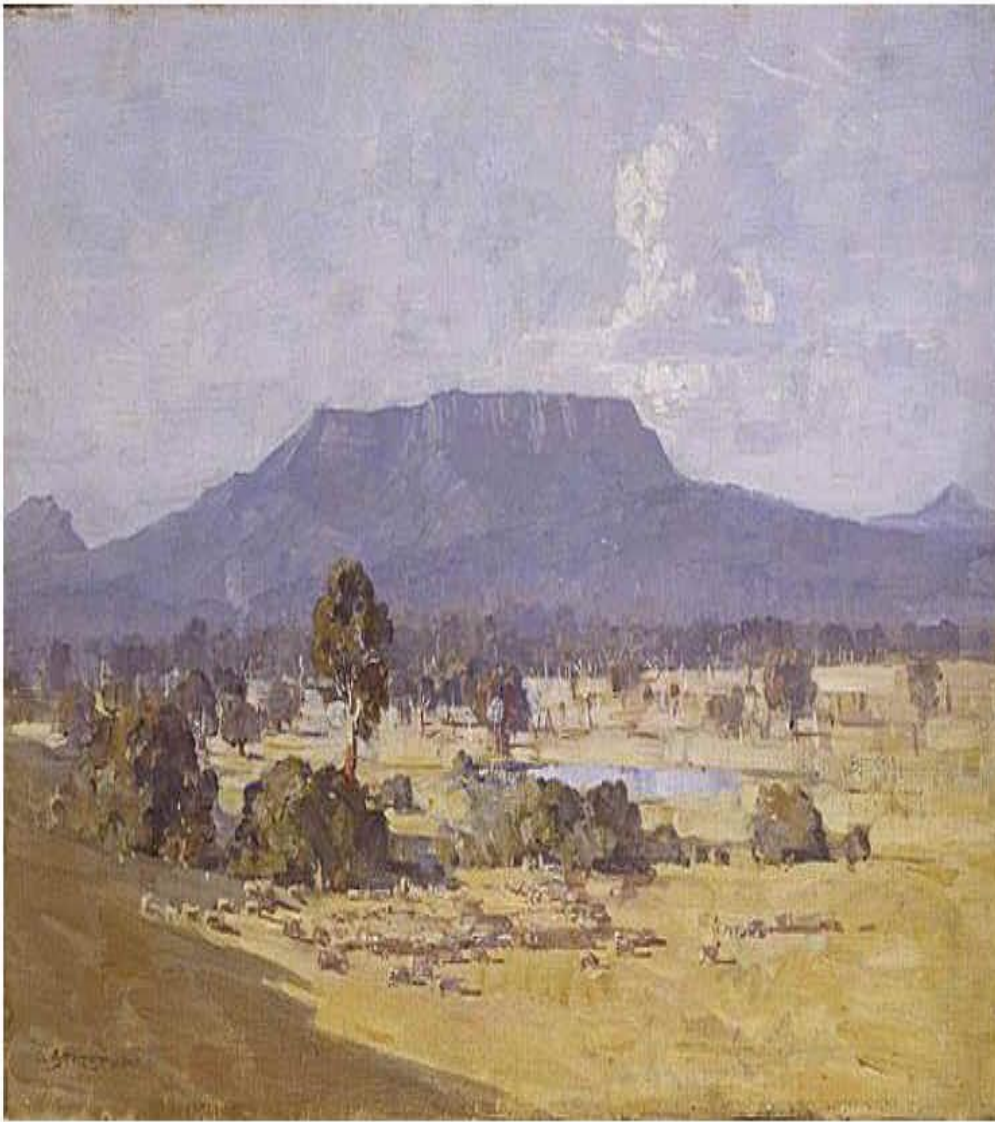


Figure 7: Arthur Streeton's *Land of the Golden Fleece* (1926), Oil on canvas, 50.7 x 75.5 cm.

This landscape painting celebrates Australia as a blue and gold paradise. Random groups of eucalypt, a windmill, a blue pond and a flock of sheep lead the eye to Mount William rising in the distance.

