Melancholic Wonderlands: Australians Painting Spaces of Terror and Half–Truths

Ann McCulloch
Deakin University

This essay was written in response to an exhibition of the works of Dr. John Forrest and Terry Matassoni in Fiji at the Double Dialogues Conference hosted by the University of the South Pacific in conjunction with Deakin University.

Works by John Forrest and Terry Matassoni

John Forrest and Terry Matassoni construct worlds that give us immediate access into places and environments that each knows well. Forrest visits a favorite place in Spain and in constructing that world in paint he also tells us another story that reflects earlier journeys in his psychological world. Matassoni renders the gleaming world of suburbia paying tribute as much to its beauty as its terror. Both painters explore the unknowable terrains of solitude a well from which stories of loss and lurking unclaimed identities struggle for expression.

Forrest’s paintings found their narrative in his visit to Spain. Forrest visited Cadaqués, a village north of Barcelona, where the surrealist painter Salvador Dali lived and painted for most of his life. It would be biographical details about Dali’s life that would serve to provide Forrest with some of the images that he incorporated into his paintings. Visiting one of the hotels at Cadaquez Forrest was amazed to see the walls covered with original Dali drawings and paintings and he sought out the owner who rewarded his interest with stories involving the relationship Dali had with Gala. Whether factual or not, the story told were drawn on in Forrest’s paintings.

The hotel owner, evidently attached to his role of narrator of a famous love affair picked up an orange as he told his story using it as a metaphor of Dali’s relationship with Gala. He did not hold back in his descriptions of their love drawing on the juices of the orange he held to represent the delectable nature of this coupling. However he noted with some mischievous intent that Dali’s experience of ‘the orange’ involved not only the delicious juices of the fruit but also the bitter taste of the peel (See fig.1).

Is Forrest’s resultant painting therefore about Dali and Gala or do the images and implied narrative become a means for the painter to represent something other? The answer to this question might be sought in what Forrest has added to the environments of his paintings. Perhaps another question that might draw out further interpretations of the art-is one that looks at the psychological dimension of the works.

In each of these paintings there is a hole dug into the earth. These holes represent a place of terror, an opening into the unconscious where the painter prefers not to descend. It is his insight that strategies for wise repression is possible, and perhaps,
even necessary for the painter who wishes to tap unconscious meaning in images which must be untainted by the categorizing power of words and rationalization. The arenas of terror he concedes do relate to experiences in childhood that he says he may remember in part but they are experiences that he has chosen not to deal with emotionally. This tendency for artists to refuse to answer questions about symbolic arenas in their work is not an uncommon one. Artists, and I include writers, argue that their art is in some ways reliant on these deep-seated memories that feed their vision and that it is their preference for art to tap them and represent them in an instinctual manner rather than a logical one. One is reminded that an artist creates a symbol in order to **apprehend** meaning in its relationship with memories and does not seek to **define** reality or even come to terms with possible pathology in a psychological sense.

In the first painting (Fig. 1) the hole is encased in a structure suggesting 'work in progress', 'do not intrude'. It is, I think, important to note the closeness of the open orange to the hole and that it is unimpeded by the white frame that otherwise encloses the outside environs, suggesting a possible descent that would be sexual and probably bitter. Therefore the story that unfolds here is a triple one. Firstly there is the story of Dali and Gala; secondly there is the use of this story as a symbol of Forrest’s ‘terror’ and ‘joy’ and thirdly there is recognition by the painter of his own pathology and how his art is a vehicle of discovery. In a post-modernist sense Forrest includes in his work self-reflective views on his artistic processes.

![Figure 1: Untitled 2, Ghosts of Cadaquez series. John Forrest](image)

The second painting, **Untitled 3**, (see Fig. 2), continues the narrative of Dali and Gala. The eye is drawn to the smeared mouth of Gala, and then to the frenetic rowing of journeyman in his boat (Is he traveling towards or away from the disaster point?). The pebbles/rocks are encased in boxes, yet are fluid as if set to escape; in their cases they frame the psychological/physical journey of Dali. On the right you see these rocks either being spat out of the hole or descending into it in maelstrom fury. The final painting (see Fig. 3), in the series, sees the hole tamed and diminished, placed neatly on a tray on a window sill yet penetrated by the crucifix indicating that containment of self is both produced and raped by fixed morality, sacrifice and arbitrary notions of reality.
Are these paintings about Dali? Are they re-inventing surrealism or using it as a point of departure. Forrest's works are not surreal. Indeed the extent to which his images give stark, realist representation alerts the viewer to the enigma of these representations. What fascinates me about Forrest's paintings is that their super-real conciseness accesses something other, something trembling and unknowable at the source of this poetic space, which is particularly evident in his alien, yet knowable, skies and seas.

These images are produced by an Australian artist whose entire life has been lived in Australia. The experience he brings to his vision is one that grew within an Australian culture and environment. They however do not pertain to an Australian poetic space in a direct sense. The paintings represent a psychological space – an apolitical melancholic gaze within the context of poetic space. Beyond the anticipated divisions and intersections between the aesthetic, the philosophical and the psychological, its formulation is inevitably ideological. One cannot discuss this question without awareness of the politics that govern what Australia was, and what it is in the process of becoming. Sovereignty, expressed in laws relating to land, in this country, dispersed the sacred; ordained violence; and now, offers a fretwork of references for the melancholic gaze. The gaze when embodied in art may become fixated and pathological, but on the other hand, it gives expression to what otherwise might become repressed. The melancholic gaze at what we might call a hypothetical (and necessarily rhizomic) poetics of Australian space may have an ‘eye for truth’. This resonance with ‘truth’ is one formed in an Australian childhood. It is one that relates to Freud's rendering of melancholia which identifies it as a pathological condition in which a person unconsciously keeps a lost object in an internal crypt and then inflicts punishment on the introjected object for betrayal and abandonment. Freud's point that 'shadow of the object fell upon the ego' (Freud, 1912, p. 249) can be viewed in Forrest's paintings as he tells a story of abuse, of betrayal, of repression, of fear and yet at the heart of his paintings there is a fight for survival and a recognition that abuse does not obliterate a relentless engagement with desire and a celebration of its insistence and urgency.

