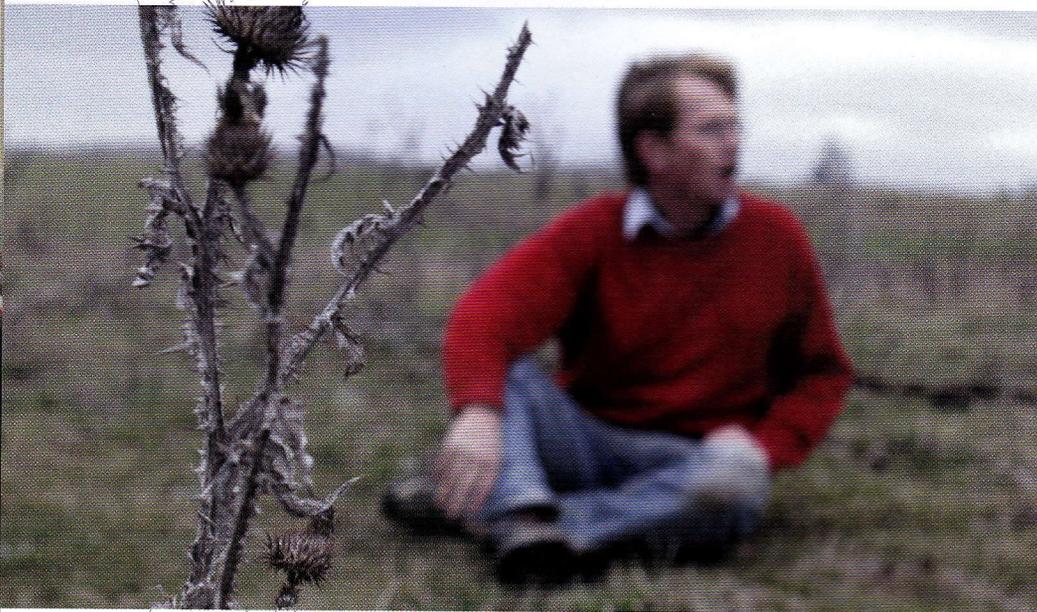


# John R Walker

Story Steve Lopes



Not the landscape itself, but how we experience our surrounds over time. This is the stuff of a painter's obsession.

**JOHN R WALKER** speaks the way he paints. His conversation flows in long streams of considered logic and theory, punctuated by poetic quotations and the occasional gruff swipe at a dispassionate contemporary art world. Then his mind settles with a reflective offering on the beauty of his adopted hometown of Braidwood. Artist Profile spent time with John on his own turf, absorbing the terrain that has inspired his life's work. He is an instinctive painter, a creator of involved, gestural landscapes that have elevated him to a coveted status in a long line of celebrated Australian landscape artists.

