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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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Sullied Sublime; Art History and Identity in the Post Internet era

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Abstract

My PhD (Fine Art) research interrogates the artist's role in the reportage of history and the impact this has on cultural identity. It too considers how historical artworks are represented in our Post Internet era.

This paper focuses on two migrant, European painters who influenced the perception of a cultural identity in the newly colonised Australia between 1850 and 1890: Swiss-born, Abram-Louis Buvelot (1814-1886) and Austrian, Eugene von Gerard (1811-1901). Both have been posthumously honoured as fathers of the Australian landscape and, conversely, criticised for their misrepresentation of Australian history.

The paintings of Von Gerard and Buvelot make a departure from the first colonial portrayals of the Australian pastoral which were mainly scientific illustrations. The period of landscape painting that followed featured a Eurocentric gaze that resembled more a Claude Lorraine than the local environment. Buvelot and von Gerard however, approached the landscape with an unprecedented naturalism and ambience.

To those at home in Europe, this new Australian landscape would tell the story of a bushy Shangri La; a romantic narrative, indeed. And yet, these images of majestic mountains and harmonious farmland belie Australia's wretched past - as a penal colony, the genocide of indigenous peoples, its harsh climate and burgeoning, unmanageable population.

Such is the prevailing critique of these two fathers of Australian landscape. One may well question the artist as the arbiter of history and identity. Is identity, after all, synchronic or are its conditions more mutable?

Buvelot and von Gerard's paintings present a version of events.

I access their artworks online, which likewise, presents multiples - variations on each "original". From the fractured space of the Internet, I source, appropriate, further distort and misquote the contended narratives painted by these two artists. My paintings, oil on linen, represent even further slippage from any claim that the artist may have on history or identity.

Key Words

Australian Art History

Narrative based Identity

Database aesthetics

Digital sublime

Romantic sublime

This project, comprised of artistic and theoretical work, considers the agency afforded to artists and artworks as narrators (or authors) of history and cultural identity. I look specifically at Internet archives of historical Australian artworks, narrative based histories and the once perceived authority of the painterly oeuvre. Central to my thesis is the problem of paintings as identity-makers. Paintings cannot help but be infused with the perspective or *Weltanschauung* of their respective painters, which compromises their claim on cultural, objective identity. Furthermore, our experience of historical paintings is largely via reproduction, online, where we will discover identity is merely implied.

The first part of this paper addresses how early colonial artists identified the bewildering new territory that they branded New Holland (Australia). Thematically central to my visual artwork and research are two European painters who, despite their foreign origins, promoted a new *Australian* cultural identity in the 1800s: Swiss-born Louis Buvelot (1814-1888) and Eugene von Gerard (1811-1901). Both are posthumously honored as "fathers of the Australian landscape" yet I question the validity of their images as "identifiers".

Through the 40,000 years of continuous art and culture predating the European invasion, a rich Aboriginal visual identity was fostered, developing traditions steeped in spiritualism and establishing unique symbols and forms. However, Aboriginal art will not be discussed here in this context. It represents a very sacred and ancient culture that deserves its own discussion. I will, however, address the portrayal and characterisation of indigenous peoples in the paintings of early European migrants. My investigation into Australia's visual, post colonial, cultural identity will be foregrounded with an abridged survey of its colonial beginnings.

The second part of the paper examines the presence of the art-historical image *online* and how this may complicate identity – culturally and beyond. This phenomenon is embedded in database aesthetics and the resultant crisis of narrative histories. Here I question the stability of the digital-archival image and the role it may assume as the arbiter of identity. After all, once digitized, an image becomes but a translation of the original.

To conclude I question the new expanded parameters of painting – how can contemporary painting reconcile with its former role of narrator, or, in the case of the early colonial painters, reporter? If narrative and context are ever-shifting, where is identity?

My research method is led by *practice*. Examples of my *Sullied Sublime* series of paintings will be discussed with reference to this methodology. It will become clear as I unfold my methodology further that the practice is cyclic and iterative; it involves a process of making, translating, deconstructing and remaking. I am creating new visual identities and by their very nature they are in flux.

Nature Reversed: Settlement in Australia

The notion of an Australian cultural identity has been a subject of contention for centuries and this is partly due the experience and legacy of early colonists. Settled by the British as a penal colony in 1788, Australia's postcolonial history is short and so identity is a cogent topic. Early colonial, Australian art was indeed a factor in the shaping of a new cultural image, albeit fraught with conflicting notions of idealism, fear and European tradition.

Pivotal artworks by Buvelot and von Gerard, between 1850 and 1890, have been lauded as the first *true* Australian vision and we shall examine such masterpieces shortly. Let us first however, survey the events and cultural climate that preceded their arrival in the mid 19th Century.

The story of Australia's colonisation begins in 1786, in Georgian England, where the entire penal system was in crisis due to overpopulation. So critical was the situation that hundreds of incarcerated men, women and children as young as thirteen were being accommodated on enormous migrating vessels, *Hulks*, on Langston Harbour at Portsmouth. Even new infrastructure could not house the exponential rate of new convictions - in an era when petty theft was punished by a seven-year sentence; so the problem grew.

Meanwhile, explorer and Australia's arguable discoverer, Captain Cook and his crew aboard HMS *Endeavour* were circumnavigating the new *Terra Australis Incognita* in the southern seas (1768-1771). By Cook's reports, the newly discovered continent seemed like a promising and inhabitable territory, rich in flax and pine – suitable for the transportation and settlement of Britain's scurvy ridden convicts. This, we will discover, was not a wholly reliable survey of the newfound land. In fact, the first fleet of British citizens transported to Australian soil was sold on a false promise - a myth that the British government continued to perpetuate back in England for some decades after settlement. The transportation of poor unwitting souls would continue for another eighty years. In 1833, evangelism for the new continent can be noted by the account of the Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately in (who never set foot in Australia) who describes transportation thusly:

...they are carried to a country whose climate is delightful, producing in abundance all the necessities and most of the luxuries of life; - that they have a certainty of maintenance ... are better fed, clothed and lodged, than (by honest means) they ever were before; (can get) all the luxuries they are most addicted to ...are permitted, even before the expiration of their term, to become settlers on a fertile farm... (It) certainly does not look like a very terrific punishment. (Hughes 1987, 317)

And yet, the new horizons brought forth a different reality, the prospects of hard labour, unforgiving climate, starvation, disease, confrontation with indigenous tribes and for many, death.

