

# Art

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## ■ Figuring Landscapes

Pryle Behrman

'There are no images that can describe the scene,' states Steven Ball in *The Ground, the Sky and the Island*, 2008, as his video camera bashes against rocks and fleetingly captures a swirling mixture of sky and parched Australian desert. 'The frame is too small,' he explains. 'Take my word for it.' This eulogy to failure, along with many of the pieces shown in 'Figuring Landscapes', a series of screenings at Tate Modern conceived by Ball and Catherine Elwes featuring moving image work from Australia and the UK, is self-consciously placing itself against a prevalent strain in the history of European landscape art that imagined the natural world as intelligible, bounded and ripe for human possession. Thus when Kenneth Clark described Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, 1750, as an 'enchanted work' with a cornfield that is 'sensitively observed' in *Landscape into Art*, 1949, in *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, John Berger countered: the eponymous subjects 'are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions' and, moreover, that this was a view of nature that 'was ultimately determined by new attitudes to property and exchange [which] found its visual expression in the oil painting'.

The most obvious way that Ball sets out to challenge these normative portrayals of landscape is via the simple expedient of selecting a time-based medium. Depictions of nature in painting or print inevitably confer some degree of calm stasis to the setting, while in video everything that was expunged from the original scene by way of sound and movement pours back in with a vengeance; order and certainty are replaced by chance and contingency. The importance of temporality in any experience of nature is emphasised in Scott Morrison's *Ocean Echoes*, 2007. Created from split-second segments of footage showing swaying grass heads, the movement of the plants is syncopated with a frenetic soundtrack that resembles a mixture of insect and bird calls. As the editing grows ever quicker the images of nature begin to dissolve until all that remains visible is a field of pulsating, abstract blurs.

As Elwes points out in the exhibition catalogue, many Australian artists have eschewed the genre of landscape in recent years since, in a time of continuing legal disputes relating to Aboriginal land rights, non-Aboriginal artists have been hesitant to depict their surroundings



Meryl Fairskye  
*Connected* 2003  
video still

lest their gaze is represented as an illegitimate claim of ownership. With this in mind, Bronwyn Platten goes to great lengths to disconnect herself physically from the land in *Meeting Nude Woman Walking on Balls (after Hans Baldung Grien, 1514)*, 2006. She assumes the role of the chastised witch depicted in a 16th-century engraving by the Flemish artist to create a surreal mirage in which a nude white female, supported by walking sticks, teeters awkwardly on balls strapped to her feet while precariously traversing an unforgiving, arid landscape in South Australia. Platten is obviously poorly equipped for the task at hand and her stuttering progress serves as an apt metaphor for the European traditions and taxonomies that proved to be so inadequate in recording and interpreting the Australian landscape.

Of course not only do the politics of identity and ownership bleed into the aesthetics of any given location, but, increasingly, so do environmental issues as well. Hugh Watt's *Blacklaw*, 2007, creates a contemporary view of the sublime in which the angular, metallic arms of wind turbines rhythmically slice through a dank Scottish skyline shrouded in a crepuscular light. The neo-Gothic splendour of these monumental machines poses some fundamental questions about the aesthetics of landscape. How should we respond to the undoubted beauty of these mechanisms? Is it OK to marvel at their poetic grace? And is this an environment despoiled by man-made intervention or, in the longer term, saved by it?

Technological innovation is one reason why each generation is forced to re-evaluate its attitude to the land, both how it is perceived

and how it should be used. *Connected*, 2003, by Meryl Fairskye explores the uneasy place in the Australian consciousness of Pine Gap, the Joint Defence Space Research Facility located not far from Alice Springs and run by the US government. Weaving together interviews, surveillance photography, satellite imagery and documentary-style reportage, indigenous and non-indigenous attitudes to the site are shown to be multifaceted and often contradictory. When construction began on Pine Gap in December 1966, this remote locale at the heart of Australia was suddenly connected to the wider world and, more specifically, conjoined with the military interests of a superpower located in another hemisphere.

Empires are, of course, not only built from such grandiose projects. Through a narrative that draws on both social and familial memories, Ann Donnelly's *Political Landscape*, 2007, explores the long history of dispossession and domination that followed from the colonisation of her home town of Corcreeny in Northern Ireland by English and Scottish settlers. It is a parochial landscape, both small in scale and rural, and yet hedges, ditches and fields contain evocative traces of boundaries, settlements and conflicts that have raged over centuries. Colonialism has flowed outwards as well as inwards: many of the locals became entwined in the trappings of British overseas trade over the years and also fought for crown and country in two world wars. Donnelly emphasises how local issues often have global resonance; as she remarks in the film: 'Empire begins in little fields with little people.'

