

Michael Snape

*Here*

15 September – 2 October 2022

Australian Galleries, Sydney

‘Inhabiting the Landscape’

In linguistics, ‘the observer’s paradox’ is a term which is often kicked about. It refers to how the very act of observation influences what we perceive. Put another way: how do we observe something that we are a part of?

Think landscape painting and how the painter traditionally renders a landscape as a two-dimensional image on a flat surface. Now think Michael Snape. Best known as a sculptor – namely, an artist who makes three-dimensional objects to inhabit a space – he now reveals his alter ego as a painter, especially of landscapes.

Is this Michael Snape wrestling with the observer’s paradox? Maybe. But one thing is certainly true and that is that Michael, like any serious sociolinguist, is an inveterate experimenter who is forever testing the methods he uses. Whether it’s sculpture or painting, he does not take anything for granted. Everything he makes begins as an interrogation: what is sculpture, what is painting, what do they do and how do they justify themselves?

Go back to 1991 and his well-known sculpture, *The Trail*, at Sydney Park. It may well be an homage to Henry Moore’s outdoor reclining nudes, but its curved metal plates are riven by slits so that we see through the sculpture to the landscape beyond. In this way, the sculpture is both an object and a part of the landscape. The same subversive tactics are seen in his cut metal figurative pieces and in his 2020 Australian Galleries show, *The Folded Forest*, whose clusters of folded steel forms allow the environment to penetrate through them to create a unity of form and space.

The paintings share this way of looking at the world. In fact, their origins lie not in *looking* at the world, but *feeling* it. The landscape is not so much observed as taken in and felt. Only then is it realised in pictorial form – an image of the landscape as felt, imagined, remembered and reconstructed as experience.

Just as *The Folded Forest* was an investigation of sculpture, so this exhibition of recent paintings explores the process of painting – in particular, the landscape. They are a response to the landscape of Michael’s country property at Wamboin, north of Canberra in rural NSW.

These paintings are not prescribed in any way. Instead, they begin as intuitive responses to the landscape. What is seen with the physical eye triggers the inner eye so that the retinal image is shaped by all those other things that determine what we ‘see’: visual habits, memory, emotions, past experience and present preoccupations.

Using a roller on ground in what Michael describes as “a pretty random way” begins an intuitive process which allows the paintings to become what they want to be. Combining the deliberate with the accidental, he starts to “cultivate” them with figurative elements – ideograms of kangaroos, birds, people, even a little truck, all of which appear tiny in the panoramic vastness of the landscape.

But this is a panorama with no horizon line. It is a landscape portrayed simultaneously across and from above, seen and felt, immediately and remembered. Its abstraction conjures up a sense of timelessness, while its figurative elements ground us in the here and now. Like his figurative sculptures with their skeins of linked dancing figures, the tension between the abstract and the figurative gives these paintings a special kind of force – simultaneously dynamic and meditative.

In these paintings Michael Snape explores the process of painting, in particular landscape painting. He asks: what is it, why do we do it and why do we love it so much? But the paintings are by no means cerebral. This is not conceptual art in disguise. Instead, they remain deeply felt responses to the landscape. They aim to render what it feels like to be part of it rather than just looking out over it.

Paul McGillick

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