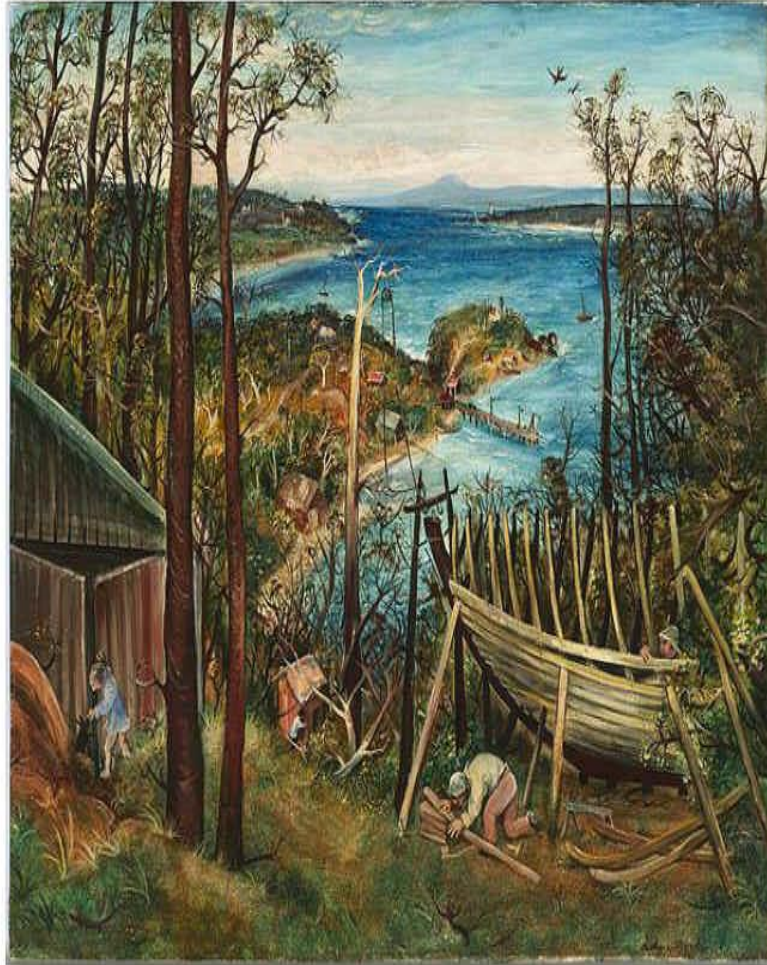


Figure 8: Arthur Boyd's *Boat Builders, Eden* (1948), Oil and tempera on composition board, 85.6 x 101.7cm.

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A peaceful scene of a builder constructing a wooden boat in the foreground looking down through the Australian bush to small bays, a jetty and the ocean. Symbolic realism

The Symbolic Realists (Angry Penguins)

The symbolic realists (also known as the Angry Penguins) sought to modernise the Australian creative arts by challenging more traditional approaches. Arthur Boyd (Figure 8), Sidney Nolan (Figure 9), John Perceval and Albert Tucker (Figures 10, 10A, 10B) were among the most notable of these artists.



**Figure 9: Sidney Nolan's *Ku-ring-gai Chase* (1948),
Synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 91 x 102 cm.**

Painting of a hazy, smouldering bushfire in the distance with vivid foreground colours showing the ferocity of the weather, depicting the heat, dust and wind on sparse vegetation.

