

NELSON Robert

Less than collaborative: scene painting and the paradoxes of the background, a visual investigation

Abstract

This paper presents and describes my participation as scene painter in a new body of work by the photographic artist Polixeni Papapetrou. The presence of painting within the *tableaux vivant* photographs presents an ambiguous visuality, which in some ways runs parallel to the somewhat liminal role of the painter's imagination in the larger creative undertaking, which also involves participation by an actress and a tailor. An interpretation of the photographs is offered which prompts a reassessment of the structure of collaborative projects. Historical and contemporary paradigms are examined and found somewhat at variance with my experience, which equates more with the studio labour toward set design and special effects in film production. In my case, the work is not quite 'contracted' by the originator (as if it could be put out to tender) but nor is it quite collaborative, for the authorship of the background is somehow subsumed into the authorship of the image to which it submits itself; and this unique authorship remains properly with the artist who conceives and controls the project (technically the holder of the intellectual property). While expressing the peculiar nature of the artistic relationship, the paper also seeks to develop a methodology of the academic interpretation of visual work by the artist himself or herself.

Biography

Associate Professor Robert Nelson is Associate Dean Research and Graduate Studies in the Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University, where he teaches research methods in the studio graduate program. He gained his MA (French and Italian painting and literature) and PhD (Greek sculpture and physiognomic theory) from La Trobe University. His published work has mostly centred around contemporary Australian art, with 100 essays in journals and catalogues and over 300 newspaper features and reviews as art critic for *The Age* in Melbourne. In 2000, Robert was awarded the Pascall Prize (a national prize for critical writing in all fields of the arts). Robert is also a painter, with 11 solo exhibitions and 10 group or collaborative exhibitions.

Less than collaborative: scene painting and the paradoxes of the background, a visual investigation

Scene painting is a technical term that means picture-making for a theatrical set. Although still a thriving minor industry, employing many artists trained at art schools, it is not normally recognised as artistically important or accorded autonomous artistic merit. This neglect is understandable, since the purpose of scene painting is not to create an autonomous artistic response to the world but to assist in the effect or impact of a drama, a ballet, a film or a photograph, largely scripted by someone else, whose response to the world is primary. Scene painters are typically modest and many conduct a practice—or aspire to one—beyond the scenic studio.

The term 'scenic' is used by artists in the industry in a specific way, meaning the sum of techniques, inventions and pictorial economies that contribute to effective theatrical backdrops. Their effectiveness is that they *set the scene*. The criterion of success is not confined to the vertical plane of the backdrop itself but the horizontal plane of the stage and the mood or evocative associations induced upon it. Scene painters will speak of a backdrop either being 'scenic' or not really scenic, which usually means that the painting does not present as a backdrop, with gently illusionistic conventions. It is an unusual adjective.¹

Beyond the various outfits that create scenic backdrops, the terms 'scene' and 'scenic' are widely used in popular parlance. The scene is often synonymous with theatrical action (as in the literary term in plays 'Act one, Scene one' or 'he created quite a scene').² But it is also used in a way rather analogous to picturesque, as when people describe a vista as scenic, a drive or a harbour. Like picturesque, the term scenic indicates a popular form of 'life imitating art' or at least life being judged by the conventions of art; for the views are reckoned to be so beautiful or spectacular that they compare with the idealized representations in a theatre or a painting.

But unlike 'picturesque', whose origins are related to representation (Latin, *pictura, pingere*, painting, to depict or to paint), the term 'scene' has its origins in the material construction of the backdrop, the propping up of canvas; for in ancient Greek, the word *skene* is a tent or a booth,³ even a holy tabernacle;⁴

the term was definitely only moved into metaphor by virtue of its ritualistic role through *mise en scène*, as it were. So the Greeks, whose theatrical interests were extremely refined, sometimes used the term *skene* in a sense that simply means backdrop or stage building.⁵ Sometimes, it even means the stage.⁶ In all events, *skene* had a highly material basis in antiquity; and upon this technical basis, terms like stage-manage (skenografeo) and scenography or scene painting (scenography) were in use.⁷

The motif of scene painting was thus technical from the beginning. Allied to canvas and tackle and born within another highly public medium—the theatre—scene painting has apparently never enjoyed prestige in its own right. Understandably, it is seldom exhibited beyond its season on the stage and is either destroyed or put into storage for recycling at a later date. Ultimately, it perishes with little trace, perhaps some photographs which may or may not be archival or properly managed. And while there is a history of theatre that goes beyond the literature of the plays,⁸ the history of scene painting would be served by altogether too little original material.