They expected grassland with deep black soil and well-spaced trees, where crops could be planted without clearing; an ample source of building stone; a protected anchorage.

But what Captain Phillip saw from the deck as his ship rounded Port Solander and hauled into Botany Bay on Friday, January 18, 1788, was a flat heath of paper bark scrub and grey-green eucalypts, stretching featurelessly away under the grinding white light of that Australian Summer. The dry, buzzing monotony of the landscape did not match Cook's account. The bay was open and unprotected and the Pacific rollers gave it a violent, persistent swell, the water was shallow, the holding-ground, poor. (84)

First encounters with the Australian aborigine were likewise, perilous, resulting in the murder of British and Indigenous alike. The latter however, would be near annihilated in the years to come by the forced relocation of tribes, the unconquerable command of artillery and the introduction of diseases such as influenza. The turn of the century up until the 1830s saw out the genocide of Australia's indigenous people. The Aboriginal population dropped from about one million to 0.1 million in the first century after invasion in 1788. In Tasmania, the Aboriginal population dropped from 6,000 to zero between 1776 and 1803. This was a great besmirching upon the legacy of white settlement, forever scarring the culture and lives of indigenous peoples. (Treatyrepublic.net 2015)

So begins the myth of Utopia; Australia's first crisis of identity. The indigenous were branded outsiders in their own land. The British migrants had been sold on a lie. Lieutenant-Governor, Robert Ross, of the first fleet wrote:

That in the whole world there is not a worse country. All that is contiguous to us is so very barren and forbidding that it may with truth be said that *here nature is reversed* and if not so, she is nearly worn out ... if the minister has a true and just description given him of it he will surely not think of sending any more people here. (95)

His words were in vain. The propaganda peddled by the English Government's Beauchamp Committee, which passed the legislation for the repatriation of Britain's felons in Australia, was concealing its two, true motives: A claim on *terra nullius*¹ and the "riddance of the blighted 'banditti'" (66). The cursed masses of felons endured the scourge for decades to come. It was convict labour that built the colonies in New Holland, as it was still to be known until the late 1830s. In fact, Australia was yet to enjoy its own selfhood for many decades. British colonists held an attitude of adversity to *Australianness* for it seemed so contrary to the urbanity to which they traditionally aspired. Until well into the 1820s, the word "Australian" was a term of abuse, or at best of condescension; it carried an air of seediness on the rim of the Pacific (325). One simply did not affiliate oneself with the feral masses of convicts or worse still, the indigenous. Indeed, it was a European colony, but one whose grasp on genteel Englishness was waning and whose class system had gone awry. Such is the shaky ground upon which the first European Australians were to establish an identity.

Visually identifying Australia; the early years

In the following we shall examine how the landscape and the indigenous were depicted in some key examples of early colonial artwork and how a vacillating identification with the *old country* persisted in spite of itself. The first images (paintings and sketches) that Britain was to behold of the natural Australian environment were rendered during the exploratory years of Captain Cook's navigation. These were purely scientific and topographic sketches aimed at recording the unique flora, fauna and the broader environment. Botanist Joseph Banks (1743-1820) employed artists Sydney Parkinson and Alexander Buchan to record the distinct flora of *Terra Australis* however, both artists perished during the voyage of HMS *Endeavour* (1768-1771). For some decades following the arrival of Europeans there continued to be visual reports of flora, fauna and topology by Banks' team of artists and are kept as archival and faithful records of Australian nature.



Fig. 1. Sydney Parkinson, *Xanthorrhoea Resinosa*. C. 1770

Sketches of indigenous people were included as part of this visually, scientific survey which speaks to the exotic otherness that they represented for the European migrants. Images of aborigines were by and large crudely executed and how anthropologically correct they appear is debatable. For example, naïve portraits like figure 2, feature an aboriginal family that resembles more a group of tanned Europeans, sporting a positively Cherubic figure atop the mother's shoulders. Studies and portraits of the indigenous continued into the 19th Century and ranged from fantastical scenes of savage nobility to callus [caricatures](#). And so from the outset, as reported by these early paintings, the identity opposed upon the indigenous was one of disrespect. Such was the xenophobic spirit in which these paintings were created and therefore, afford the artist – as – identifier shaky merit.



Fig. 2 Attributed to Philip Gidley King, *A Family of NSW*. C. 1790



Fig. 3 Joseph Lycett, *Australian Aborigines - Warriors of New South Wales. Spear shield*. 1814



Fig. 4 S.T. Gill *Native Dignity*. 1866

The practice of studying and painting Aborigines continued on for some decades with equivocating sentiments. *A corrobory (sic) of natives in Mills Plains*, 1832 (fig. 5), was painted with a more sympathetic attitude and yet it is still considered a fabrication of events. Painted by the Englishman, John Glover (1767-1849), who enjoyed success at the Royal Academy and the British Institution, it delivers a new academic competence to the portrayal of the Australian landscape. It is nonetheless, through a distinctly European lens, as Glover was so heavily influenced by the French, Claude Lorraine. Legend has it that he wished to be known as *English Claude* (Burton, Splatt 19). Indeed his oeuvre confesses a European, Neo Classical yearning. Given Glover's consignment to England as painter-correspondent, his images, a cross-cultural hybrid of styles and affects, was how the British would consequently perceive the new continent.



Fig. 5 John Glover, *A corrobory of natives in Mills Plains*. 1832

This painting illustrates the curious awe that the inhabitants of this ancient territory represented for the new settlers. Tellingly, Glover's composition features its figures well into the distance of the picture plane – as if to “spy” on the exotic other. In fact, a scene like the one painted here is unlikely to have occurred before Glover's eyes. There were probably no Aborigines left in Tasmania by this time, certainly not enough to engage in a corroboree. Glover's painting stylises the Eucalypt's limbs into ropey talons and the aborigines possess an “otherness” with which white Australia would never fully reconcile. It is as if, in this sunset corroboree we are witnessing the twilight years of indigenous presence in the Tasmanian landscape. Although Glover has taken possession of the land, it is not without some sense of guilt. Indeed, the theme of dispossession haunted Glover for the rest of his life as he re-created at least twenty such landscapes with Aborigines (Nga.gov.au 2015).