'Figuring Landscapes' is an intelligently



selected exhibition that highlights how contemporary artists continue to be drawn to landscape precisely because it remains such a highly contested field. Time and again the genre's key attraction is that it can provide a space to destabilise any notion of a fixed identity and revel in this uncertainty. As Irit Rogoff wrote in *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, 2000: 'It is not scientific knowledge or the national categories of the state which determine both belonging and unbelonging, but rather linked sets of political insights, memories, subjectivities, projections of fantasmatic desires and great long chains of sliding signifiers.' ■

**Figuring Landscapes** was at Tate Modern London 6 to 8 February and is now on a rolling tour of the UK and Australia. [www.studycollection.co.uk/figuringlandscapes](http://www.studycollection.co.uk/figuringlandscapes)

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## ■ George Barber: Beyond Language, Selected Video Works 1983-2008

Martin Herbert

'Structuralism plus fun' is how George Barber defined his early video work in a recent interview. No surprise, really, to find the English artist being his own best interpreter: Barber, over the last quarter-century, has been very much a DIY kind of guy. How many other video artists self-distribute their output through record shops, as he did with the early compilation 'The Greatest Hits of Scratch Video'? How many selections of artists' video come, as this two-hour, 23-film package does, with a director's commentary? But then language has been intrinsic to Barber's art from the start. His productions may be parsimonious of budget, but they overflow with words: monologues, voiceovers, dub-style echoes, sampled snippets of film dialogue. And if accordingly it's a touch ironic that this compilation is titled after one of the only films here with no actual speech acts in it – the ten-minute 'Beyond Language', 2005, features two distinctly unglamorous women howling, grunting and whooping together in an elevated garden overlooking an urban street – that piece could also be considered a summa of Barber's restlessly impious, comically earthy superseding of consensual sense.

That's where he began, in the early scratch video works: taking segments of Hollywood films and trashy American television shows and chopping and looping them into rhythmic, senseless (in the best sense of the word) structure, like *Absence of Satan*, 1985. A slamming car door, a helicopter whirr and Paul Newman saying 'where were you?' become percussive elements in a piece of danceable music/video concrete driven by the



George Barber  
1001 Colours Andy Never  
Thought Of 1989 video still

classically 1980s sound of the Roland TR-808 drum machine. All of which is fashionable again; this is a well-timed release. Keyed to the era's Marxism-driven debates about ownership, originality and meaning, nodding equally to Jack Goldstein and Afrika Bambaataa, this work is smartest in its accessibility: textbook Postmodernism, but with a groove. (And, in the halcyon days of early Channel 4, this kind of thing could even get on TV.) Amid the cheap clouds of video graphics and Rob Schneider stuttering 'Y-y-y-yes Frank' in *Yes Frank No Smoke*, 1985, Barber tosses out an idea – a montage of people in different films answering the phone – that Christian Marclay later made a whole work out of (*Telephone*, 1995) and that Apple lately 'borrowed' from the American artist for an advertisement. In Barber's piece, as we're released from the narrowness of narrative, all vestiges of storyline turn libidinal.

The sense one gets, frequently, is of the artist struggling to master, and combat with humour, an unpleasant situation – whether it be the tides of banality issuing from his television set, or the vicissitudes of the creative life. For examples of the former, consider the numerous works here which layer outlandish new voiceovers onto advertisements or shaky footage of consumer products: *Hovis Ad*, 1994, with its hard-luck narrative delivered in a comedy-Northerner accent, or *The Story of Wash & Go*, 1995, which offers a farcical tale of Vidal Sassoon coming up with the idea for an all-in-one shampoo and conditioner while driving his ill and foul-mouthed chauffeur, Murray, around. ('You and your fucking hair,' the latter opines from the backseat.) The art world, meanwhile, is painted as an unhappy and under-funded place to reside: in the miniature *Arts Council GB Scratch*, 1988, some late-1980s sample-heavy electro forms a winningly ridiculous framework for clips of Bridget Riley and David Hockney and a snippet of James Brown shouting 'I wanna get into it!' followed by someone saying, heavily, 'grant'. Things are little better by the time of *I Was Once Involved in a Shit Show*, 2003, a double-projection affair. On one screen

we watch a man painting some railings. On the other, a lugubrious Barber recounts his experience of contributing to an exhibition sponsored by a cement-works owner, who wanted all the work to be about cement; his wife, meanwhile, insisted that the art also be Impressionist. (And then there's the anti-capitalist demo at the opening to take into account.) 'At the level of sense, it was found wanting,' Barber concludes.

The latter film is emblematic of his shift, in the 1990s, into a faux-confessional, slacker-art mode which reaches some kind of transcendental peak of inertia in *Waiting for Dave*, 1994, whose speaker – sitting beside a chimney, on a roof – has nothing to do, but is diligent about it. ('I don't like to be wishy-washy, say you're going to wait for someone and not put the time in.') Barber, though, seems to like being a moving target. His art has been used by U2; his videography is spiked with oddities like *Curtain Trip*, 1994, a flow of abstract patterning set to a psychedelic soundtrack, and *Automotive Action Painting*, 2007, Barber's contribution to Film and Video Umbrella's no-edits-allowed 'Single Shot' series. Here, an overhead crane shot shows the artist pouring buckets of coloured paint onto a roadway (in reality, an airstrip); cars swerve around, and then finally drive through the pools, presently engendering a sensuous polychromatic blur. On the commentary track Barber notes that, among other things, he liked the idea of 'boring commuters making an emotional abstract painting'. Again there's a sense of democratisation at work here, that the ostensibly elitist language of art can be possessed by anyone, even without their knowing it. (Although the ad men knew it when using the idea for a recent car ad, soon after the release of this DVD.)

By the last inclusion, when Barber returns to heisting and recombining elements of advertising in *Following Your Heart Can Lead to Wonderful Things*, 2008, the semi-reprise of scratch video techniques underlines how debates on intellectual property have remained timely over the intervening years, with the owners of copyrights becoming ever more litigious. (As has been pointed out, try remaking the Bomb