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Beneath the Surface: The Cultural Landscape of a Mining Town

Abstract

Cloaked in an aura of technologies that have long lain idle, corroded and buried, my artwork explores the proposition that found industrial artefacts are imbued with specific histories and imprints of human intervention with the landscape. Often they are symbolic of humanity's resolve to conquer nature and reveal the struggle to survive the harsh conditions of industrial development in hostile environments. Most of all they make up the *cultural landscape* - the vast array of things, which human beings have done to alter the face of the earth.

In the following paper I will be discussing the methodology and the theory underpinning the framework of my current research. I will be presenting the argument that 'ordinary or everyday' landscapes are important historical artefacts which should be able to be read like a document so that cultural meaning and environmental experience can be deciphered and better understood.¹ Within the context of *cultural landscape*, which has been defined as a 'landscape altered by the interaction of humankind'², I will be investigating the social and cultural impact of industrial history on the contemporary community of Zeehan in Western Tasmania.

Biography

Niels Ellmoos is currently a PhD (History) candidate at the School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania. He is in the second year of the postgraduate program, investigating the social and cultural impact of industrial history on the contemporary community of Zeehan in Western Tasmania. Ellmoos returned to art practice in 1998 after 25 years in the Film industry, owning and operating his own art and design business in Sydney. His decision to undertake academic study in 1999 was rewarded with an APA Scholarship and University Medal in 2001. In the same year Ellmoos lectured in ceramics at the School of Visual and Performing Arts. He has maintained an active exhibition record both within and outside the university and has been invited to hold a solo exhibition in the Burnie Regional Gallery in November 2003.

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Beneath the Surface

Sliding sideways with small measured steps until he was almost waist deep in the icy, brown waters of Macquarie Harbour, our tour-guide raised the projection of his well-scripted spiel, exclaiming:

This should be a beach, the Gordon River punches out massive amounts of gravel but these are protected by the large structures underneath, so when you get to an edge of a structure like this...you're into deep water...oh, what the hell!³

Grasping his nose and eyeglasses he took another step and disappeared from view. Breaking the surface a few seconds later, glasses intact and continuing his oratory whilst swimming, he described slipways, which dated back to the early 1800s, now completely hidden from view underwater. This bizarre performance, which I videotaped in September 2000, was a brand of regional historical storytelling, a re-examination of a colonial past on Sarah Island in Western Tasmania. It was also a description of a cultural landscape. This research procedure of going into the 'field' to gather information by either video, still camera or in sketchbooks was the foundation of a methodology which would be carried through to the present day.

In the following paper I will be discussing the methodology and theory that form the framework of my current research. I will be presenting the argument that 'ordinary or everyday' landscapes are important historical artefacts which should be able to be read like a document so that cultural meaning and environmental experience can be deciphered and better understood.⁴ Within the context of *cultural landscape*, which has been defined by Lewis as meaning 'the total assemblage of visual things that human beings have done to alter the face of the earth'⁵, I will investigate the social and cultural impact of industrial history on the contemporary community of Zeehan in Western Tasmania.

The reinterpretation of material evidence from the sites of production is an integral component in my finished artwork. This theme consolidates practical and conceptual ways of exploring the coalescing energy of two-dimensional images and object-making. The paraphernalia of the mining industry abandoned on the sides of hills, corroded and half-buried, act as effective metaphors for the chronicle of greed at any cost and the imprint of humanity's desire to conquer nature.

An Ordinary Landscape and an Extraordinary History

I chose Zeehan for my study because the contemporary town, on first view, is visually insignificant in comparison to the rugged beauty of the Queenstown setting. As a small, sprawling, isolated rural town struggling to survive, Zeehan fitted firmly into the category of an ordinary or 'everyday' landscape as defined by Paul Groth⁶. As a newcomer to Tasmania it appeared to me as a remnant of a 'frontier' town but what sort of a frontier town? Only from researching documented accounts and historical photographs, did Zeehan's place in Tasmania's economic development begin to unfold.