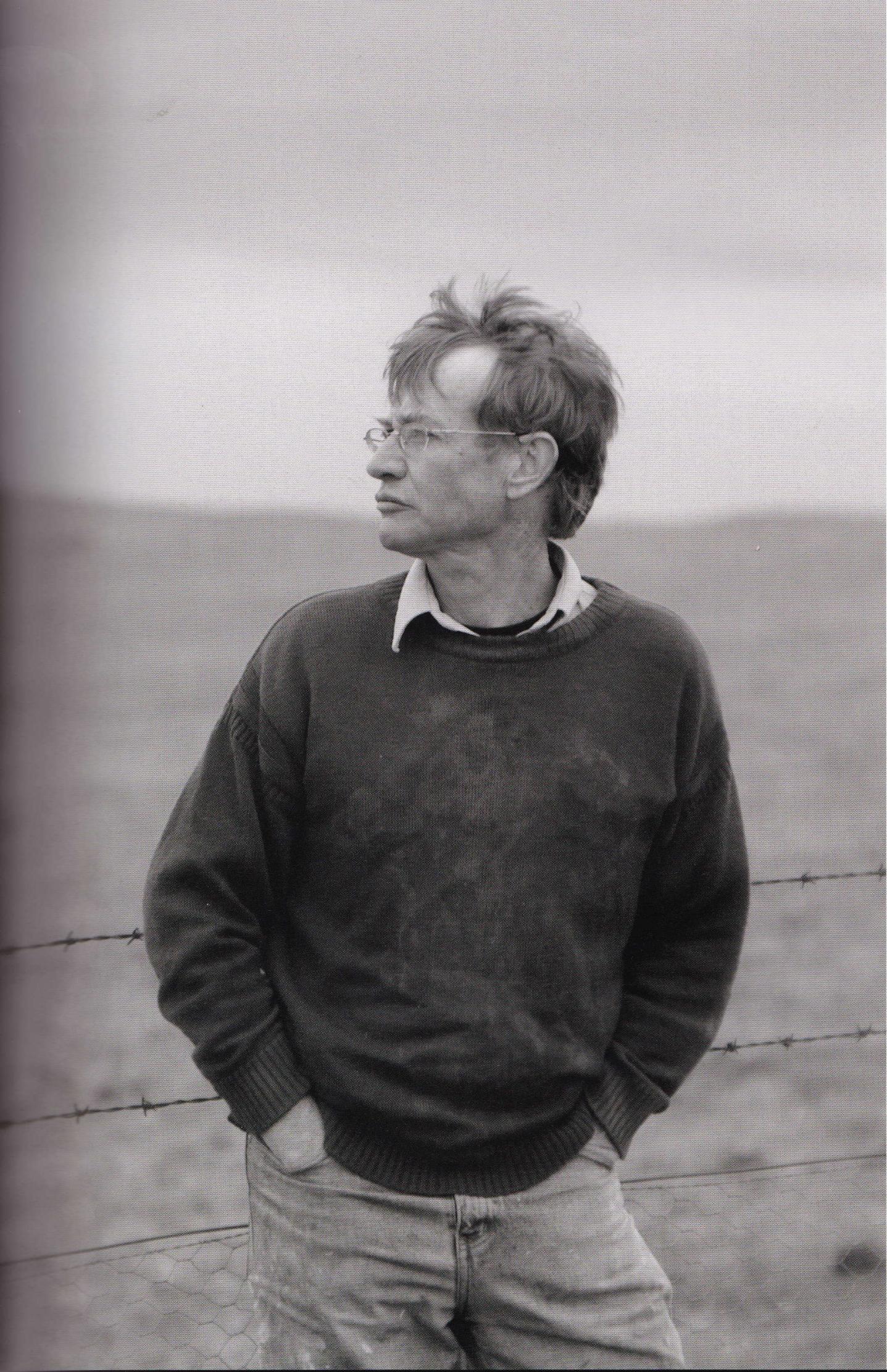
**Your work is deeply involved with a personal experience of the landscape. Can you expand on that?**

What I paint is representations of representations. It's a multi-layer thing. I've no question that there is an exterior reality but my experience is actually of my experience. So in the end what you actually represent, perfectly, embarrassingly so sometimes,

is the mind that constructed it. It may also have other things, and hopefully it does, but it always reveals completely the mind that made it. Unfortunately a lot of contemporary art is, to borrow from [Eugène] Delacroix's lovely phrase, "that somewhat incomplete expression of an incomplete mind", or actually it's the complete expression of the incomplete mind — or no mind at all in a lot of cases. What I've always been doing, what any artist does in the end, is actually paint experience itself, which is particular to the illusion that there is a reality and that it is able to be perceived.

**You've spent a lot of time bushwalking, how has that impacted on your work — the discipline of looking?**

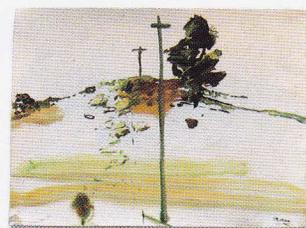
Obviously the sequential aspect to my work simply started from thinking about how you make a picture represent what it's like to go for a walk. When you go for a walk you look around for a while, stop and sit on a tree, move on. It's about a story. It's not about looking at something, rather walking around and being in it. Right from the word go, any profound instincts of mine have always been things like ecology and biology — also simple things like what's called deep time ... you know, evolution and the narrative of life and the nature of recursion. Basically, I'm a painter. I make complex forms that, if they work, produce some sort of a pattern or movement in another brain, which is the art really.





