



In dedication to my mother Nan Evans



Special; thanks to Sandy Kirby

'It's so still.....'

Megan Evan's elderly mother brings her mind constantly back to the environment with her repetitive comment, "It's so still there's not a leaf moving". As her daughter listens to this mantra, her memories drift back to childhood walks when her mother introduced her to the beauties of the Eltham bush, on the outskirts of Melbourne where they lived. As most of us know from experience, these early influences have a way of persisting, despite the numerous directions our lives take over time. In this exhibition, the intense concentrated gaze of the child returns, filtered by adult concerns, to pay tribute to her mother.

As someone with close personal ties and working relationships with Indigenous people, Evans is acutely aware of the central role that land plays in their cultural identity. In the context of marvelous paintings of country being produced by various Indigenous communities across Australia, she approaches the landscape in a spirit of reconciliation, mindful of the postmodern, postcolonial situation in which she is working. Visually at least, Australians have embraced their Indigenous heritage, but does this lead to the conclusion that only Indigenous people have an authentic relationship with the land? Can non-Indigenous artists use western visual traditions in a way that avoids a colonial, dominating gaze? What multiple interpretations and representations, encompassing Indigenous and non-Indigenous traditions, can coexist in a postmodern space?

Postmodernism enables us to acknowledge that we perceive things differently, that we see things from our distinct points of view. This does not necessarily entail a moral judgment of superiority for one or the other, nor does it preclude criticism and choice. What it does allow for is a space where different, even conflicting views, can coexist. For non-Indigenous Australians their visual tradition was formed in an imperial culture where the colonizing view recorded and surveyed the continent in order to settle and exploit it. This tradition of observation, of representing the bush, of looking at the land, stands in contrast to the Indigenous experience of being in the land, of the land. Not surprisingly, our different visual traditions express these different forms of knowledge.

With these issues in mind, Evans celebrates the bush by drawing on the western tradition of realistic representation through close observation. This is her visual heritage and this is the way her mother taught her to look at her surroundings; nevertheless, in adopting this approach, Evans is conscious of not replicating colonial attitudes in her work.

'It's so still there's not a leaf moving'

New Work by Megan Evans

Painting, drawing, photographic stereoscopes.

Ochre Gallery 2007

The legacy of botanical studies resonates in paintings and drawings such as *'I Leaf'*, *'Leave'* and *'Return'*. They are similarly meticulous, depicting detailed elements from the bush; however, they differ from the scientific tradition of documentation and classification with its imperial agenda. Evan's images are not of typical, perfect specimens but display unique characteristics, startling in their multicoloured blighted shapes. They project an individuality that demands recognition of their specificity and that of their environment. While these images are reminiscent of earlier botanical studies, the tradition has been transformed here to claim intimacy and familiarity with the land. They differ too in the way that the leaves and sticks are laid out on the paper. In an interesting echo of Central Australian Indigenous art, the viewer of these works also looks down onto the landscape.

Beautiful in its wispy spikeness, the photograph, *'Slow Burn'*, records the collaborative results of experimental work undertaken by an Indigenous man and a non-Indigenous farmer. Both men are working towards reclamation of knowledge, lost by local Indigenous inhabitants, of environmental control through slowly firing the country. Their efforts in bringing about the re-establishment of native flora, exemplify the postmodern condition, which recognises the validity of knowledge systems other than those originating in the Imperial centres of Europe.

Landscape views, depicted in *'Small Views'*, represent another approach by Evans to the environment. These appear to fall within a traditional western format, yet their diminished scale warns that this is literally a small, limited way of perceiving the world. Viewed through large, white frames the European derived landscape is shrinking from sight. The window, through which non-Indigenous eyes see the land, creates a narrow, albeit legitimate focus.

Similarly, the stereoscopic images in the exhibition invite the viewer to look though into another reality. Here, in photographic images of the landscape a three dimensional world appears. Xanthorrhoea, with their colonial nomenclature, Black Boys, survive from ancient days, as do the rainforest remnants pictured. The latter also speak of contemporary attachments for Evans. It is here, among the Beech trees of the Wirra Willa Walk that one day, following her mother's wishes, she will scatter the ashes of the woman who first inspired her to look at, and love the bush.

Sandy Kirby ©
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