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ESSAY: LANDSCAPE ON THE BRINK
While today's art world is outwardly pluralistic, it can still be quick to chastise established artists for taking a wrong turn. Looking back at Jan Senbergs' prodigious body of work I am struck firstly by the unselfconscious audacity of it, its adventurousness both thematically and formally. He seems disinclined to ever fully submit either to his audience's, or his own, expectations. This makes easy generalisations and theorising about his art highly fraught.

It is safe to say however that Senbergs is not a programmatic kind of artist. While he has a 'visual signature' (as he puts it) that is unmistakably his, it is combined with an open-ended receptiveness to the world around him. His itinerant artistic nature is in part cultivated out of familiar modernist sensibilities: the urge to mine creative impulses and visual motifs operating outside of the academy. His early training, not at art college, but as a screen-printing apprentice, also instilled an appreciation of the creative potential of peripheral and outsider practices, as well as a genuine identification with them. This, together with a cool-eyed indifference to artistic trends and art historical hierarchies, has produced an oeuvre that treks across divergent thematic and aesthetic terrain. Hence a series of works may be triggered by the purple passages of a naïve and otherwise clumsy colonial painter, or by scientific diagrams and other visual material culled from obscure technical magazines, by indigenous carvings, or more recently by pre-renaissance cartography. He turns his gaze to lofty narrative and historical subjects - to war and current affairs - as impartially as he does to the quotidian world of his studio, or a decomposing animal carcass discovered in the coastal scrub.

There is the same intrepidity in the artist's formal handling. The pictorial language shifts restlessly between careful observation and imaginative representation. The paintings in particular confront us with a more 'difficult' aesthetic than the drawings which always possess an immediate graphic toughness and observational power. Senbergs' work avoids an easy visual elegance at all cost.
He will habitually combine seemingly irreconcilable elements and stylistic conventions within unstable, almost compositionally suicidal arrangements. Rather than avoid formal difficulties, the artist appears to actively solicit them; a deceptively rigorous design, usually developed through thumbnail sketches, keeps the parts tautly, but only barely, in place. This gives the work much of its kinetic force but also allows Senbergs to fuse form with content, so often imbuing his depicted environments, particularly those in which humans have intervened, with this sense of imminent systemic malfunction.

There is then in Senbergs' construction of space a relentless pushing and shoving between elements which becomes especially vigorous in this conversation between the natural and the man-made. In Coastal Settlement 2009, for example, it is the natural environment that has the upper hand. Laid out below us, human attempts to colonise the land manifest as an act of hubris, wholly at the mercy of the crushing geological and elemental forces that surround it. The primal ruggedness of the west coast landscape, battered by the elements for millennia, is palpable. There is a raw energy in the work that arises largely through the torsion and warping of forms. Everything is agitated, on the move. A relatively placid strip of sky glimpsed through the ranges provides a counterpoint which only serves to intensify the action. The horseshoe (or saddle-like) composition—like a kind of pictorial spring—adds to this feeling of immense compressive stresses at once acting upon and indifferent to the nominal human habitation it supports. It is the antithesis of the idea of landscape as manifest destiny. So it is with all of the wild west coast works; Senbergs gives us a kind of visual truth founded less in faithful topographical description than in its power to express the salient environmental processes at work.

Coastal Settlement 2009
acrylic on canvas
169 x 216 cm
Private Collection
LANDSCAPE AND THE AERIAL VIEW

The physical landscape, in its broadest terms, remains the central stage upon which Senbergs' creative experiments and thematic forays play out. The stage or theatre is more than a convenient (not to mention overused) metaphor here. If we take our meaning from the original Greek 'theatron' — literally an 'open air place for viewing' — we are able to reconnect concepts that seem particularly apt in discussing Senbergs' art. We have, essentially, a construction of a specific view, both privileged and distancing; it is the view from above, looking down into the pit. We also have, however, a reemphasis of what is being viewed as both object and (historical) event, that is, the fusing of site and performance as the singular subject of our gaze. Hence the landscape is revealed as both form and process.