01

“It’s easier to make poetry out of things that are damaged and ugly than it is out of beautiful things.”



02

01 **Six Days at Bundanon and I Give Thanks To Boyd**, 2001, oil on canvas 183 x 221cm

02 Studio sketches, 2008, gouache on paper

**How much time do you spend in the landscape? How does the process work?**

I just go out and bike around Braidwood, look around, set up somewhere and do some gouaches and then eventually come back here into the studio and sort of try and pull something together. The main thing is I vary it from drawings to gouaches or to my foldable Chinese sketchbooks, instead of always working on something large and serious.

I didn't ever really do "look and put". I like to walk around and look at the scene and then quickly put down my immediate response. If you do enough of that you start to internalise it and at some point it's no longer something that you're separate from — it's in you. What I'm looking for, and I know it sounds terribly romantic, is if I can close my eyes and I can see it, I can examine it from different viewpoints in the mind.

The days are getting pretty habitual. I've got about three areas I keep returning to — Bedervale, Tantulean Creek, and I go out to Bombay to the river. Well, I never really stop working. The only really serious long break I've had in the last few years is when I went to Europe a year ago and wasted a lot of time looking at bloody art museums.

**How long were you away for? You were saying it was your first time to Europe.**

Probably about six weeks, I think. I found the Prado the real highlight. Almost everything in it is the best representation of that artist's work. I thought the Spanish were fantastic — I mean, they couldn't give a shit. And then there is Francisco Goya ...

**How do you translate Goya into your landscape?**

Goya, firstly, it's a thing of how he paints and it's what you could call touch. It's no copyist. In fact, a lot of academics in France would have said he was terribly rough, and he was really discovered by Manet and so on, and what they liked in a way was that Goya never hid the fact that he was painting pictures. He wasn't trying to do illustrations. Increasingly what I've learnt from Goya is 'less is more'.

**Didn't he say something like "my eye doesn't count every button on a person's coat when I walk in the street so why should my paintbrush see better than me"?**

Yes, and this brings us to the second thing about Goya — I feel similarity, in terms of ... I think artists should have schools like musicians in the sense that somebody was at the school of Paganini and that literally they were taught by somebody who was taught by somebody who received transmission from Paganini. It's not a literal thing, but Velasquez, Goya, Manet are definitely part of one narrative. The other thing about Goya, particularly in times as chaotic and stupid as right now, is honesty. He really does tell you what you saw and that the subject actually really matters a lot. It's not some accidental thing. Goya's power really comes down to one basic truth: there's a certain toughness to it. Look at his contemporaries who are all concocting pretty Rococo froth and you know it makes him all the more remarkable because most art at that time was definitely not concerned about reality. They were in fairy lands and like Yates observed 'you feed the heart on fantasy, the heart grows brutal' ... fantasy or illusions are always dangerous and they tend to end in tears.

**Is that what attracted you to this area? Its tough landscapes?**

It's a lot easier to make poetry out of things that are damaged and ugly than it is out of beautiful things. In fact, I'm quite useless with beautiful things. I mean, I like them, but if you look at this place it's full of skeletons of trees not because people killed them but because no one thought to allow a regrowth, because they didn't anticipate they'd die. Even the Hawthorns seem to be struggling — during the drought this area was pretty severe. Yet there's also this sort of beauty. I would never call myself a greenie. This place changes. For example, at Monga there's a kind of Antarctic cloud forest that's

being compared to pristine wilderness. In another direction you've got the Great Divide. This place changes so much, you could almost be somewhere a lot greener and wetter like New Zealand or Scotland at different times of the year but by, say, two months of hot weather it's start looking like outer Mongolia. It's strangely variable and there's lots of source material all within an hour on my bicycle.

