

School of Design and Art

**Rectangular Emotion: The Expression of Awe in Painting and
the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Abstract

This project integrates aspects of the affect theories of Brian Massumi and Gilles Deleuze, as well as the “reflective” and “intentional” representational theories of Rob van Gerwen and Roger Scruton for the understanding and use of expression in painting. Specifically in relation to the expression of awe, I use Deleuze’s and Guatarri’s description of “affects” and “percepts” to “reverse engineer” an experience of awe—replacing conventional concepts more traditionally associated with Expressionism or theories of the sublime with original conceptualisation of my experiences of painting the geological landscape. I travelled to Kandimalal (the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater) to make large scale paintings that render present a powerful non-living phenomenon, whose expression is extant through a feeling of awe that I propose can be made present through a painting process. The experience of a direct translation of the somatic and visual sensation of awe based on the forces of pre-cognitive awareness is contextualised with discussion of Sidney Nolan’s *Desert Storm* and Mamma Andersson’s *Family Ties* paintings. The resulting paintings respond to geological awe through the means of realism and subjective awareness, making a shift in the existing understanding and practice of expressive figurative painting—as it is historically theorised. Ultimately, I argue that constructionist theories are unsuitable for understanding emotive expression in painting, and develop an affective trans-representational model as an analytical tool and a painting methodology.

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Introduction

The art museum presents an image of pure awe even without artworks—through daunting architecture and the vastness of impalpable white walls, in which a subdued ambience is broken by the vividness of perfectly aimed lights. The space itself generally has an overpowering presence. It was in the space of the Art Gallery of New South Wales that a major part of this project was conceived, while looking at the 2013 exhibition of Spanish art, *Renaissance to Goya*. The exhibition presented a selection of powerful works that showed how difficult life could be during the period from the 16th to the early 18th century in Spain. It revealed how people have survived, even leading fulfilling lives under such conditions.

The works evoked strong reactions in me. I felt empathy, horror, joy and awe. In particular, I recall being shocked by a drawing of a person with a grotesque skin condition by José de Ribera (ca. 1622). Viewing this exhibition was unlike my normal experience of looking at art as I was in this instance, transported *into* the emotional lives of people from the past. How do feelings become encapsulated in inanimate objects like artworks? Are they best defined as “feelings,” “emotions” or “affects”? Are such responses stored by a process of representation, and how does expression occur? More importantly, how can this phenomenon be discussed, and further, analysed—even in a practical sense? What can contemporary painting learn from these highly emotive works?

The word “awe” connotes a mysterious or unknowable experience, something beyond the scope of normal human comprehension. Such experience in art is associated with the tradition of “the sublime.” This study seeks a pathway that branches out from that tradition. It investigates awe in a different sense, to not only see how awe is shown and seen—directly and indirectly—but to argue that it can be *made* in contemporary painting. Such a focus aims to escape awe as a synonym for the sublime. Instead, here, awe will be discussed as clearly as something as inherently opaque as a feeling can be. Awe in relation to painting and expression operates with difficult-to-name or ambiguous states of emotion. This study appreciates that awe and emotion in painting are difficult to accommodate in the dominant modes of understanding representation, and so aims to shift the discourse toward a more nuanced understanding of awe.

A current psychological definition of awe refers to the feeling that arises from the sensation of “vastness” and the need for “accommodation” (Keltner and Haidt, 2003). In the Bible (King James Version), dread, admiration and reverence approximate being-in-awe of God—considered essential for a virtuous life: “Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your

own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah” (Psalm 4, KJV). This sense of awe is intrinsic to major religions, so it seems reasonable to suggest that awe is an inherent, central phenomenon of western painting, springing as it does from a Judeo-Christian tradition. Awe as conveyed through painting is a nascent area of investigation however, and this research posits awe as an experience commensurate with both viewing and painting. The project expands the Kantian notion of the sublime in relation to awe, entailing certain experiences, such as the impact of loss of scale and the overriding sense of chaos. I suggest, however, that this subjectivity opens to a “subject-object dialectic” (Massumi, 2002, p.14), which shifts the discussion away from a strictly anthropocentric position.

The representation of awe in contemporary figurative painting is central to this exegesis, but ultimately the study attempts to move beyond a strict reliance on “representation” as it has conventionally been understood and looks instead to the idea of the “visual feeling” through painting. I use this term in response to the visual perception of an emotive atmosphere seen in a landscape. My response to this “atmosphere” is encompassed in the body of artwork I developed, particularly several large scale paintings, painted *en plein air* at the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater in the Tanami Desert in North Western Australia. The Wolfe Creek paintings are the exploration of an affective experience of awe. I worked on site in March 2016, in searing heat, exploring the relationship between human and non-human forces. Such fieldwork is important, particularly to avoid being merely descriptive of the phenomenon of awe. It allowed me to situate awe within a praxis that locates it, beyond a cognitive sense, and as something that is both seen and felt. I guide the exegetical investigation of the Wolfe Creek experience by discussing relevant paintings by Sidney Nolan and Mamma Andersson that demonstrate emotive expression in their paintings.

The artwork in this project has contributed to the identification of a combination of theories of expression, representation and emotion. My understanding of “practice-led research” is informed by *Practice as Research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry*, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (2010). Barrett (2010) outlines a focus on “processes rather than the products of enquiry” and the establishment of a “dialogic between the exegesis and the studio practice” (p. 100). The relationship between the studio practice and the exegesis presented here are in keeping with Barrett’s descriptions.

Through this practice-led research project, paintings work in tandem with theoretical enquiry. This exegesis uses theory that locates this study in the present, a world after the advent of modernism. I am aware that this exploration is from a western perspective and my position is culturally influenced, highly specific, respectful to other cultural perspectives and

does not attempt to be “universal.”

*

Chapter One of this exegesis is a reflection on the painting processes that led to the Wolfe Creek field trip, the trip itself, and an account of the subsequent impact this had on my painting practice, and its conceptualisation. It details the material preparation for the study and positions the investigation in a western cultural context, by exploring geological understandings of the site and the popular preconception of the site set up by the movie *Wolf Creek* (McLean & Lightfoot, 2005).

The paintings I made at the Wolfe Creek meteorite crater for this study experiment with the representation of the emotional state of awe.¹ As such, the paintings form the crucial reference for the success of this endeavour. The art practice component of this study undertakes to relay awe directly, by developing an intentional, expressive relationship through the engagement of the act of painting as both an optical and a haptic process. The optical aspect resides in the visible translation of colour and tone into paint that occurs on site. The haptic operates both through a frottage process by tactile hand gestures, and in the substance of the paint, introducing an expressive dimension. I argue that the hand transfers the shockwaves of awe “seismographically” from an assault to vision through more than cognitive registration. This process differs from the more traditional intentional idea of the artist using a mark to express subjectivity and instead considers how the body itself registers a response to the affect directly.

As a realist painter, I focus on the visual aspects of awe rather than the conceptual, and my direct experience of how this phenomenon feels. A figurative painter has the daunting and incessant task of analysing the colours of the visual field. By examining the visual field and translating this inside the frame of the canvas, I “reverse engineer” the affects of awe.

The problems of translating awe into language have prompted me to refer to the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and two other theorists directly influenced by his writing, Manuel DeLanda, and Brian Massumi, and to be receptive to a new sense of expression. Content or subject matter has its own expressive form, or in Western Australia, “negative forms”—salt lakes (lakes without water) and empty craters that imply past catastrophic events. Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda provide the impetus to discuss the affective

¹ The term “emotion” is derived from the Latin word “*emotere*” which means “energy in motion.” Further refinements of this term are discussed as required, but by way of introduction, this general term is adequate to consider it a significant impulse in the creation of a painting.

dimension of geology, responding to the “expression” of rocks. Put simply, meteorites are exotic extra-terrestrial rocks, with an age difficult to comprehend on a human time scale, and an impact crater is a unique and *expressive* culmination of these qualities. The awe generated by the crater at Wolfe Creek forms the raw material of this research, the conceptualisation of awe in painting.

Rethinking expression itself provides deeper understanding. The emotional expressions of animals (e.g., through facial musculature and ear position in dogs) are well documented and plants also *seem* capable of expression (e.g., flowers express beautiful displays to facilitate reproduction and wilt when they are not watered).² Rocks can have beautiful and fascinating attributes (e.g., crystals) and provenance (e.g., meteorites or Moon rocks), but it is unusual to attribute expression to them, at least in the Western tradition. However, Schopenhauer, Deleuze and DeLanda consider expression in a flexible way that can include inorganic things. The strangeness of response to the expressions of an inorganic geological site like a meteorite crater forms a major part of this study, as it concerns the expressive possibilities of painting itself.

*

In Chapter Two, I analyse two paintings that illuminate the fieldwork in this project: *Desert Storm* (1964) by the Australian modernist Sidney Nolan and *Family Ties* (2013) by the preeminent Swedish figurative painter Mamma Andersson.³ These works are connected through theories of affect, representation, and psychology and overlap with my own work, in regards to figuration, landscape, and the representation of awe. The strong connection between these two painters, one modern and one contemporary, reveals how expression in painting transforms through time yet maintains some core strategies of visual communication. This exegesis identifies the formal/visual qualities that translate emotion, particularly awe, in Nolan’s and Mamma Andersson’s paintings.

Affect theory is used to examine the eight panels of Nolan’s epic polyptych painting *Desert Storm* and reinterpret awe in a modernist Australian context. I consider Nolan’s response to the power of the geological landscape and situate *Desert Storm* as a successful, affective expression of awe that Nolan has successfully reverse engineered from his sense-

² It has been speculated that plants have a kind of intelligence. For example, Mancuso, S. and Viola, A. (Trans. Benham, J.) (2015). *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*. Island Press, USA.

³ Mamma Andersson is an artistic alias adopted by Karin Andersson, used to distinguish herself from other artists in Sweden with the same name.

data. In doing so, I establish the phenomenon of awe in painting as an affective state, made visible by working from the outer boundaries of representation, through psychological discourse that informs my own practice-led investigation.

Awe in Nolan's landscape painting demonstrates an experience of awe from an experiential perspective, using a genuine and describable autonomic affective experience. In *Family Ties*, Mamma Andersson's depiction of a circle of dancing figures relays how awe is felt or responded to in the body. I discuss how her process of reductive expression conveys an experience of awe. I therefore extricate the emotional state of awe from the aesthetic theories of the sublime by two major exponents, Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, to better reflect its contemporary manifestation as a psychological experience.

Deleuze, influenced by Spinoza, developed a concept of affect that takes the bodily and pre-conscious awareness of an artist's practice to be of primary significance in painting. I draw on Deleuze's notion of a *tactile-optical* space to emphasise the relationship between emotional engagement and the traced touch of a painting. The affect of the physical state of painting is therefore, an essential part of its expressivity. Affect is particularly useful in discussing expression in painting because according to affect theorist Brian Massumi, it describes a condition that exists prior to cognition and is also difficult to pin down, "affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable, and is thus resistant to critique" (1995, p.6). For Massumi emotion differs from affect: "Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning" (p.6) and is therefore closely linked to representation. I consider that awe is therefore, crucially captured by the notion of *affect*.

Deleuze describes an insight into the expressive work of Francis Bacon that results in the determination of a distinction between emotion and affect in his book *The Logic of Sensation* (2002): "But there are no feelings in Bacon: there are nothing but affects; that is, 'sensations' and 'instincts', "according to the formula of naturalism" (p.39). The problem with this distinction however, is that it denies an opportunity to translate these "affects" into a painting methodology, because by definition, they evade recognition. Therefore the

employment of theories of affect in this study is undertaken in a critical manner that fuses a dialogue between these theories with theories of intentional and reflective representation.⁴

It is productive to look at some of the terminology in general use, especially considering the three terms, 'affect', 'feeling' and 'emotion'. The work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins has been influential in giving definition to the term 'affect'. He studied the facial expressions and reactions of his newborn child to identify nine primary responses to stimuli. Tomkins' nine affects are: Joy, Interest, Surprise, Anger, Disgust, Dis-smell, Distress, Fear and Shame. Using these nine categories, Tomkins establish a theory of how an infant connects with the world. This connection point he calls 'feeling', and a memory of a previously experienced feeling is named for these purposes, an 'emotion'. Donald Nathanson, one of Tomkins' followers summarises his categorisation of these words in his book *Shame and Pride*, in this way "affect is biology, feeling is psychology and emotion is biography" (1992, p. 50).⁵

I respond to a critical view of affect theory which Ruth Leys considers in her essay *The Turn to Affect: A Critique* (2011). She begins by asking why so many academics and researchers in the humanities have turned to affect theory in recent times. Part of the answer she explains is a reaction to the 'flatness' of the use of reason and rationality in the previous semiotic era. Nigel Thrift, is cited as an example of a theorist interested primarily in people's "pre-subjective forces and intensities" as the motivating aspects that mobilise people and institutions to act in the way they do (p.435). Leys acknowledges that an emotional layer of experience has been neglected in recent academic understanding and proceeds to outline what the critical thinking of Thrift, Deleuze and Tomkins share. Leys describes the common interest in affect as distinct from emotion in this kind of thinking which "must be non-cognitive, corporeal processes or states" (p.437). Leys argues that the common feature of the writings of Deleuze, Tomkins, Ekman or Damasio is a "shared anti-intentionalism" (p.443). In other words, affective responses in humans operate in liminal states below the conscious threshold and are rooted in bodily response. The problem for Leys with many of these affect descriptors, is one of a lack of clear definitions and the limited potential for quantification. I argue that by reworking theories of representation into a trans-representational mode—

⁴ Leys describes this kind of pre-conscious affect theory as the "Basic Emotions Paradigm." She begins to reveal flaws in the Basic Emotions Paradigm, which involve exposing inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in this type of theory.

⁵ Paul Pearsall notes in *AWE: The delights and dangers of our eleventh emotion* that awe is not included on most lists of basic emotions and affects and suggests that the reason for this is it is too complex to categorise (2007, loc. 1167).

combining affect with intentional and reflective representation—affect theory can be better engaged and activated as a painting methodology.

*

The synthesis of the project occurs in Chapter Three which examines the postmodern aesthetic espoused by Hal Foster who undermines the status of expression in painting. Foster's constructionist argument asserts that expression is culturally determined. I critique Foster's argument, selectively examining several alternative ontological positions drawn from affect theory, visual analysis of artwork and my own experience as a painter in relation to representation and expression. I critically cross-reference useful features of affect theory with representational theories of Rob van Gerwen and Roger Scruton. Van Gerwen's writing, in particular through its lucid visual metaphors, provides coherence to these otherwise polarised positions. His reductive account of expression and concept of emotional *persona* have useful, practical applications for understanding the painting component of this study also.

This project has developed from an interest in painters working with a unique blending of Realism and expression. While I acknowledge that feelings and concepts are interrelated, I utilise Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) descriptions of "affects" and "percepts" as essential for painting and distinct from "concepts." Deleuze and Guattari define "percepts" as: "no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them" (p.164). I adopt this term "percept" to consider the visual sensation that was once generated by a landscape or object, but now has its own independent status as a field of visual sensation that can be registered as shapes of colour and tone. For a painter, it is important to register affects and percepts with the senses, but not necessarily concepts. Awe is dependent less on theory than experience, since it is vigorously felt and seen. It is manifest in a sensuous form and can therefore be expressed through a process of making-present or "trans-representation."

In this project, the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater is the site of awe. The crater is a geological memory of a destructive event and awe is unlocked in its field of influence, not unlike the experience of viewing an expressive painting. What do I mean when I say I experienced awe? Paul Pearsall describes awe as "feeling more totally and completely alive than you thought possible" (2007, loc. 55), an experience that is not necessarily pleasant or escapist. My visual perception of the Crater site was like having the "contrast" and "brightness" of an image viewer increased to maximum intensity. The site was like a dehydrated sensation where my presence "liquefied" the feeling. This affective experience was the raw material of awe and ignited my painting practice. Although a geological idea drew me to Wolfe Creek, dealing with the affects and percepts of the site became the painting

process—utilising qualia or sense impressions to fix this experience of awe in the paint surface.

It is this zone, where awe is felt *and* seen as sensation that is significant to this project.⁶ It is the point before cognition, where language, representation and cognition are still contingent, that is of interest here. A painter is trained to convert the data or sensation they see in the visual field into colours of paint. The registration of visual sensation precedes affect, guiding a painter to work back from sensation towards affective expression. Cognition can interfere with the making-present of a perception in a painting. Therefore, I explore how sensation/affect and physical contact occupy similar, though not identical territory and can be seen/expressed through the relationship between traced contour and mark.

Through this interrelationship between contour and mark and the response to sensation I explore a painting process that conveys the power of a landscape as much as it depicts it. I liken this to the way that a magnifying glass can create an image of the sun on a page and also physically burn a hole in the paper. This position is confluent with Deleuze's (2002) description of Francis Bacon's painting in *The Logic of Sensation* as containing a field of forces radiated by, rather than the representation of, the empirical object. A sense of the impact of the meteorite does not require specialist geological knowledge; it is visible in the upturned walls of the crater and the material ripples on the landscape. This is a Deleuzian "field of intensity" stored in the memory of geology waiting for a subject to release the feeling. At the same time, subjectivity inheres in the meteorite crater site to the point where distinct subject and object positions are less definable.

I engage with geological landscapes to develop a painting methodology for conveying an affective engagement with awe. Ultimately, this is a painting theory of trans-representational expression, combining realism with subjective awareness. This theory postulates a new way to relay awe in painting that is neither solely representational nor dependent on "non-representational" theory. Using a synthesis of affect theory and intentional/reflective representation, I re-position awe as part of an expressive catalyst that can be *presented* in contemporary figurative painting.

⁶ In disentangling awe (the feeling) from the sublime (the concept), I identify specific experiences of awe (from the Wolfe Creek Crater fieldwork) through affective reactions. I suggest that Kant's formula for object cognition through transcendence; "object = x", represents a point that oversteps the essential area for investigation of the expression of awe in painting (as cited in Deleuze, 1981 p.16). Immanuel Kant developed a theory of the sublime that uses aesthetics as part of a larger "transcendental argument" where the word "transcendental" is not, as Roger Scruton points out (1984, p.140), about reaching cosmic plateaus or meditation, but attaining knowledge from a synthesis of concept and experience.

Chapter One – The Wolfe Creek Project

Let us transport ourselves to a very lonely region of boundless horizons, under a perfect cloudless sky, trees and plants in the perfectly motionless air, no animals, no human beings, no moving masses of water, the profoundest silence. (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 203)

In order to translate the sensation of awe to a painted form, this chapter discusses the geological site, Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater, as the principal subject for this project.⁷ I review contemporary cultural and geological aspects of the site, including the horror film, *Wolf Creek* (McLean & Lightfoot, 2005), which associates the site with fear and apprehension for the informed visitor. I also situate the desert as an ancient and magnificent, if potentially dangerous, force. Importantly, this force is outside normal human comprehension. I consider Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of expression in relation to geology and explore why geology might generate an awe affect.

I describe travelling to Wolfe Creek to paint a series of works from life on a large scale and reflect on constructing a colour palette relevant to awe and to my developing painting methodology. The resulting artworks are based on direct observation and response to the site. In particular, I describe how my awareness of subject and object become “marbled” in this process and identify my experience of awe in the face of geological landscape sensed as a powerful non-living entity. The ensuing sense of ego-dissolution demands a rethinking of this subjective response. Deleuze and Guattari's writing provides some inroads here and supports the idea of wanting to experience geology in a less ego-centric or “human” way. Schopenhauer also provides insight into ego diminishment in relation to inorganic things, which bears a relationship with Spinoza. They provide a basis for my description of awe as the widening of the boundary between feeling for a geological landscape and being seemingly “felt” by it. My understanding of representation altered because of this experience. The chapter concludes with critical reflections on the project and places it broadly in the modern and contemporary field of affect/awe painting, paving the way for discussion of other artists engaging with awe and contributing to the discourse of awe, geology and expression.

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⁷ The choice was serendipitous: a book on the Wolfe Creek Crater literally fell like a meteorite from my bookshelf when I was searching for a landscape subject.

I first heard about Wolfe Creek before the film *Wolf Creek* was made and I could scarcely believe that such a place existed here in Western Australia. The meteorite crater, located near Billiluna in the far North-West of Western Australia, is nearly one kilometre across—one of the largest authenticated craters in the world.⁸ I imagined the crater as an imposing wall of rocks casting a vast shadow. Even the name “Wolfe Creek” was terrifying. Even now, it remains an intellectually and emotionally overwhelming site.

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Figure 1. Guppy, D., & Matheson, R. 1950. *Interior of Wolf [sic] Creek Meteorite Crater, looking south.*

The site is known as *Kandimalal* to the local Djaru tribe and was highly significant long before its aerial identification in 1947 by Frank Reeves, N.B. Sauve and Dudley Hart, as Peggy Reeves (2007) notes in her seminal book *Aboriginal paintings of the Wolfe Creek Crater: Track of the Rainbow Serpent*. The most famous artistic depiction of Wolfe Creek is by Boxer Milner. Milner describes the creation of Kandimalal as follows:

Star bin fall down from top and made it. That’s what happened, a big star fell and made Kandimalal (the Crater). We call that star *kiki* in our language. There was the Rainbow Serpent travelling inside the ground and it came out from the crater. (as cited in Buhl & McColl, 2012, p. 139)

We read similar descriptions of the origin of the crater in scientific discourse: it was created by the impact from a large meteorite. This impact is dated at around 300,000 years ago and meteorite speed at impact has been estimated as 39,600 km/h (Bevan & McNamara, 2009, p. 34). Scientific descriptions of the crater go beyond quantitative information, as in the following example:

When a massive meteorite travelling at a high velocity collides with Earth, the object punches a hole, pulverising the rocks deep below the surface. In a fraction of a second, the projectile is stopped and the immense energy generated as a result of its

⁸ To give an idea of scale, the average Australian Rules football field is between 100 to 150 meters from goal post to goal post.

enormous mass and velocity is instantaneously converted to heat. Consequently the projectile itself is melted and vaporised and the attendant shock waves blast away the overburden, jetting debris upwards and outwards in every direction. Upturned strata and rim raised above surrounding country, splendidly exhibited at Meteor Crater and Wolfe Creek, are characteristic features of meteorite explosion craters. (Bevan & McNamara, 2009, p. 38)

The emotive terms deployed in both descriptions highlight the affective dimension of this ancient astro-geological event.

My focus in this chapter is on this affective dimension and I refer to several theorists who offer instructive ways of understanding associated forms of expression. The affective impact of the Wolfe Creek crater is congruent with Rob van Gerwen's (2007) idea of expression in painting. For Van Gerwen, an expressive painting is like a magnet placed below a piece of paper with iron filings on it forming a pattern out of the magnetic field. We do not see the magnet itself, only its effect on the iron filings. Similarly in painting we do not see the affective influence, but can observe the expression in painted surface (Van Gerwen, 2007). This account of a magnetic field also provides a proxy for understanding hidden undercurrents in a landscape, whether that is a feeling for the atmosphere of a place or time rippling from an ancient explosion on a surface. This project adopts a similar flexible understanding of expression that can include a geological dimension.

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In researching how a site could induce awe, I looked to the desert landscape because this environment is itself a kind of "entity." For a city dweller, the awe inspired by the desert definitely elicits the fear and deference described by Keltner and Haidt (2003). The desert is one of the most incomprehensible of all landscapes to experience. It induces feelings of awe, not only in response to the immensity of space but also in terms of presenting time instantiated in vast geological terms. Schopenhauer summarises this experience as follows:

Now let us imagine such a region denuded of plants and showing only bare rocks; the will is at once filled with alarm through the total absence of that which is organic and necessary for our subsistence. The desert takes on a fearful character: our mood becomes more tragic. The exaltation to pure knowledge comes about with decided emancipation from the interest of will, and by our persisting in a state of pure knowledge, the feeling of the sublime distinctly appears. (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 204)

Here, Schopenhauer describes the potential for individual awareness of the body to become a “vanishing nothingness” in the presence of greater natural forces (p. 206). His writing about the sublime accesses a deep and powerful fear of the desert and it is this fear, as well as “the emancipation from the interest of will” (p. 204) that I experienced in the Western Australian desert landscape.⁹

As I have no skills to survive in the desert, I feel “at *its* mercy,” as an overpowering force beyond my comprehension. At the same time, the geology of the desert is intensely beautiful, a massive space in which I can lose myself. There are no human-scale objects of comparison. The seams of my own subjectivity seemed less fixed. The arrangements of rocks and layering of coloured textures are the expression of a non-living system, an austerity as absolute as its beauty. Nonetheless, I was afraid; the dryness, heat and lack of water felt hostile to me, it was a desert annoyed by my presence. It seemed only a matter of time before it would lash out. Occasionally, an intermittent gentle breeze offered a small mercy and the feeling of hostility abated. These salutary breezes occurred at the beginning and end of my site visit. At the end, I responded swiftly to this “time to leave” signal, although recognising this feeling as appreciably irrational. I was confronted with the stark contrast between being a living, potentially vulnerable person in a largely inhospitable place. I wondered how to fit these feelings with an analytic and rational model of discourse around the desert, expression and painting. How would I need to reorganise the art historical and theoretical language of representation in which I have been educated for this project?