It would seem that “Australianness” carries, in this case, the legacy of an ancient indigenous culture that is easier to romanticise than to narrate accurately or indeed, identify with.

The New Australian Pastoral

The artistic movement that follows represents a newfound, artistic kinship with the landscape. Louis Buvelot and Eugene von Gerard, both seeking new fortune, respectively stake out new territory in the visual culture of Australia. As “fathers of the Australian landscape” they carry some honour as arbiters of Australian identity. Conversely, their paintings have been criticised for their misrepresentation of Australian history. This paradoxical esteem asserts the equivocal status of artist – as - identity maker.

Abram Louis Buvelot

Louis Buvelot captured the unique scrubbyness that is the Australian bush. His is a landscape however, that avoids the human struggle that had claimed it.

Buvelot's accolades were many by the time he arrived in Australia in 1864. Rio de Janeiro was where he first registered as a professional artist and gained the honour of a knighthood of The Order of the Rose. His most notable work in Rio was a series of landscape etchings for *The Rio de Janeiro Pitoresco* in collaboration with Louis Auguste Moreau in 1844. Upon his return to Switzerland in 1852 Buvelot attempted to secure himself a career as a daguerreotype photographer and landscape painter, but with no sustained success.

Louis Buvelot arrived in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia in 1864. His migration follows the peak of the Victorian Gold Rush, which attracted thousands of prospectors to the state from abroad. Between 1850 and 1860 the population had more than doubled and reached one million occupants. By 1880 Melbourne, society had set down roots and enjoyed the esteem of being considered quite a cosmopolitan city, locally and abroad. The gold rush had brought wealth and infrastructure. The land had been cultivated, conquered. White had thwarted black and movements toward further European settlement were afoot. Australia was still a European outpost however society had begun to reconcile with the once wretched and unforgiving landscape. We will see how Buvelot's new painterly landscape would become a metaphor for societal harmony and a sense of belonging.

Louis Buvelot's artistic eye was already trained to foreign environments, in rendering the unique colour and landscape of Rio. His first impressions of the Australian landscape were well received by critics and collectors. The Board of Trustees of the Public Library acquired Buvelot, as part of the beginnings of an Australian Collection for the National Gallery. Buvelot's paintings looked different to his colonial predecessors. Visually, he captured the unique essence of Australia and this was due to his methodology: he painted outdoors. Buvelot's training in Paris under Flers exposed him to the French Barbizon School of which he was not a member but has been stylistically aligned. This movement championed the *en plein air* tradition and it can be appreciated in the close attention to light, space and colour that the artworks attest. Prior to Buvelot's arrival in Victoria, most painters planned and sketched *en plein air*, yet the resulting paintings were ultimately divorced from the original environment and finished entirely in the studio. Method was at the heart of Buvelot's celebrated naturalism.

Let us consider *Survey Paddock*, painted in 1871 as one such example of this naturalism. There is but a hint of “elm” in Buvelot’s rendering of an old eucalypt yet the painting’s truth to form surpasses any attempts by his predecessors. This departure made for a new *Australianness* in the visual psyche of new Australian settlers and Europeans alike. Buvelot was a master of colour and for this he is most extolled. The painting possesses a palette that closely resembles the bleached and dry Australian ground cover; the foliage, a dirty green but glinted with warmth from the intense Australian sun. The figures seem unusually small in proportion to the looming gum towering over them. This is not a foreboding landscape however and we are not made voyeurs despite our distance from the party. Instead there is a harmony between man and the bush that was yet to be seen in Australian painting. The tumultuous years of early settlement are in the past and the scrubby, uninhabitable landscape has succumbed to clearing. By these pictorial accounts we believe in an emancipated Australia, land aplenty, a bushy Shangri-la. This, finally, is a landscape with which the new Australians chose to identify. Its tone is neither one of fear nor otherness. It frames a selfhood for Australia by virtue of depicting local “facts” about the land but also, paradoxically, by what it omits.



Fig. 6 Louis Buvelot, *Survey Paddock*. 1871

A contemporary critique of Buvelot’s paintings centres no so much upon what he painted but what he chose not to paint. For one, he seldom depicted figures and when they are featured they are distant and unidentifiable. It has been documented that figure painting was not his “specialty” (Www3.slv.vic.gov.au 2015). Despite this the absence of figures leaves the landscape somewhat on its own to identify Australia. Indeed, this continues to be central to Australia’s branding, so to speak. These historical paintings foreshadowed the contemporary marketing agenda for tourism: the “wide, brown land” and “the sunburnt country” stand before any other cultural definitions of Australia. It was not the agenda nor interest of the colonial painter to represent the mixed and motley migrants that colonised the country, for their narrative is only one of toil and struggle. It should be noted that Buvelot’s arrival occurred after these years of settlement, genocide and hardship. Perhaps, to him, those years did not exist. This is a synchronic account; a subjective snapshot in time.

Does the absence of figures in the landscape speak to a collective guilt, or, indeed, amnesia with regard to the dispossession of indigenous? Such is the enigmatic identity that painting proffers.

Eugène von Guérard

Von Gerard is admired as for his romantic contribution to Australian painting and like Buvelot, criticized for visually editing historical accounts.

In the mid 19th Century, von Guérard studied landscape painting in Germany at the Dusseldorf Academy under Johan Wilhelm Schirmer who elevated the subject of the landscape to new heights of truthful realism. This Post Enlightenment yearning to capture nature’s awe would likewise become a passion for the remainder of von Guérard’s career as a painter. However it was not an artistic pursuit that enticed him to the shores of Melbourne in 1852. It was the prospect of riches on the Goldfields that drew him across the seas as it had done for so many Europeans. During his time in Ballarat, mining and pining for the precious metal, he made some of his most beautiful, early sketches of the Australian environment.



