

VISUAL REGIMES OF COLONISATION: EUROPEAN AND ABORIGINAL SEEING IN AUSTRALIA

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What were the visual regimes of colonisation practiced in settler colonies such as those on the Australian, North and South American continents from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century? I propose that a structure consisting of three major components – practices of calibration, obliteration and symbolisation (specifically, aestheticisation) – underlay the vagaries of style and circumstance. These components could be hidden by their apparent naturalness, or laid bare in their brash instrumentalism, while at other times they seemed so distinct as to constitute a prevailing visual order. I will explore the case of the British colonies of Terra Australis, but the interpretation may have validity for other settlements during this period.

Mapping of the oceans and landmasses, measurement of distances and of governmental and property boundaries, surveillance of peoples – all of these are practices of *calibration*. They are more than acts of noticing and naming, of fixing position and describing characteristics, after which the job of the observer is done, and he and his machinery of observation moves on. Rather, they initiate processes of continuous refinement, of exacting control, of maintaining order. They create the self-replicating conditions of a steady state, European-style. They are the bastions of a social structure which exists always on the cusp of collapse into disorder, even barbarism. Imperial expansion, economic necessity and the exigencies of practical settlement require nothing less than this constantly reflexive watchfulness.

Erasing the habitus, the imagery, the viewpoints and, eventually, the physical existence of indigenous peoples – these are practices of *obliteration*. This may take the form of violent extinguishment, or violation of ceremonial sites; of creating an environment in which the indigene can no longer live, leading to lassitude, a “dying out” which puzzles its ignorant author; of unauthorised reproduction of Aboriginal designs to a literal scrawling of graffiti over sacred signs; of assimilating the indigene to the supposedly universal frameworks of Western rationality or setting him and her at an unbridgeable distance – as a “Noble Savage”, for example. These practices range from actual, brutal murder to an equally potent imaginary othering. Art tends to serve the latter: it others the real other by abstracting the indigene, by figuring “the native” in kinds of representation at once comfortably familiar and wildly exotic. The actual otherness of the indigene is thereby screened from view.

Transforming the world of experience by treating selected parts of it, or certain relationships in it, as representative of an abstract idea (such as beauty) or of an ideological tendency (such as the rule of bourgeois law) is to practice symbolisation.



To subject the world to processes of representation which have been trialed in painting, sculpture, print-making and, eventually, photography is to apply to the world practices of *aestheticisation*. This was done to an unprecedented degree, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the visual regime known as the Picturesque. It was more than an artistic style, more even than an affection of English gentlemen wishing to swan about the countryside and the Continent looking for aspects which reminded them of famous paintings. It was an open form of visual journeying, a technique for stringing otherwise incompatible sights and sites together. It became indispensable to colonisation, the “human face” of imperialism. It spun charming appearances as garlands over the instrumental actualities of establishing colonies in foreign climates, of creating systems of control, of building ordered socialities.

The visual regimes of colonisation, then, always involved a triangulation, a simultaneous crossing of the three perspectives: calibration, obliteration and symbolisation. And each of these was itself a hardening against its own, always threatening double: against disorder, othering and the instrumental.

The Pictures at Sydney Cove

The first two known delineations of the British settlement which led to the foundation of the city of Sydney prefigure key elements of the contradictory perspectives which have shaped visual cultures in Australia ever since. On March 1, 1788 Captain John Hunter carefully rendered the shoreline, the depths of water, and the positions of both the rudimentary buildings and the boats at harbour. His chart can be fitted exactly into the world map centred on Greenwich. In his journal he records, with the same linear instrumentalism, his first impressions of the harbour¹.

During April, the following month, the convict Francis Fowkes sketched the same place (fig. 1). Despite the detailing, colouring and coding added by engravers in London, it is obvious that Fowkes sees the place quite differently, that his priorities are sites of work, living, and control, as well as food sources. His sketch evokes no larger vision, implies nothing beyond its vague borders. No written record of Fowkes' views survives.