Schopenhauer (1969) writes of the awe experienced when comprehending an elevated sense of helplessness and vulnerability in the desert. He describes how this awe response can in turn become one of elation. In this, he anticipates Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of non-human expression, firstly in describing the plant world as “yearning” to enter the world of representation. To achieve this a “foreign intelligent individual” is required to attain this state indirectly (p. 201). Importantly for this study, Schopenhauer extends this idea to inorganic things. He writes,

Yet each thing has its own characteristic beauty, not only everything organic that manifests itself in the unity of individuality, but also everything inorganic and formless, and even every manufactured article. For all these reveal the Ideas through

⁹ Ashley Crawford makes this connection between Schopenhauer and painting the Australian desert in a more traditional sense of the sublime in an essay on artist Mandy Martin (Ian Potter Museum of Art. & Vizard Foundation, 2003, p.86).

which the will objectifies itself at the lowest grades; they sound, as it were, the deepest, lingering bass-notes of nature. Gravity, rigidity, fluidity, light, and so on, are Ideas that express them-selves in rocks, buildings, and masses of water. (1969, p.210). Schopenhauer strives for an alternative scaffolding of experience and reflection that pre-emptly affect theory and leaves behind some of the rigidity of classical models of expressions of feeling.

My own initial research questions were: How can I represent the huge Western Australian landscape, such as the Lake Cowan salt lake in Norseman or the Wolfe Creek Crater, in a painting? How can I translate this vivid experience to the viewer by compressing it onto a two-dimensional surface? How can I incorporate the atmosphere, feeling and expansiveness of this experience in a direct and tangible way? The familiar structure of sender, message and receiver were inadequate to do this and I was required to transform my painting methodology to come to terms with the landscape. In doing so, I identified several problems associated with the expression of awe in a painting, including how to generate a ground for a painting with a colour that is deliberately hard to define, in advance of knowing what colours will be in the final image. The ground of a painting sets the tone of the entire work and since I did not know what kind of atmosphere I was entering, I had to make the ground deliberately ambiguous. Could the ground be complex or even comprised of “impossible colours,” such as simultaneously yellow and purple, instead of the more common single unifying colour? Did it have to anticipate the average colour of the desert landscape?

*

Wolfe Creek is located in the Tanami Desert, which is in the remote North-West of Western Australia, 1,854 kilometres from Perth, and is difficult to access. To test my methodology before my field trip to Wolfe Creek, I visited the more accessible Lake Cowan, 722 kilometres east of Perth. Lake Cowan is an expansive salt lake near the town of Norseman, where I was born, on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain in Western Australia. The salt lake forms a natural bay for the town and is populated by hemispherical planet-like hill-islands.



Figure 2. Robertson, Christopher. 2012. *Walking on Lake Cowan, Norseman*.

This huge salt lake is an expressive remnant of an ancient river system. It has a powerful affective presence, especially when you realise that where you stand would have been completely submerged in water. The plants, such as Beaded Samphire (*Sarcocornia quinqueflora*), look aquatic and intensify this illusion of being underwater, although you are on the edge of a desert. The landscape feels as if it contains a memory of all its earlier states.

My fascination and experience of the vast lake spaces led me to return after an absence of some twenty years, in 2012, when I was beginning to formulate this study. I travelled with my cousin Christopher Robertson, who is also from Norseman and is now a contemporary furniture designer based in Canberra. We arrived late at night and drove out to Mount Jimberlana (known locally as Trigg Hill) in a Jeep, anxious for a site to put up the tent. The landscape surrounding the hill of three-million-year-old rocks¹⁰ is scrubby with salt bush and rather flat. The Jeep pulled up suddenly and I recalled the monochrome television footage of the Apollo Eleven Lunar Module, its shadow looming from the dust after barely

¹⁰ According to the Shire of Dundas (<http://www.norseman.info/>).

scraping over a lunar range and landing. We set up the tent in the dark and lit a fire to cook our meal. We attempted to sleep in the near freezing conditions and I thought it weird to be camping outside the town I grew up in. Time and space seemed displaced already. When we woke, the mountain was covered in fog. I had never seen it like that before, the red iron of the earth and blue/green of the salt bush completely subsumed by the fog, I took out my sketch book and made a charcoal study (Figure 3). It seemed a weird hybrid of an Australian desert and a Nordic landscape. Perhaps Nolan and Mamma Andersson were already inevitable reference points, even at this early stage.



Figure 3. Robertson, Kevin. 2012. *Morning Fog, Norseman* [Charcoal on paper, 15 x 30 cm].

This part of Western Australia has many such salt lakes, remnants of ancient inland rivers, which form a boundary to the desert. The salt lakes once formed part of a very large inland river system. The desolation of the absent river is always present. After several hours of solitary walks on Lake Cowan, the boundary between the sky and the lake starts to dissolve. Mirages are common and I often had the impression that a huge body of water was within reach, whereas nothing could be further from reality. The desert landscape is a compelling visual attraction while also being a fearful wasteland, huge, brutal and empty: both real space and metaphor. The desert fringe is a real space, part of my childhood experience, my actual playground. It is also a metaphor for an inhospitable and meaningless world and the necessity of negotiating personal meaning and direction.

The salty surface of the lake is crunchy with thick layers of crystalized salt. This surface is ideal for frottage rubbings. The process of frottage creates a somatic feeling within a painting, as the paint layers build up, as well as making an impression of the lake surface

(Figure 4). The painting process therefore has a direct haptic dimension that dismantles “the tactile-optical space” (Deleuze, 2002, p.131). Touch and the haptic enter the painting in both a physical and an optical way as an extension of *feeling*. I utilised this technique in the first large painting I produced at Lake Cowan (Figure 5) and it became part of my research methodology.



Figure 4. Robertson, Kevin. 2012. *Frottage impression from Lake Cowan, Norseman* [Charcoal on paper, 15 x 30 cm].



Figure 5. Robertson, Kevin. 2015. *All These Worlds, Lake Cowan* (detail). Showing frottage.

Lake Cowan had been a subject of my paintings in the past, usually as small studies. However, the lake cannot be fully represented in this way because it is colossal and the difficulties of representing a subject that stretches 90 kilometres across at its widest part soon becomes apparent. Paul Pearsall (2007) writes that “an unending plain forces our binocular vision to converge far beyond its normal length, drawing us to consider the nearness of our mundane life versus the farness of yet unimagined possibilities” (loc. 779). A large scale two-dimensional painting may in fact be able to suggest the “vastness” of awe. I chose to work on a very large scale using a standard canvas roll, in order to translate this sensation of vastness. Because of the size, I decided it would be necessary to take the rolled canvas to the landscape unstretched and to work on the ground.¹¹ It also meant that I had to switch from using oil paint to acrylics, because oil would not dry in time to roll for the return trip. I also needed another innovation in my approach to maintain a fixed perspective. The painting was so large that to draw the contours of the hills across the lake I attached charcoal to a tube to enable me to reach across the canvas. I used a horizontal and a vertical chalk line as a kind of gyroscope to assist in keeping the drawing balanced in the rectangle.

Having addressed these practical considerations, I turned to the problem of the painted ground. Some painters have challenged the notion that a single ground colour should be chosen, especially for the process of painting from life.¹² Consequently, in anticipation of the lake’s white salt, I prepared the painting ground using the complementary colours of blue/violet and yellow, frequently used by Impressionists to depict snow. Violet and yellow interact to form a more neutral grey-brown instead of a single colour ground. My painting uses these complementary colours simultaneously in the ground, suggesting an “unresolved” colour. The result is a colour that exhibits the “metameric” properties of grey or puce,¹³ which also prepared the “unknown ground” of the Tanami Desert landscape in a more literal sense.

The colour violet is on the boundary of the visible spectrum, on the way to ultraviolet, which is invisible to the human eye. The electromagnetic spectrum provides a good model for a painter for mixing and understanding colour, though this model has been often overlooked by painters and designers, possibly because it is scientific in origin. The spectral location of

¹¹ Consider, for example, the problem of breeze on a stretched canvas of this scale.

¹² For instance, I recall Roy Churcher posing this problem.

¹³ A metameric colour can appear (for instance) grey or even whitish, but is composed of several colours and can change dynamically in different light sources when compared with a “fixed” colour (Paul Green-Armytage, personal communication, [December 12, 2015]).

the colour violet, however presents challenges for its representation on the colour spectrum. The visible colour range for humans begins with red as the lowest frequency of light and ends with the highest, violet. However, to the human eye, violet is blue blended with red. The colour wheel introduced in Newton's (1704) *Opticks*, which demonstrates the relationships between colours, relies on this apparently obvious phenomenon that violet is the colour between blue and red. But the colour wheel is not as continuous as it appears to be. Because of its position on the electromagnetic spectrum, violet actually demonstrates an inverse relationship between its colour and frequency, i.e., the human eye observes it as shifted towards a low light frequency (like red) while it is in fact the highest visible frequency (Figure 6). This ambiguous quality apparent in the properties of this colour has also led me to use violet in some of the paintings.



Figure 6. Using a prism spectrum to mix the highest frequency visible violet colour.

This ambiguity enables the colour violet to suggest vastness. Interior design literature commonly describes warm colours as making the walls of a room “advance,” while cool colours like pale blue tend to “recede.” This illusion is apparent in photographs of three dimensional models or demonstrated in painting studies, where the effect is far from arbitrary (Archer, Jackson, & Day, 1991, p. 30). A pale violet or mauve can make a large wall appear vast in the same way atmospheric or aerial perspective increases the depth of a landscape painting. The colour of large distant objects (like mountains) is filtered by the atmosphere (atmospheric perspective) towards blue and violet. These colours have therefore, been commonly used in painting to depict vast spaces. Since human stereoscopic depth perception only reaches a few hundred feet into our visual field, this technique is useful in examining the connection between a vast sense of space and the two-dimensional surface of a painting. Although I been unable to identify a particular colour associated with awe, it would most likely need to possess the dual qualities of vastness and difficulty in accommodation (Keltner and Haidt, 2003). Violet therefore, seemed the most appropriate colour to use in this investigation, because it comes closest to fulfilling the requirements of awe: it is unresolved and connotes space and distance. Having made this decision, I felt better equipped to tackle the enormous scale of the salt lake. The following image sequences depict the development of this methodology, from the testing of the “metameric” coloured ground in my studio (Figure 7) to painting *en plein air* on Lake Cowan, Norseman (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Studio preparation of the violet/yellow ground for painting at Lake Cowan.



Figure 8. Painting *en plein air* on Lake Cowan.

Despite the benefits of painting directly from life, such as having direct access to rich and incomparably complex colours¹⁴ as well as physical textures, the drawbacks are considerable, particularly the vulnerability an artist feels when working in public space. Passing observers usually assume the work is a form of public entertainment and stop to observe and make judgements. In some ways working in a remote landscape is worse than painting in urban areas because the artist has no protection if they encounter an aggressive interloper. Salt lakes are scarred with car and dirt bike tracks—out of control oscillating marks and spiral tyre tracks trace youthful male aggression into the landscape. On one occasion, painting on the salt lake, I could hear two dirt bikes getting closer. I imagined these bikers performing “broggies” and “doughnuts” over my painting, or worse, having to explain to them what I was doing in their territory. Fortunately, my imagination was overactive and the bikers rode past without any contact.

The painting *All These Worlds, Lake Cowan*¹⁵ (Figure 9) resulted from this first excursion. It was a successful representation of the experience of a vast space, an investigation of the awe experienced on a salt lake. Painting became the only way I could

¹⁴ The human eye can see over a million colours, but the internet for example can only display a theoretical maximum of a mere 256 colours (Leong, 2006).

¹⁵ This title, *All These Worlds* was taken from words written anonymously onto the salt lake in large letters near my painting site. It may be a reference to the quote “All These Worlds Are Yours, Except Europa, Attempt No Landings There” from the film *2010: Odyssey Two* (Hyams, 1984).

process the intensity of this experience. I could *actively* feel by transferring the experience into the paint and incorporating the haptic quality of the salt lake geology into the paint structure itself. In other words, the charged physicality of the painting experience paralleled that of the environment. The painting uses a high intensity palette and the use of violet places the focus on the distant hill. This work was a starting point in my desire to represent the expression of a non-living geological experience (of the salt lake in this case). This experience of awe was akin to a meditation, as response to alterity, to the non-human or alien “other.” *All These Worlds, Lake Cowan* embodies the methodology that I used for the future research at Wolfe Creek Crater.

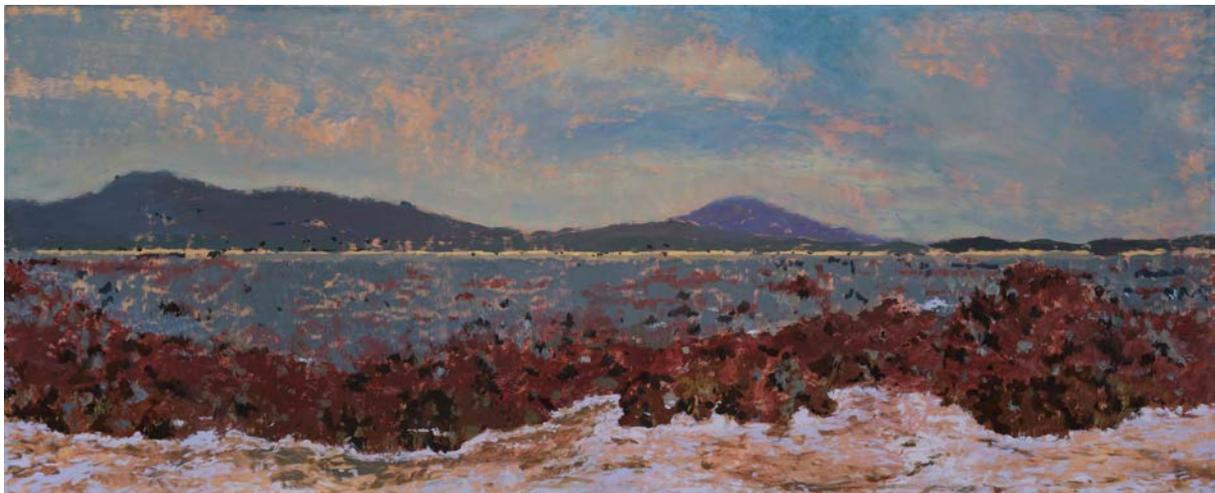


Figure 9. Robertson, Kevin. 2015. *All These Worlds, Lake Cowan* [Acrylic on canvas, 121.5 x 298 cm]. Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.

*

Having worked on the periphery of the desert, I was ready to move into the actual desert and the meteorite crater. This geological phenomenon has significant expressive features indicative of an impact or explosion, such as the permanent ridge of the crater wall, which suggests a droplet, frozen at the moment of hitting the water surface. The centre of the Wolfe Creek crater is referred to as the “eye” because it resembles an iris. Standing in the centre of the eye in the remote Tanami Desert enhances the feeling of being “watched” by a huge natural force (McNamara, 2013).



Figure 10. Robertson, Kevin. 2016. *Radiation, Wolfe Creek Crater 1* [Charcoal on paper, 36 x 76 cm].

I begin this examination of expression of the Australian/European landscape experience by reflecting on the movie *Wolf Creek* (McLean & Lightfoot, 2005).¹⁶ The geological site of Wolfe Creek Crater gives rise to a cinematic experience for the writer and director Greg McLean.¹⁷ The film combines brutal sadism and horror drawn from real events, which form a resonance of fear and an ominous sense in the landscape itself, with significant menacing aftershocks. This impression forms an interference pattern with the other apocalyptic implications at the site, inhering a strange subjectivity in this site.

Several omens in the opening narrative sequence of the film anticipate the dreadful events that befall three backpackers. The backpackers meet an aggressive male in the Emu Creek tavern on their way to the crater, later their watches stop simultaneously, and finally their car fails to start. There are four human characters in the film, but McLean refers to the Australian landscape as a fifth character because of its enormous capacity to create fear (Hearn, 2006).¹⁸ The film draws on this fear by using an abandoned mine site as the principal backdrop and including night footage. Damian Cox and Michael Levine (2012) describe *Wolf Creek* as belonging to the genre of potentially traumatic realist horror films, a relatively new

¹⁶ The “e” from the site name was dropped for the film title.

¹⁷ The film includes some actual footage of the crater, but was actually shot in South Australia. Although McLean trained as a painter, he switched to filmmaking because he considered it a more appropriate medium for his ideas.

¹⁸ Anthony Gardner (2006) argues that this attitude to the Australian landscape in cinema is retrogressive and avoids a postcolonial interpretation. I counter this by pointing out that in *Wolf Creek 2*, the killer draws his intended victim into a long quiz to check his “Australianness,” which is clearly a parody of jingoistic values.

category that lacks the supernatural element found in other horror genres, such as art-horror. They argue that,

by contrast, art-horror, when it succeeds as a source of pleasure, has none of these negative effects. An audience's background recognition of the unreality of what they witness—and their detachment from it—appears to alter the physiological response to it. What is left, it seems, is a scary and disturbing ride that one can actually enjoy. (Cox and Levine, 2012, p.150)

Negative critical reactions to *Wolf Creek* centred on its extreme levels of sadistic violence, particularly against women, which provided the viewer with no opportunity for imaginative escape (Leyland, 2005). Although my objective is very different from the negative emotional focus of *Wolf Creek*, affective realism is also an important aspect of my painting project. The Australian desert landscape itself, can provide a realistic sense of horror.

The origins of the film enhance the foreboding affect of the landscape. The film has similarities with the terrible events that occurred for Joanne Lees, an English backpacker and survivor of a violent crime in the remote outback near Alice Springs.¹⁹ Lees became the focus of international media attention in 2001 after she survived abduction and attempted murder. The story of her abduction and her boyfriend's murder has a horrific, almost cinematic quality: Lees and her boyfriend Peter Falconio were travelling through the remote outback, when they were stopped by Bradley Murdoch, who told them that sparks were coming from their exhaust pipe. Falconio got out of the car to look at the Kombi's engine and was shot and killed by Murdoch. Murdoch then bound Lees' wrists with packing tape and made her lie in the back of his vehicle. She managed to escape from Murdoch's ute while he was disposing of Falconio's body and hid in salt bushes for five hours in the dark, still bound, while her armed attacker tried to track her. Her terror is described in her 2006 autobiography *No Turning Back*:

I could hear the man nearby, the crunch of dry scrub with every careful footstep he took. That was the only sound that echoed throughout the lonely outback. The sound of crunching came closer. My heart was pounding and I felt sure he could hear it. I kept frozen still. I didn't dare move, or look up to see how near he was. (Lees, 2006, p. 60)

¹⁹ The film has an additional unnerving authenticity due to its similarity also to the "backpacker murders", committed by Ivan Milat in New South Wales from 1989-1993.

Lees' fear is described in a visual register. She cannot see her assailant and so her description of the sound of his footsteps echoing in the landscape amplifies the feeling of fear. Before her escape, while tied up in the back of his ute, she is only able to see changes in the light and dark of his torchlight through a gap in the tarpaulin covering the tray of the ute. His presence is more menacing because his human form almost dissolves in the dark landscape, merged into one malevolent force. Police photographs of the crime scene in daylight show a low desolate scrub traversed by a coarse bitumen road with few visual features, except the ubiquitous and austere orange graded gravel. Lees (2006) describes the Australian desert landscape as "a slightly bizarre place....strange, dramatic and almost alien" (p. 41). These cultural references add to the "field of intensity" at the Wolfe Creek Crater and provide the contemporary cultural context for my painting project. The alien quality of the landscape described by Lees is the focus of my painting practice, although the emotional register shifts from Lees' experience of terror to fear, and the "bizarre," "strange" and "dramatic" to awe.

While this study is confined to the expression of awe in the practice of painting, awe is also pervasive in contemporary film. The Chelyabinsk meteor (2013) is one of the most highly recorded meteor events in history, with hundreds of videos of its impact appearing online (Figure 11), and showing windows breaking in offices and schools. In one popular YouTube video, a rapidly moving fireball appears from the upper left of the screen; a meteor illuminates an intersection with a pulse of light. Within thirty seconds it explodes, obliterating the camera sensors with a white flash and sending shock waves through the city which injured over a thousand people. Fictional meteor movies, such as *Deep Impact* (Leder, 1989) or *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998), share some of this awe, using dramatic cinematic effects to create the illusion of a real event. Actual documentary video footage of rare, large meteor collisions with earth intensifies feelings both of shock and awe. The videos of the Chelyabinsk meteor strike verify Konečni's (2005) assertion that awe can be switched on and off quickly and repeatedly.

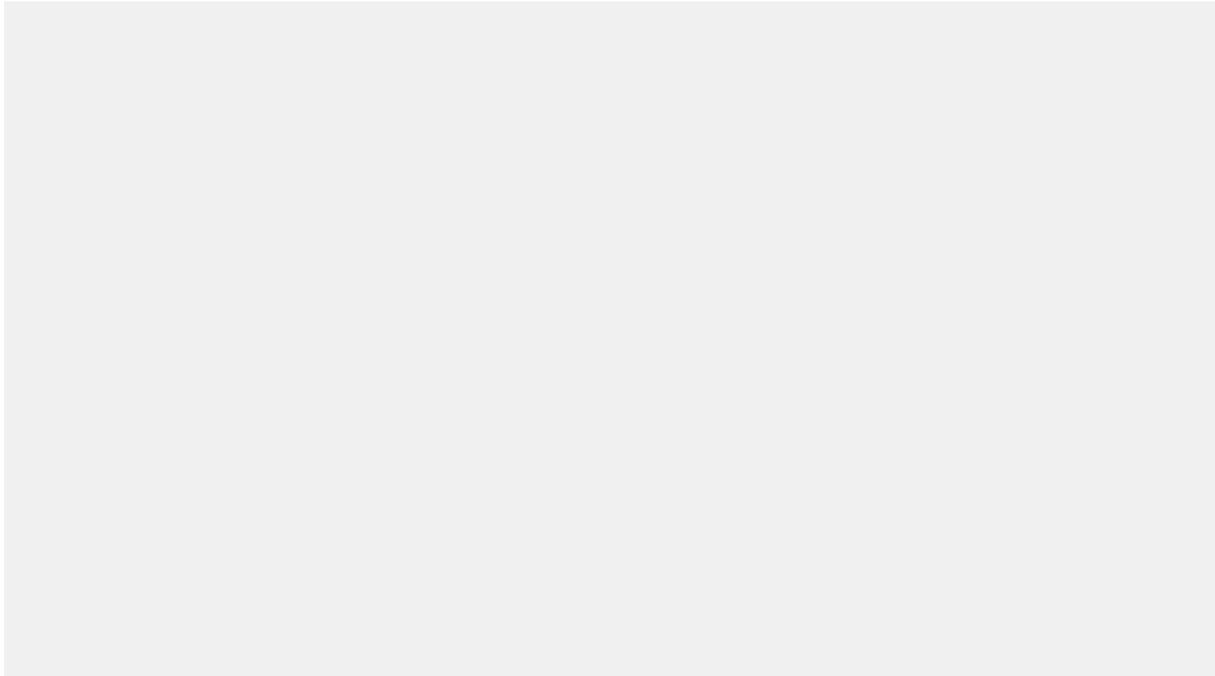


Figure 11. Video still of Chelyabinsk meteor (Tuvix72, 2013).

*

Having studied the cultural and geological background of the Wolfe Creek Crater and completed the preparation for a painting process that would work in that environment (Figure 9), I felt ready to travel there. I was anticipating a much more powerful sense of geological force than I had experienced at Lake Cowan. Although March was not a good month to travel to Wolfe Creek to paint the crater because of the extreme heat, it was the most convenient for me. I watched the weather forecasts for a few weeks prior, imagining what it would be like to paint outside in 40°C. However I forgot to pay attention to humidity. After flying in from Perth, I walked across the tarmac at Broome airport and found it unbearable for even a few minutes. I wondered how I was going to tolerate whole days outside in these conditions.