Fig. 7 Eugène von Guérard, Volume 01: Sketchbook XXII. No. 4 Australian. Australia, Apr. 1854-Dec. 1857, 1858

They ultimately proved to be more lucrative for the artist than the elusive prospect of discovering gold. Von Guérard tried his luck in Melbourne where new opportunities were opening up for artists. He made his start by painting commissioned landscapes of properties owned by wealthy graziers. By the 1860s he was the most collected landscape painter in the colonies. He continued his pursuit of a pastoral sublime by touring most of South-eastern Australia and abroad to New Zealand. These landscapes aesthetically hearken back to Schirmer's training in their very studied and close up rendering of native flora. Von Guérard's academic approach to rendering Australia's flora is to this day held in great esteem. Indeed, von Gerard's sketches and paintings are, still today, studied by environmental scientists as documents of Australia's geology pre the photographic archive (Rodrigue 2015, 31).

Mount Kosciusko, seen from the Victorian border (Mount Hope Ranges), 1866, exemplifies von Guérard's Post Enlightenment passion for art, nature and science. The influence of Caspar David Friedrich can be seen in the panoramic landscapes that von Guérard would become famous for. Von Guérard's new, epic romanticism swept the Australian scene up to the giddy heights of the sublime. In 1862, von Guérard travelled with scientist, Georg von Neumayer on two of the expeditions that he undertook as part of his magnetic survey of Victoria (Pullin 2011). Von Guérard was excited by the opportunity to explore and record a new landscape, but the daily experiences of the explorers were fraught with danger and hardship, testing their physical endurance to the limit. Von Neumayer's journal details the arduous challenges faced by the exploration party, some of whom perished on the expedition. (Ngv.vic.gov.au 2015)

Von Guérard's visual account of Kosciusko spares us these grisly details. Instead, in *Mount Kosciusko*, we see man in triumphant splendor. This painting, by all accounts, was not made *en plein air*. It would be fair to say that von Guérard's popularity as a painter was not only for his painterly detail but also for his conjuring of the sublime. It is well documented that he observed nature closely and sketched his findings avidly.

However in order to create such monolithic, painterly grandeur as *Mount Kosciusko*, the indoor, studio tradition prevailed. This may account for the slightly finer, more laboured gesture apparent in his painting style. Von Guérard's *Mount Kosciusko* is by no means a didactic illustration of Professor von Neumayer's journal accounts – but more a romanticized image of exploration. Indeed, one may question whether painting should be burdened with purpose or the duty to convey fact. Von Guerard's paintings may serve as visual identifiers for environmental scientists but perhaps not historians or anthropologists.



Fig. 8 Eugène von Guérard, *Mount Kosciuszko, seen from the Victorian border (Mount Hope Ranges)*. 1866

So where does cultural identity sit within the works of von Guérard and Buvelot? It would appear that in summary, their works convey a projection of victory upon the landscape; and one that bypasses any identification with struggle. The artworks I have discussed omit the anthropological back-story that places von Guérard and Buvelot in the landscape. Where are the artists in these pictures? “In historical models, absence is the gap between fact and collective lie, whether by the historian (to make gaps fit) or a cultural moment” (Klein 2007, 90)

Australia’s two heroes of landscape painting are today looked upon with bifold esteem. They initiated a closer, aesthetic rendering of the landscape – its colours, light, foliage and space. They did much to advance a positive sense of ownership on the land they called *Australia* and made Romantic allusions to its sublime grandeur. And yet we critique these two painters for their grand omission of historical narratives about genocide, transportation and the toilsome settlement period. So we may ask: how much should a painting document? Historical context for the work is very important to consider in answering this question. The values upheld in the colonies at this time were still distinctly European and so the landscape painter appealed their countrymen’s’ mannered tastes. It was not the motive of Buvelot and Von Guérard’s to identify Australia as uninhabitable, uncontrollable and undesirable to those back on the old continent.

The conventions of the picturesque placed order on the land that made it familiar and controllable. The picturesque aesthetic and Romanticism operated within early 19th Century accounts of exploration to strengthen imperial rhetoric... these ideas were used to describe Australia and its indigenous people and make them familiar, stimulating attachment and substantiating British claims (Jensen 2015, 160).

The stories of struggle and strife that preceded the arrival of Buvelot and von Guérard were simply not relayed - in the communal desire to forget. The paintings reflect a zeitgeist of reluctant triumph, a stage of cultural acceptance and denial. To seek a cultural identity in the above paintings is fraught with conflicting notions of honesty and valor, context and history. In the following I will describe, with visual examples of my work and the works of von Guérard and Buvelot, how our two fathers of landscape painting in fact carried on the legacy of a fabricated identity.

The Picturesque

Here I will describe the tradition of *the picturesque* as initiated by late 18th Century aesthetic theorist and artist, William Gilpin (160). I demonstrate, with examples, how employing picturesque conventions may compromise the authenticity of painterly vision. Here, I include my own “appropriated” artworks as a visual parallel to the discussion. The picturesque aesthetic was driven by series of compositional tropes. It employed high colouring, contrast, embellishment and emphasis on a distinctly Romantic vision. Buvelot and von Guérard utilise these picturesque conventions throughout their respective oeuvres.

Buvelot’s preferred picturesque motifs were: middling horizons, a large eucalyptus tree, small figures in the mid distance and either a track or creek to lead our eye into the central picture plane. The backgrounds usually consist of distant hills and far away foliage in muted greys, Prussian blue and mauves.

Pictured below is one of my own collage experiments (Fig. 9). It illustrates how tightly Buvelot held to the aforementioned pictorial protocols. Here, I have spliced two of his paintings: *Near Fernshaw*, 1873 and *Bush Track, Dromana*, 1875, together to form a composite. The experiment toys with the protocols discussed above and highlights the interchangeability of Buvelot's motifs. Here, the very notion of perceiving the environment is framed by pre-existing parameters. In this light, Australia's geological essence is reduced to an identikit of tropes; it is informed by Neo Classical painterly traditions, as per Buvelot's training. The *picturesque* homogeneity of Buvelot's oeuvre corrupts his authority to identify the "true" landscape.