Because scene painting is a labour dedicated to stage effects, it cannot easily be recognised as an art dedicated to its own pictorial or aesthetic merits. In fact, it is sometimes used to indicate an insensibility to finer aesthetic issues, a pictorial incuriosity or formulaic visual rhetoric. Scene painting, when used by critics, is pejorative, as in the rather beautiful passage by Andrew Mackenzie, commenting on the lacklustre pictorial technique of Stephen Bush:

Scanning the two rooms of paintings I am struck by how all thirty-five paintings have been sucked of life as surely and systematically as if they had been freeze dried. Contrary to their appearance in reproduced form, when seen ‘in the flesh’ Bush’s paintings are painted with little skill and less vitality. In fact at times they remind me of the bare necessity of theatre scene paintings whose economy of execution betray a fundamental pragmatism. They are not actually meant as objects of excellence but of adequacy, presenting no more than the *mise en scene* of painting.⁹

This paper takes as its point of departure my participation as scene painter in a new body of work by the photographic artist Polixeni Papapetrou, to whom I am related by marriage. Papapetrou’s photographs are theatrical not just on account of props or backdrops but because they are highly performative; they function somewhat like theatre, in which our little girl Olympia (sometimes with her friends) acts out the roles of the child subjects in the photography of Charles Dodgson, better known by his literary pseudonym Lewis Carroll. In a number of photographs, Dodgson engaged a watercolourist to paint over the photographic image—which were presumably taken in an interior—yielding fictive landscapes. Our answer to this technique was to stage the scenes over painted backdrops. The results are very different to Dodgson’s painted photographs from the nineteenth century, for the contemporary works present a feigned or painted backdrop with a real presence upon it. There is no paint running over Olympia’s or other children’s form in the photograph.

The presence of painting within these *tableaux vivants* presents an ambiguous visuality, which perhaps runs parallel to the somewhat equivocal or at least uncertain or limited role of the painter’s imagination in the larger creative undertaking. As scene painter, I do not instigate the project. I do not direct the model. I have little to do with stage management other than certain technical matters related to what is obscured or falsified if the figure steps here or there or if the camera angle is shifted one way or another. This is really only advice regarding optical engineering that relates to the backdrop. The participation ends with the canvas, which is only a point of departure for the photograph. In this, the scene painter certainly performs a conspicuous labour in providing the backdrop, with its moody mixture of substance and fibs; but it is no more meaningful than the participation of the actress (or actresses) and even a seamstress, who creates the costumes.¹⁰

Perhaps the closest equivalent to the photographs is the work of Rose Farrell and George Parkin, for they—like Papapetrou—insert a real body into a fake environment that inverts your expectations. Using large sets which extrapolate from the spaces of medical engravings from the seventeenth century, the artists use their own bodies to enter a manual illusionistic environment. Their bodies step into the drawing, as it were. Photography normally works on the premise that the surrounding world is given, essentially there or real, but the person in front of the lens is a protagonist of the moment, an actor or model with a smile or a

self-conscious glance that betrays the illusion. But in Farrell & Parkin, this relationship of figure and world is turned on its head. The figure is the genuine palpable presence, while the world around is constructed, geometrically conjectured and provisional.¹¹

Farrell & Parkin's work also has great differences with Papapetrou's, one of which is the matter of collaboration. Farrell & Parkin indeed work together on their projects and the intellectual and artistic contribution of each is indivisible and co-dependent. It would be incorrect and invidious to ascribe to one of them the invention and to the other the execution; and no one can profitably inquire as to which is the scene painter, for all tasks are collective and all are subsumed in the term collaboration. Undoubtedly one of the pair has more aptitude for one task or another; but the term collaboration tends to deflect the consciousness of this accounting methodology and induces upon the project the seamless achievement of two minds and four hands working in unison.

Collaboration is indeed a term much used and much admired; for it is somewhat democratic in tone: it invites the entry of other participants (sometimes a whole local community) into the normally exclusive and egocentric world of the studio and breaks down the historical modernist claim to authorial originality and genius. It is possible to understand many of the more enlightened moments of modernism—especially that tradition which Professor Bernard Smith interprets as the antagonist of the formalesque,¹² namely Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus—as essentially collaborative. The history of Dr Charles Green, *The third hand*, traces this development and makes the case for the dominance of the collaborative impulse (with its relaxation of canonical individual artistic genius) in the genesis of postmodernism.¹³ There is also a suggestion that the collaborative whole is greater than the sum of the collaborating parts; and this synthesising aspiration is embodied in the very term 'the third hand', evoking a presence which could not have been achieved by either of the two hands on their own.

For all that, and as glamorous as this trajectory may be, it does not resemble the condition of scene painting. Scene painting is less than collaborative, for it does not result in joint authorship. There is no third hand, as it were. It is just that one artist's project invites another artist's partial fulfilment of it. Scene painting is even unlike the great premodern collaborations from the Renaissance and Baroque, in which numerous artists were engaged in creating interiors, from stucco and grisaille workers to woodworkers to the chief artists, who were also architects.¹⁴ This venerable paradigm—which could be called 'architectural' with a view to the etymology of 'ruling artist'—is perhaps closer to the situation of scene painter to another artist; but it is also different. You can go into a Renaissance or Baroque interior and sense that every detail has integrity and is the result of a single person's hand, albeit under the direction of other eyes and under the autocratic direction of other artist's designs. But in the scene painting in a photograph, you do not see the hand of the painter except through the lens of the photographer. The reception of the brush is conditional upon the direction of the camera. A part of the picture may be obliterated by the performer; another part may be cropped or dimmed by the lights or have shadows cast upon it. Little of the final outcome is in the scene painter's hands.

