

PRUE GIBSON begins a metaphorical journey with Amanda Penrose Hart's colourful caravans.



Amanda Penrose-Hart, *Cherries*, 2009, oil on canvas, 60 x 60cm. Photography Michael Bradfield, Sydney. Images courtesy King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.

Taking your home with you



Amanda Penrose-Hart, *Burleigh Beach Tourist Park zinc caravans*, 2009, oil paint on zinc forms, 15 x 20 x 11cm approx. Photograph Michael Bradfield, Sydney. Images courtesy King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.

Caravans imply freedom, fun and flight from suburbia. However, they also represent the trap of cheap accommodation for those on the poverty line. This adds a melancholic twist to the duplicitous but compelling image of the caravan.

The first caravans to travel across the epic distances of Australia were the wagonzelts (wagon-tents) of the 1830s. These were German-introduced vehicles. The tarpaulin covers, flung over round wooden structures, much like a whale skeleton, could be undone at night. These covers would then serve as flaps of a make-shift tent beneath the wagon. Explorers such as Georg Von Neumeyer, who travelled to Mount Kosciusko in 1862 with artist Eugen Von Guerard on a magnetic survey expedition, used a wagonzelt for most of his trip from Melbourne. Unfortunately, they had to share their early 'caravan' quarters with a plague of bush rats.

In the 1950s, the round-top caravan found favour in the US and Australia, countries where long distances

could be travelled, with accommodation conveniently included. Formica bench-tops, chrome taps, built-in fridges, velour bedspreads: this was living! Thousands of suburbanites were able to experience the joys of distance, without having to pitch tents and build camp fires at night. This was the road trip adventure talked about in US writer Jack Kerouac's *On the road* or dramatised in the 1991 movie *Thelma and Louise*. This was the romanticisation of the long journey.

The caravan has long engaged landscape artist Amanda Penrose Hart, who has a studio at Sofala in NSW, beside which her pride and joy — 'the green monster' — resides. 'My van is round, it is cell-like, very protective, and I call it the green blob. It sits in the yard as a sculpture, as it doesn't function as accommodation but it is really delicious to paint and draw.' Her green blob is a 1952 vintage model owner/builder caravan. It and other caravans have featured in her recent work. She says, "Caravan holidays are on the rise [in Australia]. I think it is a novel way to bond with the family

Amanda Penrose-Hart, **Three sentries**, oil on canvas, diptych 152 x 244cm. Photography Michael Bradfield, Sydney. Images courtesy King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.



— no TV, cramped living quarters and trapped in the car together to get to the destination. Hideous really!”

Caravans have taken Hart to the Gold Coast, Redcliff, the Sunshine Coast and the ‘Humpty Doo’ camp park in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, in search of the most interesting ones, but she is ultimately a landscape painter. Her bush subject matter is usually within a two-hour radius of her Sofala studio. Hart’s landscapes are mainly *en plein air*, which explains her preference for the small scale. Small-scale paintings, made popular by Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton, have always been an interesting ‘contrary’ phenomenon in Australia because of the immense proportions of the Australian scenery. Is it easy to paint on the small scale in a land of such grand proportions? “In small works I think I try to stagger the land mass, to try and get large land backgrounds,” says Hart. She unconsciously employs the compositional habit (which she has said is not deliberate) of choosing a scene which has a diagonal line of low looming bushes or a dusty road at an angle.

Over the years, Hart’s landscape scenes have developed from pretty views to works of tension and subtle threat, without compromising their humour and beauty. In recent paintings she conveys the moody bewildered quality of nature, the inherent discomfort and potential alarm of the bush. Humour and fear are closely linked and Hart has made full use of that relationship. She has created small caravan sculptures, one of which bedazzles with synthetic gems, and adds garden gnomes to her caravan park drawings. But behind every funny little garden gnome is the memory of a tourist-abducting sociopath. And behind the middle-class caravan dream, mediocrity awaits. For an artist consumed with the light of the Australian landscape, there is also a darker counterpoint to explore.

Apart from the concept of atmosphere in Hart’s work, there is the intense power of memory: her recent catalogue speaks of “the air of comedy, history and family memories” of the caravan series. As Hart says, “My dad was a bit of a van man ... being a sea captain and often away at sea, Dad liked the big drive on land and would head inland as far from the ocean as possible.” She adds, “Caravans are a throwback to the cubby-house days. My dad took me on a tour in January of very ornate sites, set up for temporary holidays. You can even get cable TV in a caravan site now.”

Despite the opulence of some caravan sites, there is the impoverished flip side of families who live permanently in caravans which are stifling hot in summer, cramped and inadequately resourced for long periods. Where Hart’s drawings of state-of-the-art caravans allude to the humour of kitsch or the clichéd phenomenon of Australian design, other paintings of caravans, half hidden in bush, act as schismatic devices and contribute an inhospitable and gloomy edge. Hart says, “Caravans are a compromise, they are not



Amanda Penrose-Hart, **Damien’s o’nite van**, 2009, diamante on zinc and oil paint, 15 x 25 x 11cm approx. Photography Michael Bradfield, Sydney. Images courtesy King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.

camping but they are a bit of taking the house with you. I just feel very sorry for the people who have had to live in them not by choice but due to circumstances beyond their control, such as the recent fire victims in Victoria.”

According to recent Tourism Australia reports, the number of tent campers and caravan holiday-makers is on the rise. As Hart says, “The sight of caravans begins to resemble ‘pimples on the horizon’.” Despite the growing phenomenon of caravans, it is important to remember that the caravan is fundamentally an artistic tool. The nostalgia and sentimentality of the family holiday are mobilised by Hart’s choice of subject and collective family memories are affective forces. Like the Big Rock, the Big Pineapple or the Big Prawn, formulaic holidays are ones which can be remembered within the nucleus of the family, but also shared with a wider slice of society as a part of a cultural construct.

Coupled with the dynamism of the vast Australian landscape, Hart has discovered a wonderful formula in her caravans. Her most effective decision, too, was the removal of people from her scenes (excluding the odd garden gnome). It is the absence of obvious life, and the suggestion of implied drama, that contributes to the resonance of Amanda Penrose Hart’s recent paintings.



Amanda Penrose Hart, **Packed up**, 2009, oil on canvas, 90 x 122cm. Photography Michael Bradfield, Sydney. Images courtesy King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.