

John R Walker: Journey Through Landscape' Opening Address Andrew Sayers May 2008

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I first visited John in his Stanmore studio twenty years ago. It was hectic room above the old Utopia Gallery on Parramatta Road. My impression was of a painter hell-bent on a direct and physical engagement with the flesh. There was a visceral quality to his paintings of the figure. There was a fondness for gingery colours set against green, for pinks, crimsons, creamy whites and cadmium yellow. That fondness has remained constant with him – only for the past decade it has been the landscape that has been the principal font for his art.

It's impossible for any artist in Australia to paint the landscape without thinking about the history of landscape painting in Australia. John tells the story of his shock of recognition when he re-discovered Arthur Streeton's great painting of the 1980s *Fire's On* in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. And his interest in the landscape has been compared with Fred Williams. But ask yourself; 'Have I ever heard the wind or felt the chill air in the bush in Fred Williams?' You haven't. But you can feel these things in John R Walker. The parallels between Williams and Walker are mostly superficial – Williams sketched in gouache and deepened the structural integrity of his vision in the studio; Walker has a similar working pattern. Both owe much to looking at Chinese painting. Like Williams, Walker doesn't drive a car.

That might sound like a trivial thing to say about an artist but it's important. The artist who doesn't drive – who prefers to walk in or in John's case, ride a bicycle, is an artist uniquely attuned to locality. And this I think is at the heart of what is unique and important in John's work as a landscape painter.

Last year, after a twenty year gap, I again visited John, this time at this studio in the middle of the small town of Braidwood. My first impression of the studio was less of engorged flesh – everything now was bony, stretched out, linear, scrawny.

We had a cup of coffee and afterwards John took me on a journey through his landscape. I drove and when we reached the various places he has painted we got out and walked. We went first to Bedervale on the eastern outskirts of the town. I knew Bedervale because I had years before visited the John Verge homestead and been shown around by the owners, Margaret and the late Roger Royds. But John Walker's Bedervale is not that Bedervale. We stopped short of the big house and looked at a dam near the top of a hill with a dead tree and a pile of tractor tyres next to it. Recent rain had filled the dam but when John had painted it two years before, the dam had been empty, the bottom of it a stew of drying mud-earth pigments.

Then, instead of going towards the house we plunged downhill into a dry paddock riven with an immense erosion gully. You cannot see this gully from the road but you can see it on Google Earth. Close up you can look into it and see the rusting wrecks of cars that over decades have been tipped into it to stabilise the land. That place has given John a huge subject. It is artless history – a conjunction of geology, micro-climate and human activity over time; a piece of the landscape John has rescued from the indifference of people and the elements.

From Bedervale we drove east along the Bombay Road to where the Shoalhaven crosses it. Here the river and the earth around it are shallow and rocky – the edges were turned over in the nineteenth century as people panned for alluvial gold and now there are iron barbeques dotted around the car park. The trees here have struggled. It's hard to imagine that this River is the same River that 150 kms further down creates the grand and dramatic landscape of naked geology, covered thinly in spots with stunted gums. John tells me about the formation of the landscape in the ice ages and his admiration for the great poet of Braidwood, Judith Wright. He loves her poem about the ages of fire and ice and the way we still carry them within ourselves, *For the Quaternary Age*.

Leaving Monga our afternoon came to a close with a short drive north to a place where it is possible to come very close to these changes as they occur. Having called in on the farmer who has the land, we walked along the edge of Tantulean Creek, a narrow creek that winds through a landscape which is partly wooded, partly cleared. The ridges around it rise up steeply, and the succession of ragged trees unfurl as you walk along it. There are not high ridges, so the sky is always partially in your visual field. You can walk through it and you will see and feel the changes as you go.

John's painting *Dawn Tantulean Creek*, is one of the great paintings of the landscape to have been painted in Australia, in our time. You cannot pin it down, any more than you can pin down the inexorable change of the dawn light. Here is paint, but somehow it seems to have been made from the very substance of the bush itself; here is colour, the subdued gold of a Japanese screen, but it surprises us coming halfway through our looking, as if to say 'oh, the light has changed'; here is a composition that oscillates between density and openness, between microscopic incident and broad sweep. Isn't that the way we experience things as we journey through the landscape – one moment we are attentive, one moment we are content that our seeing is cued by the loose apprehension of the materiality of things? *Dawn Tantulean Creek* opens up for you – you can walk around in it.

To walk in the landscape with John is to be made aware of the subtly different and shifting qualities of different localities. It is something akin to what you get from walking over paddocks with a farmer or going on a lake with a fisherman. It's attentiveness and it's knowledge and it's experience. All around us here in the S H Ervin Gallery this knowledge and experience are shared with us. And John, we thank you for that.