

GOING BUSH WITH MR POTATO HEAD

(a guided tour of the home
paddocks)

Malcolm
McKinnon



Walk with me, out through the screen door, past the clothes-line and the chook shed (leaning precariously in the back yard) and out to the big garage where we keep the vehicles. I'll show you the fleet: the 1972 Dodge truck, still pressed into action at wheat-carting time; the couple of tractors, including the big Grain Special with the air-conditioned cab; the good Magna sedan for trips into town; a couple of motor bikes; and, of course, the ute.

It's the ute we'll be taking for this particular excursion. Just shove those loose tools and that bit of fencing wire down onto the floor, and watch that rip in the upholstery as you

climb aboard. I'm going to take you on a bit of a trip around the property... show you a few of the things which make the place what it is, a few of the things which make it home.

A couple of the dogs can jump in the back and come along for the ride. You'll have to get out and open the gates, if you don't mind.

(Sing with spirit now)

"I got a good pub (got a good pub)
Sometimes I get pissed as a newt
And on the way home (on the way home)

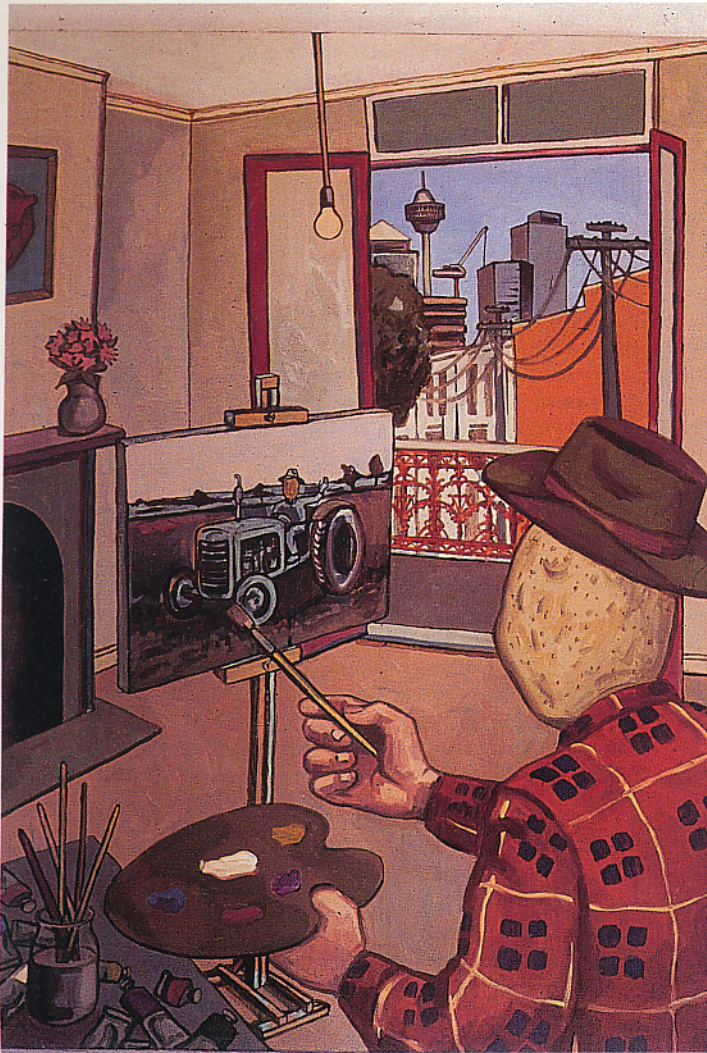
I stop and climb up on the ute
And I know why
I'm a lucky guy
I'm living in Big Sky Country"¹

There's a myth about how to read this bleached and semi-arid landscape, perpetuated by people who think they're authorities on the subject of Australian art. "Look at Clifford Possum and all those western desert painters" they say, "look at John Olsen. That's the way to depict this landscape; you've got to adopt an aerial perspective, look down on it like a map."

That's bullshit. All that these critics are exhibiting is the fact that they've never really contemplated the power of the horizon line, the power of that illusory boundary which defines our sense of location within the landscape. When you move around in this country, whether you're behind the wheel of the ute, manoeuvring through the paddock in the harvester, or crouching down with a bit of earth between your fingers: it's the line of the horizon which puts you in your place. If I was a painter, the horizon would have to be one of the major dynamics that I'd use to build the picture.

Here's a list of some of the things I'd like to show you, things that I could tell you about. These are some of the features which really define this landscape, things which really make it country. The list is just to give you an idea, to evoke a sense of the possibilities for further narrative, for stories and images which mediate a sense of place. Look at these:

* Bits of rusty machinery hanging around in the paddock, just out back of the shearing shed. You can see the entire history of wheat harvesting in



Left: Malcolm McKinnon, *Mr Potato Head Thinks Fondly of Home*, 1994, oil on canvas, 82 x 60 cm.