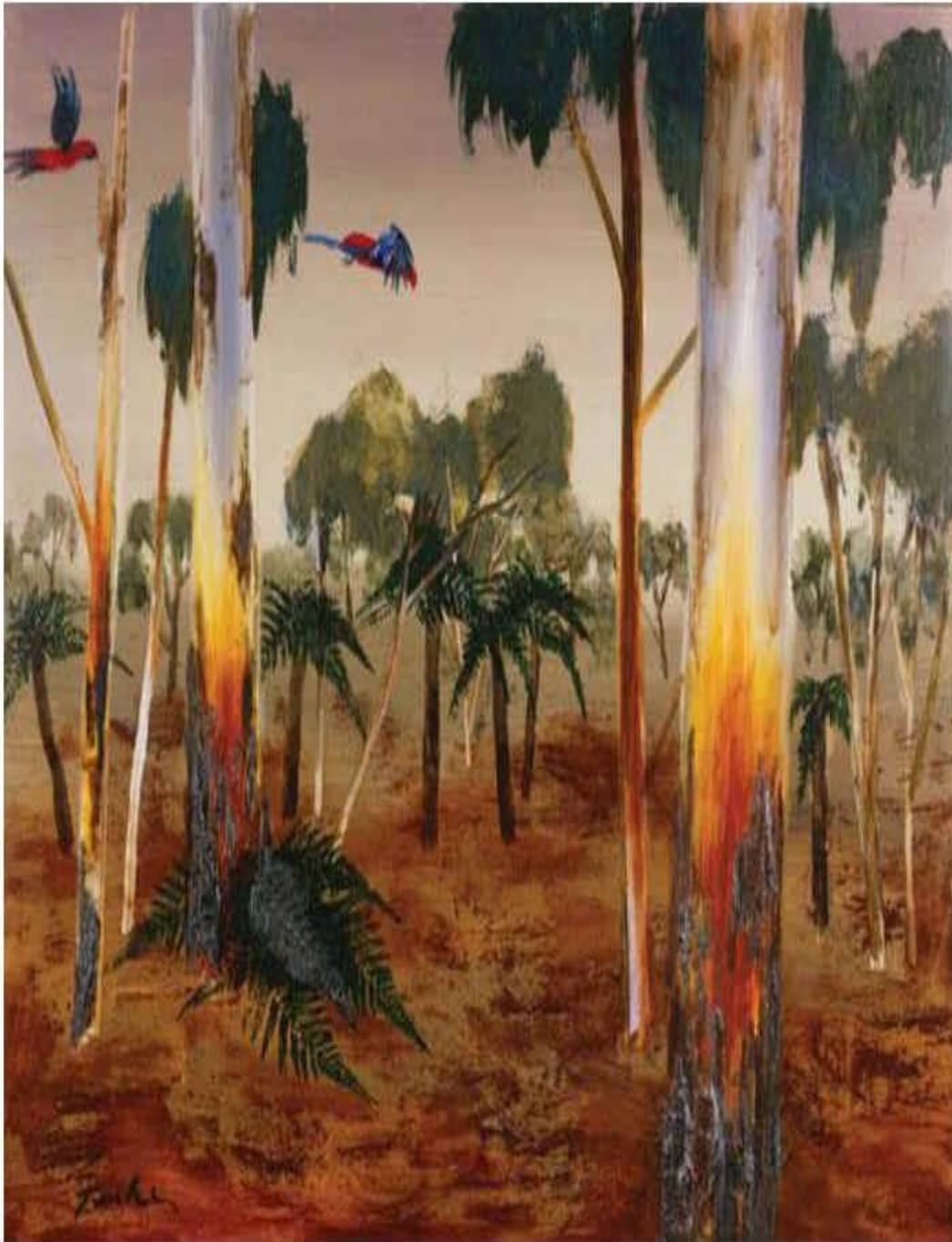


Figure 10: Albert Tucker's *Parrots in Bush* (1973)

Painting of two small red and blue parrots flying between the trunks of Gum trees across an Australian landscape where trees and small palms with blackened fronds emerge from the dark red soil.

In early 1947, Tucker travelled to Japan with the Australian army as an art correspondent. He produced a monochrome pen drawing called *Hiroshima*; it contains no figures, just the aftermath of the atomic bomb blast, with tents and shelters littering the landscape. In 1954 he met Sidney Nolan in Rome, where he produced *Apocalyptic Horse* and began painting Australia from memory..

Tucker moved to New York in 1958 and his subjects switched from the city to outback Australia. At that time Tucker rejected paintings by Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale as being overly nationalistic.

Tucker depicted the rural landscape as being a harsh, barren and sterile wasteland. He intentionally distorted stereotypes and icons of the Australian bush, including convicts, Burke and Wills and the Kelly Gang. He was influenced by the sheer barrenness and hopelessness that the outback conveyed to him. He developed his own counter iconography and symbolism and showed these icons as pawns in the outback's deadly game.