The origin and subsequent development of Zeehan was based on determination, opportunity and the stock market. The small rivulet known as Pea Soup Creek, running through the present town, contained *argentiferous galena* or silver-lead. It took years of hard slog following the first discovery of the deposits by Frank Long in 1882, before Zeehan was propelled onto the national stage for a time. The silver boom of Broken Hill was the catalyst for Zeehan's rise to prominence and a 'breath of life'. Investors smelled success in the silver lodes of the Zeehan discoveries as Broken Hill boomed in 1888, and eventually Zeehan became a capitalist's field, requiring the mechanical infrastructure of rail transport and ore-processing machinery. The town boasted its own stock market, twenty or so hotels and a music theatre, which attracted national performing artists. As the population expanded Zeehan became, for a time, the third largest town in Tasmania with a population of 8000 people in 1899.⁷

The desire and challenge to overcome the extremes of cold, rain and the difficult physical terrain in an isolated region, forged a special identity and sense of place in the mining 'sites' of Western Tasmania. Zeehan was no exception and it continues to sustain an itinerant mining population today, although the mines are now in nearby Rosebery and Henty. Nature has resumed much of the mining material evidence in the surrounding countryside and the industrial havoc is less obvious than in Queenstown where the ruined and stripped bare ochre hills are a testament to the human folly of the quest for an economic utopia.

Applying Cultural Landscape as Theory

If landscapes are documents from which their definitive histories can be read and brought to light, then the existence of the contemporary altered environment and what constitutes the landscape take on a different meaning and one well beyond the ordinary, observed scene. Reading landscape in a method comparable to reading written documents has inherent problems as described by the American historian Peirce Lewis. When human beings interacted with the land they constantly erased, added to, redesigned and reinterpreted the spaces around themselves⁸.

Material evidence in the form of artefacts and structures were often removed, misplaced or lost, rendering the evidence an 'informal document'. Often there was no regard for the evidence as the creators of altered landscapes never intended their work to be read or understood as if it were a written record. Landscapes have been altered by a multitude of people with a variety of motives and agendas. The constant erasing and amending of the so-called 'document' often produced a messy outcome difficult to be read.⁹ Human beings have interacted both individually and collectively, with the space around themselves in order to flourish as a culture and have designed landscapes, which are peculiar to their particular society. As cultures have changed over time, so too has their landscape evolved. The layering of history could be described as 'a cultural autobiography carved into the surface of the earth' and as a result - a *cultural landscape*.¹⁰

As a methodology evolved in research for scholars to interpret the interaction of humans and the landscape, *Cultural Landscape* studies was born. These studies developed in Germany and France at the turn of the nineteenth century, as a consequence of the differing points of view by physical and historical geographers. An argument presented by the geographers, Schluter and de la Blache, that 'people and their activities encoded the land'¹¹ opened up a way to interpret the results of an altered landscape, even to the point of clarifying and 'reading' the so-called everyday or ordinary landscape. This notion flowed on to

new studies in North America introduced by a German geographer, Carl Sauer after the 1920s¹² and generated a wider following by the 1950s.

Landscape, a magazine first published by Harvard historian J. B. Jackson in 1951, became a 'user manual' for a wide coalition of scholars. Jackson's essays described and interpreted common things such as houses, fields, front yards, the construction of cities and how the countryside revealed structures of culture and societies. Most importantly he acknowledged that 'landscape is history made visible'.¹³ The notion of 'history made visible' seemed an appropriate point of departure to begin exploring the cultural landscape of Zeehan.

The Traverse - Implementing Cultural Landscape Methodology

The metamorphosis from a theoretical concept into a practical activity began by visiting the site itself, to record places and objects of interest. I would use cultural landscape study methodology in my research as a way to link visual interpretation to a theoretical background. Pierce Lewis, a contemporary American academic, takes his students into the field to study ordinary landscapes, applying an analogy of a pathologist looking at cells with a microscope through a series of magnifications. Lewis begins by observing from a hill at a distance, then from another high point closer in, to finally descend into the streets to acquire a close-up view.¹⁴

On the day I chose to apply Lewis' theory 'in the field' for the first time, heavy, grey clouds swept in from the Indian Ocean bringing fierce squalls of torrential rain and wind gusts. It was the typical West Coast weather I had been reading about in historical accounts. Equipped with camera, topographical map and sketch book I set out for King Hill, a relatively small rise which would nevertheless provide a bird's-eye view of the settlement. After a thirty-minute walk I reached the top of King Hill as the inclement weather worsened.

The scenic lookout marked on a tourist brochure was completely overgrown by dense vegetation blocking out any clear view of the valley and township below. Looking to the east revealed a vista of a vast, flat expanse running up to the distant West Coast Ranges. There were no signs of the forests with almost impenetrable rainforest canopies, dripping wet with the smell of rotting leaves and dim, filtering light as described by the early explorer, R. M. Johnson¹⁵. Except for rare pockets of regrowth, examples of nature in this guise had been assigned to history. The alteration of landscape by European settlers had taken its toll. The countryside had been stripped by continuous burning and tree-felling until the small patches of swamp became vast plains of button grass¹⁶.

