

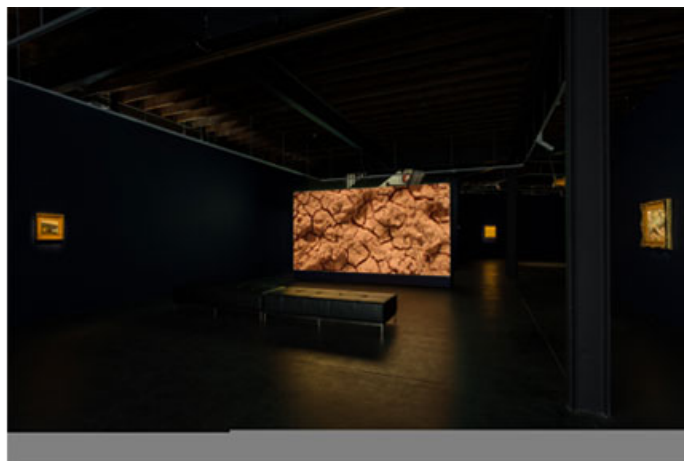
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[Letter from Melbourne: An Exhibition at the Victorian College of the Arts Tackles Contested Lands and Landscape](#)

posted by [Sean Lowry, Head of Critical and Theoretical Studies, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Australia](#) — April 27, 2017

We live in a world in which deeply contested perceptions of time and place coexist on lands shared by diverse populations. The unresolved politics of land that confront Indigenous cultures in Australia are a prime example of how such contestations continue to play out in a postcolonial context. Such tensions are particularly apparent when contrasting radically divergent artistic and historical representations of landscape. Australia is a vast and ancient continental landmass upon which a little over two centuries of colonization has savagely interrupted 50,000 years of continuous human culture expressed through over 500 distinct collective nominations. *Presence*, an ambitious exhibition curated by David Sequeira in the Margaret Lawrence Gallery at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), University of Melbourne (March 3–April 1, 2017), entered this seemingly inexpressible contestation with a curatorial strategy that provisionally marked out something of the possibility of aggregating these radically disparate understandings. As this text will attempt to demonstrate, Sequeira, in bringing otherwise ineffably distinct representations of the Australian landscape together, implicitly suggested that violently incompatible senses of time and place might indeed share space—and possibly even begin to communicate with one another.



Figures 1 and 2 show the gallery installation with Michael Riley's film presented in the center. The two images from the film depict different contemporary perspectives of a land occupied by Indigenous cultures for tens of thousands of years. The smaller paintings installed on the perimeter wall are by well-known Australian artists who are all alumni of the Victorian College of the Arts upon the occasion of its 150-year celebration (see Figures 3–8 below).

Upon entering the dramatically darkened gallery, the viewer encountered a series of small uncaptioned spot-lit paintings by some of the VCA's most distinguished alumni. These works appeared to be floating like a constellation of celestial objects around a large moving image projection at the center of the exhibition space. Sequeira strategically positioned *Empire*, a film by the late Indigenous Australian artist Michael Riley, at the heart of this carefully considered installation of historical and contemporary landscape paintings.



Figure 3: Eugene Von Guérard, *From below the Lighthouse, Cape Shanck, Victoria, 1873*, oil on paper on board, 9.7 x 12.4 in. (photograph provided by the Wilbow Collection)

Figure 4: Frederick McCubbin, *At Macedon, 1913*, oil on canvas 20.4 x 24.1 in. (photograph provided by the Wilbow Collection)

Figure 5: Fred Williams, *Hillside III, 1968*, oil on canvas, 24 x 26 in. (photograph provided by the Heidi Victoria Collection)

Contextualizing work by Eugene Von Guerard, Frederic McCubbin, Fred Williams, Clarice Beckett, Louise Hearman, and Rick Amor with that of Riley, Sequeira seductively stipulated that the viewer become mindful of Indigenous understandings of landscape that existed for 50,000 years prior to the VCA's own 150-year history.

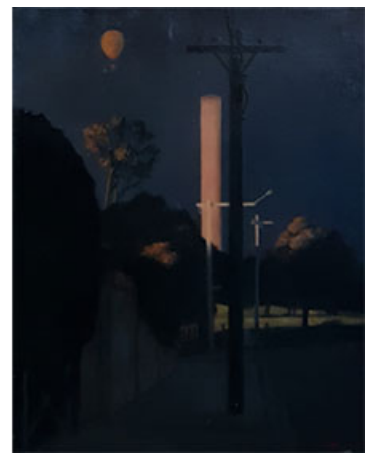


Figure 6: Clarice Beckett, *Half Moon Bay*, undated, oil on board, 11.2 x 15 in. (photograph provided by Rosalind Hollinrake and Niagara Galleries)

Figure 7: Louise Hearman, *Untitled #480, 1997*, undated, oil on composition board, 27 x 21 in. (photograph provided by the Wilbow Collection)

Figure 8: Rick Amor, *Summer Morning Lucerne Crescent Alphington, 2012*, oil on canvas, 20.1 x 15.9 in., Courtesy the artist and Niagara Galleries.