Figure Albert Tucker 10 A

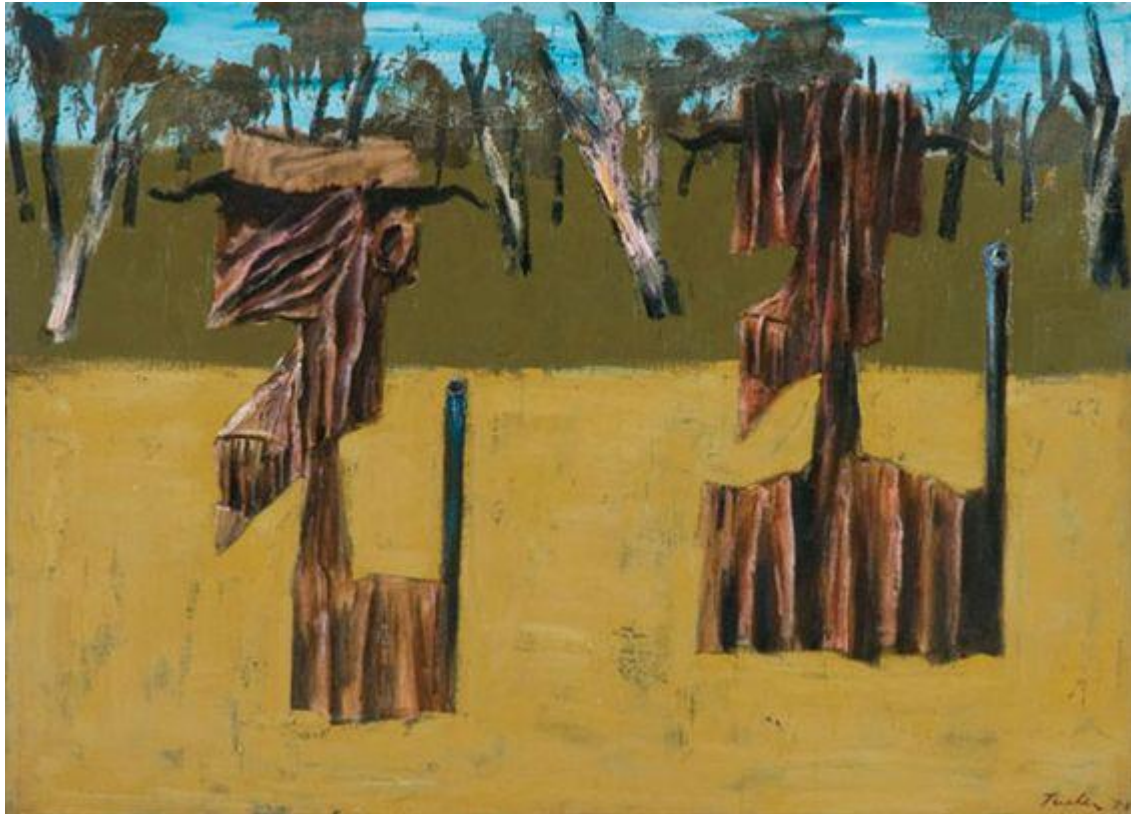


Figure Albert Tucker 10 B



Figure 11: Russell Drysdale's *Emus in a Landscape* (1950), Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm.

Painting depicting the strange and surreal qualities of the Australian outback as emus move quietly across the plain passing the precariously arranged structure of wood and corrugated iron.

The landscapes of Russell Drysdale and Albert Tucker portray Australia's changing vision of the bush. It is no longer a place of freedom and opportunity, but reflected lost hopes, risk and decay.

Landscape Abstractionists

In the 1950s and 1960s the abstractionists added another artistic interpretation of the Australian landscape. John Olsen's most important works include his Lake Eyre paintings and *Golden Summer, Clarendon*. His famous *Salute to Five Bells* decorates the Sydney Opera House.



Figure 12 John Olson Lake Eyre Series

John Olsen was born in Newcastle on 21 January 1928. He moved to Bondi Beach with his family in 1935 and began a lifelong fascination with Sydney Harbour. He attended St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill. After leaving school in 1943, he went to the Datillo Rubbo Art School in 1947 and from 1950 to 1953 studied at the Julian Ashton School in Sydney, and Auburn School from 1950 to 1956. In 1957, Olsen went to England to paint. He then studied printmaking in Paris, followed by two years in Spain. When Olsen returned to Sydney in 1960 he wanted to represent Australian culture in such a way that the world would see the diversity in the changing outback seasons.

