Space and Place

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‘And so, what with angles, niches, junctures, posts Marcovaldo’s route followed an irregular pattern; several times he thought the wall was ending, then discovered it continued in another direction; after so many turns he no longer knew what direction he was headed in, or rather, on which side he should jump…’

Italo Calvino, Marcovaldo

This article suggests an exploration of space and place as both an actual and metaphorical construct. The thematic intent and approach to my own artistic making is also addressed as a way of reflecting on the processes of art making.

During 2004 I travelled around the United Kingdom and Ireland, finishing up in Paris. Amongst many things, I pursued two particular interests, one, how place is a location of constant accretions of human intervention and presence and, two, the structure of bridges and the built environment formally, conceptually and historically. These two interests are an ongoing focus for my art making.

The Bridge

The original meaning of bridge meant beam or brow (due to its shape) One of my early childhood memories is that of constructing tunnels and environments from cardboard tubes and wooden cloth boards from my parents’ clothing factory. The boards would criss-cross around the dining room at home, resting against chairs, stools, tables, under benches and so on. This formative experience of construction and installation was both visual and kinaesthetic. Such early experiences constantly resonate in our life’s journey of making sense of the world. I have an interest in bridges which could, in part, be explained by my early constructional efforts of mastering and engaging with space.

My overseas travel provided a useful counterpoint to the Australian experience. Europe with its built environment spanning thousands of years as opposed to Australia’s two centuries of European settlement presented a stark contrast. What was similar, however was man’s capacity and ingenuity in using and reflecting the regional environment in many structures. For example, in England the availability of flint in some regions was incorporated into house and wall construction.

I live in the Yarra Valley region of Victoria, Australia. Throughout the Yarra Valley reside disused railway bridges that punctuate and assimilate the landscape. Sections of land become linked and joined together as a means of traversing and conquering horizontal...
space. Bridges have a sense of place and allude to man’s incursions on the landscape. Like commas and conjunctions, they stretch out the sentences that allude to stories and events over time when the bridges had a utilitarian function.

Akin to rotting carcases, the weathered bridge timbers stand as sentinels in the horizontal flood plain alluding to a former life. The timbers were obtained by felling and clearing the surrounding eucalypt forests. A sense of place, however, is not fixed and over time the bridge transforms into something else carrying the scars and forms of a number of lives. The timbers display markings made by tree fellers, rail gang workers, weathering, and insect habitation. They are also adorned and changed by their former usage by trains and the discoloration caused by rusty bolts. In short, the bridge is a transformational structure subject to the ravages of time and former histories.

The bridge has formed the inspiration for a number of artworks. The works produced are not literal representations but rather metaphorical snapshots triggered by the presence and form of bridge construction. Whilst the Yarra Valley represented a starting point, all forms of bridges and their structural and historic connotations are explored through some of my artworks. Travelling to Europe added an additional layer of focus where bridges and structures viewed spoke of battles, imperial conquests, bold engineering feats and regional innovation.

**Archaeology and Art**

Shapiro (2003) in his book *Archaeologies of Vision*, has examined the writings and observations of Foucault and Nietzsche, addressing such aspects as the gaze and visual regimes. Renfrew (2003) establishes a dialogue between archaeological activity and 20th and 21st Century art, drawing upon a question posed by the Post-Impressionist Gaugin in his painting, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* Both Shapiro and Renfrew explore connecting points with archaeology and art. Their works reflect the anthropologist, Geertz’s multi-disciplinary approach to learning and the potency of its consequent ‘intellectual armoury.’ (Geertz, 1993:4)

Archaeology is a field of endeavour concerned with remains and traces. When applied to visual activity it can involve an attempt to understand changing practices, perceptions and expectations through drawing upon a range of disciplines. For example, looking at the material unearthed in an architectural dig of a 19th Century industrial town, the coins, vessels, mechanical objects and signage build up a composite picture of that town from a sociological, mercantile and cultural perspective.