This comes across in Senbergs' ongoing Capriccio series. The artist has been mapping major Australian and international cities as well as townships along the Victorian west coast for over a decade now (sometimes, as in Otway and Old World Memory 2009, he seems to be doing all three at once). The series ranges between expansive aerial maps and closer, often composited, oblique views. Certainly, the elevated view has been an important visual device for Senbergs from the beginning. As has his interest in earlier map-making traditions when landscape painting and the project of objectively recording and measuring space were richly, sometimes bizarrely, intertwined.

The mappae mundi of the Middle Ages, early Renaissance maps, and 18th century capriccio landscapes clearly opened up a rich vein of aesthetic tactics and odd visual conventions for Senbergs. We get the same promiscuous blending of outwardly objective aerial surveys with re-arranged and re-imagined space, of familiar places and pure fantasy. There is the same mixture of pleasure, adventure and anxiety too. We are afforded visual mastery over the terrain and the ability to travel with our eyes alone. But we are also unsure of what is fact and what is fiction. Today we assume, quite reasonably, that our maps will be accurate to a hair's breadth and (at least in the topographical sense) objective and impartial. Yet I suspect that the aerial depiction of space has always projected an inherent psychological and perceptual veracity that is hard to dislodge, even when we know the picture harbours quite different intentions. The capriccio aerial view then is openly both authoritative and untrustworthy. This creates a perceptual tension in the capriccio work that artists have long exploited. Equally important however for Senbergs, apart from the great beauty and inventiveness of these early landscape-maps, is that they could represent other dimensions of space and place. They could convey hierarchical and symbolic relationships between places, denote systems of exchange, or instruct in religious doctrine. Perhaps most importantly for Senbergs; these traditions could express the affective experience of being in those places. These were in short, image practices...
that would allow for different kinds of ‘truth’ to be told beyond mere depiction.

As uncertain or vertiginous as many of Senbergs’ elevated views are, they nevertheless locate the spectator in this omniscient position, showing us not only, or not so much, how a landscape looks but how it functions when we are permitted a little ‘perspective’. We are given a kind of provisional grasp of the relationships or causality between things. This is not an understanding, it seems, that is bestowed upon the unseen inhabitants of Senbergs’ pictures. From these privileged vantage points, we see the manifest results of human activity and industry, and it does not appear to unfold with anything that could be mistaken for prescience or thoughtful planning. All seems shaped through an endless stream of short-sighted and arbitrary decisions, driven by the insatiable urges of commerce and progress, and more fundamentally still, by our species relentless compulsion to build. In Senbergs’ mapped cities, faceted architectural forms crowd and clamour for available space forming ever-expanding circuitry, the urban progress often constrained only by the most acute topographical limitations: by coastlines, rivers, and mountain ranges.

Again, we are not merely implicated by the objects and material products of our habitation but embodied in the artist’s construction of space, in his painterly process and abstract language. While our buildings, industrial complexes, motorways etc. are literally synthetic, inanimate, rationally constructed, the process through which these artefacts proliferate in Senbergs’ work appears raw, frenetic, and (all too) human. This renders literal human depiction largely redundant. Even when we are close enough to apprehend human scale the artist rarely does so overtly. The stratagem, as Senbergs points out, maintains the malleability and ambiguities of scale operating in the work. The mondrian-esque red, yellow and blue cars that tear up and down the highway arterials in the Melbourne Capriccios for example, stand in for the human. It is a device that represents us as standardised units, reduced to the small machinery of the city. The artist is perhaps more interested in our collective rather than individual behaviour here, and especially in how this collective behaviour seems to so easily trump and override our intentions and values as individuals. One imagines anonymous but obsessively industrious human-units carrying out apparently harmless sub-routines which nevertheless drive the urban machine toward unplanned and unintended outcomes. Senbergs’ city paintings confront us with an aspect of our collective nature that is compulsive and paradoxically destructive (we can not create without also destroying), yet at the same time he makes use of these deep urges as a prodigiously generative creative process.

