

Echoes of greatness

Nine artists – and a critic – follow in Hans Heysen's footsteps to reinterpret a landscape that has become one of the sacred sites of modern Australian art.

EXHIBITION JOHN McDONALD

ALL of humanity may be divided into two categories: campers and non-campers. Sir Hans Heysen was in the former category but I am firmly in the latter. To campers there is nothing better than sleeping under the stars on a frosty night; the smell of chops cooked over a fire, the majestic communion with nature in her many and varied moods. Non-campers think only of the discomforts of swags and sleeping bags, the chronic lack of showers and toilets, of flies and mosquitoes.

For non-campers to venture into the wilderness requires some greater incentive. In this case it was to accompany a group of artists into the fabled Flinders Ranges, following in Heysen's footsteps. The Flinders were unknown territory for most Australians until Heysen painted an epic series of landscapes, making the region one of the sacred sites of Modern Australian art.

Heysen first visited the Flinders in November 1926, at the age of 49, but came away with mixed feelings. He wrote: "It was too new to me, I suppose. I didn't know how to tackle it without resorting to a very ordinary type of composition. My first impressions were ones of vastness and age, a very old country. And the intensity of the light destroyed weight. It needed a new approach you see. And I wasn't quite ready for it."

He would return one year later, having spent many months thinking about this strange, barren landscape, so unlike the hills around Hahndorf, where he painted majestic gum trees. "It is the very thing you moderns are trying to paint," he wrote to his friend, the artist and publisher, Syd Ure Smith. This confirms the limited nature of local ideas about modernism at the time. But it also signals a change in Heysen's approach – a willingness to reinvent himself and explore a new vision of the Australian landscape.

By the late 1920s Australian art was dominated by pastoral ideals. The homegrown impressionism of "Heidelberg school" artists such as Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Fred McCubbin was regarded as revolutionary in its day but during the early years of the 20th century it became an orthodoxy. While a small group of moderns laboured in obscurity, Australian art was dominated by second-generation gum-tree painters.

Heysen (1877-1968) was the undisputed king of the gum-tree painters, an artist whose superb draftsmanship and technical skill put him in a class of his own. When he made his first trip to the Flinders – 450 kilometres north-west of Adelaide – he went where no Australian artist had gone since the days of early exploration. In that harsh, dry, clear atmosphere, he knew he had discovered the real heart of the country. The pastures and bushland formed only a fragile rim around this primordial land. He was more and more convinced that the Flinders was "an artist's country", where forms and colours commanded a painter's attention.

During the war years, Heysen stayed home but still he dreamed of the Flinders. "Not a day passes but what I live with its forms..." he wrote. "I can't tell you why but there it is – despite flies, ants, and hot winds which torture the body. There is something primitive lurking in that landscape that appeals to the primitive in one's own nature."

One cannot read Heysen's words or look at his stark, powerful paintings of the region without wanting to visit the Flinders Ranges and experience them first hand. There is certainly "something primitive" in the hearts of those artists who will endure any discomfort for the sake of a new motif. Add the temptation of painting a landscape that a great master already has claimed as his own, and the appeal of the "Heysen Trail" becomes clear. In May this year, I travelled to the Flinders with Lucy Culliton, Elisabeth



Place of vision ... (clockwise from above) artist Euan Macleod captures Mt Griselda in the Flinders Ranges; Reg Mombassa's *Haystacks And Strewn Hay, Arkaba Station, 2008*; and Euan Macleod's *Mt Griselda Flinders, 2008*.



Cummings, Neil Frazer, David Keeling, Euan Macleod, Chris O'Doherty (a.k.a. Reg Mombassa), Adrienne Richards, Leo Robba and David Usher. Making up the rest of the party were spouses, Susie Macleod and Martina O'Doherty, an ABC film crew and three tour guides.

The work that resulted from the trip would be exhibited in a show called *On the Heysen Trail*, which has just opened at the S.H. Ervin Gallery and coincides with a new Hans Heysen retrospective at the Art Gallery of South Australia (until February 8).

The Heysen Trail is a walking trail that runs from Parachina Gorge in the Flinders to Cape Jervis on the Fleurieu Peninsula, a distance of 1200 kilometres. Our party would travel only a fraction of that distance. For non-campers this was an attractive way to visit the region. Tents, swags, sleeping bags and all necessities were provided; three meals a day were prepared by the guides, who turned out to be highly proficient chefs.

All the artists had to do was paint and draw and gather their thoughts about this remarkable area. The first drawings and oil sketches would be made shortly after sunrise, the last by the light of a torch late in the evening. Macleod, O'Doherty and Robba competed to produce the most voluminous quantity of paintings and drawings. Neil Frazer, by contrast, never

touched a pencil. While the others were slaving away at their easels and portable tables, he roamed the landscape, taking the occasional photo. This has made it even more startling to see the huge, dramatic landscapes he has produced for the S.H. Ervin exhibition.

'There is something primitive lurking that appeals to the primitive in one's own nature.'

Hans Heysen

Frazer's paintings betray their photographic origins, although he piles on the paint more thickly. They are as much works of the imagination as observation.

Heysen probably would not have endorsed Cummings's loose, semi-abstract landscapes, or her three still-lives based on a visit to the

Heysen studio at Hahndorf. He would have had even less time for Mombassa's occasional space creature drawn against a Flinders landscape, or Macleod's vigorous, expressionistic pictures of the dark silhouette of an artist against a backdrop of rugged, red mountains.

Even those artists who stick more closely to observable reality, such as Culliton, Keeling, Robba and Usher, have provided a view of the Flinders far removed from Heysen's. The differences tell us a lot about the way art has changed since Heysen's last visit to the Flinders in March 1949. The artists in the S.H. Ervin exhibition had less than a week to record their impressions. They painted everything: corrugated-iron dunnies, haystacks, horses and each other. Their most memorable works are the sweeping views of Wilpena Pound and other scenic locations.

Yet this is a noisy exhibition, with none of that awesome sense of solitude Heysen found in the Flinders. *On the Heysen Trail* is an exercise in sociability, not – as it was for Heysen – a celebration of the Romantic ideal of the individual engaging with Nature and by implication, with God.

On the Heysen Trail is on at the National Trust S.H. Ervin Gallery, Observatory Hill, until December 21. John McDonald was a guest of World Expeditions.