

Mandy Martin: Eco-worrying

ZSUZSANNA SOBOSLAY

IN CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH'S *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1817), a solitary male figure stands brooding at a cliff edge. His walking stick and tailored clothes – markers of his social position – are mocked by the unruliness of his hair, frisked by the ocean squall. White sea foams directly beneath him. Fingers of rock cut the middle ground; beyond that, an ambiguous geological structure slopes inward from east and west, as if sea and sky could take hold of his heart and walk straight in. A distant mountain draws in to the peak of his crown. Perhaps, Mind can cap Nature after all. Yet, a pink and pale blue sky questions this; cloud-whisks spreading above and around him.

This is a complex image, showing man both longing *for*, and *against*, the forces of nature, demanding it match his passions, wash him clean, meet his inner power, mirror *and* transcend his soul. The vista is both what he sees, and *how* he sees it. The wanderer's mood projects into the landscape, yet the landscape also resists and survives his projection. Somewhere, in the fog of his mind, the sea holds steady her wet voice, the sky quietly holds the rays of sun.

Often cited as a masterpiece of the Romantic Sublime, Friedrich's wanderer is somewhat in awe of a force that will certainly survive if not overpower him. The Sublime, a term initially applied by three early 18th century mountain adventurers and later clarified by Edmund Burke,¹ confronts Man [sic] with the 'unbounded ... the infinitude of space', creating a kind of tangible, horror-filled *pleasure* within his body and mind.

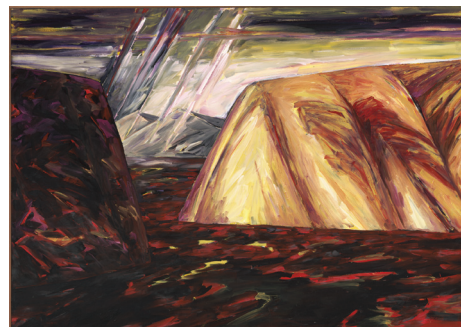
Mandy Martin is a contemporary Australian artist who is often spoken of in terms of the Sublime,² but to me the 'horror' in her paintings is of quite a different nature to that understood by the Romantics, and altogether much more harrowing.

Amongst the eleven miniatures (each 30 x 40cm) hung on a central pillar in this survey exhibition are paintings which look back to Martin's earlier industrial landscapes from the 1980s, and forward to the apocalyptic visions of fire, ice, and ash, painted in the last three years. They seem to act as thematic portals, and also unwittingly amplify some of the contradictions and controversies about her work.

Martin's *After Friedrich*, for example, shows a figure almost subsumed by fog. The vista before the man looms with shadows and shapes of amorphous substance. This is a painting not so much steeped in the Romantic Sublime, as in what became termed the 'pathetic fallacy' – a concept clarified most clearly by Ruskin, almost 100 years after Burke.³ The 'pathetic fallacy' is the treatment of inanimate objects as if they had human feelings, thought, or sensations.⁴ That is, nature is anthropomorphic – *a landscape of mind*.

Several miniatures point to the apocalyptic visions of Martin's larger paintings. Power stations belch and blur the skyline; fire-fighter figures are all but subsumed within a bushfire haze. In the imposing *Wallerawang* triptych (2009), a solitary figure walks through a wall of smog into a netherworld from which he may never return.

Even where no human figure is present, human agency is. *O-B-L-I-V-I-O-N* (1993) paints a verbal smear across a landscape so thin it could not possibly survive one more act of devastation. In *Iceberg* (2007), the Antarctic sea has become an impenetrable black impasto of grease and oil. This is less the 'awe-filled horror' of the Romantic Sublime than a horror that is both perceived by man, *made by him*, and which may well soon destroy what he relies on for survival. There is an ominous sense that hubris will at some point exert its force, perhaps at the end of 'our' era – the so-called 'age of the Anthropocene'.⁵ We are being collectively shamed.



1/ Mandy Martin, *Pink break*, 1984, oil on canvas, 173 x 244cm. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.

2/ Mandy Martin, *Wanderers in the Desert of the Real: After Friedrich*, 2009, ochre, pigment, oil/linen, 30 x 40cm. Courtesy Australian Galleries, Melbourne.