In 1968, Olsen set up and ran the Bakery Art School and in 1970, he was commissioned by the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation to paint a large mural entitled, 'Salute to Five Bells', which was inspired by Kenneth Slessor's poem and completed in 1973. Olsen's work has been marked by a deep engagement with the Australian landscape and he has lived for long periods in different parts of the country and travelled widely in it.

His significant artworks include the Lake Eyre series and more recent works, such as Golden Summer and the Clarendon'. One of Olsen's most successful murals, Salute to Five Bells, is currently in the Sydney Opera House. Although he has been labelled as an abstract artist, Olsen rejects this label, stating, "I have never painted an abstract painting in my life". He describes his work as "an exploration of the totality of landscape".

The King Sun was hung in Collins Square in the Melbourne Docklands. The work depicts a brilliant Australian sun (including three frogs).

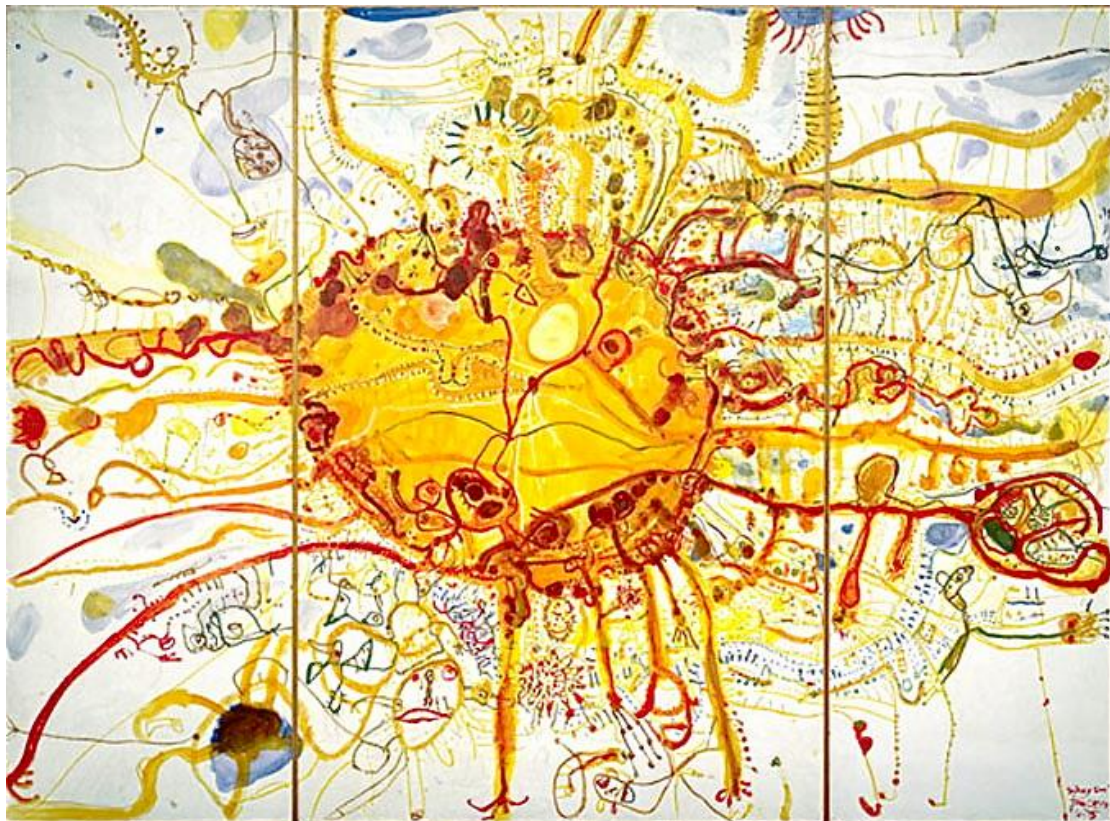


Figure 12A John Olson