There's... something in the landscape

Opens 6–8pm Wednesday 7 September 2005
Closes 5pm Saturday 1 October 2005

Watters Gallery

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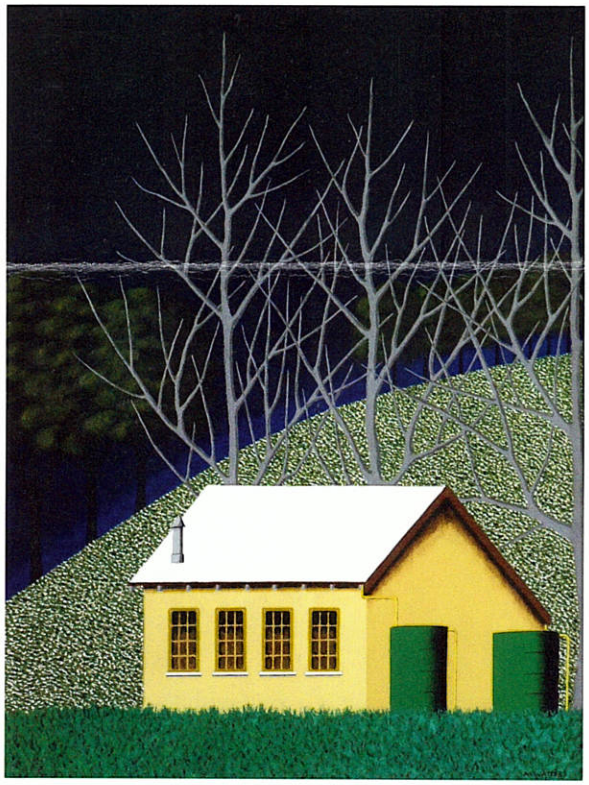
It must be said, straight way, that we are in each landscape we look at. To some extent the landscape is always a projection of our imagination, that is to say a projection of all the influences that have made us who we are. This is the source of the artist's fascination with landscape painting and is why so much abstract art that explores mental states or attempts to find the reality beneath the appearance takes the form of abstracted landscapes. That the artists in this exhibition are in their landscapes is taken as read, although it is the most important aspect of most of the work. The 'something' in the landscapes under examination is more prosaic but is important to our understanding nonetheless.

The collaborative work of **Ian Howard** and **Xing Jun Qin** illustrates this well. In a project 'Just in case ...' they are designing a national camouflage for every country in the world. The process is as follows: Howard obtains a colour image in some particular way illustrative of a country. On the basis of the colours, formal relationships and his emotional reactions to the image he paints an abstract. That is the camouflage. The image then goes to Beijing where Xing introduces a 'something' camouflaged, or camouflages 'something'. That is our something in the landscape. Paratroopers, tanks, missiles, army helicopters etc. change idyllic scenes into places of threat. Our culture is one of war; the threat we feel in these works is within us because we are not innocent but implicated witnesses.



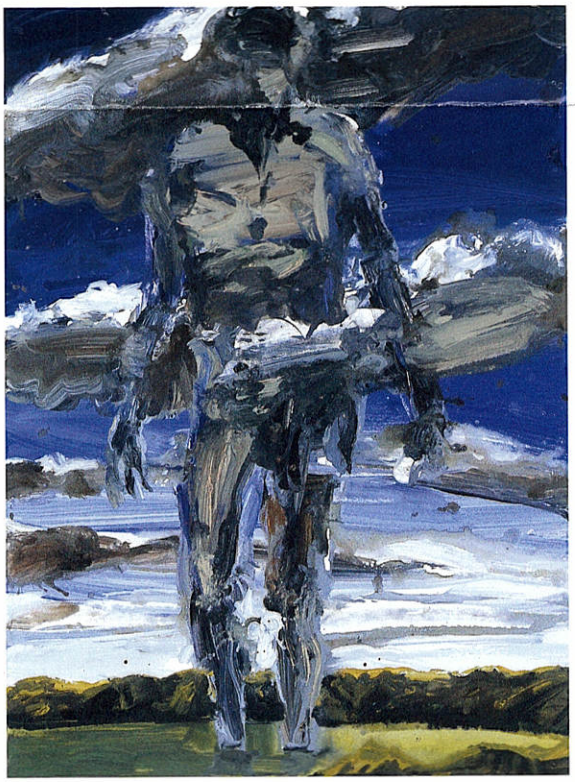
For **Max Watters** the 'something' in the landscape has been houses. Some are little more than humpies, few suggest a landed gentry. For me, they recall the groups of Aborigines in Piguenit's paintings, for the houses presuppose certain people inalienably integral with the landscape; people who cleared and enclosed the land and inhabited those houses. Houses which reflect in their shape, and offer shelter from, the mighty hills they nestle beneath. The stubborn self-reliance of early settlers lives on in the paintings. I believe they are successful paintings because Max Watters shares that stubborn self-reliance to such a degree that it is difficult to know his paintings and to see the upper Hunter landscape through other eyes than his.