In contrast the paintings of Terry Matassoni deal directly with Australian space in the geographical sense. Nevertheless, his works also engage with a melancholic gaze. Matassoni sees himself as an outsider during a childhood in Australia when he was considered a ‘new’ Australian having migrated from Italy. The alienation and estrangement that exist in his work provide a psychological context for his own separateness; in a significant way it would not be an exaggeration to see projected into his suburban landscapes loneliness and sense of loss that he has experienced in Australia.

Terry Matassoni deals with the rootless, the alienated and the self absorbed. The
characters that people his paintings inhabit nevertheless a world enflamed by nuance, energy and magic. The world that these paintings present is intense and dramatic and at its heart we witness a paradox. On one hand his de-populated paintings are figurative in the proclaimed absences (see Fig.4,5); on the other hand his populated works project people in the twenty-first century who appear homeless, without beliefs; without connection with each other and without an Ariadne thread that might provide some kind of escape.

His 'characters' are, however, often in a state of reflection indicating that they are not blind to the demands of balance and tension that besiege them. Even when his characters are in a state of action as portrayed in The Gathering this huge crowd is necessarily comprised of individuals that are not connecting with each other despite walking together behind a banner that might have unified them. Matassoni’s paintings tell us a story of our times situated as we are in the midst of both man-made suburban worlds and those naturally present.

The shock occurs when he manages to combine both worlds seamlessly. The Road is a case in point. Artists do not usually paint a road, and although close inspection does indeed confirm that this road is town-bound, one’s experience of it is far more expansive. This magical road, emanating all the colours of the sky-blue, pink, yellow, red and green, seems to be traveling to infinity (within the natural world) or nowhere (into town). Despite the throng of people moving snail-like beneath it the impression is one of absence, of space-desolate urban space- the people secondary to the buildings that appear more individualized than they. Their colourful, pastel luminosity dominates the scene. Similarly the still life that is the foreground to The Young Couple, and the smaller painting with its fruit, candles and TV controller have a vivacity that has left the people, engaged always it seems with either melancholic stares of disengagement or lost in a revelry that cannot, it seems, be accommodated in the outside world. The odalisque character on the couch, lounging in a Matisse guise, is also a still life but without the animation of the objects in front of her.
A vision of urban life as alienated is given a personalized experience in *On the Balcony* the protagonist has her back to the outside world aglow with buildings which have an aggressive presence serving to further underline the unhappiness or disengagement of the person. *Working Back* is a disturbing painting with the intensities of lights emerging from the sea and the sky outside, a cruel contrast with the offices within where workers are inanimate staring things. It is a mysterious fact for me that the Matassoni paintings that are most filled with human activity are the ones where they are absent. *At the Water's Edge*, a walk-way on the right, a bridge overhead and the lights showing the way succeeds, as does *Montmartre* with its steps leading to the sky, in presenting a philosophical world of beauty and intention; the ‘divine’ immanence is a human one in that it anticipates the viewer’s recognition.

The piece in this exhibition that transfixes is *Federation Square* where the buildings take undeniable ascendancy. Matassoni’s Italianesque, warm palette (the sky is pink, the concrete red) is not unlike Poussin’s tertiary palette; Matassoni however has his own special way of bouncing colours around a canvas, interplaying the modern with the postmodern and succeeding in creating wondrous relations between object, colour, space and presence. The smaller paintings in the exhibition have an intimate European sensibility. Clearly finished pieces in themselves, these refined perceptions are carried into the larger works. Six of them are studies of the melancholic personality looking out to sea, looking at nothing in particular or simply being relentlessly alone. Alongside these people are the landscapes that suggest there is, despite the isolation, always choice and those choices, it is suggested, are best made away from town down pathways of other possibilities. These are indeed philosophical paintings alerting us to our terror and our joy.
References


ART WORKS

Fig. 1, John Forrest, Untitled 2, Ghosts of Cadaquez series, acrylic paint on canvas, 5’ x 3 1/2’ 2004.

Fig 2, John Forrest, Untitled 3, Ghosts of Cadaquez series, acrylic on canvas, 6’ x 3’, 2004.

Fig. 3, John Forrest, Untitled 4, Ghosts of Cadaquez series, acrylic on canvas, 5’ x 3 ½’, 2005.

Fig.4, Terry Matassoni, Under the Bridge

Fig 5, Terry Matassoni, Flinders Street

Fig.6, Terry Matassoni, The Gathering (or Crowd)

Fig 7, Terry Matassoni, Saturday Morning Protest

Fig 8, Terry Matassoni, The Road

Fig 9. Terry Matassoni, The Young Couple

Fig 10, Terry Matassoni, On the Balcony

Fig 11,Terry Matassoni, Working Back

Fig 12, Terry Matassoni, Federation Square