Fig. 9 Saffron Newey, *Picturesque Collage Experiment*. 2015



Fig. 10
Abram Louis Buvelot, *Near Fernshaw*. 1873



Fig. 11
Abram Louis Buvelot, *Bush Track, Dromana*. 1875

Von Guérard's Romantic inclinations make for another brand of picturesque: *the sublime*. Von Guerard was a Romantic painter and his tropes reflect the grandiosity and awe that is typical of this movement – broad horizons, tiny figures, enormous skies and tumultuous weather. His are pictures of postcard perfection; a paradox of tight scientific detail up close and, from a distance, a swooning panorama. The Humboltian¹ principles that von Guérard worked within held science and imagination in equal esteem. "(Von Guérard's) vision of the Australian landscape, while scientifically accurate, is – as Humboldt would have hoped – are informed by the 'vivifying breath of the imagination'" (Ngv.vic.gov.au 2015).

Below, I have considered this duplicity of fact and imagination and made homage to von Guérard's famous work *Tower Hill*, 1855 (Fig. 12). His painting is fit with the Romantic, picturesque trimmings of vast perspective, dwarfed figures, cumulous clouds complete with diagonal sheets of rain in the distance. The figures in this instance are a group of Aborigines, harmoniously at leisure on a clearing of neat, green grass, overlooking a pristine lake. My appropriation of this painting began with a small jpeg sourced on Google. I then digitally filtered and blurred the image, before copying it in oil paint on linen (Fig. 13), *Vanished Lake*, my painterly homage of von Guerard's image, alludes to a disappearing connectedness with the environment and a nebulous grasp on identity. We simply cannot see plausible detail in this painterly appropriation. Fact is eradicated and we are only left to imagine an identity.

The picturesque tradition overrides the potential for spontaneity. The search for identity in the works of von Guérard and Buvelot are here filtered by convention.



Fig. 12 Eugene Von Guerard *Tower Hill*. 1855

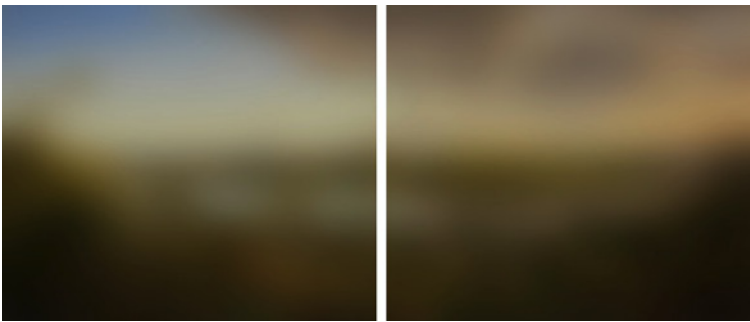


Fig. 13 Saffron Newey, *Vanished Lake*. 2 panels each 31 x 36 cm
Oil on linen, 2014

The oeuvre and identity

The concept of the oeuvre is important to this discussion because it is from this broader vantage that we may seek conclusive identities. How might one locate an artist's entire oeuvre? And furthermore, could it be within in the oeuvre that we discover an overarching leitmotif, an identity?

There are two ways we may consider a body of work. It could be read as a progressive story – a *narrative* – or alternatively, as a non-linear *database* of images. Buvelot and von Guérard can be easily situated within the *narrative* structure of Australian art history. The story of images in Australia's colonial history represents a linear progression that begins with the naive curiosity of early colonial drawings and culminates in a new, confident, painterly movement, motivated by my two subjects. When we look at the work of Buvelot and von Guérard in this story we can reflect upon their historical context and attempt to understand the “identities” that they portrayed. The artworks belong to a diachronic history and we imagine them here, in categories and oeuvres, safely archived in totality. Alternatively, the Internet is a vast database that fractures narrative. It takes histories, artworks and identities and makes them miscellaneous. Here, on the Internet database is where I source canonical works of art by Buvelot and von Guerard. In the space of the Internet, the artworks have lost their historical, narrative context and become discontinuous. Identity is now dispersed throughout a digital quagmire – the online environment. Instead of discovering the essential qualities of painterly Australian identity in the collected works of these two artists, I find semiotic conflation, confusion and misrepresentation. The syntagm that they represent is replaced by phantoms; a paradigm of signs that point nowhere but to each other. What was already a “fluid” cultural identity in these early Australian paintings is now, more than ever, in flux.

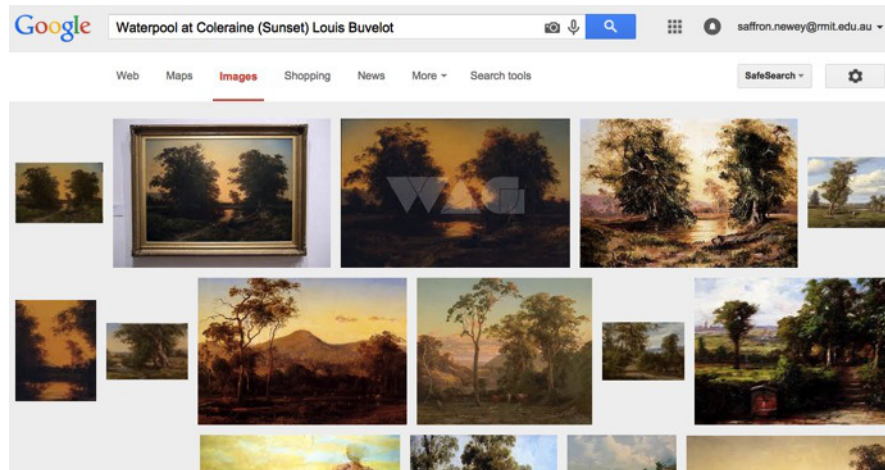


Fig. 13 Google search results for Louis Buvelot's *Waterpool near Coleraine (Sunset)*. 1869

If one were to “Google” Buvelot’s famous painting *Waterpool near Coleraine (Sunset)* 1869 (Fig. 13) – the result would be a multitude of images that match this search criteria, each algorithmically varied to some degree, but ultimately, none of which truthfully identifies the original painting. Through a series of Chinese Whispers any semblance of truth, identity and authenticity is lost. “Databases are shaping our collective reality” (Bulajić 2007, xiv) The oeuvre is an entity that is merely implied by the database structure. The oeuvre is, like identity, forever indexical.