Middle right: Malcolm McKinnon, *Mr Potato Head Explains the State of the Rural Economy*, 1994, 35 x 70 cm.

Bottom: Malcolm McKinnon, *Seasoning the Chook*, 1994, oil on canvas 64 x 122 cm.



this district by looking around out there.

* The imprint of the tractor tyre on moist soil, stretching away from your eye so that sharp sculptural relief fades to a thin, scratched line.

* 44 gallon drums, standing sentry beside the shed and in the corners of various paddocks.

* Old fridges, stuck out beside the road, names painted on the doors, waiting to receive the mail.

* Old car bodies, expired on the job, maybe kept for parts at some stage of the game, but now functioning as not much more than passive contributors to a palpable sense of history.

* The ruins of stone buildings, vacated by human inhabitants. We can still tell you who used to live in them though, pretty much from the time they were built up until when the last people moved out. Mainly, it's a sign of how the farms have just got bigger, and of how many people used to work and live around here.

* Stray bits of wire, always easy to find, or to trip over even when you're not looking for a piece. Bits of rusty barb, or perhaps a good length of number 7 which can still be put to good use.

Another thing:

I used to work with these blackfellas in a town up north. It was almost a ghost town really, with not too many people left after the railway stopped running. There's a bit of a booming tourism industry though, mainly rich city folk in new four-wheel drives out on some kind of safari vacation.

These tourists would come through the town and visit the Aboriginal community centre, part of which was set up to give out local information and sell souvenirs. A lot of the Aboriginal mob, especially some of the young ones, used to get embarrassed when they were dealing with the tourists. Mainly, it was the questions that some of the tourists

like to ask. Questions like, "Is this your traditional land?" or "How do you say hello in your native language?"

There's only a few Aboriginal people in this town who can talk language, and the town itself is located on land which traditionally belonged to a tribe that, according to anthropological wisdom, no longer exists. Local Aboriginal people come from a couple of different tribal backgrounds, interrelated through marriage and brought to the town because that's where the jobs used to be and because of a mission which used to be just up the track. They've got tribal links with this region, and they can also claim blood links with white pastoral settlers.

Anyhow, the point is that all of these people had stories to tell which were just as impressive as some kind of myth from the dreamtime. They knew that country like the back of their hands, and could tell stories from working on it as cowboys and station hands, shearers, railway gangers and highway workers, as well as cooks, housemaids, childcarers and teacher's assistants.

When you went out bush with these people they could show you so many things, all relics from a history which ties them to the landscape. Out on a picnic trip with Mr and Mrs W., for instance, we come across places which evoke all kinds of knowledge: Mrs W. talks about a place beside the creek bed which runs past the old mission where people used to camp when they came in from out bush to visit their relatives; Mr W. pulls the Toyota up somewhere in the middle of the gibber and casually points out a splintery piece of wood which is the remainder of one of the poles from the old overland telegraph; both of them know all the places around the springs where there are scatters of stone flints and spearheads.

Really, I reckon that a lot of these stories have things in common with

the ones that I can tell you about the farm. It's about having an intimate working relationship with a particular landscape, about knowing the detail of its features but still being impressed when you see it on a new day, about feeling like you really belong. As well, it's about not only having a relationship which is central to your own sense of personal identity, but also about having stories which locate you as one link within a larger history.

They're complex things, these relationships with a piece of land, and they're certainly politically contentious. Of course, this is especially true for my Aboriginal friends because their custodianship is based on complex and multi-layered associations, the credentials of which are frequently contested. And the Potato Head custodianship will also continue to be challenged. If it's not the government and the banks questioning the viability of the farm, or the conservationists questioning our capacity for responsible environmental management, it'll be the kids asking themselves whether life on the farm is really an attractive prospect anyway.

As with everything else, the country that I've been talking about is frequently regarded as a commodity, be it in relation to yields of primary produce or to spectacles and hypothetical experiences marketed for tourist consumption. Here's the main thing to understand: this commodification is entirely at odds with the appreciation of landscape that I've been trying to tell you about. □

Footnotes

1. C. Adams and the Clip Clop Club, "Big Sky Country", Larrikin Music 1992.



ENVIRONMENTA

international ecological art event

July/August 1996: a site-specific, city-wide installation project involving artists from Australia and the Asia Pacific region.

July/August 1995: a forum designed to give critical and theoretical focus to the 1996 project.

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