There is a patent and surprising connection between the 'something' in the paintings of Max Watters and those of **Chris O'Doherty/Reg Mombassa**. The connection is houses; For everywhere in O'Doherty's paintings we find anonymous fibro houses. They, it seems to me, also represent the people who live in them: suburban and urban Mr and Mrs Australia. They are the backdrop to the stage on which O'Doherty's inexhaustible ideas act themselves out. The stage is often a landscape and a variety of 'somethings' strut upon it: manifestations of Jesus, Holden cars, space monsters. Beneath the humour

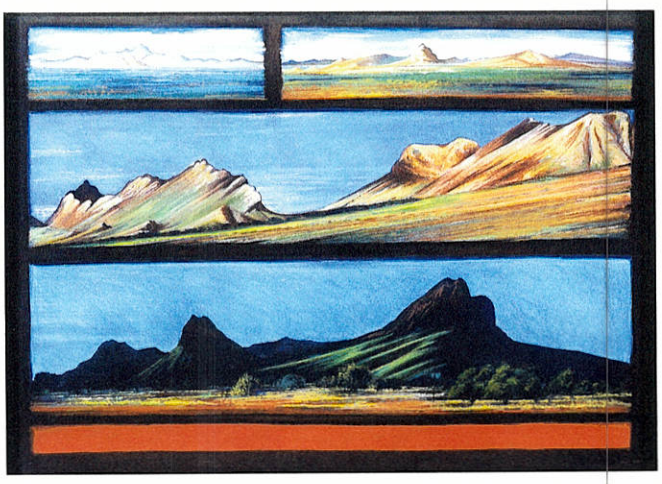
in his work lies the expression of serious insights and sympathies.

The fibro houses have another level of meaning: his father built such houses. We can infer, then, that his father and the family and environment that enveloped his growing up have stolen their way into his work. That is another way of saying that O'Doherty is in the landscapes he draws or paints.

The landscape in **Euan Macleod** paintings in this exhibition is imagined. Yet it is convincing because he knows it well; it is the Lyttelton landscape not far from Christchurch, New Zealand, where Macleod grew up. It forms a language which is articulate in the expression of his conscious and subconscious ruminations. If landscape is, to some extent, our invention we must concede that to some extent we are the invention of landscape, especially our childhood landscape. And something more profound seemed to enter Macleod's work when the Lyttelton Harbour landscape replaced the Australian bush. The 'something' in Macleod's landscapes is a male figure which has now become gigantic and Goyaesque. Early on the figure was human size and strode naked through the landscape, unselfconscious (Piguenit comes to mind again). In an incontraversial way the paintings showed that man had a place in the landscape because he and the trees, cliffs and rocks were evocative of one another. After his father's death the figure lay down and could be discerned in rocky promontories within Lyttelton Harbour. Perhaps Macleod was surprised to find that the figure had all along been (like O'Doherty's houses) to some extent a father figure.