As the rain abated I continued further along the fire trail where the trees thinned out revealing a settlement in the valley that was a pale shadow of its former self, according to earlier black-and-white photographic evidence I had observed in the Zeehan Museum and by the Tasmanian photographer, John Watt Beattie in 'The West Coast Album' collection¹⁷. The archival photographs had indicated a cultural landscape pock-marked with mine shafts and an expansive grid of roads and building structures. From my observation point on the hill, the absence of a once-thriving town was apparent in the tapestry of rectangular imprints marking the boundaries formerly pegged by prospectors and claimholders. There was no evidence of the extensive network of railway lines, which at one time linked the mines to the seaport of Strahan, fanning out across the surrounding district and terminating in the centre of Zeehan itself.

Shifting my gaze further along the ridgeline, I saw the unmistakable signifiers of an absent mining industry. The headframes and carriers of the aerial ropeways used for transferring the ore from mines to processing plants remained as tangible evidence. As the land had been transformed from nature to an industrial site and then to a tourist town, only relics like these provided proof of a former vigorous industrial cultural landscape.

Descending into the town itself to apply the final stage of the Lewis' methodology, I began to uncover even more compelling signs of the mining history. Concealed under paspalum on deserted blocks of land, I discovered structural foundations of mine 'heads' which had been reduced to anonymous minimal concrete monuments. All flesh had been stripped away; only the skeleton remained as the pits were filled in and the companies moved on. Mine shafts had been covered with steel grids and great rusting shards lay abandoned, destined to become the detritus of history. These were the missing parts. Imprints of

human endeavour that had turned energy into product; the pieces that had once succoured the economic growth of a community, lying quietly dormant.

Responses in Themed Artwork

As industrial history and archaeology are at the heart of my research into the 'shaping' of the cultural landscape of Zeehan as part of the West Coast mining strip of Tasmania, the on-site recording provided vital background research for practical and conceptual explorations. Translating the Lewis methodology from the field trip to the studio was the next step. This involved applying the 'micro' and 'macro' ways of 'seeing' - into the artwork itself. Until recently, ceramic sculpture has been the main form of artwork produced, however over the past year I have expanded my art-making to include a two-dimensional component which has developed into a dynamic counterpoint to the sculpture.

Large drawings in charcoal and black pastel provide an appropriate vehicle to combine the various views of landscape as the Lewis methodology suggests. The artist John Wolsely incorporates close-up detail against a wider expansive view of landscapes, presenting a 'mapping' of topographical features. My work differs to Wolsely's in that it is not preconceived or recorded from the actual physical landscape in a 'scientific' way. These drawings have been described as 'first sightings', 'Gothic', an amalgamation of 'the apparent and imagined' or 'maps of the mind'. The drawings do not rely on a 'subject', but mimic the structure of a 'blueprint', becoming progressively filled-in with line, tone, mass, light and shade.

Paul Klee described a similar process of the artist's hand becoming 'an obedient instrument of a remote will'. His drawings, which are comprised of symbols or what he called psychograms, were made 'without enforcing preconceived order upon the composition, indirectly recording whatever the irrational impulse dictates'.¹⁸ As Klee observes; 'all art is a memory of age-old things, dark things, whose fragments live on in artists.'¹⁹ Inevitably a landscape emerges out of my drawing, in a mass of lines and swirling marks carving across the canvas, inviting the viewer to enter into another realm.²⁰

The works have evolved through meditation and a harnessing of intuitive subconscious energy; a negotiation of deliberation and inspiration between the making of ceramic objects and responses to the cultural landscape. As historical archaeology is concerned with the retrieval of objects as well as the gathering of information relating to the meaning and usage of material evidence, the sculptural component of my work relates specifically to the industrial artefact. In scientific terms, analysis leads to the labelling and classification of the artefact as an aesthetic object with both collective and individual meanings to us as well as the society from which it originated. A dislocation occurs once the artefact is removed from its 'natural' place in the landscape and placed within another setting such as a museum. It is this disjuncture of meaning, origin and time that has defined the conceptual parameters and is the driving force for my artistic and aesthetic outcomes.

In a manner characteristic of the artists Steven Montgomery, Tony Hepburn, Eduardo Paolozzi and Tony Cragg, my sculpture incorporates references to industry, the machine and history. The sculptural objects are produced using clay and plaster moulds in a technique called 'slip casting'. This ceramic mass production mode of manufacture, where the same object can be produced in quantity, is similar to the use of patterns in industrial production. Working in ceramics allows the nature of clay to be explored by manipulating form and surface to highlight the disjuncture between meaning, origin and time factors. The objects themselves, although having some similarity to 'real' artefacts, are not replicas of anything found in the 'real' world.