Narrative, database or otherwise, it is nigh impossible to view an artists’ entire oeuvre. Even a retrospective or survey exhibition involves a curatorial process, which edits the oeuvre according to a set of pre-conceived parameters ultimately altering the body of work as a whole. The oeuvre is framed and supplemented, with contextual works by artist contemporaries and so the identity of the subject becomes conflated with others. Likewise, the Internet may indeed feature many digital examples of an artist’s work but one can never be sure that all that could be seen - is seen. Multiple versions of each painting may vary slightly in colour and quality; they may be cropped, appropriated, re named or entirely incorrect. The oeuvre is ever incomplete and therefore fails to articulate identity as a finite entity.

Painting, the copy and the Internet

“Artists working with the Internet as a medium are concerned essentially with the creation of a new type of aesthetic that involves not only visual representation but invisible aspects of organization, retrieval and navigation as well” (xi).

Paintings are not discreet objects. In the following I will discuss paintings with regard to their material status, the phenomenon of the copy and painting’s presence within a network. I argue that, this network exists online and also in the physical world.

Painting, as a mode of identity creation, is transitive (Joselit 2009, 128). It carries within it a whole paradigm of cultures, histories, methods and allusions. Paintings are not limited to their materiality and content. In the post modern, post Internet era, our consideration of painting must also embrace context, site and intention. We must also consider the cult of the copy, the translation, the reproduction and appropriation. In the early 1990s, Martin Kippenberger claimed that painting belongs to a *network* (125). Paintings also *contain* a network of semiotic cues, inferences and allusions. Postmodern painting is informed by modernism and contemporary culture. Painting today translates a sociological cacophony of information from the online database and from narrative histories. It is an indexical medium that moves in and out of traditional margins, by incorporating the history that precedes it as well as new media, installation and all manner of material. Paintings in this sense are relational objects that have no inherent “truth making” nor “identity creating” authority. These notions are instead, implied.

The networks in which all paintings operate are proliferated with digital and printed copies. In fact, we are faced with so many versions of paintings that it has somewhat replaced our experience of historical artworks, in person. Moreover, copies of artworks vastly outweigh their original antecedents. The map has become larger than the territory, so to speak. We can no longer consider the *original* and the *copy* in binary opposition. “The fiction of the master and the copy are now so entwined with each other that it is impossible to identify where one begins and the other one ends.” (Davis 1995, 381)

Indeed, they are contingent upon one another. The indexical nature of the copy emphasises the absence of the original. In the copy, indexicality replaces identity and the original becomes mythologized. The material original, as a synchronic, historic certainty, is obfuscated. The copy is the “remains of that act - what was not consumed by the moment” (Klein 2007, 90)

In this light, the Internet is a vast database of *momento mori* par excellence. What happens to an *original* painted image when it is shunted from its site (of creation, exhibition or storage) and it is copied and re-copied ad infinitum? How is it to be identified? Digital images are infinitely reproducible. These reproductions will vary but there is no

hierarchical link between them. They are equal to the code upon which they are based. They are after all, a replication of code, not artwork. It might be more useful to re-name the digital copy as the *translation* (Bentkowska-Kafel, Cashen and Gardiner 2005, 6).

And what of context, history and narrative – identity? It would seem that narrative (history, knowledge) has been replaced by a vast database of mostly unrelated units of information. This conflict between knowledge and information is where identity becomes corrupted.

“The digital image is not a reproduction in the way that an analogue image is. Rather it is a transformation of an image, a translation from a continuum to a set of discreet units. When displayed on a screen the image is re-performed according to a set of encoded instructions” (6).

Sullied Sublime

In the following I will discuss my painting project *Sullied Sublime*, which investigates the mutability of identity within painterly parameters. The methodology that underpins this project is led by making and trial which I will discuss with more detail. *Sullied Sublime* homages the Romantic sublime, as captured by Louis Buvelot and Eugene von Guérard and contemplates its multifarious presence in the online network: the *digital sublime*.

“It’s worth pausing to consider how difficult it is to visualize networks, which, in their incomprehensible scale, ranging from the impossibly small microchip, to the impossibly vast global Internet, truly embody the contemporary sublime.” (Joselit 2009, 128)

It is not an uncommon activity in postmodern art/painting practice to create appropriations, or pieces based on historical artworks. Indeed, it represents the reflexive tendencies of painting today, which are concerned with both “the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it” (Graw et al. 2012, 10).

In the contemplation of identity and painting’s faculty to create such, I find Buvelot and von Guérard’s works most curious for the many reasons mentioned in the foregoing. I access their artworks online, which likewise, presents multiple versions and variations on each “original”. From the fractured space of the Internet, I source, appropriate, further distort and misquote the contended narratives painted by these two artists. My paintings, oil on linen, represent even further slippage from any claim that the artist may have on history or identity.

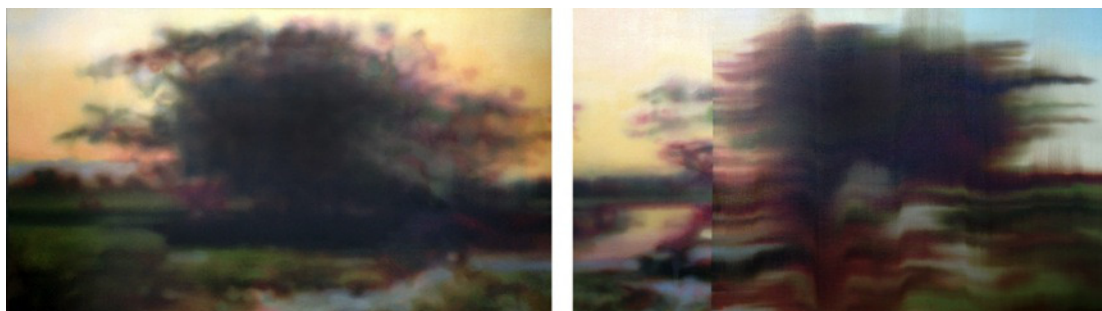


Fig. 14 Saffron Newey, *Detached Landscape*. (after Buvelot) Oil on Linen, 2 panels, each 80 x 100cm, 2014