One of the more conscious archaeological strategies that both doubled as a memento hominem and a work of art were the time capsules created by Andy Warhol. Numbering 612 at the time of his death Warhol adopted a strategy wherein he would throw receipts, correspondence, precious objects, magazines, books, photographs, experiments, fragments of objects, clothing, in short, anything to hand, and place them thematically in uniformly sized cardboard boxes (10 x 17 7/8 x 14 inches), which were sealed, labelled and never opened again until after his death. (Warhol. 2003) The collection of time capsules reside and are carefully guarded at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Much of Warhol’s work tells us as much about process as content and the time capsules locate the viewer as that of an archaeologist as one attempts to make sense of the collected fragments. The impact of viewing such material is akin to raiding celebrity garbage bins and pouring over the contents in order to get closer to that celebrity or to unearth a dark secret. The strategy adopted by Warhol grew from a concept he enunciated in the 1960s that outlined placing flotsam and jetsam to hand in cardboard boxes for a designated period of one month. (Warhol. 2003 :11)

In exploring bridges and ruins, I am both drawn by archaeological posturing as to how things come into existence and what they may represent or symbolise, as well as,
metaphorically transforming the material collected (sketches, drawings, photographs, historical accounts, anecdotes) into a painting or sculpture. Rather than the materials becoming Duchampian readymade art works by being selected by the artist and designated as such, as in Warhol’s time capsules, the collected material becomes a resource from which further drawings and images are created. The collected material is then in dialogue with future options and possibilities. As T.S. Eliot expressed it poetically

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; 
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, 
But neither arrest or movement. And do not call it fixity, 
Where past and future are gathered. (Eliot, 1959:15)

As noted earlier, the bridge is a ‘space connector’ joining one area with another. For example, the right and left banks of the Seine in Paris. But the bridge has also been a point for division. A strategic structure that is often targeted during warfare as a way of paralysing or disenfranchising the opposition forces by cutting off their mobility.

Bridges also serve as a place of entrapment, as in the ubiquitous cutting of the ropes of a suspension bridge with people caught on it, as viewed in many adventure films in the style of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.

The bridge can be viewed as a multi-layered symbol that has a sentient quality. It is a structure that tells us much about its history as well as ours. Bridges exist in time and place and are subject to the initial impact of human construction and subsequent use and abuse. Markings, sometimes accidental or consciously made by man, are also of interest to incorporate into my paintings. Rusty metal and weathered timber reflect a ‘lived’ history as the ravages of time are directly evidenced. Surface markings are important elements in my art work. The X mark or diagonal cross is also one I incorporate into many of my paintings and drawings.

The X Motif or Diagonal Cross

The X motif is one that resonates and manifests itself throughout society. From the cross-markings on windows in new construction sites, the metal plug-hole in bathroom sinks, the cross bracing of metal girders and beams in high rise buildings and bridges or the square you mark when casting your votes at the ballot box, the X motif is omnipresent. The diagonal cross is also a national symbol. The Scottish flag features the cross of St Andrew, a Saint who had been martyred on a diagonal cross. The flag, dating back to the 12th Century and is one of the oldest national flags of any country.

In paintings by the Spanish artist, Tapies, the cross and X motif is redolent of the affirmation and assertion of one’s existence; X marks the spot. The diagonal cross becomes an existential assertion that ‘I was here.’ However, it can be both an affirmation and also a symbol of denial or danger – ‘no’ as opposed to ‘yes’.

Tapies work from the 1960s on presented the canvas as a battleground that featured scratches and etched marks that mirrored the century old walls and buildings of Spain, and in particular Barcelona. The canvases alluded to the formation and deformation of matter that were part of an ongoing transformational process (Penrose, 1978). Subject to the processes of weathering and erosion once grand objects become vestiges of their former existence. As matter they are part of a yet to be determined continuum and possibility.

The Australian artist, Elwyn Lynn, incorporated the diagonal cross into his works as he absorbed the influence of the European Matter painters, particularly Tapies, with his own observation of the Australian landscape. Tapies work resonated with Lynn and he drew upon his experiences of the dry, dusty, unforgiving rural Australian environment and its rich variety of surfaces and textures (Pinson, 2002).
Similarly, Tim Storrier painted fictional and actual Australian landscapes that were ruptured by an X motif that demonstrated a painting (as in a mark) superimposed on a painting (representational image). In this context the work becomes a commentary on process and structure rather than the painting being interpreted as bland illustration. The diagonal cross structurally jolts the viewer just as a mark superimposed over a photograph or image in a book can generate additional import and impact.