Not inconsequentially, Riley was not a VCA alumnus. This was a brave and deliberate curatorial gesture on the part of Sequeira to mark the occasion of the institution's 150-year celebrations: "For most of its 150-year history, the Victorian College of the Arts ignored Indigenous Australian culture and art practices. I wanted the large-scale projection (including its soundtrack) by Indigenous artist Michael Riley to be the filter through which the other works of art are perceived."^[1]

Significantly, the deliberately modestly sized selection of paintings orbiting Riley's intermittently expansive and forensic visual meditation upon the impact of colonialism and Christian missionary activities on Australian Aboriginal land and culture, were subsequently drawn inward to perform in concert with the deeply melancholic musical score by composer Antony Partos and performed by the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra that accompanied Riley's filmic essay. Sound is clearly an important part of Sequeira's matrix of considerations. Considered together with the lighting design, we can see why Sequeira describes a "multi-sensory approach" as "critical in the process of generating new [historical] resonances." Already an ode to the simultaneous expansiveness and minutiae of Australian landscape, once experienced on a big screen at the center of Sequeira's installation, *Empire* commanded a hitherto unconsummated presence (especially when considered in comparison with earlier broadcast and exhibition presentations).

It was clear that none of these works had ever been exhibited like this before. Consequently, one of the most marked features of this exhibition was the conspicuous visibility of Sequeira's curatorial voice. Moreover, it was not a stretch to reimagine this poetic exploration of new possibilities in selection and display as an installation by an artist rather than the work of a curator. Here, networks of relations marked between very different artistic materializations and senses of placemaking clearly instantiated the space of the exhibition itself as medium. In demonstrating profound new ways in which very different conceptions of landscape might sing together, and by extension, how accepted lineages of art history might in turn learn to incorporate understandings of Indigenous Australian art and culture, Sequeira created a work of art that far exceeded a sum of its parts. Although Sequeira understands his responsibilities to these histories "as part of a bigger commitment as an artist," he also recognizes that curatorship demands very particular responsibilities. Despite the fact that we might reimagine the exhibition as an installation by Sequeira the artist, Sequeira the curator nevertheless understood that this would invariably "reflect a different style of authorship." Interestingly, he appeared at once emboldened and troubled when asked to consider the exhibition as an installation by him as an artist. Clearly, Sequeira necessitates that these activities remain ontologically separate—for as Ruth Noack put it in 2015—just as "the other of the artist as curator is the curator," it is also apparent that "the other of the curator as artist is the artist."^[2]

Importantly, Sequeira sees his “own subjectivity is a departure point for the exploration of other histories.” As a “middle-aged gay Indian born Australian man,” he sees his “subjectivity as an access to the disclosure of new understandings of art and art history.” For Sequeira, “creating opportunities for the revelation of new or previously undistinguished facets of history is integral to this process.” In order to facilitate this process, he first considers “selection and display strategies used in the construction mainstream histories” and then begins to develop alternative formats that suggest “new resonances within both individual works of art and a group as a whole.” When asked to imagine this exhibition as the first in a series, and that its next instantiation might be in the United States, Sequeira excitedly described one possible scenario:

the compelling video work of Mohawk artist Alan Michelson could be a potent context for re thinking American landscape painting. For example, set within a suite of small historic and contemporary landscape paintings by artists such as Thomas Cole, Josephine Chamberlin Ellis, Frederick Church, Georgia O’Keefe [*sic*], Alma Thomas, Andrew Wyeth, Michelson’s large scale projection (on a screen of turkey feathers), Mespratt, 2001 could expand the understandings of consumerism, spirituality, the sublime, environmentalism and ownership associated with considerations of landscape.

From exhibitions to nation states, delineations of place are destined to be dynamic and temporary. Unlike space, which possesses abstract physical and formal properties, the value of place is socially constructed. Against a backdrop of inevitable change, art performs both a mnemonic and a transitive role. This role is perhaps most apparent when art is experienced as a dynamic constellation of elements rather than as ossified objects. Although the idea of landscape is central to the sense of *being* in Australia, it can clearly evoke complex and unresolved historical and political tensions. Artists that deal with landscape as subject are by default connected to these tensions. The island continent of Australia is at once a timeless geological formation and a historically layered series of cultural projections. For a mere blip in historical time, a new nation has been superimposed over an ancient geological formation and accompanying appropriated nations. Landscape, like painting, is a register of gestures enacted upon a surface. Marks, together with conspicuous omissions and evacuations, can imply both desolation and new possibilities. Painting, like film, is a fertile ground upon which to stage a dynamic play between registers of information and space for the imagination to flourish. By suggesting new possibilities through the poetic play of disparate representations of landscape, and at the same time reminding the viewer that full comprehension is impossible, Sequeira has created an evocative vehicle with which to reimagine absence and presence.

[1] David Sequeira, email conversation with the author, March 31, 2017. All subsequent quotations by Sequeira are from email conversations that took place between March 31 and April 3, 2017.

[2] Ruth Noack, “The Curator as Artist?” (symposium presentation, Central Saint Martins, London, November 10, 2012). See <http://afterall.org/online/artist-as-curator-symposium-curator-as-artist-by-ruth-noack/>.

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