Both Hunter and Fowkes made instrumental images, aides to survival. They converge stylistically, but only because they were both re-presented in the same, other place, that is London. Beneath these changes aimed at making them similar, we can discern the traces of original lines made by people in possession of quite

1. It had rather an unpromising appearance, on entering between the outer heads or capes that form its entrance, which are high, rugged, and perpendicular cliffs; but we had not gone far in, before we discovered a large branch extending to the southward; into this we went, and soon found ourselves perfectly land-locked, with a good depth of water. John Hunter, *An Historical Journal of Events at Sydney and at Sea 1787-1792*, London, 1793, ed., J. Bach, Sydney, 1968, 29.



different degrees, and kinds, of power². The perspectives of people like Fowkes rarely appear in colonial representations of any kind – indeed, images of them, and of convicts as a class, are rare to the point not just of oversight but of repression. The practices of calibration, so clearly exemplified by Hunter's mapping, lead to their own kind of obliteration: they erase the perspectives of the victims and the slaves of imperialism.

Yet there is, already, another significant absence. Nowhere in the drawings of either man is there any sign that prior to their mapping of this place there had been others who, for many thousands of years, had lived in it, and represented their relationships to it. The approximately three thousand Dharug (Dharruk), Dharawal and Kuring-gai peoples of the region had developed systems of marking their bodies, implements and shields with traditional designs, and of representing animals and spirit figures by charcoal drawings inside caves and by elaborate engravings into open rock. But disease, murder and dispossession devastated their society. As the convict period drew to a close around 1850, less than three hundred remained in the region. While the large number of images of Aborigines by white settlers enable us to trace their perception of the original inhabitants, it is impossible to trace to the period an Aboriginal visualisation of convictism, nor even of the territory of its occurrence³.

Aboriginal "Mapping"

It is possible, however, to extrapolate backwards from practices of mapping in recent and contemporary Aboriginal representation. Given that every aspect of Aboriginal identity originates in the earth, takes form as a figuring of an aspect of a wide variety of relationships to the land, and constantly refers back to one's place as the foundation of being, then it is scarcely surprising that representations of territory constitute the most significant frameworks for sacred ceremony and are a frequently occurring subject in the many kinds of sacred/secular art forms which circulate beyond tribal communities to serve the burgeoning interest in contemporary Aboriginal art⁴. Nothing survives

2. The *Sketch of Sydney Cove* by John Hunter and William Dawes was in Hunter's *Journal*, copy in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. Fowkes' *Sketch and Description of the Settlement at Sydney Cove* was published in London by R. Cribb on July 24 1789, a copy is in the National Library of Australia, Canberra. Both are discussed in the relevant entries in Joan Kerr, ed., *The Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, sketchers, photographers and engravers to 1870*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992.

3. F. D. McCarthy, *Catalogue of Rock Engravings in the Sydney-Hawkesbury District*, New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, Sydney, 1983; Peter Stanbury and John Clegg, *A Field Guide to Aboriginal Rock Engravings, with special reference to those around Sydney*, Sydney University Press, 1990; Peter Turbett, *The Aborigines of the Sydney District Before 1788*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1989.

4. See, for example, Fred R. Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Washington, D. C. and Canberra, Smithsonian Institution and Aboriginal Studies Press, 1986.



from the Sydney Cove region, but “mappings” of those areas throughout the Australian continent in which Aboriginal communities remain active are commonplace.

They occur in all forms of Aboriginal art: in body marking for ceremony, as symbols on sacred message boards and burial poles, in sand paintings and in paintings using natural ochres on rock walls and on bark. There is rich evidence that these practices are many thousands of years old, the earliest forms dating to perhaps 40,000 year BP. They remain the primary content of art made by current Aboriginal artists who live and work in tribal settings. For those artists who live away from their communities, or who are the children of those separated from their families during the assimilationist period of the 1940s and 1950s, actual or psychic journeying is a frequent subject. In the work of Aboriginal artists living in the predominantly white cities and country towns the effects of dispossession are often registered as a traumatic yearning, in the art of Judy Watson, Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett and Fiona Foley, for example⁵.

Australian Aboriginal picturing of the land is, then, not a precise cartography, oriented north-south, east-west, nor set out in measured distances, with objects drawn to scale and events located exactly in time. It is a visual provocation to ceremonial song, to the telling of elaborate narratives of how and why the Original Beings created the earth and everything in it, how the Ancestor Figures lived and where they went, their journeying, their acts, their example. These movements generated and differentiated the land; every land form, every element of the flora and fauna is evidence of their passage – and of their continuing presence, especially as their descendants re-enact their creativity in sacred ceremony and in sacred/secular art⁶.