My curiosity regarding the X motif has been continually aroused after viewing Tom Roberts’ *A break away!* This 1891 painting, that resides in the Art Gallery of South Australia, features a rider on horseback mustering sheep. In the drought ridden, dusty summer environment a mob of sheep stampede towards the spectre of water. A stockman is caught in the resultant maelstrom. What particularly interests me is the sky in the top right-hand corner. A faint white cross like the tracings left by a sky writer unmistakably form an X. Why such a mark? In a painting executed before man-made flight, the tracings of an aeroplane are not the answer. The X etched into the sky is an unnatural occurrence.

Why is it there? The X seemingly anchors the eye within the picture frame both holding one’s gaze and drawing back one’s eye to the central action that echoes the X form. The outstretched arm of the rider counterbalanced by the outstretched leg is structurally crossed by the horse’s turned head and the stampeding sheep hurtling down the gully. In Roberts’ paintings, such as *Shearing the Rams*, the internal formal structures such as triangles and pyramids provide a classical balance to the compositions.

The diagonal cross incorporated into my own paintings functions as a multi-layered image that alludes to structure, the built environment, materiality, metaphor and a tradition of Australian painting. At any one time the diagonal cross could symbolically be one or all of the possibilities mentioned.

**Process in painting**

I generally play with ideas and images on paper before starting a painting. Some paintings, particularly those that are small, are considered thought pieces where various techniques and ideas are enacted. All works proceed through several layers of paint being applied and over time scratching back a surface to reveal an earlier layer. The resultant dialogue between several layers of marks is a way of engaging with surface and allusions to time. To illustrate further, peeling layers of rock music posters on external walls of buildings reveal a series of histories. As one rock concert ends another poster is placed over the top as a new concert is flagged. However, over time the residue of underlying layers or histories become exposed due to rain and weathering. The metaphoric layering of histories is of interest to me in my work.

Texture may or may not be applied in my paintings. If texture is used PVA mixed with sand is the most common technique employed. Similar to most artists, the works evolve from a concept, thought or plan and change in process due to scale, colour juxtapositions, intuitive leaps or the need to balance and unify elements. The works are not formulaic nor do they follow a prescriptive structure. The ideas driving two works, *Traversee* and *Newgrange* will be described in more detail.

*Traversee* (101cm W x 70cm H - Acrylic on canvas)
This work is structured as a long horizontal postage stamp with the dominant image being a railway bridge and a cloth overlaying the bridge and the almost indistinct word *traversee*. The bridge timbers are braced by several diagonal crosses and *traversee* is French for passage, voyage or crossing. The notion of stamp, marks of crumpling on the surface and the bridge itself are self-referential of a journey or crossing and *traversee* is a pun on the French *traverse*, meaning cross-bar or cross-piece. The cloth alludes to a covering or concealment, particularly of the title of the work.

Stamps are functional but they also tell us much about a culture and society through the images used and the style of art work and design. A stamp series based on a fictitious land or countries provides much scope for invention and myth making and is an area that I will develop in the future.

Newgrange (182 cm W x 152 cm H - Acrylic on linen)

In July, 2004 I visited Newgrange, a Neolithic tomb dating back to 3200 BC. The site north of Dublin in the Boyne valley features a large circular mound or cairn which protects a burial tomb. You can enter the tomb through a narrow opening where at dawn on the 21st of December every year (the winter solstice) a beam of sunlight penetrates the shaft lighting up the central burial chamber. The burial chambers corbelled ceiling consists of overlapping stones that have resisted water penetration for their entire existence.

Nearby to Newgrange is the location of the battle of the Boyne staged in 1688 between the deposed Catholic King of England, James 11 and his Protestant daughter Mary and her husband, William of Orange. The Protestants won, confiscating land, possessions and maintaining power over Ireland from that time.

The Newgrange site and the Battle of the Boyne became catalysts for the painting *Newgrange*.

Conclusion

In this article I have articulated some concerns and interests that I have in order to shed some light on the processes and approaches I use in my art works. Time, space and place are issues that I explore in various forms within my paintings, drawings and assemblages. The motifs and marks that I make are multi-layered and metaphoric and are symptomatic of my concern with accretions of time and phenomena in a total state
of flux.

To conclude in the words of T.S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

(Eliot, 1959 :59)

REFERENCES