Historical and contemporary paradigms of collaborative artistic work are thus somewhat at variance with my experience, which perhaps equates more with the studio labour toward set design and special effects in film production. In a film, the painting is quite susceptible to being interpreted with great licence by the director. Not only may a particularly poetic part of the painted set be obscured by the actors or cropped or dimmed by the lights and so on, but the camera may skate over a scene rapidly, may induce moods upon the backdrop—probably entirely unintended by the painter—by means of camera distance or soft focus but especially the duration for which the scene appears on screen.

Film presents the closest analogy with scene painting as I experience it, partly because the filmic props and backdrop involve scene painting; so there is a definite kinship. But even with film, there is a bureaucratic difference. In my case, the work is not quite contracted by the originator (as if it could be put out to tender) because a special sympathy is needed for both artists to work with one another's ideas and limitations. Both artists need to know intimately what they think they can do. Unrealistic expectations would be disastrous. In a sense, the project has to grow up organically between them, with one contributing the backdrops and the other taking responsibility for the image.

Although the necessary closeness of working together suggests collaboration, the work is not quite collaborative, for the authorship of the background is somehow subsumed into the authorship of the image to which it submits itself. The unique authorship remains properly with the artist who conceives and controls the project (technically the holder of the intellectual property).

The intentions of the scene painter have slightly narrow parameters. To explicate the scene painter's predicament is by no means to break down the division, to redeem the lost prestige or renegotiate the marginality of the practice. This would all be vain and unachievable. Scene painting is essentially marginal. It may make or break an image or performance but it can never take centre stage. If it does, it signals a fault in the production. It is welcome to lend the keynote and is often expected to. In the theatre, it is often what you see before you see the actors. In this sense, it has visual priority. It can be loud, brilliant, sketchy, lyrical, strident, effusive, murky, gushy; it can take licence and no doubt always exhibits much liberty in its economical visual contrivances. It does not normally seek to be artistically convincing, as of autonomous painting, which aspires to a destiny on the walls of the gallery and to remain there for millennia.

To be a scene painter in the theatre is rewarding for other reasons. It is the theatrical experience, the excitement of helping to stage an action; besides, it may also pay. But although it may require certain talents and not everyone can do the artistic work, the rewards are not altogether for yourself. Scene painting involves many paradoxes, one of which, ironically is that it has no intrinsic enigma. It has little inherent mystery and is largely a work-a-day thing of scruffy drawing, large brushes and four-litre tubs of ghastly matt acrylic. But it both stands up *and yields* in exactly the same way as the scene painter does: it throws itself at you but recedes at the point of taking control. It may be forceful but it does not force the artwork.

To grant this genre a kind of independent legitimacy is an unwanted kindness, a well-intentioned but misguided recovery of a minor charm which is determined to recede for the sake of a major artistic expression. The scene painting is there but not there: it has an undeniable presence but is nothing on its own as an image; it quite dominates the scene but is ultimately abducted by the ulterior photographic use to which it is put. This is a destiny that must be accepted by the scene painter, else the scene would not be set and the painter would be better off painting apples for himself or herself.

¹ A well established paint shop and scene-painting service in Melbourne, for example, trades under the name of Scenic Studios. This does not mean that the building in Kensington has any aesthetic merits.

² cf. the German terms *Aufzug* and *Auftritt*, a leading on and a stepping on, i.e. stepping onto the stage, which are not visual so much as spatial or dynamic.

³ As in Euripides, *Hecuba* 1289, Sophocles, *Ajax* 3 or 218 or 754 or 796

⁴ As in Euripides, *Ion* 806 and the Septuagint, *Exodus* 26.1

⁵ See Plato, *Laws* 817C, *Vitruvius*, 5.6.1.

⁶ cf. Demosthenes, 18.180, Aristotle, *Problems* 922b17

⁷ The verb is in Heliodoros, 10.38, and the noun in Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a18, in which it simply means scene painting, the honour for whose introduction the philosopher gives to Sophocles.

⁸ Indeed a codified history, as witnessed by the monumental *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*

⁹ Andrew Mackenzie, 'Stephen Bush', *Broadsheet*, vol. 32, no. 2, June, July + August, 2003, p. 30

¹⁰ In fact my mother-in-law, Polixeni Papapetrou's mother, Effie Papapetrou.

¹¹ Parts of this paragraph come from my own review of Farrell & Parkin's work, *The Age, Saturday Extra*, review section, 12 April 2003, p. 7

¹² Bernard Smith, *Modernism's history*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney 1999

¹³ Charles Green, *The third hand: collaboration in art from conceptualism to postmodernism*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney 2001. Dr Green is himself an artistic collaborator in paintings and photographic collages created jointly and indivisibly with his wife Lyndell Brown.

¹⁴ The term 'premodern collaborations' is an anachronism, for the term in this sense is recent. There would have been no need for a term like collaboration, because it was self-evident and assumed.