Fig. 15 Saffron Newey, *Ultramarine* (after von Guérard). Oil on Linen, 100cm x 213 cm, 2014

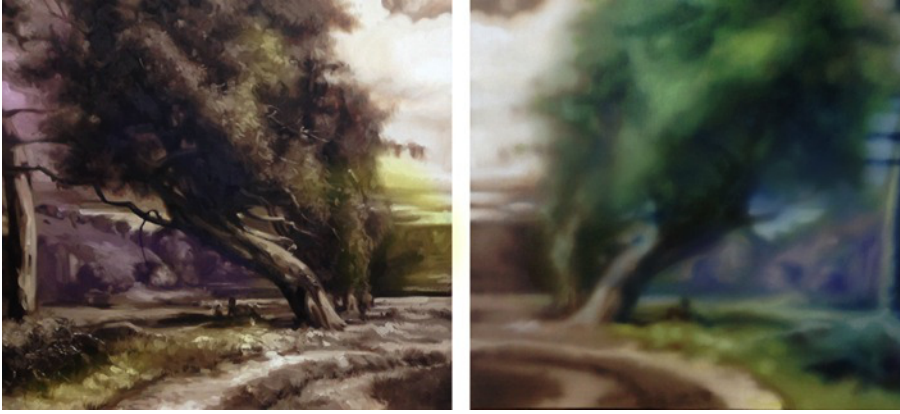


Fig. 16 Saffron Newey, *A Parting of Ways* (after Buvelot). Oil on Linen, 2 panels, each 110cm x 110 cm, 2014

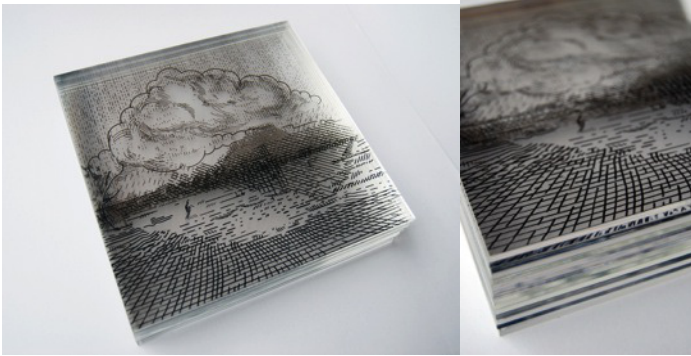


Fig. 17 Saffron Newey, *Romance Novel* (An artist's book after Eugene von Guérard)
Acrylic paint marker on 30 layers of Perspex
20cm x 20cm x 9cm
Left, detail
2014

As a research methodology, *practice* represents a unique mode of enquiry for it is driven by instinctive and sometimes intangible cues. The Australian landscape was imprinted early, in my mind's eye, by key paintings by my two subjects and those who followed in their tradition. Despite my postmodern critique of the narrative identities conjured by von Guérard and Buvelot the works have enjoyed a posthumous adoration by the Australian public. Theirs was a vision that implanted itself within the Australian zeitgeist for a century and beyond. In discovering landscape for myself as a painter, my hand took to the tropes of these early masters rather unconsciously. And yet a true affinity with their "Australian" subject and visual narrative was more problematic. This irresolute spirit in my homages can be seen in the distortions I have created. It is not without a hesitant inclination that I despoil these canonical images with my own blurred, stretched and re-composed appropriations. Many of my painterly homages feature a split composition that alludes to the duplicitous nature of the "appropriated image" and the copy. I do however, consider my paintings to be kindred and not copied; they share the network with von Guérard and Buvelot. They are neither critiques nor corrections of the equivocal identities that these artists affected but rather further additions to the multifarious and indefinite network of identities that they occupy.

More recently the project has taken on a discursive twist with regard to methodology. I have begun to utilise the paintings featured in the *Sullied Sublime* series as the subject of new online image searches. Google's "Reverse Image Search" function, designed in 2011, allows users to search with pictures instead of words. Google then answers the request with what it believes the image to be and, subsequently, a selection of "Visually similar images". I have uploaded jpegs of my paintings to Google to further enquire as to their visual identities in an online network environment. I wonder - with what other images will they be affiliated? For example, in uploading my painting *A Parting of Ways* (after Buvelot), the first result that Google offered was correct; it had found my painting on website marsgallery.com.au, where it was previously exhibited. The "visually similar images" however, were curiously diverse.

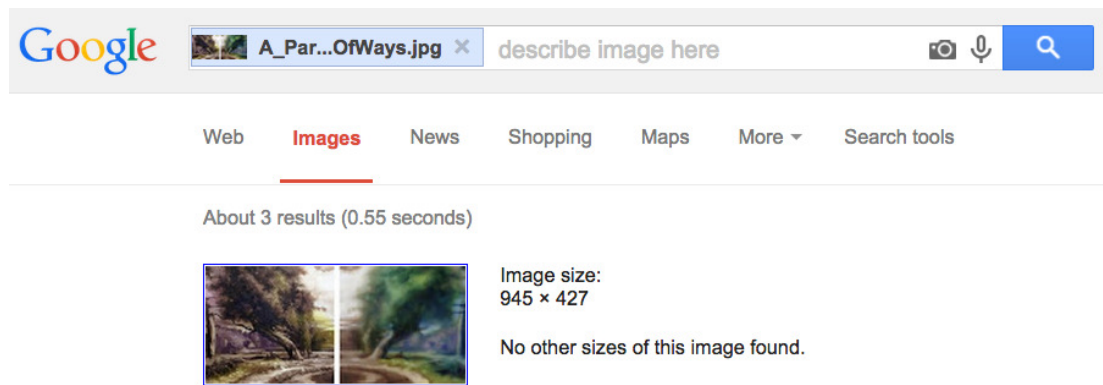


Fig. 18 Google's Reverse Image Search function.
Here I use a jpeg of my painting *A Parting of Ways*, 2014, as search criteria instead of words.