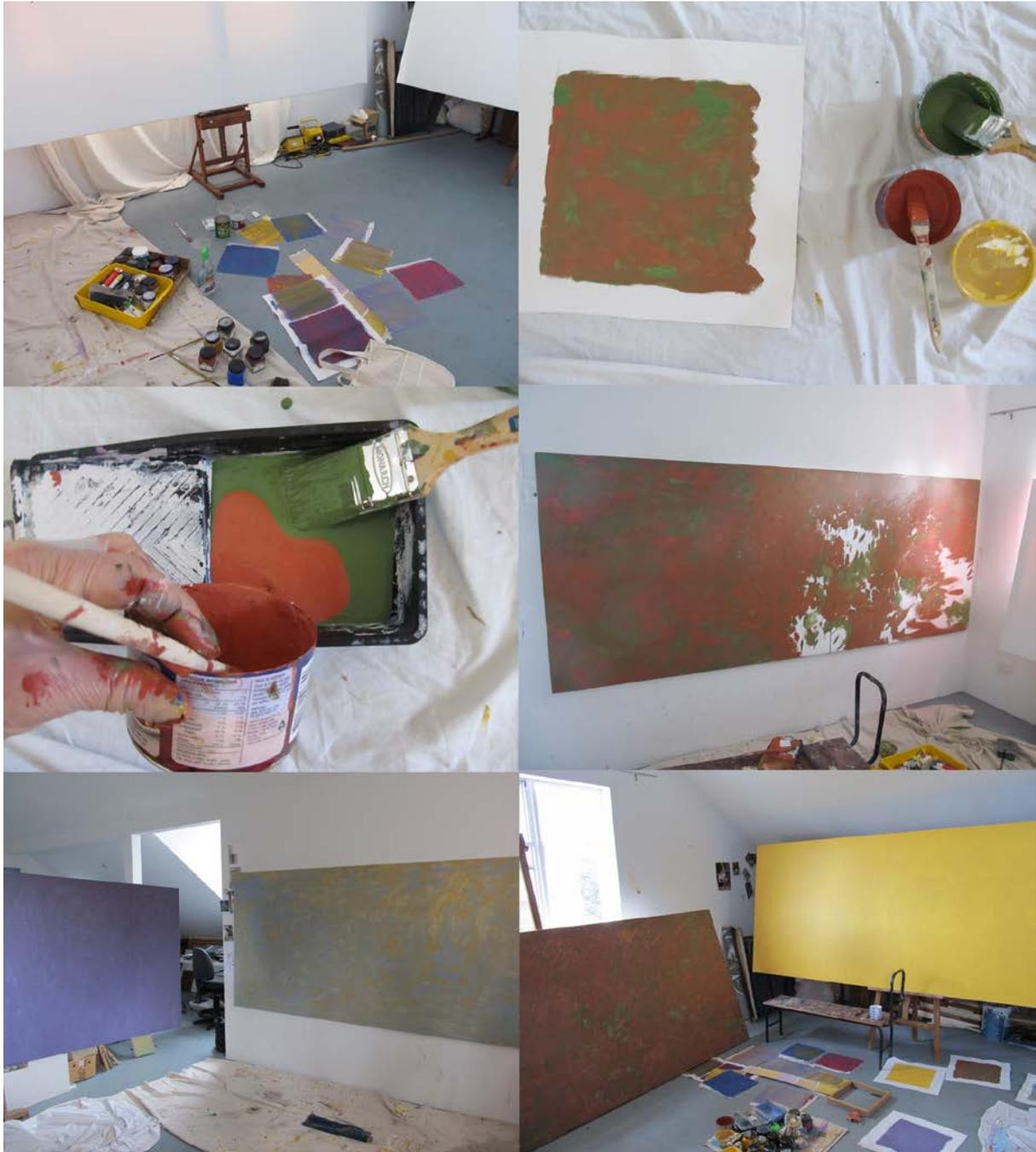


Figure 12. Photo montage showing preparation of metameric grounds for Wolfe Creek field trip, 2012.

To paint in Wolfe Creek, I flew from Perth to Broome, where I rented a four wheel drive vehicle to drive to Halls Creek, which is seven hours on a good sealed road. From Halls Creek, I drove to the Aboriginal community of Balgo, which is approximately 150 kilometres south of the Wolfe Creek Crater. The drive to Balgo is a slow two-hour journey on a rough, unsealed road which is often closed due to flooding. I was relieved to find the road open. The road was littered with the black, skeletal remains of tyres from “blowouts,” which I dreaded happening to me. But I made it safely to Balgo, where I stayed with the resident medical

doctor and friend, Russell Hayes. I planned to drive alone from Balgo to Wolfe Creek Crater each day for four days, and return each day before sunset to sleep.²⁰ The Wolfe Creek Crater is part of a national park, open to all tourists and visitors, but physical access is difficult.



Figure 13. *I prefer the moon's surface because it has no gum trees.* Taken from the green notebook, Wolfe Creek entries (pp. 106–117), the title is a reflection on my love of the sparse alien landscape. During my childhood, the gum trees always broke the spell of feeling as though I was on another planet.

The following descriptions of my experiences at Wolfe Creek Crater are taken from notes that I typed on my mobile phone and entered in my notebooks (of which I had three) during the field trips to Lake Cowan, Balgo and Wolfe Creek Crater. The informal, diary-like nature of these notes is in keeping with the heightened emotional state of the experience.

28 March 2016 8:32 AM

I had arrived in Balgo at the end of the wet season. I nearly became bogged crossing Wolfe Creek itself, as you need to drive across the creek to reach the crater. At other times I was forced to drive my vehicle through instant “lakes” up to one km in length that had formed on the road, from sudden downpours. When I had finished painting at the crater on the first day, the car’s thermometer was reading at 44 degrees. It is hot and humid and

²⁰ I am extremely grateful to Dr Russell Hayes, not only for his hospitality but for contacting Jimmy Tchooga, Elder and senior artist in Balgo, who gave permission for me to paint on Aboriginal land.

reaches 38 degrees by eight in the morning. There is no mobile phone coverage at the crater (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Work in progress, Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater.

31 March 2016, 10:58 PM

Today I drove to Wolfe Creek from Balgo to complete the second painting. As I approached the crater in my vehicle and saw the silhouette of the crater on the horizon, I felt an emotional shudder through my entire body. Kelter and Haidt (2003) attribute this kind of shuddering or shiver to awe.²¹ It is almost as if the meteorite impact is still sending out shockwaves.

The track that leads to the crater faces what appears to be the forward dispersal of the thrust of the impact. I chose a spot in the centre of the crater. The crater itself must be accessed on foot. It was difficult to get my painting gear down the forty degree slope of the crater wall because of the very rough and loose rocky ground. The rocky wall is a 50/60 metre drop down into the basin and creates sense of danger as physical barrier. I set up in the centre of the crater, then I heard a loud rush in the bushes behind me and asked for the person or thing to come out but there was no response, so I assumed it was a kangaroo and nervously

²¹ As well as shuddering or twitching, the condition of piloerection or goose bumps (also called chicken skin in the US) is widely considered a physical manifestation of awe

continued with the painting. This view inside the basin is looking south (Figure 15). I thought about Mamma Andersson's painting and her useful advice in an interview about leaving things out for an image to become expressive: “so it's going to be less, just a few small things who [sic] can tell a story” (2009, 1:46).

There were many things to consider that were making me anxious. I thought about bushfire and how I could get out of the crater (the centre was already partly burnt out from a previous fire), but I calmed down and worked for a few hours on painting an affective/realist response and saw blackened burnt branches that looked like human rib cages that recalled the paintings of the artists Graham Sutherland and Paul Nash as well as the unfortunate victims in the Wolf Creek film. *I wanted to put down that feeling on canvas, not just how the place looked...bomb site.*²²



Figure 15. Work in progress, *Ash Field and Crater Wall, Wolfe Creek*.

As I continued to work on *Ash Field and Crater Wall, Wolfe Creek* (Figure 21), it was hot (about 38 degrees in the shade), but not as hot as the first day I painted the crater. I found some shade under some bushes. I felt some reassurance looking at the gypsum colours²³—raw umber and cobalt blue, because they were one of the few geological aspects

²² The green notebook, p. 106.

²³ According to the report by Guppy and Matheson (1950), the central ‘eye’ of the crater consists mainly of gypsum.

of the landscape that seemed familiar or similar to the salt lakes of Norseman. When I packed up, it was hard to carry my gear up the inside wall of the crater. I was carrying a bucket of water, brushes and paint pots and the canvas roll on my back. I was quite dehydrated. I was worried about seeing a Death Adder on the rocks and was careful where I placed my hands as I climbed up, although I didn't want to stop and lose momentum, but I had to stop to rest about half way from the top then was very relieved to make it out.

Tired from the long drives, I decided to change course and paint a local view the following day instead of going to the crater. I considered the lookout view from the Pound,²⁴ a valley near Balgo, where I hoped to control the painting more, rather than the difficult conditions in the landscape controlling me.

The following day I painted at a site several kilometres to the south of the Pound. It is an alien-like landscape made of interlocking sections of chrome green and grey/purple. I made a drawing first, followed by some abstract underpainting (Figure 16), then painted directly onto the prepared ground working right through the day. There were no trees, just spinifex and bushes. I clapped my hands to try to hear the echo of the huge space, but the sound was as dead as an anechoic chamber. The extreme stillness and silence led me to name the painting *A place without an echo*. Although the air was silent and still, the activity was visual. The swirling opposing colours in this painting reflect the chaos and clarity or “marbled” feeling of awe at this site (Figure 22).

²⁴ The Pound is the local European name given to the valley.

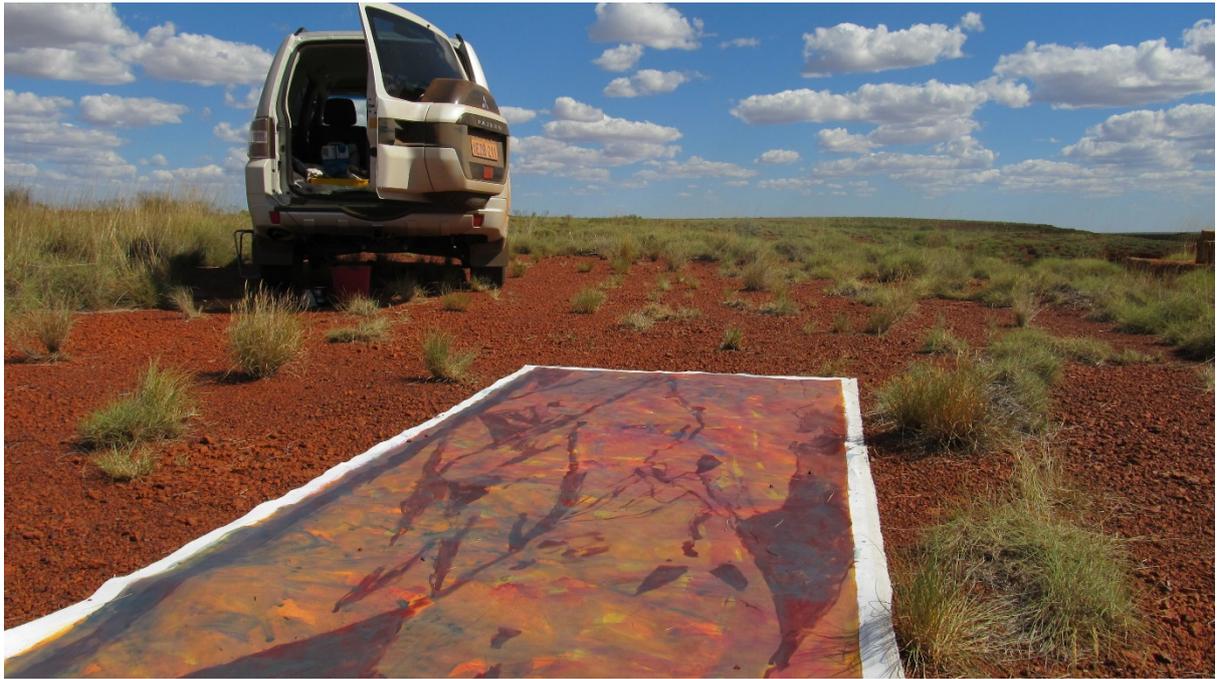


Figure 16. Working on an underpainting for *A Place without an echo*.



Figure 17. Work in progress for *A Place without an echo*.

20 April 2016, 10:16 AM.

At Wolfe Creek Crater, artifice seems to evaporate from the experience of painting, it is difficult enough to simply continue with the task. Awe has a raw, bright, hot quality here that is felt directly. I could see Nolan's work in the landscape, in the low lying detail of dark

spikey plants layered over the middle distance.²⁵ I saw and felt awe in full daylight, instead of the more conventional dusk or dawn visual modes in landscape depictions of remnant mist and darkness.

On the fourth trip out, I decided to paint the crater from the north, as a Balgo local had informed me that it looks “most like a crater” from this angle (Figure 18). There were tiny native violet flowers growing between the rocks and I found a black skeletal-like bush that I decided to place off-centre in the foreground. Out on the edge of the crater there are no mirrors, reflections, cars, buildings or other people to locate your scale in the landscape. One is supposed to feel small in the face of nature’s scale, *qua* Kant, Burke, Schopenhauer, but I felt bigger and lighter and lost all sense of proportion, as if my head and vision were actually indistinguishable from the visible landscape.²⁶ I could feel my head roasting in the sun, but this was a separate or disconnected part of my experience, and I protected myself only from logical awareness. It felt strange to be alone in such a remote situation, before this beautiful, ancient and freak geological formation, and be compelled to paint.



Figure 18. Work in progress, Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater from the north.

²⁵ See for example, Sidney Nolan’s (1949) *Windy plain, Cape York Peninsula*.

²⁶ Pearsall (2007) notes that “awe happens when we lose all sense of self” and that people experiencing this state are more focussed on “the stimulus and the experience itself,” rather than themselves (loc. 1275).

I lay my canvas on the inside of the crater wall, which was not a flat surface, but I used my experience of painting on the texture of Lake Cowan to use the frottage-like effect in my painting to my advantage. Due to the heat, I could only put down simple marks of colour, because the paint was drying so fast. Over a five-hour period, I laid out the painting, recording my first reactions and immediate impressions of the site with the intention of completing it later in the studio. I was careful not to spill anything or mark the landscape in any way and to carry everything back out with me.

In seeking a realist approach to the landscape, I worked on a scale that was directly connected to what I could see. The great difficulty in working from the landscape is that there are no boundaries or edges to compare with the painter's rectangle. So I used the edges of my frame of vision touching the edge of the painting. In other words, I used the left and right edges of the canvas on the earth as the corresponding edges of my perceived picture plane. This helped with proportion as I was initially using a brush taped to a long stick to reach across all of the canvas. I was mostly interested in the direct realism of this scale—like “sight-size method,” there is a direct correspondence between the two, so the scale is the scale I saw standing at painter's reach from the canvas.²⁷

Painting from life in this way is a “long exposure” to real experience. In this encounter with the force of nature, in respect of the high temperature and the isolation, one is fortunate to simply persist with the painting process. The heat, the insects and the breeze are the pulse of the landscape. These qualities enter your awareness and affect your response physically.

The unique colour ripple of the crater (including the sky) gives a band of colour spectrum from wherever you stand which is:

Blue/Red/Yellow/Grey-green/Yellow/Red/Blue

This shows visually as a pulse. I wasn't sure how I should record the colour, but reasoned I had to try to paint the colours I saw or why go there? I mixed pots of colour to take back to the studio in Perth with me to complete the paintings, because they would be the most

²⁷ On the plane to Broome, I had been reading Wittgenstein's (1921) “picture theory” from *Tractatus*, which states that a proposition has a direct correspondence with reality:

2.1511 “That is how a picture is attached to reality: it reaches right out to it.”

2.1512 “It is laid against reality like a measure.”

2.1513 “Only the end-points of the graduating lines actually *touch* the object that is to be measured.”

accurate reference. At Wolfe creek, I felt intensely aware and alive and responsive to the atmosphere of the site.²⁸

Delirium, Wolfe Creek (2016) was the last painting I produced on site and includes something of a “figure” in the foreground, in the burnt black bush (Figure 19). The skeletal form of the bush appears as a feature on the left-hand side of the composition. This “figure” is an expression of the potential of the landscape’s destructive force and is a notable anchor point in the series that gives the viewer a sense of scale.

The paintings produced at Wolfe Creek display an insistence of the tactile qualities of the paint application and the temporal nature of following those marks again when the paint is read or viewed, giving awe a physical and temporal placement on the painting surface. My tactile/realist approach to the landscapes in this project was informed by Sidney Nolan’s and Mamma Anderssons’s work, by my own experience as a painter, and by the writing of Gilles Deleuze. At Wolfe Creek, I focussed on my sensations of my experience of awe. This realist painting experience of awe was rooted in visual and somatic sensation, physical manipulation of materials, and an intense awareness of the uniqueness of the Wolfe Creek Crater.



Figure 19. Robertson, Kevin. 2016. *Delirium, Wolfe Creek* [Acrylic on canvas, 121 x 302 cm]. Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.

The paintings illustrated in Figures 19–22 show the final results of the painting process. Although they were almost completed on site, I re-stretched them and subtly reworked them once back in the studio, correcting the tonality where they seemed too light

²⁸ The colours in Balgo were so vivid that when I returned to Perth, the local scenery looked grey and desaturated by comparison.

and adding density to the mark making and texture where I had simply ran out of time. *Ash field and crater wall, Wolfe Creek* (figure 21) was the most heavily reworked, where I darkened the palette considerably from the initial work, because it failed to reflect the sense of fear I experienced there. From my perspective, *Wolfe Creek Crater* (Figure 20) seems to best reflect the brutal and minimal structure of the crater and be reminiscent of heat that emanated from the rocks and has the least retouching.²⁹ My concern was whether someone who hadn't been through the same experience would sense that experience through the paintings.

During this year-long process of reworking the landscapes in my studio in Perth, I had the idea instead of making one more large painting to give an impression of the landscape at night (which was simply not possible to travel out to the location after dark, due to the legal restrictions of the hire car company). To give some continuity with the *plein air* landscapes, I began working directly from actual meteorites including a fragment of Wolfe Creek meteorite shale (Figure 24).³⁰ Through a magnifying glass, the surface appeared as a landscape (Figure 25). Awe was still operational in the sense that as I was aware I looking at an extra-terrestrial micro-landscape, and reacting to the visual sensations of a bizarre alien surface. I chose a low view point to emphasise what it felt like to experience the uncertainty of how to safely navigate through the Wolfe Creek landscape. This later work utilized darker colours inherent in the meteorite's surface and synthesizes the atmosphere of awe I sensed at Wolfe Creek Crater (Figure 25).

²⁹ Monet also retouched his paintings in the studio away from the landscape. (See photo in Spate, 2001, p.266).

³⁰ I am grateful to geologist Geoffrey Blackburn for generously giving me these meteorites.



Figure 20. Robertson, Kevin. 2016. *Wolfe Creek Crater* [Acrylic and oil on canvas, 122 x 301 cm]. Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.



Figure 21. Robertson, Kevin. 2016. *Ash field and crater wall, Wolfe Creek* [Acrylic and oil on canvas, 121 x 302 cm]. Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.



Figure 22. Robertson, Kevin. 2016. *A place without an echo* [Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 301 cm]. Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.



Figure 23. Robertson, Kevin. 2016. *A place without an echo, Balgo* (study) [ink and permanent marker pen on paper, 37 x 76 cm].



Figure 24. Kevin Robertson, *Wolfe Creek Meteorite Shale*, 2017, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm



Figure 25. Robertson, Kevin. *Black Meteorite Terrain*, 2017, oil on canvas, 122 x 301 cm.
Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.

The Australian landscape, particularly Western Australia, is not characterised by the large mountains and river systems of Europe, so its affective expression is different. Instead,

it has significant negative forms (salt lakes, craters) and vast deserts. Representations of the awe experienced in these landscapes differ from the European representation of awe as a sublime, dramatic landscape, and draws instead on implied, unseen forces, through a depiction of hot, austere terrain. Sidney Nolan is important here, because of the realism of his palette and his choppy, anxious, and restless paint quality, in contrast to the sweeping chiaroscuro and softly gradated tonal qualities that characterise the European model, seen for example, in the works of John Martin and Caspar David Friedrich.

Schopenhauer (1969) describes the destruction of the ego when he writes, “this is the full impression of the sublime. Here it is caused by the sight of a power beyond all comparison superior to the individual and threatening him with annihilation” (p. 205). Schopenhauer’s interpretation describes the sublime as an active or violent force, or as a desert. It is evident that the experience is relayed through sensation. However, the less dramatic stillness, heat, and slow destructive force of the Australian desert has more in common with Schopenhauer’s description of the sublime than does the dramatic European landscape. The desert is menacing to a person not equipped to survive, but is also extremely beautiful. Is it necessary to dilate Schopenhauer’s sense of a momentary register of emotional tension into another kind of experience? Could this experience be more continuous with the environment at large? Does a stable geological environment offer a *slow release* of the same magnitude of awe as a bushfire or avalanche might? Based on my Wolfe Creek experience, it does, and this expression of awe goes beyond anthropocentric projection of fear onto the landscape

Deleuze links affect with geology. He refers to the force of nature and in particular nonorganic forms, as something to fear: “the non-organic life of things, a frightful life, which is oblivious to the wisdom and limits of the organism” (2002, p. 22). This fear in the face of a massive and oblivious geological system was a familiar experience at the Wolfe Creek Crater. Deleuze’s attention to non-human expression implies that a painting process may engage a deeper understanding with affective reactions to the geological landscape and that this landscape itself expresses something. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest a “geology of morals,” which has provided a springboard for this understanding.

Manuel DeLanda (1996) reworks Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas on geology proposing that content/expression dichotomies exist at differing “strata.” DeLanda’s argument is a reconsideration of how organisms and things are “stratified” and given this, that we should rethink our links to non-living things:

Living creatures, according to this stance, are in no way "better" than rocks. Indeed, in a nonlinear world in which the same basic processes of self-organization take place in the mineral, organic and cultural spheres, perhaps rocks hold some of the keys to understand sedimentary humanity, igneous humanity and all their mixtures.

(DeLanda, 1996, para. 35).

DeLanda's proposition offers possibilities for reconsidering a non-human system like geology. I have taken this opportunity to consider how geology, without human intentions or purpose, could be expressive of awe. DeLanda (2007a) illustrates the idea of a geological expression using the example of light passing through a crystal and producing a rainbow effect, arguing that this effect is the crystal's "expression." He draws on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) point that "the crystal is the macroscopic expression of a microscopic structure" (p. 57). This materialist metaphor, where the distinction between the idea and the physical embodiment of it is blurred, is key to understanding an affective engagement with a landscape through painting.

DeLanda (2007a) also uses James J. Gibson's theory of affordance to describe how an environment can direct an action, for example, an animal walking near a cliff does not need a concept of the cliff to stay away from the edge. The clues are in the environment itself, the dropping away of the earth is enough to make the animal move away to a surface that *affords* it stability (DeLanda, 2007b). I concur that the landscape is comprised of expressions that act as affordances, but instead of associating these affordances with actions as do Gibson and DeLanda, I connect them with affects.

Wolfe Creek Crater is surrounded by a rocky ridge with a steep incline, which affords a sense that one could fall onto the sharp rocks below. The structure itself is an affective expression. Further, the structure is a huge, near perfect circle in an otherwise featureless desert, which affords a sense of wonder. This wonder combined with the fear of falling means the structure expresses awe. The environment itself expresses this affective force. I found apperception of this phenomenon difficult and with my normal perspective thrown off kilter, I became immersed in the landscape and relayed the experience through painting. I became sensitized to the expressivity of the landscape, the features of which are an affordance which generates awe.

My subjective boundaries shifted while I worked. I was not there to paint how I "felt" about the landscape or impose an art historical concept onto my experience. As I spent time in the landscape, I became increasingly uncertain about not only what I was painting, but also what I believed representation and expression to be. The resulting paintings show my

influences, feelings and thought processes, but also reflect this experiential subject-object dialectic through my use of raw mark-making, frottage and widened perspective. These painting experiences demonstrate a shift towards an interactive perspective on the geological landscape, where expressions afford affect as much as a person projects an affective state onto it. The painting process facilitated my understanding of the desert as a place in which quantification and representation are inadequate and affective engagement through awe provides involvement in a sense of sheer scale and power.

As I drove away from the Wolfe Creek Crater for the last time after painting *Delirium, Wolfe Creek*, the eye of the crater had somehow been poured into my imagination and consciousness. I had a fixed view of the crater centre, which was unlike my normal visual memories where a fixed viewpoint is difficult to discern. My visual acuity had been activated by the intensity and awe of seeing something that I had spent several years imagining. The eye became a *leitmotif* or refrain that my mind was trying to accommodate and the image replayed incessantly. My understanding and experience of the landscape converged in this single image—the eye of Wolfe Creek.

Chapter Two – Awe in Sidney Nolan’s *Desert Storm* and Mamma Andersson’s *Family Ties*

The representational process is complex because expressive painting does not sit well with the current metaphors used to describe it. These metaphors are dependent on constructionist notions more readily applied to signs, language or computer memory systems. I contend that painting is different to this—a highly sensitised “engineering” process that becomes an extension of a human affective response. In simple terms, a painting could be considered *as* recorded feeling. This chapter explores the problems of representation and expression in relation to awe by examining *Desert Storm* (1966), a major polyptych painting by Sidney Nolan, and *Family Ties* (2013), a contemporary painting by Mamma Andersson. This exegesis proposes that the work of these painters employs processes that are *simultaneously* intuitive, reflective and intentional. The intuitive aspect is particularly important. It involves the sensitive selection of an affective subject that can then be represented through the skill of the painter. I propose that Nolan and Mamma Andersson utilise this framework, which could be characterised as the “felt” and the “thought-through”—a paradox of somatic perception and intention/reflection where I believe painting to be at its most interesting.

The difficulty in characterising affect in painting is that it is simply not possible to have a fixed methodology that will ensure affective expression. Every component of this argument must be contextualised, otherwise it can appear contradictory. So, to proceed, I examine several operative factors that come into play for each artist. I discuss how Nolan is expressive in his work through subject matter, colour, and paint handling, and argue that this results in a sense of chaos and disorientation. In Mamma Andersson’s work, I focus on the opposite condition, where an expression of awe emerges out of the social structure of the human figure in contemporary domestic life.