In this context, meaning is conveyed on four different levels. Each of these has two aspects, and all operate simultaneously, reinforcing each other. The paintings work as a depiction through inherited forms and techniques of stories, events and figures of sacred significance, as both the broad narrative involving many related people, and as a specific moment or moral particular to the ancestors of the artist; as a visual writing of a place owned by the dreamer-painter, including journeys across it, both by the sacred originators and by the artist as a hunter or gatherer; as a witness that the duty of representing or singing the dreaming has been done, thus constituting a restatement of title or deed to the land indicated; and finally as an individual interpretation of these duties and practices, varying somewhat, and thus keeping

5. For good general introductions to Australian Aboriginal art, see for example, Robert Edwards, *Australian Aboriginal Art*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974 and 1979; Peter Sutton [ed.], *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, New York and Melbourne, Viking, 1988; Jennifer Isaacs, *Arts of the Dreaming, Australia's Living Heritage*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984; Jennifer Isaacs, *Australian Aboriginal Painting*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 1989; Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1993; and Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, London, Phaidon, 1998.

6. On “mapping”, see particularly Peter Sutton [ed.], *Dreamings* and Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, chapter 4.



alive, the obligations and pleasures of painting. Self-expression is important, but less so than all the other reasons for painting⁷.

While not all examples of Aboriginal art display this degree of complexity and subtlety, many do so. A striking example is the painting *Warlugulong*, made in 1976 by brothers Clifford Possum and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri (fig. 2). Both are from the Anmatyerre/Aranda language group, whose lands are vast tracts of the Central Desert, largely to the north and east of the town of Alice Springs. It is one of the first major statements to be made by artists working within the painting movement which began at Papunya, a settlement west of Alice, in 1971⁸. Within that tendency, artists use sticks or reeds to juxtapose dots of acrylic on canvas surfaces, in a manner which echoes the practice used in making ceremonial sand paintings, of depositing small mounds of differently-coloured sands or crushed vegetative matter such that the overall configuration sets out a sacred ground. Sand paintings of these sacred subjects have been made for many thousands of years. The normal practice is for them to be used as the central physical and spiritual focus of the ceremony, which can last for some hours or for many days, and then for them to be swept up or left to the elements.

Warlugulong is the name for fire, particularly a series of Ancestor Figure stories associated with fire in an area near the present-day town of Yuendumu, about 300 kilometres north west of Alice Springs. *Warlugulong* is an actual site near Yuendumu where the Ancestor man Lungkata, whose original form was the Blue-Tongue Lizard, punished his two sons for killing and eating a sacred kangaroo by setting the bush alight. Its explosive flames may be seen in the centre of the canvas, the tracks of human footprints above being left by the fleeing sons. The waving lines between concentric circles indicate another major narrative of origination: at the top of the image, the Great Snake Yarapiri is shown travelling from Winparku, 200 kilometres west of Alice, through limestone country. Other, lesser connected lines and circles relate to other snakes and snake men whose journeys through these regions were devoted to instructing locals in ceremonial matters.

The white emu tracks moving from the upper left to the lower centre of the painting indicate the path of an Emu Ancestor from near what is now Napperby Station (50 kilometres east of Yuendumu). He met with emu men from Walpiri regions nearby, and shared food with them, establishing the possibility of harmonious relationships between the Walpiri and the Anmatyerre. The brown human footprints through the lower right area recall happy exchanges of the prolific supplies of food in the region between women from the two tribes. The possum tracks along the bottom edge of the painting are traces of a less happy story: one of warring between possum men and hare wallaby men. The unlinked circles on the right relate to the killing of an

7. This is a reformulation of an account given in Terry Smith, "From the desert", chapter 15 of Bernard Smith with Terry Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1991.

8. Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*, Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1991.



euro (a hill kangaroo) by a wedge-tailed eagle. There are also a number of other narratives, ranging all the way back to the Original Beings who created this area, through the ancient Ancestor Figures to not so distant relatives of the present-day artists. The variegated patches of dots throughout the work evoke the kinds of country in which these events occurred: white areas indicate water, orange the colour of sand, black the burnt-out areas, and so on.