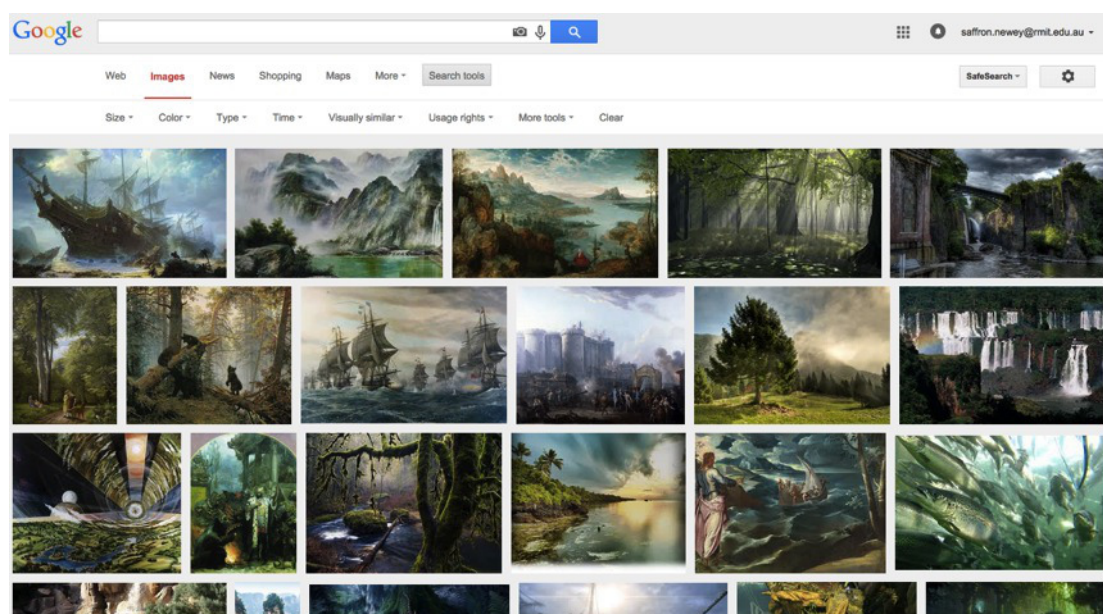


Fig. 19 Google's Reverse Image Search "Visually Similar images"

Among them were kitsch stock photographs of digitally manipulated landscapes, Chinese fantasy art illustrations (some from games) and paradoxically, some select examples of European, Romantic painting. In the mix of paintings displayed were *Weimar's Courtyard of the Muses*, Theobold von Oer, 1860, *Battle of Lutzen*, by Carl Wahlbon, 1855, *Landing of Columbus*, by John Vanderlyn, 1847 and also the earlier British Romantic, William Blake's, *Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing*, 1786. Now, by association, my artwork now takes on the tangential identities of kitsch, fantasy and European Romantic.

The software behind this functionality, simply put, is driven by an algorithmic code that searches for "similar" pixel dimensions, colours and layouts. Google's Reverse Image Search criteria do not include the image's history, title, medium or subject. Therefore the resultant matches are purely selected on scientific parameters that have no cultural or contextual bearing. I find this further confluence of identities and images compelling and anticipate the unforeseen results with great curiosity. These random search results provide me with potential images for new hybridized, appropriated artworks. The cyclic nature of the project defies traditional narrative structure. Instead, it interrogates the database in an indiscriminate and promiscuous new way. Identity is has been created by a sum of associations. The methodology and the final artworks are equally important in the *Sullied Sublime* project for they both embrace chance and strip the preconceived notions of Australianness, the picturesque and tradition away from what were considered to be "canonical masterpieces."

Conclusion

...the distinction between documentary and fiction is disappearing. A documentary, even if none of the scenes are "staged", presents a false picture if it is fitted together as a neat, temporal linear object. Only when we can be made aware

of the database that underlies it, and the fact that [an artwork] cuts a path of one way or another through this database, do we begin to approach a way of representing ourselves that has some link to the way we are.” (Bulajić 2007, 84)

Australian identity was influenced by the artworks of European settlers in a truly Romantic spirit. Many contemporary artists have looked at defining and identifying the Australian culture with a more critical, political and exploratory agenda. Despite this, the pictorial vision of the colonials in the late 1800s still holds most esteem for the general populous. Still governed by the British monarchy, ours is a culture, which continues to cringe at our painful and shameful colonial beginnings, whose sense of self is still ill-defined. Despite some claim on reconciliation, the indigenous Australian population continues to suffer discrimination, poverty and segregation. With a society that is paradoxically multicultural and xenophobic, patriotic and penitent, Australia’s cultural identity is nothing if not fickle.

Identity and selfhood are capricious entities. The artist – as – identity propagandist cannot survive scrutiny any more than a politician can. An agenda is always present, when creating paintings, whether conscious or unconscious. The contingency and mutability of identity will always defy its status as an essential truth.

Lost between knowledge and narrative, information and database, identities are ever indefinite. Paintings, indeed oeuvres – as – identifiers are likewise, essentially indexical and problematic. They exist within a grand schema of images that happened before and will happen henceforth. As I have discussed, paintings are highly subject to association, especially in the online database, and so the paradigm shifts. They can never have the last word on identity. Furthermore, the giddy space that is the Internet will continue to morph our shaky perceptions of ownership and identity and forge new, conflated histories. Through artistic practice I have tested and toyed with painting, the database, tradition and technology. The results are as discursive as the identities that they sought to define. Such is the sullied sublime.

Biography

Saffron Newey is an artist, lecturer and researcher, living in Melbourne Australia. Her current PhD in Fine Art is a practice-led investigation into art history, identity, painting and the Internet. Saffron has held numerous solo and group exhibitions in Melbourne and is currently represented by Melbourne Art Rooms [MARS]. The artworks featured in this paper can also be found at www.marsgallery.com.au and www.saffronnewey.com alongside examples of past exhibition works.

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Notes

¹ The directive to Captain Cook when he circumnavigated Australia was to take possession of any land only by consent of the natives - if it was inhabited. However, consent was not necessary if the new lands were not being used in a European sense and thus were termed *Terra nullius*. (Hughes 1987)

² Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt, (1769 –1859) was a [Prussian geographer](#), [naturalist](#), and [explorer](#).