Nolan and Mamma Andersson show similarities and differences that yield important clues for the development of a methodology for translating awe into painting. The shift from representations of awe in a modernist idiom to contemporary painting is negotiated through these two examples. I identify the visual qualities that become expressive transfer points for awe in each. Even in their distinct methods for expressing awe, certain points are similar, and these support my proposition that figurative painting is a uniquely expressive medium capable of transferring powerful affective states. This is achieved visually through a complex

interrelationship between preconscious affects (especially with relation to somatic sensation and tactile aspects) in conjunction with intentional and reflective representation.

Awe is a locus to examine expression in Nolan and Mamma Andersson's work, underpinned by Deleuze and Massumi's affect theory. Although affect theory is a useful ontological position to examine visual expression in a painting, it can lack clear definition as a theory. Some objections to affect theory are offered by Ruth Leys' critique, which is based in cognitive psychology. My position is ultimately responsive to affect theory, because expressive painting *ipso facto* does not rely on cognition. On this point, I broadly agree with Kant's (1790) position in *The Critique of Judgement* that feeling in art is non-cognitive and replaces the need for a predicate in its appreciation.

*

The paintings of Sidney Nolan and Mamma Andersson access private worlds of feeling/thought through expressive painting practices. There have been misgivings about the very notion of an artist's ability to represent subjective experience and these reservations are discussed in Chapter Three. With this in mind, Nolan and Mamma Andersson have a dual internal/external (expressive and realist) quality active in the visual outcomes or finished works of both artists.³¹ Their paintings evince a compelling emotive expression, though it is of course difficult to articulate such expression. The expressive quality of these artists' works may reside partly in the way their paintings are made, not materially, but methodologically.

In an expressive representational painting process, although an overriding and final objective may be held somewhere in the mind, an image is made by painting one shape or mark at a time.³² In realist painting, there may also be an actual reference, a field of sensation or a view to work from. Each part of the process of painting is potentially both mimetic and responsive to feeling at the same time. This idea of employing feeling and intuition in painting can be completely derailed by the confining parameters of a "style," as in the case of Expressionism and, more recently, Neo-Expressionism. The complex discoveries of a more subjective approach to painting become mere stylistic conventions. Kenneth Clark (1976) provides an insight into the awkward status of using affective expression in painting, when he writes,

³¹ Arthur Boyd and Joy Hester of the Antipodean group also fit this argument. Mamma Andersson works in the context of current Swedish figurative painting that includes the artists Sarah-Vide Ericson and Anna Bjerner.

³² Similar to writing one word at a time.

devotion to the facts will always give the pleasure of recognition; adherence to the rules of design, the pleasure of order and certainty. Bad expressionist painting is merely embarrassing. But we should not therefore avert our eyes, in an agony of good taste, from the value of this style at the present time (p. 202).

Clark's view proved to be highly pertinent to the reception of Neo-Expressionist painting in the 1980s, as was Hal Foster's critical response to Neo-Expressionism, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Three. Clark (1976) identified the continuity in the turn to expression as "an extension of the pathetic fallacy, and the use of landscape as a focus for our own emotions" (p. 241). Although sceptical about the survival of the individual spirit in the modern age, Clark discovered a newfound optimism in art via the landscape painting of Sidney Nolan during a visit to Australia in 1949. The expressive force of Nolan's early work still presents a powerful counterpoint to constructionist arguments against Neo-Expressionism. As a term, Neo-Expressionism is questionable, because it implies Expressionism from the early twentieth century had made a comeback. The work of Nolan and Mamma Andersson illustrates how processes of representation that enable expression in a figurative painting have been ongoing concerns for some painters, even though this may not always be intelligible in the popular media.

Virginia Spate frames the historical cycles that have characterised the shifting taste of the art world in relation to expression. She notes in the catalogue introduction for the exhibition, *Aspects of Australian Figurative Painting 1942-1962: Dreams, fears and desires* (Dixon & Smith, 1984) that "the current revival of figurative painting, here and overseas, seems to be shaped by expressionist and surrealist practice. How new is the 'New Painting'? What might we learn from confronting an earlier manifestation of the same concerns, itself a precedent for the present?" (p. 7). Spate proceeds to argue that fear was the dominant emotional state of the 1950s, caused by the horror of the Second World War and the Cold War climate, events which caused artists to retreat into "private worlds."³³

Nolan exemplified this withdrawal from society's dominant symbols, and presented an anti-hero figure in several famous works: the Burke and Wills series, the Kelly Series, and the Gallipoli series. In his work, "there is no violence, no interaction, no known enemy" (Dixon & Smith, 1984, p. 7). I suggest that Nolan's images continue to resonate in the twenty-first century because they are not sentimental. Their affect transcends the climate of

³³ This period followed a time of technological awe, including Hitler's *Wonder Weapons* and the atomic bomb.

fear in which they were created, and the desert landscapes particularly extend into the realm of awe. Although Nolan's drawing is often tentative and fragile, his paint handling is confident, textural and virtuosic. His expressive handling of paint and manipulation of texture assert the differences inherent in human imagination made visible by physical touch, which is a major vehicle of the expressive potential of painting. These qualities of physical touch and textual affect counter the intangible illusion so admired in Photorealism.

The re-emergence of figurative painting in the 1980s provides a platform to discuss both landscape and the body, and how in Nolan's case, land is merged with figure. Nolan's contemporaries, Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach, painted people with a terrain-like quality, suggesting tree trunks or rock formations. Virginia Button (2015) discusses how Freud, for example, was fascinated by John Constable's (ca. 1821) *Study of an Elm Tree* and admired Constable's truthfulness to depicting a particular place. Button argues that Freud tried unsuccessfully to imitate the qualities of Constable's *Study*, until he transposed a tree trunk into human form in *Naked Portrait Standing* (Freud, 1999–2001), when he managed to capture some of Constable's power. Similarly, Nolan engages with awe through anthropomorphic expressionism. In Nolan's work, "the figure becomes landscape" trope is often reversed and the landscape takes on the qualities of a figure—thin skin-like membranes of paint seem to flex and pulse like a living body. The relationship between sensation and the experience of the body in the expression of awe is especially evident in his 1966 painting *Desert Storm* (Figure 26).

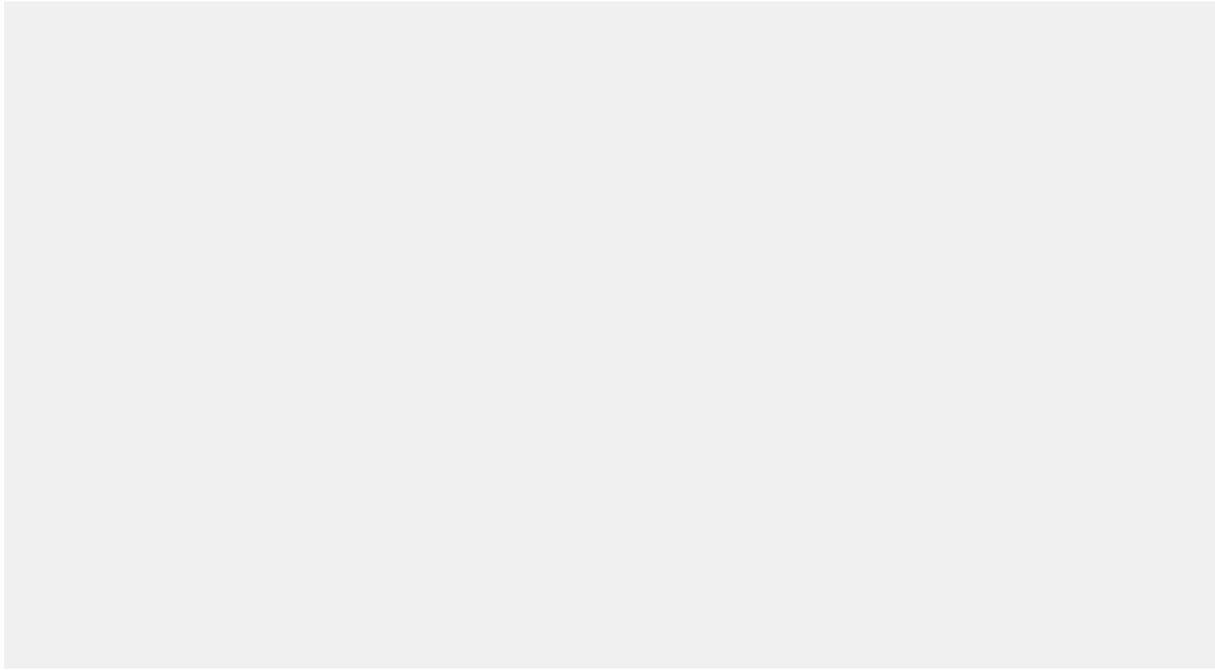


Figure 26. Nolan, Sidney. 1966. *Desert Storm* [Oil on board, 7 panels, (each panel) 152.3 x 122 cm]. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia. Copyright by The Sidney Nolan Trust / Bridgeman Art Library.

Nolan titles the work *Desert Storm* to introduce a tempestuous affect to the viewer. Through this association we are given a chance to put our emotional state “into gear” for an experience. The simple title is carefully chosen: Nolan was an avid reader of poetry, reflected in his skilful selection of a few words that frames the visual experience and identifies the kind of engagement we are about to have with the work. This engagement is in the realm of an affect of awe, rather than emotion.

The scene depicted in the left-most panel already suggests that something is not right (Figure 27). The colours of enamel white and earth red meld with a small strip of strangely violet sky, suggesting imminent change. Following convention, reading the images from left to right, things just get worse, there is no escape from the perishing conditions. In the far-right panel, the sky is fused with the earth and a massive mars violet blanket of dust envelopes and suffocates the landscape. The five middle frames convey a rapid, evenly paced time-lapse video, but this is not a detached recording, we are trapped in the “percepts” of the experience—you can feel the heat and the choking dust entering your lungs.

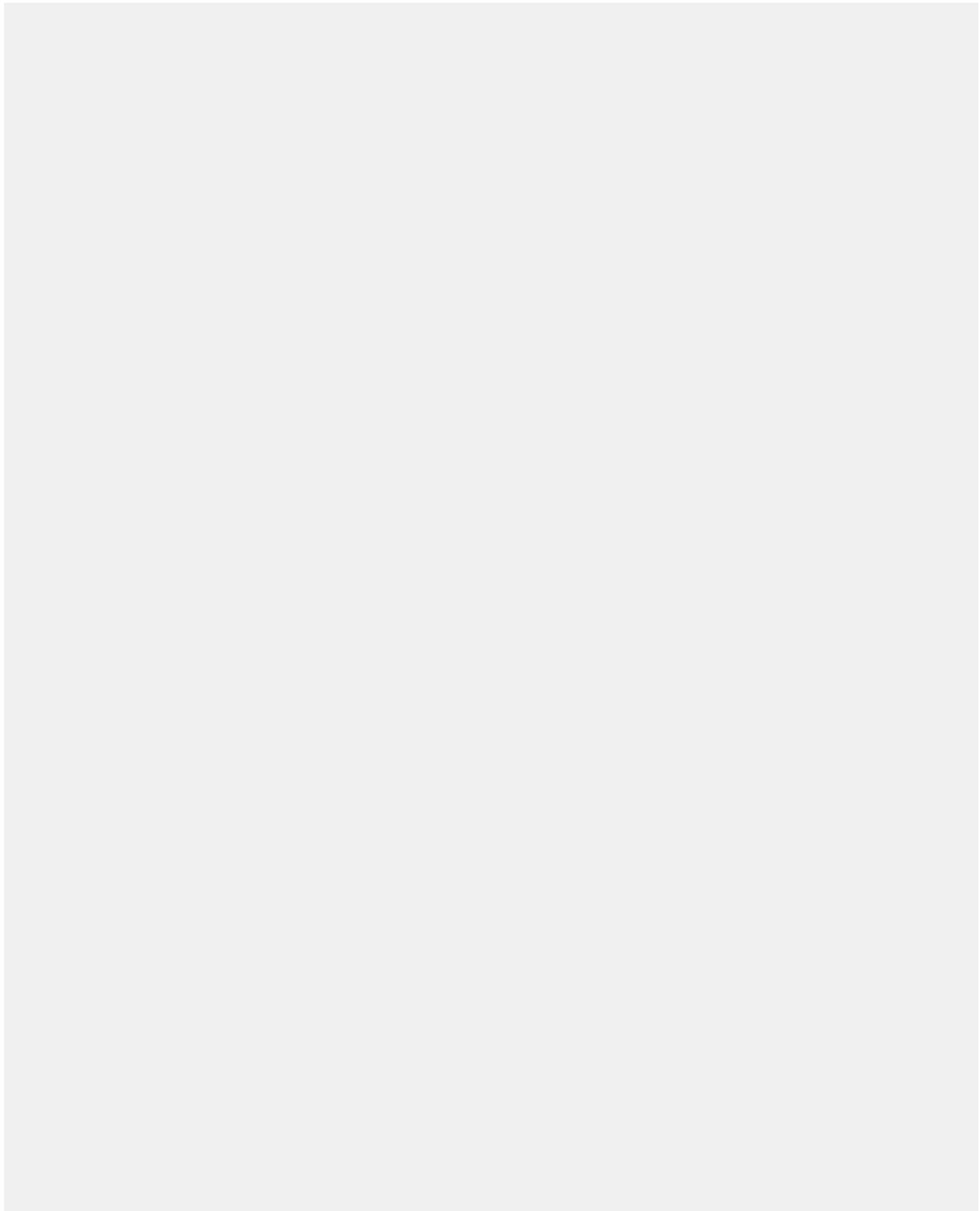


Figure 27. Nolan, Sidney. 1966. *Desert Storm* (panel one) [Oil on board, 152.3 x 122 cm]. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia. Copyright by The Sidney Nolan Trust / Bridgeman Art Library.

There are no folk-heroes or anti-heroic figures in *Desert Storm* and no sense of the ego of the artist. Nolan focuses on the terror and power of the Australian landscape. He scrapes and drags the paint, then overlays it with waves of chaotically blended impasto.

Everywhere is hot earth red, the colour so difficult and alien to a European sensibility, yet ubiquitous in the Australian desert. Red earth evokes terror—Nolan combines this hot, ultra-low frequency colour with yellow ochre in *Desert Storm* to suggest an inferno or hell-like place.³⁴ *Desert Storm* contrasts this red/yellow with Mars Violet, deeper and tuned down in amplitude than high frequency violet to suggest wonder, infinite space and sonority. Awe can be described as a blend of fear and wonder³⁵ and Nolan's palette conveys this affect even if we are not conscious of the storm as subject matter. Nolan achieves this without the dark, northern-romantic palette associated with the work of Caspar David Friedrich. The blue-violet sky indicates an oncoming storm, particularly in the Kimberley. It implies a major threat—of being trapped outside without shelter when the storm breaks. Fear and paranoia overtake the rational mind. Details such as clouds transform to look suddenly like the surface of Jupiter, as in the surrealist paintings of James Gleeson. In this state of awe, the storm takes on the presence of a tumultuous sentient entity or natural force to which you are entirely vulnerable, exposed and unprotected. This is the ubiquitous affect of *Desert Storm*.

Desert Storm is highly gestural. Charles Darwin (1872) in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* associated specific human gestures with emotional responses, some of them learned, but most innate. The affect in *Desert Storm* is connected to Nolan's overactive and agitated hand gesture. This gesture is not calm and serene as would be demonstrated by gentle gradations of tone and colour. Instead the shifting planes of colour suggest an anxious inability to settle on one thought, reflecting a hyper-alert state of mind.

How can the expression of an affective landscape painting like Nolan's *Desert Storm* be translated into language? Deleuze and Guattari (1987) construct a lexicon to discuss things about which we cannot ordinarily speak, which can be used to reconsider the landscape as an expressive, non-human entity. We interact with complex systems such as geology or weather systems (or both in the case of *Desert Storm*) through our affective response. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assert that paintings depict *affects*, not emotions, and that art is comprised of affects and percepts. They hold that painting preserves a "block of sensation, that is to say a compound of percepts and affects" that is no longer either a feeling or a perception, but independent of these things and of the artist that made it (p. 164).³⁶ Through his paint handling, Nolan negotiates a series of transactions with the landscape that utilise this "block

³⁴ Nolan also commenced a series of paintings and prints in that year based on Dante's *Inferno*.

³⁵ This definition of awe is described in the introduction and is influenced by Keltner & Haidt.

³⁶ This is similar to Van Gerwen's concept of non-egocentric perception.

of sensation.” He constructs a scene that is independent of his own feelings, which becomes a threatening space for the viewer to access.

With paintings such as Nolan’s *Desert Storm*, it can be difficult to name the kind of reaction we are having. Affect theory offers a way to describe complex and blended reactions to paintings that are hard to reconcile with a cognitive awareness. Affect theory, as presented by Deleuze and Guattari, discusses these otherwise ineffable reactions that art can present by focussing on autonomic and other bodily reactions to stimuli. Affect theory therefore becomes central to an analysis of awe as an affective expression in Sidney Nolan’s paintings.

Nolan’s *Desert Storm* works like a cinematic experience, hence it is necessary to examine each panel individually.³⁷ Swirling molten lava patterns in the upper section of panel two of *Desert Storm* (Figure 28), just before the horizon, are reminiscent of an alien world. They have qualities reminiscent of the marbled surface of the planet Jupiter, combined with the hot colours of Venus. T.G. Rosenthal (2002) recognises this sci-fi aspect of Nolan’s desert landscape depictions: “they sometimes look like the refugees from some science fiction paperback cover. Another, *Central Australia* of 1950, also bears the stamp of science fiction, yet we assuredly believe Nolan here, and do not question his airborne accuracy” (p. 126). Nolan’s paint application echoes the unsettling texture of Jupiter’s surface,³⁸ but relocates this onto the contours of the Kimberley landscape. This visual association with the powerful presence of the largest planet in the solar system enhances the experience of awe. The mixed, but not blended, colours suggests conflicting states of unresolved feeling, as in accounts of awe (Pearsall, 2007). These marble patterns paradoxically fix states that would otherwise quickly transition.

³⁷ This analogy is not to suggest that the experience is a quasi-filmic one. In film, certain frames or scenes may be evocative, but we cannot pause the film without changing the experience. In Nolan’s polyptych painting, each frame is a “still,” yet integral to the whole.

³⁸ The Great Red Spot on Jupiter is the longest observed storm in history.

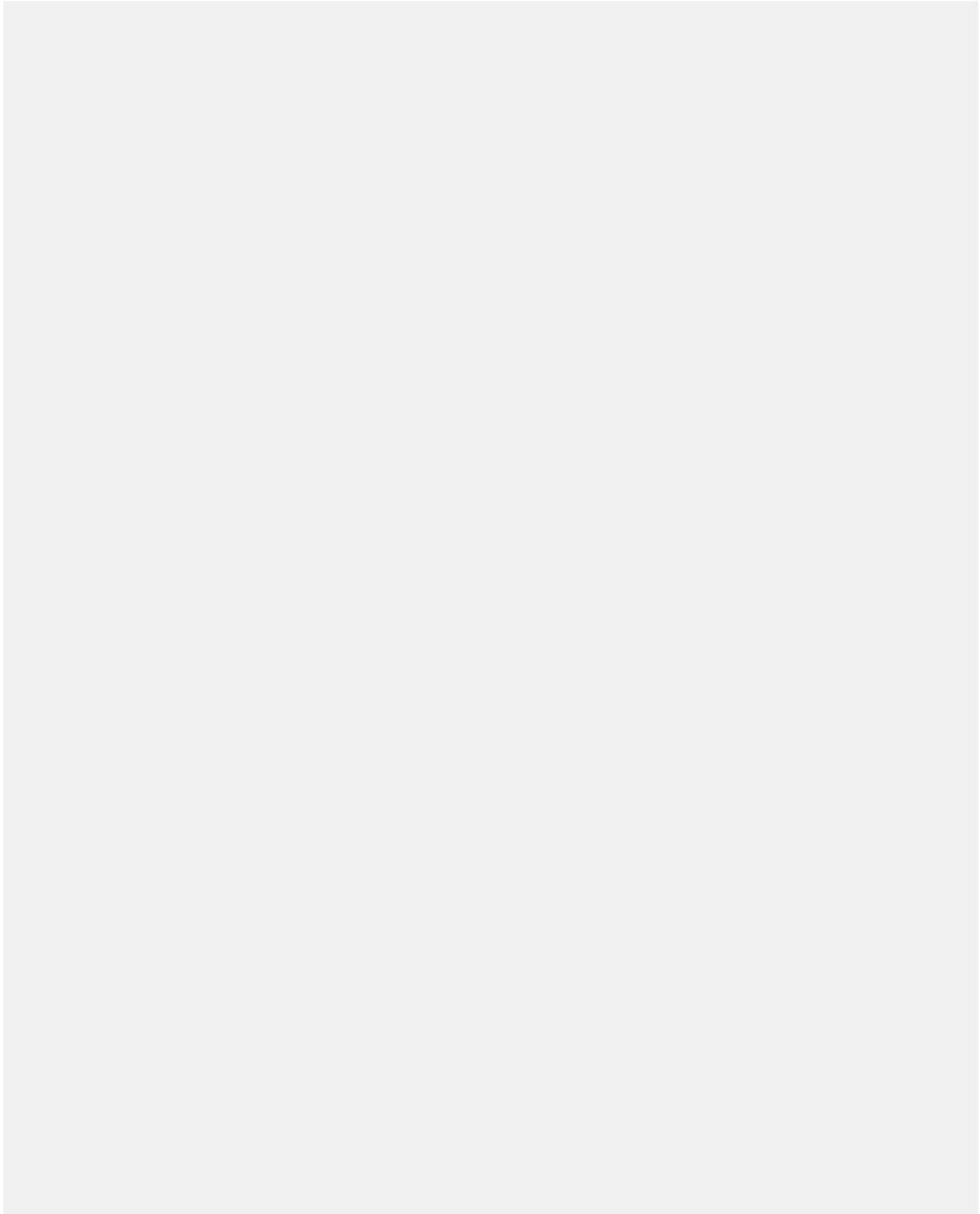


Figure 28. Nolan, Sidney. 1966. *Desert Storm* (panel two) [Oil on board, 152.3 x 122 cm]. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia. Copyright by The Sidney Nolan Trust / Bridgeman Art Library.

Consider the difference between a sensation and a feeling. In the morning, we might wake up and feel cold when we get out of bed. We may also dread the idea of going to work, but we might start to feel better about both these things after taking a hot shower. The

sensation of hot water on the body puts us in a better mood. Recent studies have indicated that our bodies feel different emotions in different physical locations. Happiness and love can be felt right through the body, whereas neutrality or depression can lack body feeling (Doupleff, 2013). However, one need not be a neuroscientist to appreciate this. The sensation of being in the warm shower has a direct association with a warm “all-over” feeling of happiness and we emerge better equipped, mood-wise, to deal with the day. What we have then is sensation working on the body to elevate us to a happy mood.³⁹ Although awe was not mapped in Doucleff’s study, surprise and fear occupied very similar zones of the body, that is, the head and upper chest. We should however, exhibit caution when trying to correlate body posture, expression, and sensation with emotion. As Rick Furtak (2010) points out, “adopting a sad or angry facial expression does not automatically *produce* sadness or anger” (p. 54). However, he does observe that “a person who is inadvertently making such an expression is more susceptible to experiencing the corresponding emotion” (p. 54). Could the light and colour in panel two of *Desert Storm* work directly on the body in this way? In other words, can we feel light through our bodies? Light is often accompanied by warmth (or in the case of Nolan’s *Desert Storm*, extreme heat), so the connection can be direct as well as associative. Hence, colour makes the viewer susceptible to affect.

Nolan’s use of red or alizarin crimson in *Desert Storm* has another important association, “frequently shading into a deep blood-colour of the kind that, as it dries becomes almost black” (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 129). This dried blood-colour creates an association with perishing, death, and suggests horror and fear. Altogether the visual association creates an affect of awe. The affect is the result of a sensation, i.e., I see the colour of dried blood in a desert landscape and experience a similar sensation from the perception. The affect is transferred by a percept, generating an expression of awe.

We are drawn into the locale of the storm in the third panel of *Desert Storm*, by the placement of a large geological feature and trees on the right-hand side of the frame. The sky has settled back to ultramarine and the image is stabilised by temporary stillness through solid horizontal lines. In panel four, the lighting and colour have shifted slightly to suggest an autumnal landscape, which might be considered pleasant. However, the minor changes are ominous. We brace for the storm to hit. In panel five (Figure 29), the storm begins to strike the landscape. Awe is evoked through visual sensation in both the colour of the land and

³⁹ Mood is another concept, according to Dylan Evans (2003), moods are emotional states that last for sustained periods of time, even days.

textural qualities of paint. Engulfing diagonals of black, red earth and yellow ochre convey an atmosphere of complete hopelessness. Disaster can strike without the time to plan for it, but in *Desert Storm*, the disruption was at least hinted at from the beginning. The representation of dust begins pouring in from the upper right section of the painting. Dust storms are highly unpleasant physical events—the air scrapes and stings like hot sandpaper on the skin, filling clothes and hair. The wind changes direction like a heated irrational argument and makes bad situations *feel* worse. Nolan has captured the unpleasant sienna colour of the airborne dust that sullies the blue sky and interrupts the stillness of the rock face and plains from which it rose. The strong relationship between the visible elements of the experience and the somatic feelings evoked is reinforced through this use of colour and texture.

