

Jan Murphy Gallery, Melbourne Art Fair, 2012

Text by Una Rey

For many Australian artists the landscape is a sleeping dog, best left lying, and it is hardly a genre associated with the emblazoned practice of **Ben Quilty**, an artist largely renowned for his portraits. And yet Quilty's anti-heroic bronze *Cook after Baghdad* (matched in scale to the Saddam Hussein monument, violently toppled by the Iraqi people and the U.S army in Baghdad, 2003) continues to raise issues of nation, identity and masculinity, which lead invariably, back to the heart of landscape.

Quilty's enquiry into Captain Cook, a figure whose ambivalent legacy has so dramatically shaped Australia since 1770, was first tested in *Inhabit* (2011) an installation of sculpture and sixteen paintings acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia, where the artist's self-portrait is spliced with Cook's and the devil's image in a public display of post colonial soul-searching.

Currently under commission to the Australian War Memorial following his war-artist's tour to Afghanistan, Quilty has taken private respite in the bush by falling into the landscapes of others. Painted on small boards discarded by Sunday painters, the *plein air* studies made in the Central Highlands and around Hill End pay poetic respect to these unnamed artists as well as reflecting on the origins of the country, its various occupations and its archaic mysteries.

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Heidi Yardley has established a painting practice based on the rigors of academic figuration charged with an unsettling, ambiguous moodiness. Previous bodies of work have engaged with mythologies and mysteries within the Australian wilderness landscape, but Yardley's 2012 paintings are interior worlds, which ardently dismiss domesticity. The intimately scaled tonal paintings read like filmic juxtapositions, brushed with the low light of a certain time of day, composed with the languid stillness of photography.

Yardley has always teased out uncanny emotional currents and contradiction in her imagery recently coming full circle in her appreciation of Surrealism, rediscovering some of its lesser-known figures and borrowing from the fragmentary logic of collage and Freudian dream-states. In tribute to de Chirico's *The uncertainty of the poet*, Yardley creates a contemporary Venus by way of classical antiquity, an acute example of her potently mixed visual metaphors. Time is fugitive, an alliance between *The Stepford Wives* and *Bladerunner*, but they also evoke the newest 'vintage' ages – the 1970s and 80s. By carefully collating her imagery, often from old magazines, the artist's painterly vivisections begin to reveal intimate 'magic realist' narratives that elide any easy recognition but hint at desire and denial, abandon and control, chance and possibility.

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Melbourne based painter **Rhys Lee** digs deep into the well of imagination for his images, but once lured forth in translucent colour each picture sets the ground for its heir. This creative stream of consciousness is anchored by the rudimentary universalism of the human face in all its guises so the perennial tensions of the human condition are never far from the surface.

While some prosaic references to popular culture such as 1950s Japanese comics can be reluctantly prised from the taciturn artist, the eyes within his paintings tell a more intriguing story: part primitive mask, part ghostly effigy, the head studies and become haunting archetypal portraits that attract and disturb the viewer with their malevolent gazes.

The raw, energetic aesthetic of Lee's gouache paintings and the radiance of his day-glow oils recall the visual deception of colour film negatives where local colour is rudely reversed to deliver a sense of displacement. At a glance these childlike apparitions seem innocent and accessible, but on the double take they dispel such easy notions and deliver a paradoxical, cauterising lyricism.