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More recently the capriccio idea has enabled Senbergs to run his own creative experiments: how, given the same essential ingredients (human nature, environment, historical contingencies) would our cities look if we rewound the clock and began things over? In Geelong Capriccio 2010, the artist asks this quite explicitly: 'If Geelong were settled instead of Melbourne, how would the area look today?' Senbergs clearly wants us to ponder just that. The work in many respects is not as capricious as one might expect. He is careful to preserve key topographical features: the distinctive profile of Port Philip Bay, the Barwon River and Lake Connewarre, along with many of the existing infrastructures and arterial networks. Variables are maintained in order to convey the larger narrative. Senbergs' powers of invention thus work in concert with an intimate knowledge of, and connection to the area, the culmination of many decades travelling and working in the region. The result is not merely the fantastical or the whimsical, but a fully realised and plausible alternative scenario of the Melbourne-Geelong region.

The effects of this are unexpectedly subtle. The brute power driving many of Senbergs' pictures is tempered here. There is a certain wry pleasure for the viewer in looking at these alternate histories told through alternative patterns of settlement. We feel like insiders in the deception, but we are also shaken from our own distorted sense of history as natural and inevitable rather than contingent. The urban matrix turned out this way but if we re-ran the experiment perhaps rather insignificant, vexingly unheroic, transactions would result in very different realities. On the other hand, Senbergs conveys something about the human project that does look both inevitable and 'predictably irrational'! It is in the way it expands and consumes; in the way, for example, the vine-like road networks spread and branch parasitically over their landscape host. The particulars have changed but the underlying patterns of settlement and expansion have not. For me, it is this conversation between contrasting time scales – between the geological instant of human history on the one hand and the land's own vast (geo)history on the other – that emerges most persistently in Geelong Capriccio, and which adds a melancholy note to the work's humour. The Yarra Ranges that run along the visible limits of the landmass like a prehistoric spine re-enforce this palpable sense of time, casting the landscape not as inanimate rock but as an ancient and evolving organism. Abetted by the luminous and limitless sky beyond, the dome of the horizon stills the urban white-noise as the machinations of the human project are set against unfathomable time and space.

Other works in the exhibition plunge us back toward terra firma, sometimes functioning as close-ups in Senbergs' thought experiment. Otway and Old World Memory as the title suggests, is a curious amalgamation of modernist,
Renaissance-ish, and retro-futuristic architectural forms wedged somewhere into the harsh but picturesque Otway coast: the old historical-cultural centre at the arse-end of the world. We question not only where but who has done the settling here. One senses, with its grand continental piazzas, monuments and canals, that it is a fabrication that particularly appeals to Senbergs’ cosmopolitan tastes. Old world buildings jostle and vie for position within the rugged terrain while modern beachfront high-rises lean precipitously into Bass Strait. Senbergs’ familiar chewed-up compression is still present but this time the whole scene looks like it’s been flayed open. The natural topography is literally unable to restrain the urban activity as the city peels itself away from the ground plane altogether, transforming itself into a colossal, freestanding machine-monstrosity. Roads convert into a series of giant sci-fi-esque struts and in the process our perception wavers – between the relative safety of a distant aerial view and a side-elevation of this landscape-cyborg hybrid that encroaches into our own physical space.

Threatening as many of these works are, they cannot be neatly categorised as dystopias. As other commentators have been careful to point out, Senbergs is never pointedly judgemental or didactic. He does not offer us conspicuous moral sermons, and rightly so. A figurative artist, no matter how sensitive his gut is to the sufferings of others, will nevertheless rejoice at the visual possibilities and aesthetic riches of a burnt, bombed, flooded, or environmentally decimated site. Indeed, an artist never wipes away his tears because he is too busy rubbing his hands together. Senbergs is no exception. It is after all the more extreme, dysfunctional, and downright apocalyptic environments that suit his aesthetic instincts best and this inevitably creates a more complex and ambiguous moral relationship to the subject. Even so, Albert Schweitzer’s oft-quoted warning comes readily to mind when looking at many of these works: ‘Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the Earth.’

In the meantime, Senbergs’ practice continues along its open-ended and experiential way, led not by an undeviating artistic mission but by the opportunities of a chance encounter, a current event, or the invitation of a new assignment or expedition. This is perhaps as close to a fixed creative maxim as the artist gets, and one gleaned from a lifetime of practice. The endurance and constant inventiveness of his art is fuelled, in part, by an unwillingness to maintain a set course.

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