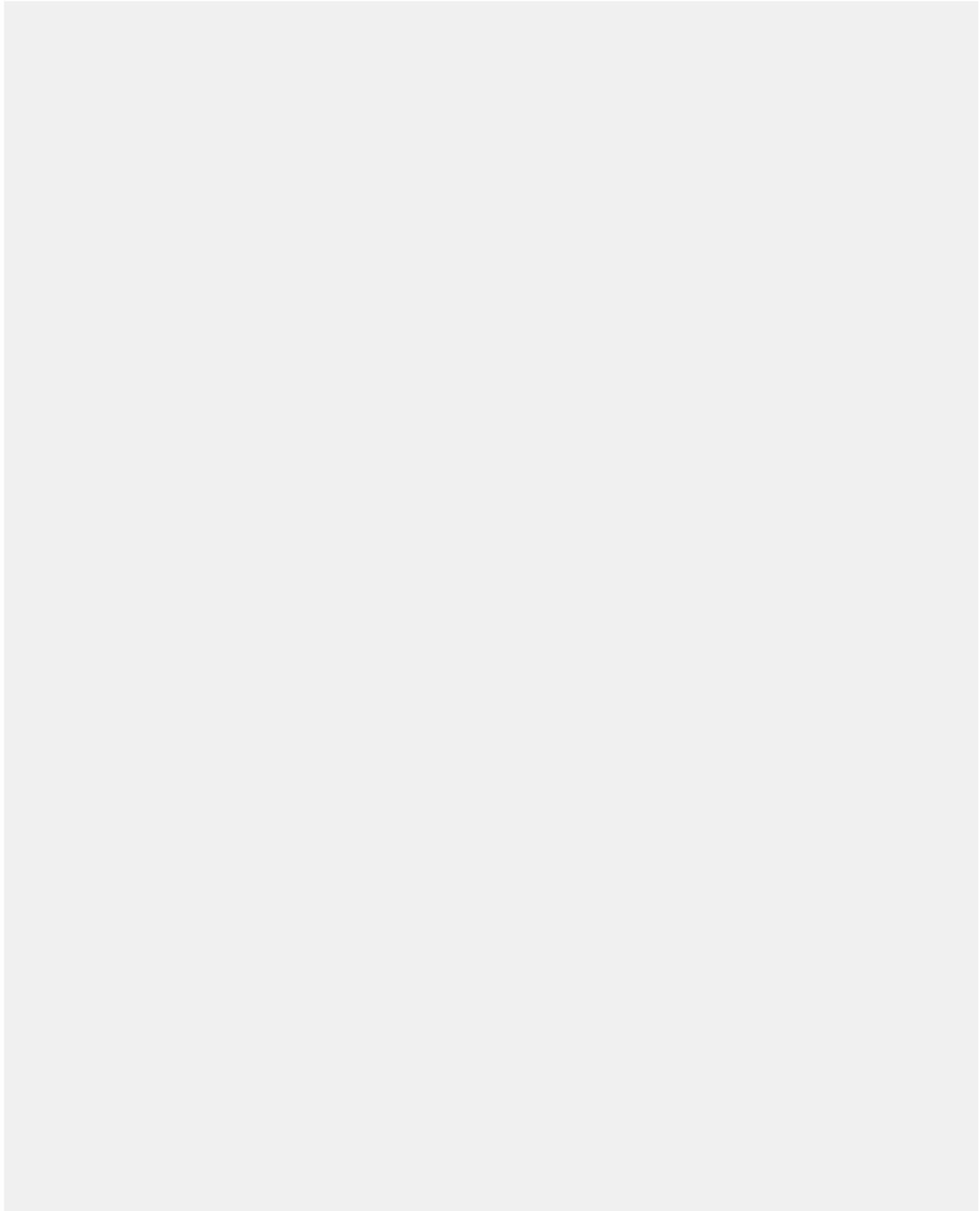


Figure 29. Nolan, Sidney. 1966. *Desert Storm* (panel five) [Oil on board, 152.3 x 122 cm]. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia. Copyright by The Sidney Nolan Trust / Bridgeman Art Library.

As the chaos in *Desert Storm* increases, representation proceeds towards the dissolution of egocentric subjectivity. The painting deeply evokes an overpowering non-human or geological force, similar to my own experience at Wolfe Creek. Spinoza's

unification of God and Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) views God as depersonalised, inflicting floods or famines without discriminating between individuals. “Spinoza is attempting to remove any sense of mystery from God. If God and nature are identical, then to use a medieval term, the ways and works of God are perfectly intelligible” (Seeskin, Ed. Nadler, 2004, p.120). Kenneth Seeskin argues that Spinoza wanted to remove a sense of awe in man's relation to God. However, Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy has some contemporary appeal to artists, as the mystery in this idea of non-human expression increases the sense of awe we feel for nature.⁴⁰ Through Spinoza, there is also an interest in affect and the body and what happens at an autonomic level when an individual feels overpowered by nature.

Spinoza's writing on emotion is important in terms of this study, since his influence on Deleuze and Massumi is notable.⁴¹ In Spinoza's thinking, actions and thoughts are causally related, set on a path by external forces, just like the forces of physics.⁴² For Spinoza, emotional reactions are things that modify our experience and over which we have little or no control. The somatic experience of sensation is important to this discussion. Spinoza is interested in the mystery and power of the human body, as independent of the activity of the mind (whilst still considering it as part of a unified whole): “By affect I understand the affections of the body, by which the power of acting of the body is itself increased, diminished, helped, or hindered, together with the ideas of these affections” (Spinoza, 2001, p. 98). Here, the body itself is a source of awe. Thought seems familiar, cognitive and comprehensible, but actions on and of the body are mysterious, because they are part of an unknown set of processes.

Modification by the body is a key notion in Deleuze's reading of Spinoza and also forms an important aspect of Massumi's writing on expression. For Massumi (2002), expression is conveyed through the human body in “strata,” each with its own levels of “content formation” and “modification.” Taking Nietzsche's example of a lightning flash, Massumi (2002) elaborates on this exciting image, “for example the movement is caught by a

⁴⁰ Although not religious in any conventional sense, Nolan makes an interesting distinction between “wonderful” and “wonderment” after looking at the religious paintings of Giotto, Michelangelo and El Greco: “Our trip to Europe forced a few rigorous conclusions on me. The outstanding are [sic] being that the painters who moved me the most (El Greco and Giotto) seemed primarily of faith. Presumably religious faith. The painting is wonderful in the sense that it is a painting of wonder. Differently from Michelangelo for instance, in the Sistine Chapel; which is certainly wonderful painting but by no means paintings of wonderment.” (as cited in Underhill, 2015, p. 226)

⁴¹ Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* is a significant reference point for Deleuze and Guattari's somatic theories of affect. Spinoza's writing describes the affects.

⁴² The typical example of causation is one billiard ball striking another and causing it to move.

human eye...It has passed from an autonomous expression into the content of a body and a life” (p. 25). Expression is therefore the transmission of an external field or event extrinsic to any organism that may potentially perceive or be “modified” by the action of this event, resulting in each point of reception having its own “mini-subjectivity” (p. 30). This implies that fear, joy or awe reside as external experiences that influence and then modify a person's emotional state.⁴³ In painting, the autonomic response of the body provides an important kick-start to expression.

Non-cognitive experiences are conveyed through visual perception in *Desert Storm*. In Nolan’s hands, colours operate outside symbolic conventions and work like “subtle electrodes.” *Desert Storm* provides a visual analogy for near-suffocation. Panel five is engulfed in mars violet, earth red and orange paint. There is little negative space—a small portion of blue hangs in the upper left, portentous of a lack of air, the rest of the painting is a dense wall of hot colour. The hot-coloured steep vertical lines, appearing for the first time, suggest descent. The effect of these qualities is immediate; one does not need to consciously reflect to appreciate them.

At this point, time is disrupted.

The seventh panel of Nolan’s *Desert Storm* moves the eye into a diagonal vertical motion that offsets the extreme vertical of the sixth panel. The bold brush strokes assert an active painting experience, as though the viewer is the painter. The painting is constituted in consciousness as a series of intense, intersecting brush strokes.⁴⁴ The direction of marks in *Desert Storm* work to relocate our awareness into a world where time has a physical quality, like space or colour. By following the trace of the mark, which is sometimes painted, but often dragged or scraped particularly in the most dramatic panels five to seven, it is possible to see one motion, layered on another, creating a “history of touches.”⁴⁵ Nolan’s painting process is driven by chance and spontaneity. His brush strokes *anticipate* the forms, textures and colours conjured by a physical, process-driven painting method.

Nolan captures the experience of awe in *Desert Storm* through his manipulation of paint extending a “mini-subjectivity” into a material itself through his expressive technique. Also, Nolan sometimes uses extremely long, dragged, continuous marks that extend a sense

⁴³ In contrast, Ruth Leys (2011) is critical of affect theorists’ idea that, for example, laughter can be activated by electrodes in the brain is if it were without intention and meaning, as a materialistic and image-based understanding of human emotion.

⁴⁴ Unfortunately, this experience does not occur when viewing a scaled down reproduction of the painting, but can be recalled after the work is viewed in situ.

⁴⁵ *History of touches* is the title of a song by Björk, from her 2015 album *Vulnicura*.

of time and suggest vast spaces. The brush marks activate the tactile and visceral qualities of the paint, and provide an equivalent of a haptic experience. The awe experience of “getting lost” in this painting resides in many factors, including its large scale, its sonorous colours, its hypnotic alien planet-like surfaces, and the clashing brush strokes that move in different directions. We are deposited inside the chaos of a dust storm.

Affect theory offers a way to discuss painting on a related spectrum of emotional responses, for example, in the intuitive, gestural qualities in Nolan’s painting. Ruth Leys critiques affect theory through a cognitive theory model which “erases all the fuzziness from cultural productions.” Though I admire the strength of her analytic approach, Leys’ stance negates the role of intuition.⁴⁶ This leaves very little to work with when applied to painting, where the vagaries of atmosphere and the “noise” of affect constitute a large part of the aesthetic experience which this study investigates. Intuition is a considerable part of expression in painting and research into it as pre-cognitive experience harmonises well with the actual process of painting.⁴⁷ This emphasis on the somatic experiences of emotion was noted by William James as far back as 1892:

If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left, no “mind-stuff” out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains. (James, 1892/1985, pp. 246–7)

The “constituted” affect that James describes finds form in *Desert Storm*.

The experience of viewing the seven panels of *Desert Storm* fits with an affective and somatic response to awe. The affective description gives a deeper insight into how awe might be experienced through an expressive painting. If paintings are considered as “affect machines” (Cronan, 2015), a distinction between emotion and affect is necessary for their creation, but possibly not for their reception. In this sense, Nolan’s *Desert Storm* operates as

⁴⁶ Psychologist Antione Bechara’s (1997) “gambling” experiment justifies intuition and emotion as important determining factors in what motivates a deep drive to make expressive paintings. Bechara conducted an experiment known as the Iowa gambling task, where the subjects won points drawing from four decks of cards, two of which had been carefully rigged to yield better results. After only a few tries most subjects developed a “hunch” as to which decks were likely to be the good decks long before this kind of judgement could be made using a quantitative process of evaluation (Pearsall, 2007, loc. 1129–1130). Similarly, a painter must choose subject, scale and technique, based on hunches, without being able to fully predict an outcome.

⁴⁷ For the painter, the scale of a painting, the colour of the ground, the exact selection of the motif are all unknown quantities when beginning a new painting and it makes little sense to consider these choices as a series of rational decisions. To use a car analogy, if we are intending to park our car in a bay and several are available with little distinction between them, it becomes necessary to use a feeling or an intuition to make this decision, and although seemingly arbitrary, one of these bays feels right.

an awe field, made up of chance as well as intended decisions; successful, but, as is the shifting nature of expression, not necessarily repeatable.

Nolan was an artist who loved myths and constructed his own autobiographical mythology, which Nancy Underhill (2016) describes as often misleading, to say the least. I was therefore interested to come across an almost mythical dimension to *Desert Storm*: the painting has a missing eighth panel (Figure 30).⁴⁸ The eight panel work was exhibited in Perth in 1970 by Rose Skinner. The Art Gallery of Western Australia wanted to acquire it, but did not have a wall big enough to display the complete work. Skinner's solution was to sell the seven panels that would fit to AGWA and the eighth panel was sold separately to Alistair McAlpine. Some years later, McAlpine offered the eighth panel to AGWA, but, according to Rosenthal (2002), the Trustees declined. McAlpine then gifted the eighth panel to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, with the hope that one day it would be returned to Perth (Rosenthal, 2002).⁴⁹ Violet, rarely seen in nature, is a dominant colour in the "missing" eighth panel. Its addition to the sequence offers some hope after the suffocating dust of the seventh panel and significantly changes how the whole polyptych is read. If the eighth panel of *Desert Storm* is ever permanently re-instated with the rest of the painting, this more optimistic side of awe could again be experienced.

⁴⁸ I am grateful for this information from a discussion with Gary Dufour, former Deputy Director and Senior Curator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

⁴⁹ This story has been verified by the Art Gallery of NSW (personal communication in 2016).

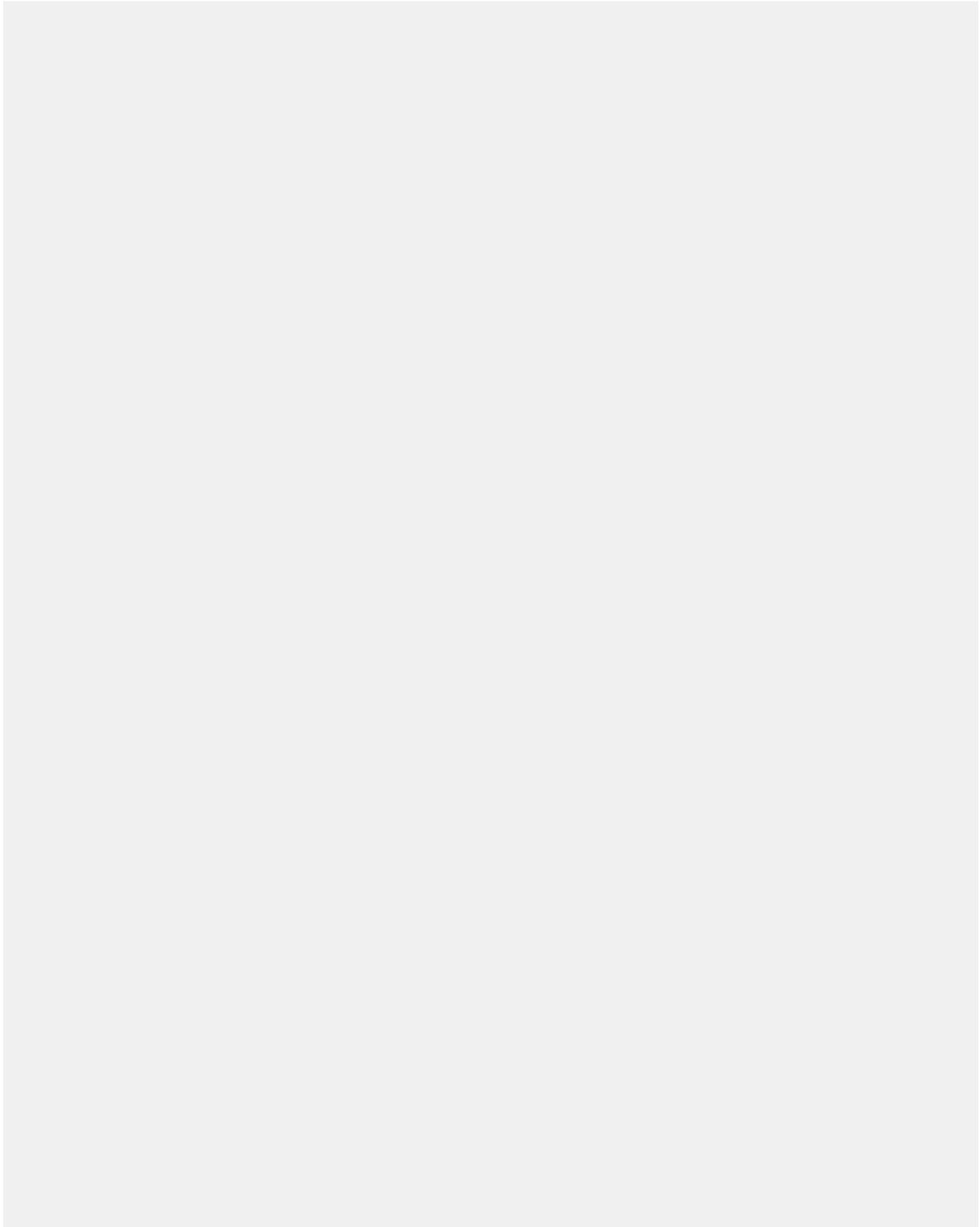


Figure 30. Nolan, Sidney. 1966. *Desert Storm* (panel eight) [Oil on board, 152.3 x 122 cm]. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Copyright by The Sidney Nolan Trust / Bridgeman Art Library.

Using the visual and tactile factors outlined in the preceding analysis, Nolan found a way to express awe through affect that is still relevant. In the contemporary context however, much of the excitement surrounding antipodean exoticness has faded. Some of the spirit in

Nolan's vision is echoed in the contemporary work of prominent Swedish painter, Mamma Andersson, who, as will be shown, has strong links with the Nolan. Like many of her contemporaries, Mamma Andersson is interested in depicting and re-negotiating a relationship with the natural environment, but on more intimate terms.

Awe and Mamma Andersson's *Family Ties*

Mamma Andersson's painting *Family Ties* is particularly relevant to this discussion because it conveys a contemporary expression of awe. Her work is less brutal and visceral, and works in a more lyrical way than Nolan's painting. Where Nolan's paintings explore the austere terrain of the Australian desert, Mamma Andersson depicts figures in harsh, freezing Nordic landscapes. Mårten Castenfors (2006) suggests that Mamma Andersson has been influenced by Nolan's paintings. Nolan's work was exhibited at the Modern Museum of Stockholm in 1976 and "the catalogue for Nolan's exhibition is still to be found in quite a few Swedish studios and just like Nolan, Mamma Andersson has pursued an artistic journey that is quiet and determined" (Castenfors, 2006, p. 74). Castenfors (2006) observes that "Swedish narrative painting has its roots in the 1920s. Then, as now, artists were reacting against an increasingly aesthetically insipid modernism" (p. 74).

People inhabit Mamma Andersson's landscapes, yet they feel alien to it and there is a sense that they cannot survive there for long, reminiscent of my experience at Wolfe Creek. *Family Ties* contains four female and two male figures (Figure 31). Judging by the look of their clothes, two of the female figures they may be teenagers and the other two may be older. Dress also indicates that both the male figures may be mature adults. The only figure whose facial expression can be seen is not smiling, instead she appears hypnotically engrossed in the experience. Each participant is lifting their left leg slightly to indicate that the group is moving in a clockwise direction. The dancers move in what appears to be a void, which directs the eye to the dark, flat space near the horizon. The image is mysterious: where is the car that brought them here?; where are the lights of the town?; and if this is midsummer circle dancing,⁵⁰ why does it look so serious?

⁵⁰ The reference image for *Family Ties* may be a photograph of dancers taken as part of the annual Summer Solstice celebration in Sweden, a dance that occurs from midnight till dawn, a remnant from pagan fertility rites from the past. However, no reference works or similar photographs can be found online and, according to Mamma Andersson's London gallery, no literature on *Family Ties* is available. This ritual was slowly passing out of fashion in Anders Zorn's time, but it has been revitalised in a highly tourist-friendly manner (Arts Council of Great Britain catalogue, 1986, +1).

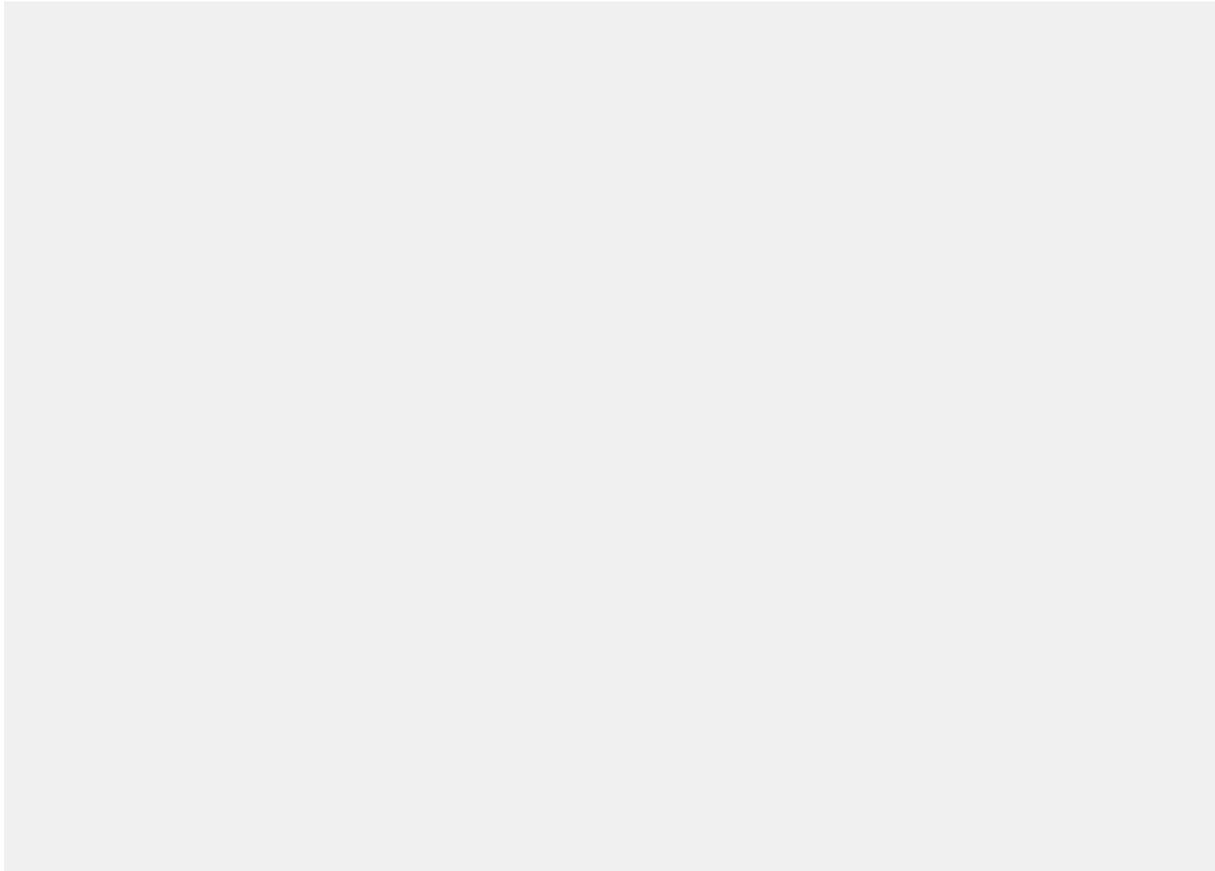


Figure 31. Mamma Andersson. 2013. *Family Ties* [Oil on panel, 121 x 166.5 cm]. London: Mamma Andersson and Stephen Friedman Gallery. Copyright by Mamma Andersson.

In the following visual analysis, I demonstrate that Mamma Andersson uses a combination of different modes of expression in her work to express awe, including visual poetry, a reductive approach to expression, a gestural response to her photographic source, a sense of rhythm from imagined traces of the contours of the dancing group of figures, and psychological dimensions. These modes combine to convey a sense of awe.

I discuss the psychological implications of depicting figures to express awe in the contemporary moment. The figures are elements of an anonymous family group, a distinct contrast to the individual *Rückenfiguren* or figure viewed from behind frequently used by Caspar David Friedrich. We are not transported to a level of external awareness by the painting, but instead are privy to a seemingly real event that is located inside our everyday awareness. In this work, awe operates outside the traditional aesthetic theories of the sublime.

*

Mamma Andersson uses a lyrical yet austere approach to landscape to make present awe while avoiding what has been called the “Pathetic Fallacy.”⁵¹ Responding to the poetry of Alton Locke, John Ruskin (1856) wrote,

The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the “Pathetic Fallacy.” (section 5)

Ruskin uses the word “fallacy” here to mean falseness, which differs from the current use of the word as illogical or displaying false reasoning, and the word “pathetic” implies pathos or emotion rather than pitiful. In coining this term, Ruskin warns against using affective expression in a way that is untrue or false: “and there is no greater baseness in literature than the habit of using metaphorical expressions in cold blood” (section 11). He argues that greatness is the ability, not to be destabilised by an emotionally-moving aspect of nature, such as rock covered with moss, but to stand apart from the feeling and watch it, “as it were, from far off” (section 10).