At the same time, however, each of the paintings is admirable – even beautiful – for its masterly washes, tantalising impasto mixed with sands and soils, strident compositional structures. Even the earlier powerhouse 'portraits' (1981-92), with their irradiant colours, dramatic line and composite placement of features, reveal a degree of painterly admiration for the human mind which can make machines, play with light, and so rearrange things.

Martin's opus thus operates in various states of self-contradiction, not that this detracts from the power and skill of her works; rather, that their anthropocentrism, and their ambivalent recognition of the power of mind, is primary to our experience of them, and that this per se leaves them open to particular kinds of opposition. They also provide an interesting, but problematic, focus for contemporary debates on climate change, in which arena Martin is prolifically active.

The title overarching the most recent series on display, *Wanderers in the*



1/ Mandy Martin, *Wanderers in the Desert of the Real: Wallerawang Powerstation*, 2009, ochre and pigment on linen, 180 x 410cm. Courtesy Australian Galleries, Melbourne.

2/ Installation view, *Mandy Martin Painting 1981-2009*, Canberra Museum and Gallery, with *Home Ground 3*, 2004 on back wall. Image courtesy CMAG.

3/ Mandy Martin, *O-B-L-I-V-I-O-N*, 1993, ochre, pigment and oil on linen, 152 x 274cm. Collection: Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.

4/ John Wolseley, *Scrambling, climbing, flying and moving through the Cobboboonee Forest* (detail), 2006, 16 sheets as wall installation; watercolour, carbonised wood and graphite on paper; 56 x 76cm per sheet. Image courtesy the artist and Australian Galleries, Melbourne. Photograph by Jenni Carter.



Desert of the Real, both nods backwards to Friedrich, but is also a direct quotation from the writings of contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In psychoanalytic theory, 'The Real' – the continuum of what exists – is 'cut into' by the processes of (acquiring) language and meaning. This process begins as soon as the infant can perceive itself as separable from the world. Lacan calls this the 'mirror stage', and sees the coming into 'Self' as traumatic and inevitable. But Žižek argues that contemporary culture further traumatises the Real via our mechanised relationships with nature and reliance on virtual realities.⁶ We create a *desert*, desiccating the Real and taking from it what best suits our ends. We wander in a state of disjuncture from its interconnective flows.⁷

As a title, Martin borrows Žižek's term to haunting effect, but as a philosophy, the borrowing is problematic, none the least for the way it limits the play of *time* and *agency* in most of her paintings.

Fallen from grace

I think essentially we've reached a point with history landscape painting where it has to be for something, it has to be used for something. Just sort of as a genre in itself, [it] was pretty well and truly dead a long time ago, but in terms of a vehicle to raise other issues I think there's still a lot of potential there.⁸

Martin's political activism, teaching and collaborative research work are admirable models of engaged and politically committed artistic process. Yet it needs to be remembered that other cultures and philosophical positions do *not* uphold the psychoanalytic framework and its insistence on trauma as particularly helpful or intrinsic to

making identity, meaning or useful action in the world. Pick up any book by Gregory Bateson or David Suzuki, trace the thinking back to Buddhism (Tibetan and Zen) and various indigenous cultures, and you'll see my point.

Indeed, there are other contemporary Australian landscape painters, such as John Wolseley, who argue, that:

What artists can do and musicians and dancers and so forth can do, is try and find ways in which we can unite ... alienated things ... to experience what it's like to be the wind or to experience the forest, to experience the sea ... become part of what you're actually painting ... express something very much about the innerness of things.⁹

Martin's paintings exhibit an inherent resistance to such a proposition. This is evident in her *After Friedrich*, which is clearly without 'innerness' to sky, rock, or sea. Even in her extensive immersion projects,¹⁰ which she conducts in collaboration with biologists, geologists, and Indigenous artists/elders to document country in Arnhem Land, the Simpson Desert, and the Warrego, her landscapes seem delimited by human time. In such paintings, Martin's documentary style, with its thin colour washes, shallow depths of field, resistance to depicting broad horizon, and precise, close enumeration of botanical details, seem to heighten the fragility and impending *endedness* of things.

Yet one painting in this survey does something quite unique. As large in scale as the apocalyptic *Wallewarang* (2009), *Home Ground 3* (2004) talks of a land-in-time quite different from the burnt-out patches survived by termite mounds (*Tanami Spinifex fires*, 2008) or the ashen endgame visions of the power plants.



