

Jeffrey Makin and the Grandeur of Nature

In this post-modernist age when appropriation is often taken for originality, the rule of the Australian landscape tradition seems to be as strong as ever. Perhaps this tenacity is to be expected in a country of such vast spaces, where so many of the grand gestures of nature seem as if they have survived since primordial times to fill even us supposedly rationally minded white people with awe and wonderment. Parts of Australia go back a long way in geological terms, and Aboriginal lore offers as good an interpretation of creation as any of the more literary based tales.

Jeff Makin is one of many Australian contemporary artists of European descent to adopt the landscape as his chief mode of expression. It is particularly relevant to his sense of regionalism, of being an Australian artist. He senses the grandeur of nature, responding to Aboriginal beliefs, while painting in a manner that still has its roots firmly implanted in the European landscape tradition. Makin has, of course, been much influenced by the sharpness of antipodean light and the bold forms and curious shapes of our ancient continent. Nevertheless, it is in his selection of subjects as well as in their execution that you can find ideas and inspirations that are derived from eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, and from those European-born artists who settled in and pioneered Western styled art in Australia.

Makin casts his net wide to include in his artistic baggage artists as varied as the convict painter, Joseph Lycett (see Makin's *The Apsley Gorge* 2001), and his picturesque views of New South Wales and Tasmania; and the romanticist, Conrad Martens, whose watercolour, *Viaducts on the Descent to the Lithgow Valley* 1872, in the collection of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, provided the genesis for Makin's more closely focused and robust oil painting, *The Great Zig Zag Railway* 2002. His particular favourites are those late nineteenth century painters Eugene von Guerard, Nicholas Chevalier and Louis Buvelot. Makin has even walked in Von Guerard's footsteps in search of the sublime motif, to recreate it in terms of his own times. For his impressive painting of the Wannon Falls, Makin visited a spot that, a hundred years before, had enticed such artists S.T. Gill, Thomas Clark, Chevalier, Buvelot, and Von Guerard to draw and paint it. In his *Wannon Falls* 2000, Makin even took the almost identical viewing position as that used by Chevalier for his painting of the falls in the 1860's, whereas in the 2002 version, *Wannon Falls No 2*, Makin adopted a view closer to one chosen by Buvelot for his several watercolours and oil paintings of the subject.¹ Leaving its topographical accuracy aside, this is Makin's most traditionally pictorial painting in the exhibition, achieved with a decided increase in his stylistic individuality. The illusion of space is handled with a new authority, as likewise are the colour harmonies and tonal relationships, in an inviting painting of the silver cascades of water flowing through his characteristic black, line-bound rocks. By drawing closer to verisimilitude in this painting, Makin has succeeded in making an important breakthrough in his art.

Makin is not alone in calling on the past to make sense of the present. Frederick McCubbin and his contemporaries looked to Buvelot and others working in the *plein-air* tradition. In later years, artists as different as Fred Williams and Jan Senbergs have evoked artists of the past; and extraordinary connections can be made between, say, such radically different artists as Hans Heysen and John Davis, joined over time by their concern for conservation in the face of the despoliation of the Australian landscape.

The diversity of Makin's subjects reflects the diversity of the regions, climatic zones and related motifs within Australia. Such a painting as *McLaren Vale Vineyards*, with its lush fertility and intensely cultivated fields of vines, could not offer a greater contrast to the barren outback of *Flinders Ranges 2002*. And again, in *Desert Boabs 2002*, what could be more different than the curious boab tree, a natural, fecund, water storage among furnace-red rocks and sands? The approach to these diverse subjects requires not only a totally new palette, but also a different set of mind. The landscape of one is full of the evidence of human activity. In the other, it is so extraordinary and challenging that it evokes awe, a kind of reverence in the face of things so different and over powering.

Makin often uses a blunt approach as in such works as *Flinders Ranges* and *Desert Boabs*, to give them greater impact and added drama. As in some of his Kununurra paintings of a few years before, he makes confronting use of their unrelenting frontality, with the emphasis on the broad picture plane, enlivened through the use of texture and colour. Both in imagery and technique, they are about as far away as you can get from the gently rolling slopes of McLaren Vale. Yet Makin succeeds in both fields. In his views of settled or humanised landscape, Makin invites the viewer's participation through such compositional devices as curves and recessions leading into illusionistic pictorial space. On the other hand, his early waterfalls come into a wonderment category, being more impressive than any towered battlements of man. Eyes scale the rocks and then cascade down with the waters, in paintings which place a decided emphasis on the compositional verticals. In the outback works the emphasis is changed to solid horizontals of stark, impenetrable, red rock and baking heat, with the mirage turning solid forms into shimmering, intransient images, beguiling and dangerous.

In this exhibition a new refinement can be found. There is still that demanding simplification of forms, yet, the usually harsh horizontals are made visually gentler by being tilted and angled, as in the large painting, *Desert Boabs*. The same device is employed in the similarly large *Glen Helen Gorge 2002*; while *Chamber's Pillar – Sunset 2002*, with the desertscape still reduced to its essentials, evokes the peaceful, softer mood of twilight. This is found again in the super simplifications of the two studies for *Desert Sunset*. Each shows a new interest in and handling of the sky, a major feature of our landscape, which influenced Makin so much during his recent visit to Lake Eyre. *Hannigan Bay, Lake Eyre 2002* captures the change at work. And again, compare the magisterial *Agnes Falls 1989* and *The Apsley Gorge 2001*, full of energetic angles, with *Wannon Falls No 2 2002*, and you can see the change in mood and vision that is taking place.

Like many landscape artists, Makin seeks to capture the spirit of the place he paints; not its exact visual appearance, but that essence (for want of a better word) that says 'this is it – here it is'. Our Aboriginal cousins achieve this in their art with intuitive ease; but we, the more 'civilised', often have to struggle for it. To this is added the autonomy of the work of art itself. It stands alone as its own creation, reflecting in wonderment the greater creation all around us. From the highly pictorial *Acacia and Blackboys, Margaret River to Lake Womboy*n at his minimal best, Makin gives us his own special moments of wonderment.

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1. *Wannon Falls*, collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. A chromolithograph based on this painting was included in Chevalier's *Album of Lithographs*, produced by Charles Troedel, Melbourne in 1865. Paintings of the Wannon Falls by Buvelot can be found in the Ballarat Fine Gallery and the Hamilton Art Gallery.