The poetic aspect of *Family Ties* is striking and immediate. However, it is through the avoidance of the Pathetic Fallacy that forms part of the painting’s poignancy. The contemporary use of the Pathetic Fallacy in painting to associate features in a landscape with feeling tends to be as a trope rather than expressive of awe. The Pathetic Fallacy is described by Laura Hoptman, D. Molon and H. Zuckerman Jacobson (2010) in a catalogue essay on Mamma Andersson:

the attribution of human-like emotions to nonhuman beings—for example, an oak tree martyred by lightning in a Friedrich, a bed made tragic by its look of poverty or its suggestion of disease in a Munch, or a colour so intense that it could cause one to cower in awe in a Rothko. (p. 61)

A more subtle poetic methodology that also extends to literature informs the work of Mamma Andersson, as she discusses with Christian Hawkey:

Whenever I feel short on imagination, I always read poetry. I can pinch a meaningful or beautiful phrase, even if the poem I’m reading is awful. I feel right away whether a title works or not. A bad title can kill a painting, and a good title can lift the painting

⁵¹ John Ruskin (1856) named this phenomenon in relation to feeling and poetry.

up. But a great title can't save a fiasco, no matter how brilliant it is. (Mamma Andersson & Hawkey, 2007, para. 8).

The awe in *Family Ties* is made possible by what Mamma Andersson leaves out as much as by what is shown. This operates through a process of reductive expression, or what she calls “reduce and refuse:”

And I think for me it's very interesting too, you must have a concentrate [sic] of a strong feeling for something. You have to reduce and refuse also things, so it's going to be less, just a few small things who [sic] can tell a story and you can, if you look at the painting, you can make your own history. (Mamma Andersson, 2009)

Similarly, Rob van Gerwen's “subtractive account” describes expression occurring only with certain strict and reductive conditions (Hills, 2002). In painting, colour range, movement, illusionistic point-for-point correspondence, and an entire dimension are stripped from the image in the process. Delimiting the expressive range of a painting enhances the feeling of awe, since the imagination is set off by shadows rather than things. This process facilitates the expressive ambiguity of Mamma Andersson's work. The palette of *Family Ties* is reduced to a few colours. Facial expressions are obscured, except for one ambiguous figure. There is sufficient information to convey a sense of mystery and awe, but any more detail would ruin the effect.

Reductive expression is also noticeable in the restricted palette of *Family Ties*. Painting uses a subtractive colour mixing system, continually reducing the purity of colour on the palette to achieve more complex mixtures of colours and tones. A painting usually starts with all colours (white ground) and becomes darker as it progresses.⁵² The constant filtering of colours by mixing in this “light to dark” technique can lead to murkiness and lack of clarity. However, expressive painting is not mimetic and does not try to replicate the colours that exist in nature, no more than a violin imitates a human voice. This subtractive quality gives the medium its visual timbre. Just as one instrument is distinct from another, the continual reworking of this visual timbre helps establish an expressive range for a painter. Mamma Andersson moves one further step with her reductive palette in her use of black. There is no apparent light source and a contour of white canvas is left around the foreground figures to distinguish them from the blackness of night. This blackness is typical of Mamma

⁵² This is called “light to dark” painting and is currently popular, but the reverse “dark to light” painting is a more traditional technique, working on dark grounds. Dark to light painting is also subtractive and potentially “murky.”

Andersson's work; an untamed, unmixed blackness—black as a colour in its own right. Black contributes to a feeling of awe as it is paradoxically something (black as a colour) and nothing (black as the absence of all colour).

The expression of awe can also depend to some degree on Mamma Andersson's choice of photographic reference material. Photography has become the basis for contemporary figurative painting, following Edgar Degas' photographically inspired cropping, the causal⁵³ nature of the photographic process, and the accidentally composed look of mechanical and more recently, digital imagery. The search for the inexplicable, poetic dimension of awe has lead ambitious artists into the new and unknown circumstances of this causal zone. While this may have initially re-invigorated the medium and helped painting keep pace with the technological world, it has come at a cost.⁵⁴ Much of the more fragile, deliberately expressive component has been lost in this exploration of mechanical (and now digital) imagery generally. Nolan's awkward, expressive work is diametrically opposed to that of the photo-based realist painter, even when a photograph is used for reference (Underhill, 2016). Mamma Andersson inherits these delicate painterly qualities and retains a foot in the causal-image camp, by basing her paintings on photographs and using photographic proportion. The tactile and expressive aspects of her work suggest a way out of the affective impasse that painting has been caught in since the constructionist critiques of the 1980s.

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Mamma Andersson also accesses the poetry of awe by locating an interstice between an experience of time and a complete absence of time in her painting. Any depiction of people dancing in a representational painting contains an inherent paradox. Dancing naturally involves movement and this essential aspect of the expression of dance is missing in a painting.⁵⁵ Paintings do not freeze time like photographs. In still photography, this missing

⁵³ See Roger Scruton's essay *Photography and Representation* (1981) for the details of this argument about photography's intrinsically causal nature. Further explanation is given in Chapter Three.

⁵⁴ In Jean Cocteau's (1950) movie masterpiece, *Orpheus*, the poet Orpheus listens obsessively on his car radio to psychic poetry, after he lost his previous source of inspiration. Orpheus is transfixed and spends long nights in a garage listening to the radio, hoping to use this inspiration to regain his place as an important poet when he should have been listening to his imagination. The scene serves as a compelling metaphor for the ushering in of the new media age and its effect on traditional mediums like poetry or painting. In the late 1920s, Walter Sickert (a follower of Degas) began to look to photography as a way of enlivening his practice after a long career of working from drawings made from life.

⁵⁵ *Family Ties* shares this motif with the Goya etching "Three Gentlemen and Three Dancing Ladies," exhibited in *Renaissance to Goya* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2013, an exhibition that was instrumental in stimulating this research.

movement is more readily accepted as a by-product of that medium. The intentional construction of the image in a painting places transient events like dance into an unusual context. *Midsummer Dance* (1897) by the Swedish realist painter, Anders Zorn⁵⁶ provides an interesting comparison with this aspect of Mamma Anderson's *Family Ties*. *Midsummer Dance* depicts couples in folk costume dancing outdoors at night. The work captures the particular quality of the light in the north of Sweden between the months of June and July and the couple in the foreground have a spectral quality, the male figure's face is indistinct and the woman's head, turned away, is almost skull-like. Zorn may have used photographs as a reference for his work (though his practice is founded on painting from life) and the play of light in this painting reflects his absorption of the compelling attraction of the new medium of photography. Zorn's painting is charming and has an engaging, celebratory mood, but does not express awe.

Family Ties exceeds the limits of a frozen image of a circle dance—we read into it and empathise with it through our bodies. The visual trace around the contours of the figures also evokes movement. Freedberg and Gallese (2007) argue that what is actually depicted in a painting can also be “felt” by the body:

the importance of empathy for esthetics was first emphasized by Robert Vischer in 1873. “By *Einfühlung*, literally ‘feeling-in,’ Vischer meant the physical responses that are generated by the observation of paintings. He described how particular forms aroused particular responsive feelings, depending on their conformity to the design and function of the muscles of the body”...the feeling of physical involvement in artworks not only provoked a sense of imitating the motion seen or implied in the work, but also enhanced the spectator's emotional responses to it. (p. 198)

The combined effects in *Family Ties* of viewing a private performance and following contours of the dancing group contribute to the work's feeling of awe. The zig-zag pattern formed in the interlocking hands, as if they have been cut out to form a paper doll chain,

⁵⁶ At this time Zorn was one of the most popular artists in Sweden. His work demonstrates a highly competent realist painting style, with echoes of other Scandinavian artists, such as Thorarinn B. Thorlaksson and Vilhelm Hammershøi. *Midsummer Dance*, was included in *Dreams of a Summer Night*, an exhibition of Scandinavian painting at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1986. The exhibition contextualised Edward Munch's works within a group of his contemporaries who were moving away from academic realism stylistically into a unique and emotive vision of their environment. Many of the artists, including Thorarinn Thorlaksson,* Prince Eugene and Vilhelm Hammershøi, operate in a compelling stylistic region of Romantic Realism preceding Expressionism.

* The paintings of Thorarinn Thorlaksson in particular, resonate with the experience of awe. Thorlaksson carefully attends to the ambient light and atmosphere of familiar environments. In *Thingvellir (Parliament Plains)* (1900), a horse at daybreak is depicted in an austere Icelandic landscape. The dawn light catches the horizon, the crevasse of a materialising lake, and the nostrils and mane of an exquisitely painted horse.

makes transitory arrangements into a solid and fixed form. The eye touches the edges of the dancer's bodies and follows the patterning and the notion of "feeling in," actively comes into play. We are touched by the beautiful human forms and imaginatively respond by "touching" the image with our eye (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007).

Mamma Andersson explicates experience through association with conventional proportions and forms in the figures, but she also implicates an association with the expressive articulation of the forms and her brushwork. The paint on the surface beneath the dancer's feet has been dragged and is active, supporting the sense of movement. The expression of awe comes about by engaging with the bodies in a simultaneously personal and impersonal way, we feel the emotion, but at a distance as Ruskin described. An experience of awe is formed by Mamma Andersson's intimate aesthetics.

Awe can be experienced beyond a basic reaction such as a feeling of dislocation, and heightened when encountering strangeness, such as seeing a ring of figures dancing in a landscape. The point of view in *Family Ties* is located outside the circle, emphasising displacement from the social group. The depicted figures dancing in face of the bleakness of nature suggest the outlook of "romantic pantheism" (Hoptman, 2010 p. 63). Exotic and surreal, the dancers find poetic expression through their physical relationship with the environment. However, the expression of awe also arises from the inability to mentally construct a narrative in a painting that looks complete and purposeful.

*

Awe in Mamma Andersson's *Family Ties* is reliant on a simultaneous mix of negative and positive effects that emotionally destabilises the viewer. The response to awe is both physical/bodily and psychological. A painting like *Family Ties* works at a subtle level and can produce of an existential anxiety that is both disconcerting and pleasurable. The experience of awe can be both pleasurable and a torment, whether looking at nature or the human body. It presents distinct challenges for artists who depict this feeling.

Family Ties demonstrates how a work can harbour many different (and conflicting) forms of affective expression, another feature of Van Gerwen's (2007) theory of expression in painting. *Family Ties* shows how an image can be both "happy" and "desolate," two different terms for a singular artistic expression, terms that can be considered in opposition to each other. The artist Mike Kelly describes his own work with the ambivalent term, "negative joy," i.e., having a strong but mixed feeling for life that could also be observed through the experience of awe. Mamma Andersson's *Family Ties* accommodates this paradox well.

Separated from any literary references or available image references, *Family Ties* is completely mysterious. The figures look ordinary, neither naked and paganistic, nor dressed in costume as are those in Zorn's painting. This ordinariness makes the work seem like a strange image from a family photo album. The image does not look staged, rather it has the accidental quality of an event witnessed by chance in the forest. The title *Family Ties* is the only other clue. Does this refer to the artist's own family? Karin Andersson adopted the alias "Mamma Andersson" in art school to distinguish her from another student with the same name, but could also refer to the fact that she is a parent and juggles her own family ties.

Rooms under the influence, the title of Mamma Andersson's 2006 exhibition at David Zwirner Gallery, New York, is a direct reference to John Cassavetes's 1974 film, *A Woman Under the Influence*, a film that depicts the psychotic breakdown of an emotionally fragile woman (Andersson & Hawkey, 2007; Molon, 2010). However, *Family Ties* does not seem to be a painting about mental illness, rather a portrayal of a unique event. Circle dancing by members of a family suggests a ritual. The title *Family Ties* implies social bonds, but this "family" seems to be making the most of these constraints. The social constraints of family can be both suffocating and liberating, which makes this painting yet more intriguing. The blackness of the background and the expressive impasto deep red and green colours of the foreground also add to its mystery. The scene is not the overpowering shock and awe of the sublime, but an intimate experience of awe.⁵⁷

Although it is obvious that the family is dancing, it is still unclear *why* they dance. The artist creates a strong awe-inducing quality through ambiguity and the need for accommodation. However, the beautiful melancholy circle of the family is ultimately impenetrable. This is an awe affect—there is no solution or resolution to shut down interest and no conclusive answers.

*

Contemporary Sweden, like Australia, is not all sweeping landscape, it is also urban and suburban. Although Nolan presents a vision of Australian landscape that is still relevant for the authentic experience it evokes, it is from a time when old Europe was looking to Australia as an exotic answer to its own cultural challenges (Fuller, 1985). Mamma Andersson reconfigures this experience for the present. Her "family in the landscape" motif traverses both perspectives of both nature and the suburban family. The intimate nature of the

⁵⁷ It is reminiscent of the paintings of Édouard Vuillard, which also suggest a domestic mystery.

awe experience (subjective and poetic) diverges from the grandiose theory of the sublime that accompanies more familiar imagery. Like Vuillard and Munch before her, Mamma Andersson finds awe in her urban landscape. This urban quality or “backyard-ness” is a defining quality that makes her work feel “closer to home,” even though that environment may be completely unfamiliar.

Deleuze (1997) says of T.E. Lawrence’s writing that “it is as if the entities populate a private desert that is applied to the external desert, and project fabulous images onto it through the bodies of men, beasts and rocks” (p. 124). Projected through the rocks in Nolan’s external desert, awe is seen and felt, but Nolan’s subjectivity is an impenetrable private desert. His character becomes furtive through his merger with landscape in *Desert Storm*. Working in desert spaces can reveal surprising things about our own internal nature and this subjectivity is still important to navigate through. Mamma Andersson’s *Family Ties* includes figures to depict a relationship with landscape that involves dissolution of the ego among a family group that alludes to a blended or collective consciousness as an expression of awe in the present.

I applied Mamma Andersson’s reductive approach to my own methodology and found it made sense in a different context—the intense complexity of painting a real subject at Wolfe Creek.⁵⁸ As time was limited and the task overwhelming, it enabled me to concentrate only on what seemed essential to make the painting. Through Mamma Andersson and Nolan, I became sensitized to my own subjective awareness in relation to a powerful geological feature, and experienced an openness to the expression of the landscape itself. This is evident for example, in *Delirium, Wolfe Creek*, but also in the other works that convey the landscape through the “rawness” of the brush strokes that each contain their own “mini-subjectivity” (Figure 19). I was eventually able to extrapolate the feeling of the potential obliteration of the “human measure of all things,” into a work that uses a meteorite to synthesize the landscape experience in *Black Meteorite Terrain* (Figure 25). The relationship between representation and expression raised by Nolan’s and Mamma Andersson’s work and my own experiences is addressed in the following chapter.

⁵⁸ Much of my painting in the past has centred on the human figure and it was this that attracted me to Mamma Andersson’s work.

Chapter Three – Expression in painting

This chapter looks at how expression in realist painting may be recalibrated in the contemporary context. I examine the arguments against intuitive expression via constructionism, and provide a brief history of the recurrence of figurative expressionism in the 1980s, and discuss how the paradigm has shifted. I consider affect theory as a challenge to one of the basic premises of constructionism, that expression is entirely culturally and socially determined (Hall, 1997). However, affect theory in itself does not seem to answer the problems of expression in figurative painting, partly because it lacks a clear definition as a theory. In response to this, I discuss some of the related theories of representation (reflective and intentional) and how they align with the expression of awe. I argue that both these theories are not in themselves adequate to account for the actual practice of painting and require an integration with affect theory which I summarize in the conclusion as a trans-representational process.

Authentic emotive expression has become diminished in recent contemporary painting. The *14th Biennale of Sydney* (2004), “On Reason and Emotion,” was curated by Isabel Carlos and was a major exhibition which addressed the subject of emotion (or lack of emotion) in art. Carlos (2004) drew on the prominent neurologist Antonio Damasio, when she argued that “if anything in our existence can be revelatory of our simultaneous smallness and greatness, feelings are” (p. 24). Carlos proposes here that the potential exists for a greater homeostasis between emotion and the disembodied flatness of a wholly rationalist approach to aesthetics. Notably, Carlos (2004) states that “emotion is a word that artistic, critical and aesthetic discourse has carefully and surgically removed, especially after modernism” (p. 26).

The Biennale presented the work of a selection of international contemporary artists, including New Zealander Michael Harrison, whose paintings depicted simplified figures with blocked out facial features to suggest a state of alexithymia, a condition where a person is unable to articulate or express emotional reactions. Harrison’s paintings were unusual in this context because the Biennale was dominated by new media artwork. His paintings seemed more entwined with the concept of “expression” rather than “connection,” which Carlos proposed as more relevant to the contemporary condition, where mobile phones and email are the main modes of communication.⁵⁹ Carlos’ premise resulted in an interesting exhibition,

⁵⁹ The word “connection,” while appropriate due to the rise of the internet, has now been widely adopted by advertising and should be reconsidered in relation to the more complex “expression.”

which did not establish any new ground in discourses of painting. To understand why this shift away from expression, and painting more generally, occurred, it is necessary to begin by looking back—critically, as a painter.

Two decades previously, in 1984, I stepped into the crossfire of critical debate about expression and painting. I was as an uninitiated art school student attending the 5th Sydney Biennial, where painting was the dominant idiom. I was struck by a small satellite exhibition at the S.H. Irwin Gallery called *Dreams, Fears and Desires* which traced the history of Modernist Expressionism in Australian figurative art. Sidney Nolan in particular, is a powerful residue in my memory from that moment. I recall Nolan's work as an authentic emotional engagement compared with the Biennale, which struggled to engage despite its much larger scale and emphasis on Neo-Expressionist painting. Neo-Expressionism became suddenly popular in the 1980s and has since been in decline. Neo-Expressionism does however have an important legacy to offer as evidence of the complex reception of the *feeling* of awe in painting by viewer and art critic.

The following discussion points to problems with the view of expressive painting during the 1980s and the effects of some of these residual arguments on how we look at painting now. I critique Hal Foster's constructionism and note the impact of constructionism in constraining the expressive range of contemporary painting with its current emphasis on detachment and irony.

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Expression as a phenomenon should be more carefully discussed in relation to historical styles of Expressionism, so I take up the problem of expression and emotion in contemporary art in the period following the demise of Abstract Expressionism. This occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the emergence of Pop Art and the work of Andy Warhol in particular. Warhol's sentiments on art as a business and his prolific production via The Factory brought cold, objective and distanced perspectives into the establishment, to the exclusion of the emotional content of painting. Consider Warhol's (1962) *Campbell's Soup Cans* paintings made by a print process that eschews the artist's hand. For artists aspiring to connect with or gain endorsement by the establishment, "cool" became the *modus operandi*. This is not to suggest emotion was eradicated from the art world completely during the 1960s and 70s. Through performance art, Joseph Beuys and the provocative feminist performance art movement more generally held the baton for expression. Broadly speaking, painting responded to the influence of Pop Art and Minimalism which "cooled down" the medium sufficiently to make expressive painting no

longer tenable. Craig Staff notes that during this period: “Although for many painting had fallen out of critical favour, the very fact that it was perceived as a peripheral form of practice afforded artists a certain degree of latitude” (2013, p. 52). Emotional expression however, fell into a further peripheral category and became difficult for a contemporary painting practice to embrace. It is easily confused with kitsch, whereas a strategic device like irony recurs and is readily accommodated with a postmodern perspective that meaning is culturally constructed (Hall, 1997). Consequently, unapologetic emotion is often more readily expressed in the contemporary art gallery in the form of performance art rather than painting.

Painting made a public comeback in the early 1980s with Neo-Expressionism and its associated controversy which is illuminating for this research. The Neo-Expressionist style of painting, usually large scale, impasto, crudely drawn, often with confronting imagery, was highly visible and widely debated in the international art scene (Saatchi, 1981). Some major practitioners of this style included; Georg Baselitz, A.R. Penk, Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente. It invested in emotionality in direct opposition to the conceptual focus of preceding contemporary art movements. Sandro Chia reflected the optimism surrounding the emergence of what he termed the Trans-Avantgarde in Italy in the late 1970s and early 1980s—which paralleled Neo-Expressionism:

I've been through conceptualism, minimalism, everything. There is a new richness to our perception because we went through all that. Now it's possible to look at paintings again, we see it not only as paint on canvas, but as something else...A painting is not just an object: it has aura again. There is light around the work” (as cited in Staff, 2013, p. 81).

It is interesting to note that Chia uses the term “aura” in his statement, a notion that pertains not only to aura of the painter-genius that seems to decline after Pollock, but to the concept of awe.⁶⁰ Tony Godfrey (1983) puts a lasso around the group of painterly figurative artists in Italy, which included Chia, and the similar concerns of the German and later American movement known as Neo-Expressionism. Quickly however, this exciting reappropriation of historical painting and expressionism was almost universally rejected.

Before considering the downfall of Neo-Expressionism, it is important to note that a more enduring idea of expression has survived through the School of London, a group of expressive painters (quite separate from the Neo-Expressionists), who were also highly

⁶⁰ The term “aura” was famously used by Walter Benjamin (1935) in his description of the demise of the aura of an artwork, discussed in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

relevant to the Australian context. Expressive figurative painting was a continuing tradition in England (Staff, 2013). The Anglo/American painter R.B. Kitaj (1976) coined the term “School of London” to describe the artists who exhibited together in several important exhibitions, including *The Human Clay* (1976), which Kitaj curated. This exhibition was inspired by a line from Auden's (1937) poem *Letter to Lord Byron*: “To me Art's subject is the human clay” (as cited in Staff, 2013, p.71) and included Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. The School of London were pivotal in what became known as a return to figuration and their reverberating effect remains influential.

In 1981, *A New Spirit in Painting*, at the Royal Academy in London was a landmark exhibition that brought together the School of London painters, the Trans-Avantgarde and the Neo-Expressionists. Presenting 145 recent paintings by 38 artists from different countries, the exhibition included established figures such as Pablo Picasso and Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola), the German Neo-Expressionist A.R. Penck, and then emerging artists such as Julian Schnabel (Saatchi, 1981). Emotional qualities were an important feature of *A New Spirit in Painting*, which drew large audiences at the time (Saatchi, 1981). Particularly the School of London painters were artists for whom emotive expression was a key element.

A New Spirit in Painting became internationally influential, with several Biennales taking up its themes, including the *Fifth Biennale of Sydney* in 1984 and the satellite exhibition *Dreams, Fears and Desires*, which had such a profound effect on me. *Dreams, Fears and Desires* situated Australian expressionist artists like Nolan some thirty years “ahead” of the Neo-Expressionist movement that dominated the Biennale, forming an important link between the Antipodean group and the Euro-Americans. Art critic Peter Fuller⁶¹ directed international attention to the work of Sidney Nolan (Fuller, 1985) as the link between Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism. Nolan had been left out of accounts of the movement by most critics. Generally speaking, Nolan was greatly undervalued at the time when artists embraced the international imperative of Neo-Expressionism.⁶²

The burgeoning mythology that expression involved the privileged (typically) white male painter in the early 1980s eventually resulted in a reaction against Neo-Expressionism. In 1983, Hal Foster published an influential essay in *Art in America*, “The Expressive

⁶¹ Peter Fuller followed the lead of Kenneth Clark’s interest in Nolan and became an influential English critic and writer in the 1980s.

⁶² In Western Australia, artists such as Ivan Bray and Cathy Cinanni connected with this international trend. A group of figurative painters (with whom I am associated) later emerged and became known as the *Oddfellows*, largely due to the curatorial work of Sandra Murray. This group tends to express what Kenneth Clark (1976, p. 202) termed “devotion to the facts” rather than high emotion.

Fallacy,” in which he debunked the principal tenets of Neo-Expressionism, particularly that affective responses could be conveyed *unmediated* through the medium of painting. Foster’s critical approach assessed cultural production through structuralist and semiotic theories. His critique of Neo-Expressionism takes a constructionist approach, understanding representation and therefore expression, as culturally and socially determined. Foster viewed Neo-Expressionism as highly derivative and argued that it “peddled a fallacious ‘unmediated expression’” (p. 80). He championed artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman who he argues had intellectual reactions to the idea of emotive painting and figurative painting, which they expressed as parodies of the mythology around expressionism.

Foster's essay functions to advance alternative stylistic strategies by fashionable artists of the day rather than provide a detailed analysis of expression as an idea. He dismisses the merit of Neo-Expressionism by championing artists that display a derivation of Duchampian irony. Duchamp's attraction to irony and indifference is firmly entrenched in the contemporary art world and hence, references to emotional expression are often dismissed as sentimental or tropic.⁶³ Foster’s constructionist premise overlooks the biological basis of emotion and affect. It also neglects the more flexible sense of expression that extends to non-organic systems like geology, which this research demonstrates. However, the influence of the “expressive fallacy” argument persists in broad establishment views that, in my experience, continues to circulate in art schools today.

The influence of postmodernism, the rise of new media, theories of relational aesthetics, and trends such as the group of Young British Artists characterise the critically acclaimed movements at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first century. These movements and directions often rely on the use of irony rather than an expression of feeling. For example, MoMA curator Laura Hoptman asserted the position as dogma, stating that the second most important quality in a painting after belief is irony: “Of course it’s also important to be ironic, to problematize this notion of belief” (as cited in Kerr, 2016, para. 11). Consequently, the lack of an emotional response or inability to feel, respond

⁶³ It should be noted that even Duchamp, the “high priest” of emotional detachment, became emotionally “leaky” at the end of his artistic output. Duchamp highly restricted his emotional profile through most of his career and his more emotional side was only revealed in his last work *Étant donnés*, a homage to his ex-lover Maria Matins. The work is hence difficult to place in his oeuvre, but its conflicting attractive and repellent qualities locate it within the realm of awe.

and articulate feeling have become normalised qualities in contemporary painting. Neo-Expressionism, which deals with emotive expression, has almost disappeared.