Rolling hills hum a honey richness that belongs to an older time. There is little evident manipulation of compositional structure and something in spite of the painter's eye seems to glow and override any habitual tendency to warn. I'm not sure that what is painted is an 'innerness' so much as a continuum. Within this vast and warm canvas, *something hums*.

Mandy Martin is a prolific painter, a kind of eco-warrior who insists we sit up and be called to account for our actions. But her paintings too rub our faces in it – in admirable, strong, insistent ways – singing up our consciences to imagine and face the potential consequence of our disconnections. In some ways, too, they replicate – and are held to or fascinated by – them. Yet, in terms of her being a 'landscape' painter, i.e., representing landscape, it leaves a space for many to disagree with her position. I feel very differently about the power of landscape to communicate something – regarding innerness, continuum, perhaps even *teachings*, ways of recovering, and moving forward – other than what the majority of Martin's paintings seem to tell.

But that's another story.

Notes

1. Between 1693-1709, the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, John Dennis and Joseph Addison 'expressed an appreciation of the fearful and irregular forms of external nature' as experienced in their journeys across the Alps. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(philosophy)) Edmund Burke later formalised the concept in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

2. See for example the catalogue essay by Peter Haynes, Director, ACT Museums and Galleries, and curator of the exhibition.

3. Coined by John Ruskin in his work *Modern Painters* (1856).

4. The word 'pathetic' is not pejorative. Josephine Miles in *Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century* (1965) argues that 'pathetic bestowal' is a neutral and therefore preferable label.

5. Allenby summarises that this term, first proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, refers to the way that 'the biosphere itself, at all levels from genetic to the landscape, is increasingly a human product'. B. Allenby, 'Earth systems engineering and management', *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 19(4), 2000, pp. 10-24.

6. See Tony Myers, *Slavoj Zizek*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 27.

7. These terms are my extrapolations, after Zizek.

8. Mandy Martin, quoted in *Arts Talk* with Julie Copeland, Sunday 30 August, 1998. www.abc.net.au/rn/events/brush3.htm

9. Wolseley, quoted in Copeland, 1998.

10. Not well represented in this exhibition, but go to www.mandy-martin.com for details.

Mandy Martin: Painting 1981-2009 was curated by Peter Haynes and shown at the Canberra Museum and Gallery, 30 May to 9 September, 2009. Mandy Martin's solo exhibition, *Wanderers in the Desert of the Real 2009*, is currently showing at Australian Galleries Derby Street, Melbourne until 6 December. *Mandy Martin and Mangkaja Artists painting Fitzroy River Valley Country 2007-2009* is also showing at Australian Galleries Smith Street, Melbourne until 6 December.

Zsuzsanna Soboslay is a performance-maker, writer, and visual artist who lives in Canberra. She has a special interest in environmentally response-able process.

EXHIBITIONS

Hello Dolly
5 December – 31 January

Hilda Rix Nicholas
The man for the job
23 January – 5 April

bendigoartgallery.com.au
Open daily 10am – 5pm
Gallery Café opens 10am

Bendigo
Art Gallery

42 VIEW ST
BENDIGO
VICTORIA 3550
AUSTRALIA
t 03 5434 6088
f 03 5443 6586



Bendigo
Art Gallery

Mosman Art Gallery

12 December - 31 January

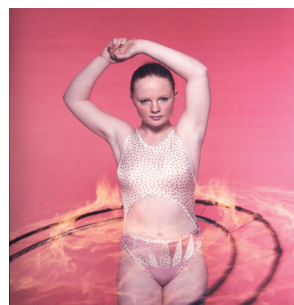
Controversy & Acclaim
60 years of the
Mosman Art Prize



Lucy Culliton, *Still life white ground*,
Winner 2000 Mosman Art Prize

20 February - 28 March

A Generous Gift:
The Gwen Frolich Bequest



Step Right Up!
The Circus in Australian Art

Petrina Hicks, *Freyja # 1*, 2006 (detail)
Polaroid photograph Polacolor Pro 100
(P6v6), AlburyCity Collection

arts nsw

Australian Government
Visions of Australia

Mosman Art Gallery

Cnr Art Gallery Way & Myahgah Road, Mosman
Open 7 days, 10am - 5pm (closed public holidays)
T: (02) 9978 4178 www.mosman.nsw.gov.au

Mosman Art Gallery is a cultural service provided by Mosman Council