These various stories are set out as inscribing an area of country, as literally making it what it is, as being alive within it. This means that the painting *Warlugulong* is a conceptual field of these occurrences, these memories, these continuing actualities. While all of the narratives depicted can be traced on actual ground – indeed, this is what much sacred ceremony consists of, it is an actual going over the same ground and then a convening in one place, around a sand painting of the whole ground, to ritualise the knowing of it – this painting does not set them out in the same spatial relationships one would expect to find in a European map. The artists changed the north-south axis in the case of each of the main stories shown: the two sons fled south but are shown as going upwards (North on a European map), Yarapiri travelled south to north but is shown moving left to right (East to West on a European map). Taking just these two together requires a “spinning in space above the landscape” on the part of a spectator who wishes to remain anchored, or better, a letting go of Western spectatorship⁹.

Aestheticisation: Land into Landscape

Why were panoramic views of the newly-settled colonies so popular during the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century? The many long, horizontal views of Sydney Cove, each one securely knowing that it would be succeeded by another, seem to be staging the processes of colonisation, as if the emergent social order could be measured as it grows against an increasingly clearly understood natural topology. This is a technique of reportage, an extension of the necessary business of mapping the coastline. An aesthetic with great appeal to a maritime people, a social order whose empire depended on control of the seas.

Many areas of Terra Australis were depicted as if they were recognisably like, or approximate to, specific English landscapes. This not only reinforces a sense of familiarity, it does so with a purpose: to promote free emigration to the colonies, an outcome greatly desired from the 1820s, becoming a necessity with the cessation of transportation in the 1840s. Joseph Lycett's *Views* are an early instance, and were continued in many publications and presentations, such as the London exhibitions of John Glover and John Skinner Prout. Related to this is the enthusiasm for literally transforming suitable areas of land into approximations of environments in England

9. Vivien Johnson, *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Gordon and Breach International, Sydney, 1994, p. 54.



or Scotland, by imposing similar modes of cultivation in farming lands and laying out huge public garden spaces in the main cities (returning them to walk-through pasture, as it were, but in picturesque modes). Both of these processes shape *The Town of Sydney in New South Wales*, a set of watercolours made by Major James Taylor, probably in 1821 which trace a 360 degree panorama around Sydney Cove from what is now Observatory Hill. In London two years later three of them were printed as hand-coloured aquatints by Robert Havell & Sons and published by Colnaghi & Co. The set was intended as a gift to key government officials, to be purchased by the small group of gentlemen who collected books and prints of the colonies, and be of interest to those concerned with the current controversy about the political direction of the colony. At the same time, Taylor's "designs" formed the basis of a full-scale display at Barker & Burford's Panorama in Leicester Square. The message is clear: Georgian order can bring English civilisation to the wildest, and most distant, places on the Earth. It is a utopia specific to Sydney Town: each figure encapsulates a particular dream of social mobility, of rising above the realities of harsh circumstances, exclusive class divisions, brutal systems of punishment and the ghostly presence of strange, dark otherness. This was possible, in fact, for some. In Major Taylor's vision it was happening to all, right before their eyes¹⁰.

By the 1850s an instrumental imagery returned, briefly, to prominence, especially with the pragmatics demanded by picturing of the goldfields of Victoria – a site which captured world attention, and attracted the adventurous from everywhere. During the 1860s, however, with the return of the pastoral industries to economic, social and political preeminence, the evidently aesthetic category of the landscape became the preferred vehicle to release a set of symbolic purposes. This occurred most clearly in a genre of paintings which can only be called "portraits of property".

The master of this genre was the Swiss-born immigrant Eugene Von Guérard. His Western District propertyscapes celebrate not just the results and rewards of decades of development, but something of the transformatory power of pastoralism as a set of practices for controlling natural forces so subtly successful that they become themselves an ordering principle – of people, animals, places and things. His 1864 image, *Yalla-y-Poora*, is outstanding amongst these. There is, certainly, a careful record of the signs of recent success: the Italianate Style house, the imported trees and sully. These are the superfluous, the real question is: what is the setting which von Guérard has activated? The work of the farm is conveyed not through the static overall gestalt but through the visual journeying within it: in looking, we rehearse the