Foster (1983) compares classical expression with Expressionist painting, pointing out that the former conceals the traces of how a painting represents a thing, whereas the latter “frees these marks to simulate direct expression” (p. 80). The problem for Foster is that no such direct representation of an inner world or subjective experience is possible⁶⁴ and he turns to Cindy Sherman’s photography for verification. Foster interprets Sherman’s costumed self-portraits as challenging the idea of the “self” and links this challenge with a critique of expression. Foster is critical of “unmediated expression,” which is the assumption that an artist can transfer a feeling directly from their subjective world into a meaningful objective experience. He therefore lays out a spectrum of expression:

At one extreme are artists who suspect the very idea of expression; at the other are artists, mostly painters, who are consumed by “earnest passion.” Somewhere in between come the Neo-Expressionists who, consciously or not, play at expression. Neo-Expressionism: the very term signals that Expressionism is a “gestuary” of largely self-aware acts. (Foster 1983, p. 80)

Foster favours a system of culturally determined representation that critiques the expression in painting of conscious, subconscious or more liminal states of awareness. He rejects the possibility that the visible world and/or internal states can be represented and posits a direct mirror reflection of the world as a naïve pursuit:

For example, we commonly say an Expressionist like Kandinsky ‘broke through’ representation, when of course he replaced (or superposed) one form with another—a representation oriented not to reality (the coded, realist outer world), but to expression (the coded, symbolist inner world). (Foster, 1983, p. 80)

In Foster's semiotic analysis, Kandinsky presents an illusion of inner expression, generated by an external cultural code. In this case, Foster presents a valid critique of Expressionism as a style, but the crucial question of understanding expression itself is unresolved. He conveniently leaves out the (messy and contradictory) emotional and affective dimension of expression in painting. Foster’s inability to account for the visual expression of “inner states,” except as linguistic and cultural constructs, indicates that other theoretical approaches are required. Brian Massumi and Donald Kuspit, on the other hand, allow for an

⁶⁴ This is a general philosophical problem inherited from Wittgenstein known as “The Private Language Argument”.

expressive dimension in art, even though it is difficult to pinpoint. That affective expression can be identified in a painting, but not verified, should not result in its annulment. Although it may not be possible to quantify emotional transference,⁶⁵ neither should it be discarded.

Foster's semiosis asserts that expressions are, for the most part, mediated through a subject's environment and cultural identity and inseparable from these constraints, ignoring the biological aspects of behaviour that manifest in these cultural expressions. Affect theory provides the stepping stone to question the strict "nurture" location of the constructionist theory of representation in the nurture/nature debate. The nurture or cultural focus of semiotics diminishes the psychological concept of commonalities, where qualities like facial expression are consistent across cultural boundaries, suggesting a biological origin. Further, information theory computer-based metaphors, e.g., language is like a code, have limited application when considering the expressive possibilities of figurative painting as a medium. The application of these theories to painting neglects important expressive qualities such as or texture and atmosphere or "noise." Foster places critical art strictly in the nurture camp and insists that a critique of "natural expression" is central to the intent of the work of Cindy Sherman, as well as Richard Prince, Jenny Holzer, Roy Lichtenstein and Peter Nadin. Foster also offers a critique of unified identity by highlighting Sherman's portrayal of a multiplicity of selves in her photographic self-portrait series.

Foster considers critically the work of painter David Salle. Like other Neo-Expressionists, Salle is part of a wider group, which Foster labels as "neoconservative postmodernism" because these painters retrieve an idea of history and tradition in their work and reinstate the artist (often male and white) as author. While Foster's criticism may be accurate, Salle employs an interesting Neo-Expressionist strategy that can result in an emotive state that I identify as awe. In *Poverty Is No Disgrace*, Salle (1982) appropriates images from various sources, but the final conflated image does not cohere in a single unified meaning. As a result, a viewer is suspended, distanced from the subject, and in a state of apperception as they try to comprehend the discord.⁶⁶ This effectively describes the lack of synthesis that occurs during the experience of awe.

The work of another Neo-Expressionist, Julian Schnabel expresses awe in a different way to Salle. The very large scale of the work from the 1980s creates the experience of "vastness" while the unreality of plates and found objects plus the shock of seeing actual

⁶⁵ It is too opaque to quantify.

⁶⁶ This suspension is sometimes referred to in semiotics as a "floating signifier."

antlers and cowhide suspended on the canvas provides the other awe inducing quality—“accommodation” (Keltner and Haidt, 2003).

No two human brains are ever “wired” alike (Johnston and Malabou, 2013) and these differences manifest in the touch of a painter. Although students in drawing and painting use the same model, medium and instruction, the results are always extremely different. This expressive component is a strong feature of painting and drawing and may be the reason people feel they are looking at a visual translation of the unique inner workings of a painter’s mind. This example points to painting’s heterogeneous properties. It draws attention to the intentional and expressive aspects of the medium that make it different to the causal and more homogenous nature of photographic and new media imagery that Foster supports (Scruton, 1981). The unavoidable causal outcome of an illusionary “real” reconstruction of the visual field (whether through digital photography, video, or the algorithms that mimic it in computer games) has become a significant (homogenous) aesthetic principle by which visuals are evaluated. This principle asserts the dominance of a singular, intangible, illusionary space. In contrast I draw attention to painting, where the touch of the individual, the somatic affiliation with expressive possibilities, and the heterogeneous nature of the paint medium, offer a window into a painter’s unique physiology and mind.

Foster’s expressive fallacy is similar to Wittgenstein’s “private language” argument, which argues that such a language is impossible, however Wittgenstein insightfully defines a space in which his argument no longer operates. In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein refutes the certainty of the Cartesian cogito, by doubting that we have direct and therefore privileged access to our thoughts. This privileged access would imply a first-person language, or a language that could not communicate anything except possibly to itself. Wittgenstein discussed thought in terms of language—that the limits of language define the limits of thought. Foster however, challenges the possibility of unmediated expression through visual means, instating language with a finality that as a painter I find questionable. Foster argues that expression is rhetorical, based on pre-existing signs. However, his argument neglects the “chicken and egg” aspect to consider that an expressive “sign” requires invention.

Constructionism has been critiqued for stripping “the world of any ontological or agential status” (Grusin 2015, loc. 138). Semiosis comes adrift from its anthropocentric basis when we consider awe, especially in relation to the power of a “geological expression” that might occur in a spacious desert landscape, where we lose our normal sense of dominant human perspective, scale, and even who or what we are. The ongoing correlation between how our minds perceive, hold and feel images and how we represent them in drawings and

paintings is the neglected “nature,” as opposed to the “nurture” elements of constructionism. Theories of affect suggest steps towards understanding the “nature” aspects of expression in painting,⁶⁷ which a strictly representational theory or semiotic structuralist theory do not adequately provide.

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The Neo-Expressionism debate hinged on the value of unemotional rationalism as opposed to emotional expression. Donald Kuspit supported the Neo-Expressionist movement and took the opposite position to Foster. In doing so, he was critical of semiotic approaches to art. He drew on Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, noting that “Nietzsche grasped the great importance of worrying the correspondence between thought and world, language and things, which Wittgenstein embraced so confidently in the *Tractatus*....Nietzsche realized (as did Wittgenstein) the pointlessness of trying to make anything systematic of that puzzle” (Kuspit, 1987, p. 128). Kuspit describes the semiotic approach to art history as “shallow” because it neglects the “subjective dimension” found in “social institutions, the religious ritual, and work habits, and moral codes that humans construct over time” (p. 131). He asserts that these cultural entities ought not to be reduced to semiotic meaning as they “are all ways of expressing and channelling instinctual demands” (p. 131). Kuspit argues here for the inclusion of a psychological dimension into the discussion, not for the reinstatement of rituals and traditions.

An assumption underlying constructionist approaches to representation is that any form of expression is uncritical subjectivism. Massumi (2002) explains that the idea of expression is rejected as it “conjures the image of a self-governing, reflective individual whose inner life can be conveyed at will to a public composed of similarly sovereign individuals—rational atoms of human experience in voluntary congregation, usefully sharing thoughts and experiences. In a word: communication” (p. 8). Massumi's statement underlines problems triggered by the concept of expression. He considers that the turn toward affect has refigured the expressive impasse resulting from the dominant influence of structuralist and semiotic movements of the 1980s. Massumi (2002) argues (following Deleuze and Guattari) that “the subject's expression is still causally linked to its content, but the nature of the link has changed” (p. 14).

⁶⁷ As well as the consideration of nonhuman phenomena.

The problem for Massumi partly resides in the idea of communication and he sees expression as different, more as transduction than transmission. Transduction can be understood as the conversion of expression to another form—from the initial stimulus (he uses the example of a lightning strike) through to the bodily experience of the person experiencing an affective state. The “receiver” is not simply involved in a reception of information, but instead has unique somatic responses, a “mini-subjectivity” that changes the nature of the “message” (Massumi, 2002, p. 30). The integration of recent theories of affect with expression demonstrates how a state like awe can be expressed through a figurative painting. We experience feelings, not only through the body, but also through the way the painting is carried out. For example, Lucien Freud’s work is emotive, but not emotional in a sentimental sense. His portraits are embodied affect. His experience is always measured through the human body—the dynamic exchange of existing in space and being defined by a somatic existence. This presents an alternative, or at least a more nuanced, approach to reader-reception theories, which are currently foundational to contemporary art.

The somatic aspect of painterly expression creates a quite different mode of thinking and feeling to the language of signs. Deleuze’s understanding that painting thrives in the affect and percept stage, but falters in the concept phase where language flourishes, comes into operation and underlines the significance of experience/knowledge unrestricted by the boundaries of language. The implications of understanding have important consequences now, when theorists are questioning the metaphor of mind as computer, that visual memory is stored like a jpeg file, or that a visual representation can be understood as if it were a text, or system of signs (Epstein, 2016). In the conclusion of *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein (2001) acknowledges the mystery in human experience that cannot be dispelled by scientific explanation: we should in effect “pass over in silence” the things we cannot name with language (p. 89).

The influence of Foster’s argument however, persists in contemporary art theory. Virginia Button (2015) reflects on the fact that Linda Nochlin used the expressive fallacy argument in her 1994 critique of Lucien Freud:

Freud was criticised for pretending that a direct and privileged relationship existed between what he saw and felt and the marks on the canvas. Perhaps for him it was no pretence but commensurate with his understanding of how art is made, a visual language learnt and reworked through the individual eye. (Button, 2015, p. 78)

Button (2015) challenges Foster’s assumption of the autonomy of cultural and social signification, when she observes that “Freud’s idea that a face and body could somehow

reveal the essence of an individual personality, while dismissed by critical theorists in the 1970s and 1980s, now seems less at odds with current scientific thinking” (p. 86).

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Moving beyond constructionist thinking in relation to the expression of awe requires a resolution of expression and representation. We have two related concepts—the feeling of awe and the expression of awe through painting—and two that are seemingly unrelated—affect and representation. The following discussion considers a version of a reflective theory of representation (sometimes called mimetic theory), Rob van Gerwen’s “reflective representational model” of expression. Rob van Gerwen (2001) compares expressive painting and acting to introduce the concept of a representational expression of emotion. An actor does not have to *feel* bad when a script tells them that their character is experiencing grief. The actor creates a symmetry between their experience of that feeling and their imitative ability as a performer to convey that experience. The skill for the actor, as for the painter, is to select the right combination of qualities to emulate the affect. This suggests that if a painter wanted to convey a feeling (like awe), they would not have to *be experiencing* that affective state, but could use their artistic skills to apply the right visual cues to enable the viewer to recognise the feeling. Because a painting is not a responsive egocentric entity, some cues will be missing, requiring the viewer to “fill in the blanks” from their own experiences of that feeling. I suggest that the dynamic quality of a painting is partly due to this absence which can be demonstrated by the reductive expression in Mamma Andersson’s painting.

The term “expression” in common usage refers to either the process of making one’s thoughts or feelings known or, in more concrete terms, the particular configuration of a person’s facial features showing a particular emotion. It can also be used in a broader cultural sense; for example, it is possible to say the Greeks “expressed” their philosophy through their sculpture. The facial expression definition is a useful analogy in relation to painting. In Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou’s (2013) terms, the face is a zone or plane where emotion finds expression and so the canvas or the two-dimensional surface can be seen as the visible manifestation of an emotional state. A face that depicts happiness is a readable expression and it is reasonable to say that you saw someone’s expression as joyous.

Richard Wollheim uses “expressive perception” as an underlying concept of expression in painting (as cited in Van Gerwen, 2007). In this mode of thinking, an artist projects an emotional state onto a landscape or person and this is in turn perceived through the resulting painting by a responsive spectator. Van Gerwen elaborates on this idea, but

makes a distinction between an egocentric perception, which might occur in reading facial expressions in real life, and a constructed mental expression that occurs in painting, which he defines as a non-egocentric “persona,” comparable to the persona masks of ancient Greek theatre. The painting obviously cannot express emotion like living people, who can use their bodies, their tone of voice, and “presence” to convey their feelings. The painting is constructed by a painter to present cues from everyday life (through a persona) as an approximation of an emotional experience. An artist can recall visual cues from their personal experience of awe and reconstruct them in a painting. These new awe affects do not necessarily belong to a “pre-existent image repertoire” of which Foster is critical (1983, p.80). The affective expression therefore occurs in a painting through the representation of a new emotional “persona” and not through a naïve translation of a feeling through a trope.

Van Gerwen’s model implies that the expression itself is a representation—that we can dispense with an authentic emotional experience and use a form of mimesis or reflection, to “fake” the emotion as an actor would do. The problem with this theory in terms of this discussion is that this does not sit well with affect theory, which relies on the authentic significance of autonomic and “preconscious” reactions to find an escape hatch out of the artifice of cultural expression and representation.

Reflective representation is however an important aspect of figurative painting. Both affective expression and representation operate in my Wolfe Creek paintings. The meteorite crater expresses a geological force that is experienced as an affect, but and I rely on a process of reflective representation to create an image of it.

Van Gerwen (2007) adopts Wollheim's model of representation that involves the dual perception of the marked surface of the painting and awareness of the thing being represented. Van Gerwen adapts this “twofoldness” to represent a naturalistic scene that does not incorporate “cross-modal” (e.g., using both touch and vision) aspects:

Something which is perceived egocentrically is a representation of the naturalistic type if and only if while being perceived non-egocentrically, causes us to anticipate (in a postulatable world) the homomodal recurrence of some of the thing's properties.
(Van Gerwen, 2007, p. 140)

Van Gerwen’s description seems to be no more than a well-defined tautology, but he adds that the properties of a thing do not have to resemble something actual, but could be a fictional “tracking” of that quality. It is not necessary to consider “whether our anticipation regards such tracking as causal (as in photography) or intentional (as in painting)” (Van Gerwen, 2007, p. 141).

Van Gerwen's distinction between painting and photography is drawn from Roger Scruton's (1981) persuasive, yet contentious, argument that painting, being "intentional," is representational, whereas photography, as a causal process, is not. For Scruton, intentional representation is a foil to causality. From the viewpoint of a realist painter however, this may not be strictly accurate because painting can utilise a rigorous mimetic component that becomes operational when painting a subject from life (using a reference object or person) and thereby shares a relationship with photograph's causal aspects. In an intentional theory of representation, the painter imagines or sees an image of a person in a state of fear for example then through a deliberately imaginative painting process, gradually and thoughtfully forms a two-dimensional image in the form of a painting. Things are rarely this linear in making a painting however. The painter may only have a vague idea of what they are about to do and arrive at an expressive result through the painting process. This may not have been the initial intention. An intentional relation could still be affirmed however, by arguing that the intention simply arrived late, or the painter changed their mind mid-way through the process.

Also a painter may have more than one intention in mind when depicting a scene. For example, they might intend to make an approximate copy of the visual field and also reflect in the painting a feeling for the landscape. In the first instance, the painter would imitate the visual features of an external reality (for example, mixing ultramarine with titanium white paint and alizarin crimson to make the colour of distant hills) and in the second, try to represent what it feels like to be in a particular state of mind (such as awe) and so may increase the intensity of the colours to encapsulate this feeling. Alternatively, the artist may, after climbing a hill to get the best view, find the simple blue/mauve hues of the distant hills perfectly elicit the feeling of awe and so use that colour accurately, because it also reflects the affect.

The difference between causal and intentional/reflective image making has a long history that predates photography, as this historical observation by Robert Dale (1833) suggests:

In the neighbourhood of our bivouac, and for some distance around were large masses of granite: in one of them we discovered a cavern, the interior being arched and resembling somewhat in appearance an ancient ruin. On one side was rudely carved what was evidently intended to represent an image of the sun, it being a circular figure about eighteen inches in diameter, emitting rays from its left side, and having without the circle, lines meeting each other at right angles: close to this representation of the

sun were an impression of an arm and several hands. This spot appeared to be used by the natives as a place of worship. (p. 58)

Dale's observation is of the ancient Aboriginal paintings at Cave Hill at Gwambygine, eight kilometres south of the small town of York, Western Australia.⁶⁸ He describes one image as a "representation" or intentionally created image (Figure 32), and the other as an "impression", which occurs as the result of a causal process that created the outline of a person's hand, rather like a contact print or one of Man Ray's "Rayographs" (Figure 33). The representation of the "sun" is made ambiguous by the internal cross-hatching lines.⁶⁹ This painting could be considered as an ancient example of figurative painting operating as an expressive representation.

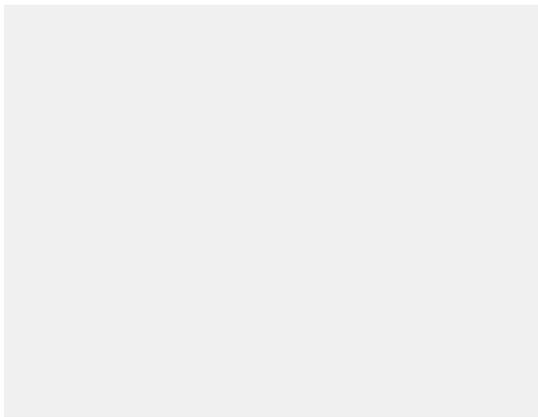


Figure 32. "Gwambygine Cave, The 'sun' of Ensign Dale's account. The thick white lines make up the design on a background of red. Photos V. N. Serventy" From "Cave Paintings Near York and Hyden," by V. N. Serventy, 1952, *The Western Australian Naturalist*, 3(6), p. 123.

⁶⁸ York is 97 kilometres east of Perth. The first officially recorded documentation of the art in this area is by Dale, himself an accomplished artist.

⁶⁹ The illustration does not show the emitting rays.

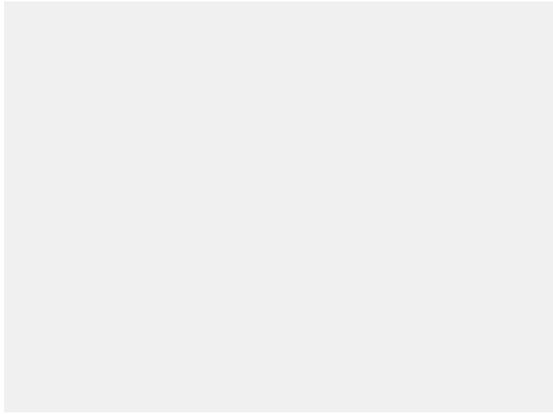


Figure 33. “Gwambygine Cave. The hand and forearm on the wall” From “Cave Paintings Near York and Hyden,” by V. N. Serventy, 1952, *The Western Australian Naturalist*, 3(6), p. 123.

I suggest here that the stencilled hand by contrast is the outcome of a homogenous and causal process rather like photography and is in fact a form of photography coexisting with the history of painting. Similar stencilled hands have been found at different locations, the cave paintings of Lascaux in France, for example, but intentional representation, in this case, the representation of the sun, varies significantly in different times and cultures, indicating that representation and expression are related to heterogeneous processes of cultural and individual difference. Simply put, the “representation” is more uniquely expressive than the “impression,” illustrating how we might consider expressive painting. Photography, hand stencils, or frottage can all be considered causal processes. The hand stencil may transfer an awe affect as a concept (it is the actual imprint of person from the long distant past). However, painting breaks the causal chain because the links can, at least to some degree, be reassembled and this process is sensuously embodied in the final image. Although Scruton’s identification of the distinctive causal properties of photography is a useful tool, his definition of painting as intentional representation is a distortion of an actual painting process, particularly when painting from life. This process that begins in intuition, then combines reflective and intentional representation is *trans-representational* expression.

Conclusion – Trans-representational expression

The critique of representation as an idea in painting comes from many different directions, one being in response to dominant powers and ideologies that create a specific subject position. Michel Foucault's analysis of the various subject positions and the exchange of power that occurs in Diego Velázquez's 1656 painting *Las Meninas* is relevant here (Hall, 1997), because for Keltner and Haidt, awe is felt when someone of a lower social status encounters a person from a much higher status, but this by extension can apply to other phenomena. "The capacity to experience awe in response to questions of social dominance then generalises to other stimuli such as buildings operas or tornados, to the extent that these new stimuli have attributes associated with power" (2003, p.307). The important point in this study is that awe can be experienced and expressed because power is operational in the geological landscape. The paintings I made at Wolfe Creek Crater respond to the power of the site in several ways; I take a perspectival position (a representation), but I am also influenced by the harsh conditions of the landscape and through process and touch, respond affectively to the site. Power and representation are inextricably linked in Foucault's terms, but can the representational aspect of the expression of awe be dispensed with altogether?

In conclusion I consider the opposite position to representation—that representation be dispensed with (non-representational theory). I argue that it cannot, but a new theory that is more fluid is required, one that adopts affect theory to work as a more accurate idea which occurs inside the frame of the painter's canvas. I arrive at an affective trans-representational position to integrate these concepts into a meaningful position.

Mamma Andersson's paintings fit with the early twentieth century canon of tonal realist painting, but they also draw the expression of awe evident in Nolan's works into the current period with specific subject matter and execution. I have argued that the reductive quality of her representation and her poetic depiction achieve this. Both these qualities are strictly within the bounds of "traditional" representation/depiction. However, her (and Nolan's) transference of awe also includes a performative element. This performative element fleshes out my conception of trans-representational expression.

In arguing for non-representational theory, Nigel Thrift (2007) suggests that critical modes of expression are centred on how processes operate beyond the confines of the Cartesian theatre. Thrift's suggestion prompts me to consider whether the expression of awe can occur using a model of performative painting outside of representation. Because painting

is a physical act that occurs over a period of time, it has a significant “performative” aspect. Barbara Bolt (2004) discusses process and representation in relation to the performativity of painting, beginning with the birth of perspective in Renaissance art, which offered a window onto the world through reflection (mimesis):

Our common sense understanding of representation has grown out of this modelling of the world. According to this mode of thought, re-presentations can be understood as a copy of a model. In the world of models and copies, the model exists “out there” as some pre-existing static reality which the copy then imitates. Reality is what-is; and the representation is only ever a copy of it. Representation reflects reality. (Bolt, 2004, p. 16)

At one level, it is possible to accede to this “common sense” or mimetic understanding of representation. It becomes confusing however, when a distinction is made between “copy” and “model.” Bolt's writing references Martin Heidegger who rejected the simple (mimetic) idea that art reflects the world like a mirror in his 1953 lecture *The Origin of the Work of Art*. For Heidegger, the work of art does not strictly refer to something else, nor is it a sign or a symbol for something else, but is instead an “inexplicable mode of being,” a “formlessness” beyond the boundaries of language.

The opposite of this “formless” expression resides in the Cartesian concept of representation. In this often criticised paradigm, the mind perceives an experience and “plays” a constructed image to consciousness, just as a person sits in a cinema and looks at a screen. It assumes an integrated self in communication with itself, receiving the “data” of perception. But given there are many viewers in our “bundled” consciousness, how do the various “selves” form consensus between image perception and multiple image “processing”? Painting, understood as a two-dimensional image constructed on a picture plane, has long been lumbered with this model.

Deleuze (2002) suggests another alternative to representation can be seen in Francis Bacon's paintings as directly rendered “sensation.” However, Bacon often incorporates a perspective element (a representation) in his work, e.g., the cages and cubes that contain figures, popes and portraits. He also uses recognisable human shapes, outlines and contours that can readily be categorised as representations of external reality. So Deleuze's sensation becomes another way of describing representation.