If vast landscapes can be encapsulated in our minds, then they become tiny and we become vast, towering above the clouds. Macleod's giant figures seem invulnerable, at ease, and at one with nature. But nature seems to harbour the human passions, containing great cauldrons of rage which burst forth in volcanic fire, smoke and fearful atomic mushrooms. Whatever the deeper meanings within Macleod's work, in one way or another it struggles towards an understanding of himself through the emotions that landscape (nature) can express.



Ken Searle's landscapes have usually had an easily perceived 'something' which is the vehicle for his insights just as the plot of a play is the vehicle for the playwright's intended message. He is best known for his 'portraits' of suburbs. First, he paints or draws - in the open air - all sorts of aspects of the suburb. He gains a deep understanding this way: the suburb's history as evidenced by the architecture; the cultural mix; where people work and how they get to work; where they relax, play and pray and much more. Then, in the studio, these outdoor works are repainted on to

a large canvas. The buildings make us conscious of the people who frequent or frequented them (as in the houses of O'Doherty and Watters) but, together on canvas, they become a vehicle for the cultural ethos of the suburb. Its soul, so to speak, comes clothed in the buildings, the graffiti, the parks, the washing on the line and a myriad of other detail.

It seems a far cry from the city suburbs to the Aboriginal community of Papunya, in the centre of the continent. The 'easily perceived something' here is the ring of the Macdonnell Ranges, rising sharply from the desert. However, these are domestic paintings. Just as Searle's urban landscapes record the public and private lives of their inhabitants, these depictions of community and country represent the *ngurra* (home) of the traditional owners. While working as a consultant at the school at Papunya over a number of years, Searle drew and painted on site around the community and in the surrounding country. When he brought the work back to show people, they put names to the *puḻi* (hills)and places which he had depicted. The shapes of the mountains, as well as the spaces between them, resonate with stories. Every piece of rock and soil is part of the *Tjurkurrpa*, the sacred law.

The landscapes in Ian Howard's work were gathered from various sources: postcards, friends' tourist photos, the internet, etc. They don't incorporate an interpretation by Howard. The Howard/Xing works rigorously observe the title of this exhibition for the 'something' in their landscapes, the camouflaged addition, carries almost all the burden of content. **Patricia Moylan's** landscapes are at the other extreme: there seems to be no 'something' except Patricia Moylan herself.

She paints on the reverse of Perspex. First applied are dots and squiggles that will become light on leaves, ripples on a pond, sunlight caught on a fence post and so on. Then other levels are applied, carefully observed and giving meaning to the previous level. By working in reverse of the usual way each level is fixed, unalterable, by the next level, and we become aware of the levels in the landscape and, mysteriously, aware of levels of insight and imagination. Each brush stroke of Grace Cossington-Smith builds what I have called Moylan's dots and squiggles into an entire landscape. The magic of colour conjures depths and distance. Lovely paintings, indeed, but the possibility of delving into the depths of things which Moylan's work encourages us to do is no little thing.

Moylan, I should add, often has 'something' in her landscapes that betrays her preoccupations. Her love of bird life, manifest in a seagull, perhaps, painted with the authority of a fresh, unhackneyed admiring eye; her daughter, her dog, an Aboriginal flag. They may occupy a tiny part of the painting but they are that 'something' which augments, for all the work in this exhibition, the artists' vision and our responses.

Geoffrey Legge

1. Howard / Xing	Ecudor (part of work)	2004
2. Max Watters	School, Stewarts Brook	2002
3. Chris O'Doherty	Space Barbecue, Tamworld	2004
4. Ken Searl	Puḻi (hills), Ulatjurrk, Anayali, Umparru, Slim Dusty's Hat	2004
5. Euan Macleod	Figure and Clouds	2005
6. Patricia Moylan	Guru on Buddha	2005

Watters Gallery
109 Riley Street, East Sydney NSW 2010
Tel: (02) 9331 2556 Fax: (02) 9361 6871
www.wattersgallery.com info@wattersgallery.com