**Do you intend to you spend the rest of your life painting here?**

I certainly don't plan to move. I had this ambition, I suppose conceived years ago, particularly the first time I went to Bundanon, where ... right I'm 45ish, I'm either going to really make this move now while I've still got energy, because by the time I get to 55 it's a bit too late. It was my intention to try and build a life as an artist. By moving out of Sydney, I had the space to actually do things I couldn't do there. And the climate? Some people think it's cold but I think I'm Scot enough to actually respond to it somehow. Probably a genetic thing, that sort of harsh edginess that I like. It's a real working country town and there's still plenty of real things happening here. Living in Braidwood where I have my studio, if I think I'm overworking something I'll go out the back and plant some cabbages. I really like growing vegies and being able to cook or go for a walk. It's a funny thing about artists, most of those I'm interested in have lives, where there is an awful lot of artists who have careers and you've got to keep some sense of proportion about all this. Cabbages are probably just as important.

**How was your work received at your recent SH Ervin Gallery survey show in Sydney?**

It's really nice — a bit embarrassing in a way — it's basically the last 10 years of work and the first time the whole project was in one room. A lot of it I hadn't seen in ages so there's a slightly odd feeling that reminds you of the fact you're actually getting old and it's all down hill from here. But the response was amazing. I'm used to being on my own. I'm quite happy with the idea of being fairly obscure, though I'd like my work to be known. I'm very fond of two [Akira] Kurosawa films called *Sanjuro* and *Yojimbo* and they're the original *Man With No Name*. Basically the artist and the Samurai are very much the same — if you're any good at all you work for yourself or if you're really good you work for nobody. I like the idea that I can walk into any shop on the main street here and people just think I'm a scruffy little guy.

**When you were about 38 years old, you started to focus solely on landscape. How did that decision come about?**

It was a number of things. It took me a while to grow up and be honest. It's funny 'cause being in the land for me, right from when I was a child, was where I felt really alive. I'd internalised this thing, which I think was really common back in the late 70s, that serious art couldn't be landscape art, and I thought I was a serious artist pretentious twat. It took a long time for me to accept otherwise. I mean, intellectual pride would have to be my sin — to accept the somewhat humbling realisation that the only thing that I actually really connected with was uncool. And then the final sort of thing, and this sounds awful sentimental, but my wife Anne and I got together when I was about 38, and the fact that Anne thought I was alright actually made me feel a lot better about myself. My friends at the time couldn't believe — and probably still can't believe — that such a stylish and cool women could see something in this guy. That helped me too. I think it's the kind of thing that at some point you have to come to terms with. I accepted landscape was my given 'patch'. Well, you either go with what you actually really are and make the most of it or you spend your whole life trying to be what people expect. If you're going to be an artist there's no choice, you either follow your own necessity or you die. This is the thing I meant about Goya, apart from anything else, if you're any good, if you simply do it straight. There's no fussing around, there's no style, there's no concern about art, per se. Art is something you use and the more you do that — something that Goya said — the more it travels.



05

I'm quoting again but I love the [Edo period] poet Matsuo Basho. He's quite an amazing character — the original sort of samurai poet. He says beautifully in *Narrow Road to the Deep North*:

'In this mortal frame of mine, which is made of 100 bones, 9 orifices, there is something, something that is called the 'windswept spirit' for lack of a better name and for it is much like a thin drapery that is torn and swept away at the slightest stir of the wind. This something in me took to writing poetry years ago, merely to amuse itself at first but finally making it this life long business. It must be admitted, however, that there were times when it sank into such dejection that it was almost ready to drop its pursuit or again times when it was so

had a class in transcription at the AGNSW but they'd taken down every picture that was on the list and rehung the gallery. I was running around desperately trying to find a few things for my class to get them to do before they lost attention and I just said to someone, well, what about *Fire's On* by [Arthur] Streeton. I was standing in front of it and it really hit me. The painting sang and all these memories and smells from childhood came back to me. Suddenly it was a really interesting picture and so tough. In the context of when he did it, in like 1891, this picture defies every convention of sentimentality that drove picture making — it's in your face. The final thing was being at Bundanon in 2001. The fact the place was overly determined by Arthur Boyd but I was still able to produce 60 works on paper and five major oils, which made me feel stronger. Then also I started to think in terms of a fairly big ambition — I can't quite put into words, but like sort of being the Dickens of Braidwood or something, that making a map, if you like, of the whole place.