Barbara Bolt turns to the practice of painting itself as a way out of the seeming deadlock of representation. Take, for example, Bolt's description of her own painting practice:

At first the work proceeded according to established principals of painting practice—blocking in the shapes, establishing a composition, paying attention to proportion and the shapes of light and dark—a re-iteration of habits and strategies of working. However, at some undefinable moment, the painting took on a life that seemed to have almost nothing to do with my conscious attempts to control it. The “work” (as verb) took on its own momentum, its own rhythm and intensity. Within this intense and furious state, I no longer had any awareness of time, of pain or making decisions. In the fury of painting, rules give way to tactics and the pragmatics of action. The painting takes on a life of its own. It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me. The painting no longer merely represents or illustrates reading. Instead, it performs. In the performativity of the image, life gets into the painting. (Bolt, 2004, loc. 98)

Bolt’s description of her practice (which sounds like Abstract Expressionism, but could apply just as well to figurative painting) becomes the basis for a critique of conventional understandings of representation in painting. However, I contend that there is nothing in her description that is outside the normative experience of concentrated focus experienced by art students and artists while painting and drawing. This kind of amorphous description can be seen in popular books, like Betty Edwards’ (1982) *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*.⁷⁰ Edwards (1982, p. 4) describes that artists often feel they are transported to a different conscious state, “at one with the work,” that their “awareness of the passage of time fades away, and words recede from consciousness,” and they experience a “mystical activation,” closely approximating Bolt’s descriptions of her own process.

Bolt’s description fails to indicate that the artist is no longer actually using a process of representation, just as the driver of a car, who has let their mind wander and wonders how they arrived at their destination, could be said to be no longer driving. Bolt bases her critique of representation on an inaccurate paradigm of human conscious awareness. The phenomenon she refers to might be better described as a process that occurs below the threshold of human consciousness. In fact, we often use this “below” conscious processing as part of everyday experience, whether drawing and painting or walking and daydreaming. Bolt’s attraction to the idea that the painting takes on a life of its own is understandable

⁷⁰ I should note that neuroscience has subsequently challenged Edwards’ theory and in this research, the “before” drawings were often more expressive than the “afters.”

however, because many artists experience an alterity with their own work and liberation from their own ego.

Figurative painting operates from within the boundaries of representation and in some ways helps define representation. However, a transformation occurs when it is extended to affective expression. The performative aspect of Bolt's discussion addresses important issues to do with preconscious awareness and physical process, as occur in affective expression. Thrift and Bolt may not be working with clearly defined concepts when they discuss the performative aspect of artistic practice, but what they imply gets around a constructionist reduction of representation and expression. The problem with non-representational theory however, is that it does not sit well with figurative painting, which is inherently representational. In contrast, trans-representational expression incorporates mimetic and intentional representation with the somatic aspects of affect theory.

As a figurative painter, the possibility of experiencing vibrant visual sensation often seems more important than the need to convey a preconceived idea. This may mean making a copy of the visual field, or engaging with a landscape with the animation of an action painter. Tom Conley (see Deleuze, 2002) notes that a painting made on the floor, then displayed on a wall has the "optical catastrophe and the manual rhythm" of an event (p. 145). My Wolfe Creek paintings were worked on the ground and later displayed on a gallery wall, and depict aspects of chance in the mark making and causal forces (through frottage). The paintings are visual events that correlate with the sensation experienced in an awe-inducing landscape. The expressive possibilities of the painting medium are not merely mimetic processes related to the visual field or the feelings of the painter, but also convey the physical forces of the world. If you spill milk when you are making coffee, the spill is itself a disruption. The "mess" makes you feel uncomfortable, the irregular physical shape has an immediate emotive impact. In painting, this "mess" is a move away from a reflective representation to a physical and affective realism.

The representation of affect in painting is difficult to untangle, partly because our reactions to paintings are not recognisable or nameable in way that even television commercials can trigger strong feelings of desire, envy or elation. Van Gerwen asserts that paintings do not express everyday emotions and Deleuze offers a concept of affect, where the painter's input is not an emotion, but a pre-cognitive reaction to sensation. The physical traces of the painter's hand reveal the subjective world of the artist and, although we do not have a clear understanding of how this operates, it is possible to consider this an epiphenomenon of the painting process. Further, a painting embodies a tactile knowledge that

cannot be accessed in photographic reproduction or description. It can only be fully experienced by viewing an actual work.

Recent figurative painting such as Mamma Andersson's *Family Ties* has tended to blend painting with photography, imbuing the fidelity of electronic/mechanical image with the warmth and feeling of the painter's touch. Nolan's painting on the other hand, uses accidents and chance to access the causal chain, giving his work a process-based characteristic and all the emotive implications that come with this. My own painting uses the causal frottage as well as strict adherence to the contours of the landscape as they fall within the frame of my painting. I adhere to the causality of the light field, to utilise the sensations that create the affect, but I am not *forced* to do it. Although causality conveys the force of affect which is a significant characteristic of the expression of awe, it is ultimately the intentionally constructed image, the representation, which conveys the awe of a landscape in a painting.

Van Gerwen's persona model emphasises that paintings are not sentient and do not carry feelings in the way we experience them in an everyday sense. Deleuze and Guattari also negate the "emotional" aspect of expressive painting when they refer to affect in paintings as not emotion, but as hard-wired reflex. My own experience insists that there is an overlap between van Gerwen's representation theory of emotive expression and Deleuze and Guattari's affect theory. A painting is an intermediate zone between forces and processes, affects and percepts that permits enough control (intention) to express the power of a feeling like awe.

A painting can be therefore an enclosure that operates as an extension of the human body, a sense organ between feeling and sight. The painting is a retina that cannot itself see; the images are visible traces from the painter's retina. Paint has a physical skin that cannot feel, but can relay the painter's feelings through touch, gesture, and the mark made.⁷¹

Massumi (2002) describes that the charge of an expression is picked up through non-human formation integrated in the human body itself:

a ray of light passing into the human eye strikes on the level of physics. Its impulse passes through many an interlocking level, from the physical to the chemical to the

⁷¹ In my Wolfe Creek painting series, the extreme conditions affected the surfaces via the impressions of rock, rapidly drying paint and spinifex grass and grit sticking to the painting as well as the "urgency" of the paint handling.

biological. On each level, it produces a dedicated effect that is captured as content. (p. 29)

This entire process remains an autonomous series of affective responses, unless a representational painting process is used to intervene. The physics of light on the retina are then reflected in a painting, intentionally represented and expressed.

This affective trans-representational model takes the landscape as the ignition point for awe—painting and expression follow and into which the performative act is brought. This model applies under the following conditions: awe is understood in an autonomic sense; painting operates as an extension of the sense organs, incorporating both sight and touch/feeling; and expression is an affective response to the sensations of awe. Overall, this project can be approached in these terms. The sensation (or qualia) can be copied and transported from the picture plane. Other forces, such as the feeling of awe and the process of painting itself, influences the trajectory of the “block of sensation,” so that it changes condition many times in response. The mimetic influence that keeps the sensations or coloured shapes in certain positions and proportions as they are seen. After a long, roaming path inside this catalytic structure, the information arrives on the painting’s surface, completely reformed by the forces of affect and reflective/intentional representation. These unique occurrences inside the catalytic field give painting its expressive agency. Different subject positions are negotiated in the process and merge with the representational process. The painting is still a recognisable image, but it carries with it the imprint of the subject/maker and the visible forces of sensation. Awe becomes affect on the painted surface through this collision of processes and influences.

Goya shares with painters like Nolan, Mamma Andersson, and the School of London an expressive motif drawn from life rather than a reappropriation of an historical style that occurs in the mannerisms of Neo-Expressionism. Foster’s critique of Neo-Expressionism’s faux “unmediated expression” described an inherently problematic movement, but also threw expression out with the bathwater. In response to Foster’s semiotic critique, I position awe as both biological reaction and a cultural expression, and therefore difficult to capture accurately in constructionist theory. The expression of awe in painting is trans-representational.

Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman (1996) write that it is important to think of emotion and affect as significant because they are evidence for what one values: for example, your guilt at not paying your taxes shows that you think you should pay them. Emotion and other forms of affectivity, do indeed

play these roles. But...they play far more important roles—roles that place them at the very centre of value and evaluation. (p. 3)

Emotion and affect are at the forefront of the capacity to make an otherwise completely arbitrary aesthetic decision, e.g., should one paint Lake Cowan or the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater. Representational painting is not an instantaneous image making process, it is slow (often taking months or years), laborious and fraught with the potential to fail. It therefore takes significant effort and emotional commitment to make any single image. It is painful to look at when it isn't working and difficult to show to others in case it is criticised. The risks are enormous, in that affect/emotion and intuition are required to make major guesses (that are often, but not always correct) in the process. Affect is therefore crucial to understanding aesthetic expression in figurative painting and was a motivating feature of this project—the outcome of which was the successful production of a series of large scale works responding to the awe of the Wolfe Creek site.

Nolan's landscape paintings ooze with the tension between expression and representation, but they are expressions from a time past. Mamma Andersson's use of the human figure offers visual notes for contemporary expression of awe in painting, providing an effective "meshwork" between content and expression. She incorporates photographic source material in a way that is highly sensitive to the imagery. Her work encapsulates the intimate properties of awe rather than the more traditional forms of chaos and submission to power. Her material process and tactile elements implicate rather than explicate the expression of awe.

This research offers a critical framework to view contemporary painting practice, accessing an affective response in painting that is not reliant on sentiment or naivety. I principally used a realist/materialist framework, through Deleuze and Guattari, DeLanda, and Massumi, but others are applicable. I considered both the living and the inorganic expression of the meteorite crater at Wolfe Creek through my interaction with it and the expressive "affordance" of the site itself, is integral to the expression of awe conveyed in my paintings. The site is made extant by the power and indifference to human life manifest in the expression of awe. The awe response is not simply submissive however; it activates a sense of one's own empowerment. The site is a physical and material phenomenon recorded in the

surrounding distribution of ejecta and shocked quartz,⁷² and a physical metaphor expressing deeper existential concerns.

Trans-representational expression is a painting theory for affective expression that merges realism with subjective awareness rather than viewing them as opposites. It is relevant to art practitioners and students of art, and provides a conceptual framework not only for awe, but also other emotions, reinvigorating contemporary figurative painting. The study provides a focus for the expression of awe and defines methods of expression such as touch/gestural handling to develop a new painting methodology for representing affective states and nonhuman expression through the geological landscape. It also invites critical reinterpretation of cultural hierarchies that have neglected affect/emotion and expression and greatly restricted engagement with contemporary painting.

My main accomplishment during this project however, is the series of large scale paintings that express the awe I experienced at Wolfe Creek Crater and surrounding areas. The paintings embody some of the chaos, heat, intensity and activity of the site. This integration of affective states into painting strengthens the expressive potential of figurative painting, intentionally accessing poetic states of subjectivity, rather than reiterating conventions of Expressionism. Representation is still an essential part of affective expression in painting, but it needs to be understood in a more fluid way than the reflective, intentional or constructionist approaches of the past. A trans-representational model of expression sees reflective and intentional representation modes interact with the force of pre-cognitive awareness described by Deleuze's affect theory. These components are reformed by the artist within each new affective context. The body is the ultimate transceiver, through which a painting trans-represents the expression of awe through sensations and processes, touches and colours.

⁷² Shocked quartz is a geological term that describes the patterning in quartz that displays a received a shock from the past and is particularly relevant to meteorite collisions.

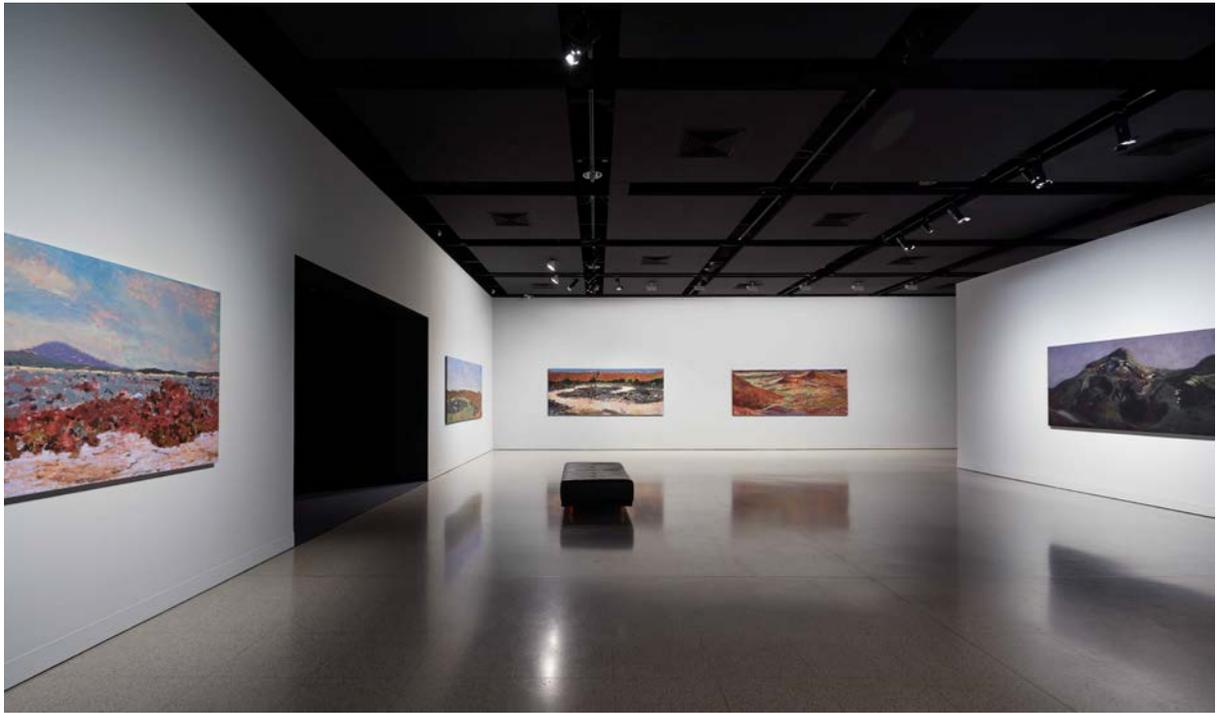


Figure 34. Installation at the John Curtin Gallery. Photograph by Robert Frith/Acorn.

Appendix

Notes on some existing connections between awe and art

1. Awe in painting may be contingent on the gaze. Artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger writes that “the gaze of the artist, having trespassed its eye is vibrated by it, so as to awaken a new swerve or roll up in a rapport” and in unison we examine the contours of a motif in a painting (as cited in Massumi, 2002, p. 227). This suggests that following the contours of a large painting potentially reinforces a feeling of awe, and that a physical transference (similar to touch) has occurred in the actual “roll” or “swerve” of the human eye.

2. Awe does not always exist where we might expect it, particularly in relation to scale. Concerning physical features understood to contribute to a sense of awe: if the work is particularly large, or contains some extreme form of contrast or strong light effect, then these qualities alone or combined may create a feeling of awe. For example, contemporary portrait artists, such as Chuck Close, often enlarge the subject's face to a massive degree. According to Keltner and Haidt (2003), a human head of this massive size should result in a perception of awe in the viewer, but frequently does not, perhaps because of the ubiquity of the advertising billboard in the West or enormous portraits of political party members in socialist regimes, it has become itself a cliché and therefore annuls the surprise or wonder necessary for awe.

3. Awe in relation to painting may be auratic, i.e., being in the presence of a work by a well-known artist like Munch or Rothko can stimulate feelings of awe. This feeling of awe may be quite separate from the qualities of the work or the power of the artist and is simply by virtue of the fact that the work is unique and has a certain reputational or historical context.

4. The discourse of awe and painting has been dominated by the Kantian theory of the sublime. Immanuel Kant developed a theory of the sublime that includes the distinction between the mathematical sublime (applied to impressive buildings and perspective, for example) and the dynamical sublime (such as experienced in great storms). These definitions have a strong resonance with the actual practice of painting subjects of this kind, but the theory requires adaption for understanding awe in the contemporary context, for the following reasons.

Steven Shaviro (as cited in Massumi, 2002) observes that reference to Kant's theory of the sublime has become fashionable and associated with more (ostensibly) radical thought, whereas beauty is assigned a more pedestrian position in critical theory. He notes wryly that

The Sublime seems more appropriate to contemporary taste because it is an aesthetic immensity, excess and disproportion. Whereas the Beautiful is one of harmony and proportion. It is as if Beauty were somehow old-fashioned, whereas the Sublime is considered more radical. (as cited in Massumi, 2002, p. 9)

The reception of Kant's theory of the sublime in the contemporary context indicates that a critical re-reading of Kant is paramount. Kant's theory of the sublime speaks directly to the contemporary reader. He writes of the sublime in a form that conveys anxiety and uncertainty: "the feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy, in some cases merely with quiet admiration and in yet others with a beauty spread over a sublime prospect" (Kant, 1764/2011 p. 16). Over 30 years ago, Bertrand Russell dismissed Kant's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful as outmoded: "Like everybody else at that time, he wrote a treatise on the sublime and the beautiful. Night is sublime, day is beautiful; the sea is sublime, the land is beautiful; man is sublime, woman is beautiful; and so on" (Russell, 1984, p. 679). The distinctions Russell draws attention to in Kant are simplistic; the sublime is real and powerful even dangerous, while the beautiful is somehow reduced to the trite and to the predictable. This indicates that a renewed approach is timely.

Critical re-readings of the Kantian sublime have been examined through popular culture. Shaviro addressed the imbalance or contemporary bias between the two concepts of sublime and beautiful, by presenting Prince's (1986) *Under the Cherry Moon* as an example of a film that is beautiful, but not sublime: "The screen is suffused with light, which vanquishes all shadows...But even the night is luminous" (as cited in Massumi, 2002, p. 10). Shaviro draws attention to the contemporary hierarchy that places beauty on a lower rung than the sublime.

5. Burke's (1756) treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful* begins with a discussion about taste that asserts all people have the same standards in reason and taste and that without such standards the labour of critics and theorists is absurd and even useless. Burke affirms the clarity of his argument with a warning to future critics not to pass over the premise and conclusion of his discussion with objections based on "some poetical passage" (Burke, 1756, loc. 187). Burke's treatise is more directly related to painting than Kant's theory (which is more general in nature) as it outlines many sources of sublimity which all have direct visual

comparisons. The qualities outlined by Burke include “obscurity” (objects or scenes difficult to perceive), “power” (large scale or contrast), “infinity” (vanishing points or diminishing repetition), and “magnificence” (including stars, galaxies or natural wonders). These qualities create an immediate visual cache for someone representing the sublime in the visual arts

6. Slavoj Žižek positions the sublime in the political realm of the present. He argues that governments use awe to create a feeling of power or a “false consciousness,” particularly in the case of war (Mundy 2015). Notably, the United States strategically employed “Shock and Awe” as a military discourse to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Two years earlier, intensely shocking images emerged from the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, New York City, conveying a more negative expression of awe.

Žižek’s theory is interesting from the perspective of representational painting in that it is the *failure* to represent the sublime (Kant’s “Thing in itself”) that allows the feeling of desolation. As Žižek (1989) observes, “we succeed in transmitting the dimension of subjectivity by means of the failure itself” (p. 207). In Žižek’s terms, a meteorite crater would be a “negative presentation” of a meteorite’s past catastrophic presence, but this only serves to emphasise the feeling of awe by working on the imagination. Žižek turns from Kant’s idea that the object of the sublime evokes a “boundless terrifying phenomenon” towards Hegel’s notion that we are dealing with a “miserable little piece of the real” (Žižek, 1989, p. 207). In this more materialist sense, there is no longer a place for the sublime and only the *feeling* is left. This notion of an “abandoned sublime” is the point where awe manifests in the contemporary context.

7. According to Keltner and Haidt’s (2003) analysis of Burke’s theory of the sublime, there are two major components that are significant to the experience of awe. The first of the two stimuli capable of producing an awe experience is power. Power may reside in the charismatic attributes of a leader or an experience in nature, but the effect is often a response of overwhelming terror or submission to a higher power. The second major component is based on Burke’s understanding of “obscurity.” Here, Burke argues that when our visual perception of something is less well defined or obscured we are more likely to have an expanded or sublime experience of it. This aspect of the Burkean sublime (and Keltner and Haidt’s theory) is not universally applicable to the experience of awe, which I argue can emerge from very opposite visual stimuli—from a highly focussed and detailed visual experience. Consider the example of seeing time-exposure photography of activity on the

sun's surface.⁷³ The experience of awe here is activated in several ways, but observation of the detail of this activity is one significant aspect rather than the veiling or obscuring of that visual detail as Burke suggests.

8. Keltner and Haidt's (2003) theory of awe does not depend on an understanding of the sublime, although it does refer to Burke's theory in particular. They establish an argument that is mostly independent of cultural and religious dimensions. In contrast, Vladimir Konečni's (2005) theory of awe is dependent on these dimensions. Konečni argues that severance from the classical and ancient traditions of art has eliminated the sublime and that awe has become an unacceptable response to contemporary art. This argument is not substantiated by Konečni and has therefore to be understood as a general opinion. Contemporary painters like Mamma Andersson and Michaël Borremans do appear to aspire to the condition of awe, and my understanding is that they would welcome such a response from a viewer.

9. Konečni has some have interesting ideas about awe particularly that awe is an emotional response that can be "switched off," i.e., the person experiencing awe can quickly and consciously withdraw from the experience if they choose to do so. This is a potentially useful quality in an art gallery setting, where the emotional exchange varies and is often time-restricted. He also explores bodily reactions to awe, i.e., "being touched" by a work can result in chills and even tears in some cases.

Notes on awe

Keltner and Haidt (2003) identify two essential conditions for awe as an emotional state that differentiates it from similar emotions like wonder or amazement. According to their theory, the feeling of awe arises from the sensation of "vastness" and the need for "accommodation." Vastness may mean physical size, like encountering a huge natural landscape feature such as a gorge or mountain range, but Keltner and Haidt also take it to mean an encounter with a higher social status or notoriety, as in being in the presence of a

⁷³ Images of the sun's solar flares demonstrate Burke's theory of fear in the face of power. There is a feeling of accommodating something we are taught not to look at. A strange visually forbidden zone is present before you. On viewing the powerful and even violent activities of the sun, one is reminded of the fragility of our existence on Earth and how completely dependent we are on it. Close-up images of solar flares are not part of our normal viewing experience, but they are both familiar and terrifying. Scientists convert these images to something we can view through many filtering processes and, most significantly in terms of this painting project, they have been tonally reduced or restricted to a dark or mid tonality with just a few bright and dramatic highlights, not unlike the Romantic paintings of John Martin.

famous artist. The underlying emotional impact of Keltner and Haidt's vastness is captured by the experience of power, particularly when a superpower overtakes a more normal experience. Accommodation, in the sense of the difficulty accommodating something, becomes operative when an overwhelming new experience requires apperception or a new experience is assimilated and layered with what is already known.

Keltner and Haidt attribute awe in its most basic form to human hierarchies and our ability to function as highly organised social animals. They refer to this aspect of awe as “primordial” and distinguishable from “elaborated” forms of emotion. The ritualistic display of circle dancing (examined in Chapter Two) in Mamma Andersson’s *Family Ties*, for example, fits both this idea of a primordial display and an elaborated cultural activity. Primordial emotion refers to the relatively hard-wired pre-cultural sets of responses shaped by evolution and built into the peripheral nervous system of the human species. Elaborated emotion refers to the full set of culture-specific norms, meanings, and practices that cultures build up around primordial emotion (Keltner and Haidt, 2003, p. 10).

Keltner and Haidt use a form of the basic emotion paradigm which Ruth Leys (2011) thoroughly problematizes and which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. Some of Keltner and Haidt’s descriptions have direct potential aesthetic application, but most of their argument is less applicable to painting. They suggest that encounters with paintings and artefacts can have a transformative effect on the viewer, even potentially shifting a subject’s world view, similar to the traditional sublime response. It may seem a circuitous path to the conclusion that paintings inspire awe, but Keltner and Haidt's theory has more to offer artists: “The potential power of awe, combined with the mystery of its mechanisms, may itself be a source of awe, giving pleasure both to those who study it and to those who cultivate it in their lives” (2003, p.10).

The awe response of a person to a natural phenomenon like an intense electrical storm, according to Keltner and Haidt, relies on the fact that the object or event is large and suggestive of power. It may also occur in response to patterns in nature that suggest infinite repetition or vastness, as suggested in Emmerson’s 1836 essay *Nature*: “all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing: I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (as cited in Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 309). Emmerson believes he is part of the supernatural, one Keltner and Haidt’s awe-inducing qualities, and his experience of nature becomes enmeshed in this experience.

Keltner and Haidt also describe bodily reactions associated with awe—in particular piloerection or “goose bumps” as a physical manifestation of awe, “suggesting that this may be a distinct autonomic nervous system marker of awe” (p. 312). Another condition is shuddering (“someone walked over my grave”), or reacting to an awe-inducing concept or sight with a tremor or twitch. Recent studies have highlighted a concomitant relationship between a person’s emotional reaction and the automatic nervous system (Benedeka & Kaernbach, 2011). Like Massumi, Benedeka & Kaernbach (2011) observe often overlooked relationships such as those existing between sadness and pleasure. However their findings differ from Massumi’s qualitative approach, because their conclusions are based a scientific methodology that uses music as the principal source of stimulation. They observed that chills and goose bumps (sometimes called “chicken skin” in the United States) are commonly associated with awe. Can reactions to music be compared to the two-dimensional and silent world of affective painting? I experienced such an automatic nervous system response on viewing the Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater, and this led to further investigating painting as an expression of an awe experience.

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