My sculpture and two-dimensional work result from distinctly different approaches to creating art. It is the classic conflict between the rational, scientific and the unknown subconscious mind. The deliberate control and planning which are essential components in a perfunctory technique such as slip casting are pitted against the spontaneity of the free drawings.

Conclusion

Tying together the issues of methodology, theoretical frameworks and the practical outcome resulting from the investigation of the cultural landscape of a former mining settlement, I have concluded that 'ordinary or everyday' landscapes are important and crucial reservoirs of historical information. Their place as archives of social meaning and vessels of historical value help to shape cultural identities and individualism, which are the characteristics of regionalism. Landscapes that appear ordinary may contain

stratas of meaning and layers of history, which transform them into extraordinary landscapes. Detailed observations of the visual evidence of material culture reveal the need to question material form, purpose and connection to our world.

Manipulation of nature by human beings to live and adapt in the world results in a cultural landscape. What Lewis calls 'the vast disorderly collection of human artefacts that constitute the cultural landscape'²¹ are fertile sources of inspiration which can be increasingly used by artists and craftspeople to articulate and strengthen ties to 'home sites', such as Zeehan, in their own region of the world.

Finally, my contention is that the industrial artefact is an object imbued with a human imprint with the potential to reveal a relationship with materials, objects and the environment. As well as design and engineering considerations, industrial artefacts have social, political, economic and even personal stories to tell. They are an integral part of a cultural landscape containing a metaphysical quality through the cultural aspects we bring to that object, its history, mythology, meaning and aesthetic. Whilst they are authentic evidence of a former industrial time they have the potential to be prescient of our future. We ignore their message at our own peril.

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- ¹ Paul Groth and Tod W. Bressi (eds), Paul Groth, 'Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Studies', *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, Yale University, New Haven and London, 1997, p3
- ² Peirce Lewis, 'Common Landscapes as Historic Documents', Steven Lubar & W. David Kingery, (eds), *History From Things*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1993, p116
- ³ Richard Davies, video footage by Niels Ellmoos, Tasmania, 2000.
- ⁴ Paul Groth, 'Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Studies', Paul Groth and Tod W. Bressi (eds), *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, Yale University Press, New haven and London, 1997, p.3.
- ⁵ Peirce Lewis, 'Common Landscapes as Historic Documents', Steven Lubar & W. David Kingery, eds, *History From Things*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1993, p.115.
- ⁶ Groth, op. cit, p.1.
- ⁷ David I. Hopkins, *How the West Was Won*, West Coast Authority, Zeehan, 1997, pp.8-9.
- ⁸ Lewis, op. cit, p.116.
- ⁹ Graham Connah, *The Archaeology of Australia's History*, Cambridge Press, Melbourne, 1988, p.1.
- ¹⁰ Lewis, op. cit, p.115.
- ¹¹ Vidal de la Blache, *Principals of Human Geography*, (M.T.Bingham, trans.), Beacon Press, New York, 1926, in Helen Armstrong, (Sustaining Cultural Landscapes as Sites of Production), Proceedings of the XIXth Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, SAHANZ, Brisbane, 2002.
- ¹² Carl O. Sauer, 'The Morphology of Landscape', *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2(2), 1929, pp.19-53, in Helen Armstrong, (Sustaining Cultural Landscapes as Sites of Production).
- ¹³ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (ed), 'J.B.Jackson and the Discovery of the American Landscape', in J.B. Jackson, *Landscape in Sight-Looking at America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997, pp..x-xv.
- ¹⁴ Lewis, op. cit, p.119.
- ¹⁵ R. M. Johnson, cited in C. J. Binks, *Explorers of Western Tasmania*, Michael and Pauline Brewer Publishers, Hobart, 1980, p.17.
- ¹⁶ C. J. Binks, *Explorers of Western Tasmania*, p.16.
- ¹⁷ Cited in *Tasmanian Photographer From The John Watt Beattie Collection*, compiled by Margaret Tassell and David Wood, Exhibition Catalogue, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.
- ¹⁸ Christian Geelhar, 'Assimilation into Artistic Society', *Paul Klee-Life and Work*, Du Pont Schauberg, Cologne, 1974, p.28.
- ¹⁹ John Olsen, 'Part Four', *Drawn From Life*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1997, p.164.
- ²⁰ Malcom Bywaters, *Artline 2002 The Contemporary Portrait*, Exhibition Catalogue, Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania, 2002.
- ²¹ Lewis, op. cit, p.115.