

AUSTRALIA

Main Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, London

21 September – 8 December 2013

The idea of Australia looms large in the imagination.

As the site of “the world’s oldest unbroken art tradition dating back 50,000 to 60,000 years”, Australia provides a unique cultural vantage point of global significance. This enlightening exhibition features over 200 paintings, drawings, photographs and multimedia works by 146 artists, curated jointly by the Royal Academy of Arts, London and the Australian National Gallery. Presented chronologically from 1800 to the present day, the exhibition includes many works never before seen outside Australia with a thematic focus on land and landscape.

Billed as “the most significant survey of Australian art ever mounted in the UK” ‘Australia’ is an exhibition whose significance lies in the tenacious vision of its indigenous and non-indigenous artists and in the discovery of a unique visual tradition. We are a country consistently grappling with its origins, identity and sense of belonging. In spite of the linear, institutional presentation, the best works in the exhibition celebrate this vibrant, expansive dynamic. It is the creative compulsion and necessity of digging deep beneath the earth on which you stand to transcend time and place.

Doreen Reid Nakamarra’s extraordinary painting *Untitled 2007* (Synthetic polymer paint on canvas) is a dazzling example. Walking around the painting (displayed flat as created on the ground) reveals an overwhelming sense of life and movement. Abstract linear marks transform before the viewer’s eyes into undulating three dimensional ridges, shimmering with light and heat. The crafting of this work invokes natural and sacred forces, sensed and felt in the body. The artist powerfully communicates the spiritual energy of the sand hills at Wirrulgna, an ancestral birthing place. It is a direct response to land and home, inhabited on physical, emotional, cerebral and cosmic levels of awareness.

Indigenous and migrant experiences curiously merge in Hussein Valamanesh’s profoundly moving work *Longing / Belonging 1997* (Direct colour positive photograph / carpet, velvet.) The artist focuses on the idea of home which for many cultures centres around the campfire. A photograph of a fire lit in the centre of a carpet, made in Southern Iran and positioned in Australian scrubland, hangs above the same rug displayed on the gallery floor. The rich woven pattern contrasts with its blackened centre, a burnt out void of loss and longing. Valamanesh communicates an emotional state of dispossession with eloquence and poignancy, the edges of this interior space shaped as if they were an island or a country. It is the state of migration; of ceasing to belong where you came from but never fully belonging to where you are.

Since Australian Federation in 1901 the majority of the population have lived in coastal cities, clinging to the edge of a vast continent whose interior inspires both terror and awe. When confronted with that great interior space we are, as human beings, forced to re-evaluate our own scale and sense of self. Shaun Gladwell’s short 8 min 37 sec film *Approach to*

Mundi Mundi 2007 is a powerful statement of human scale. We see the artist filmed from behind on a motorbike in a slowed contemplative arc of movement, which rises emotionally with the trajectory of the road until his outstretched arms encompass the entire horizon line. The position of the figure in the landscape is aspirational, even Christ like. Within this open tableland the artist introduces another layer of understanding in the title; the Aboriginal word 'Mundi' translated in Latin as "of the world". Gladwell visually expands human presence in the landscape, reducing the speed of the film to create a contemplative space in the mind's eye of the viewer.

Similarly Sidney Nolan's iconic painting *Ned Kelly* 1946 (Enamel paint on composition board) presents a mindscape in a landscape, with the figure starkly reduced to the outlaw's black geometric armour. The rectangular open space of his visor merges with the infinite blue sky of the background. Nolan positions Kelly on his horse in a vast desert landscape, amplifying the mythic status of an uncompromising figure of resistance and imagination. In terms of presence the scale of the figure and that of the landscape are rendered equal.

Australian Art History is a visual record of human reverence and would be dominance in the landscape, universal terrain where we may see, sometimes in the most unforgiving light, all that we are capable of. In many ways "the land Down Under" refers to the collective psyche. It speaks to how we imagine and reimagine ourselves.

An extensive catalogue with essays by Wally Caruana, Franchesca Cubillo, Anne Gray, Deborah Hart, Thomas Keneally, Ron Bradford, Kathleen Soriano and Daniel Thomas, together with a programme of talks and related events at the RA will hopefully generate further debate. Whether Australia is a place of connection or dispossession in the mind of the viewer, there are plenty of works here to fascinate, challenge and inspire the visitor.

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