10. For more detailed discussion of this work, see Robert Dixon, "Colonial Newsreel". In: Daniel Thomas, *Creating Australia, 200 Years of Art 1788–1988*, Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, 1988, pp. 66–67; Elisabeth Imashev, "Taylor, James". In: Joan Kerr [ed.], *Dictionary of Australian Artists*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 780; Tim McCormick [ed.], *First Views of Australia. 1788–1825*, Sydney, David Ell Press, 1987; and Gordon Bull's "Taking Place: Panorama and Panopticon in the Colonization of new South Wales", *Australian Journal of Art*, vol. XII, 1995, pp. 75–95.



processes of working over the land. We do so through the geometry underlining the narrative passages. Split into halves by an emphatic horizon line, the upper half of Grampians and sky shows the natural world changing slowly, majestically, relentlessly, according to a geologic, while the human industrial transformations below hang from the horizon in ways which could be agitated, even discordant, but are absorbed into a matching harmony by the figure-of-eight (a virtual Mobius strip) of the ornamental lake and the passages around and across it. This subdued but nevertheless vital drama unfolds before us, as we “walk” across the few rocks in the foreground to join the traveller at the fence marvelling at the power – and the equivalence – of these two “natural”, transcendent orders. Von Guérard shows this not only by picturing it, but also by subjecting the compositional potentialities of illusionistic naturalism to its limits. He creates here something close to the heart of painting’s own paradoxical freezing of time, a nearly-still geometry of implacable change. This is a visual metaphor of pastoralism’s processing of the land which will echo for nearly a century¹¹.

Aestheticism reaches its most precise, calibrated form in works such as this. Everything which the natural world does, everything which human beings strive to do to it, is subject to the measuring eye. But what an eye! There is no indigenous person to be seen, nor any traces of an indigenous presence on the surface or structure of this scene – the processes of obliteration have done their work. This scene was brought into this being by the labor of the colonizer, but this human effort has become something larger, more implacable. It has become a virtual civilisation, a calibrating machine, a world imposed on the rawness of Nature by perfect measurement itself. For a moment, we look at the world as presented by this picture, and see the world through the superhuman eye of this picture. Our merely human seeing disappears, and for a moment, virtually, we see with, and are ourselves, the Eye of Seeing itself – what von Guerard (fantasizing back to late medieval holy innocence, and in parallel with William Blake’s joy to the world) would imagine to be the Eye of God.

Triangulations – Coincidences

The coincidence on the Australian continent since the late eighteenth century of its first people’s creation of a rich culture in conditions of scarcity and the expansive, transformative marauding of European imperialism threw into sharp relief several divergent practices of seeing. I will conclude by highlighting the three which have occupied us here.

Colonists such as Hunter applied to this strange place a supra-human regime of measurement, one which was capable of fitting any phenomena that came before it into a frame. Each frame was a separate section of a larger whole, itself made up of a huge but finite number of similar sets: latitude, and soon longitude, calibrated from

11. For further discussion of this work, and of the themes of this essay, see chapters 1 and 2 in my *Figuring the Ground, Colony, Nation and Landscape in Ninetieth Century Australian Art*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 2000.



Greenwich. That which did not fit the frame, which was not measurable by such framing, was simply not seen, was effectively obliterated. As settlement progressed to a point when it needed to introduce its own practices of selective forgetting, landscape became more and more prominent, both in actual journeying and in the distilled visitation of the painted image. Artistic landscapes “improve” human observation, idealise it, aestheticise it. Sometimes, *aestheticisation* induces such passages of reflexive engagement that it transcends itself to being, almost, a “pure” kind of vision – seeing as if done by a disembodied eye. In contrast, Aboriginal representation of territory – as far as one can generalise from such a variety of practices among what were over 900 language groups (now 90) throughout the continent – does not calibrate in the senses of measure distance or plot exact location on the earth’s surface. Nor does it use the landscape forms of either Western or Eastern traditions, except by occasional adoption and adaptation. It is the product of a group of people standing together, leaning over a piece of ground or bark or the prone body of a ritual relation, and, taking this surface as a field for evocation, making the marks – the signifying “designs” – which trace how the larger surround – one’s “country” – came into being. Painting and singing continue this sacred ground into the present. Ceremony and art-making repeat the imbrication of the bodies and spirits of men and women into the actual, and the reimagined, ground. It is a representing which preceded the era of colonisation, and will supersede it. It is a murmuring and a mark-making which is incessant.