**You can't deliberately be spontaneous. It's like grace. It just happens. It's not determined. It's not earned. It just falls from heaven.**

puffed up with pride that it resulted in vain victories over the others. Indeed, ever since it has begun to write poetry it has never found peace with itself, always wavering between doubts of one kind or another. At one time it wanted to gain security by entering the service of a court and in another it wished to measure the depths of its ignorance by trying to be a scholar but it was prevented from either because of its unquenchable love of poetry. The fact is, it knows no other art than the art of writing poetry and therefore it hangs on to it more or less blindly.'

I'd really like to sit down with a few glasses of sake with him.

**So then landscape captured your attention?**

I then started going to Badja one winter and I did a whole load of gouaches and it was organised for me to use the shed on [Utopia Gallery Director] Chris Hodges' farm up in the Hunter Valley. I started going places, just painting, and realised I quite liked the work and it was quite interesting. There was this huge area in art that was basically vacant, you know, that had lots of interesting stuff which no one was doing much with. There's a sort of freedom with that. I was also teaching and

**Your work's quite spontaneous, it's has a freedom.**

Look, the great paradox about spontaneity is that it's impossible. You can't be deliberately spontaneous, full stop. It's one of those things that just happens, but also to do it you have to be really, really calculating, you have to do an awful lot of thought and preparation ... to try and visualise the thing, make it real. You can't deliberately be spontaneous. It's like 'grace', It just happens, It's not determined, It's not earned, It just falls from heaven. Paint does the thinking. If you're lucky something completely unexpected comes out. The making is the thinking — there is nothing else.

**Has indigenous art been an influence on you?**

That's a strange one, obviously because I virtually used to live in Utopia Gallery, which I show with and which was principally an indigenous artists' gallery. I've seen a lot of it. Rover Thomas has always meant a lot to me. I've always felt a sort of connectedness to the way he constructed pictures. But, if it is, it's more by subconscious osmosis. I'm very aware of and concerned with actually making the culture I'm a part of. My ancestors came off a hill in Scotland, but I live here. What's more, my great-great-great-grandmother was born here, in 1850, so this is all I have and I have to start with what is at hand. My tradition is Tom Roberts, Sidney Nolan for good and bad, and you can only make something better by first accepting what you are — that is the key to transcendence. As long as you keep pretending you're something else, you can't actually do anything about it, you're shadow boxing. The other thing with the indigenous aspect is that it is overwhelmingly from out in the desert. It's a great thing and I'm not knocking it, but I don't live there. Not a lot of us do. Almost nobody does. That's an important spiritual space.

...it feel like I'm painting landscape, I feel like painting history or time, a residue of actions about looking really hard at things. I'm more concerned with where we live and paying attention to the places we're really destroying. Of course, there's damage in the desert with extinctions etc, but the places we're really ruining are the ones we depend on for living. I mean we're concreting over the Hawkesbury, we're turning the Murray into an artificial sewer, and they're the places where our food and water come from, not Alice Springs.

*You have mentioned before how important Nolan is to you...*

Maybe I'm biased, but I think Streecon and Nolan are, in terms of Australian art, the two greatest and the two most original. I have deepest affection for Ian Fairweather and I respect Fred Williams but I think the sheer luminosity of [Streecon and Nolan's] best stuff is something special. I just find Nolan's inventiveness and his ability to make these signs for all sorts of things out of the most unlikely stuff, it's amazing. His best stuff, from say about 1949-1959, could have been done yesterday. They're about us being Australian, about the place and they're an odd view. I'm not sure I entirely accept what underlies some of them in a way but it's bloody good.

I mean, Nolan had some limitations, which were not unlike Picasso's, if you ask me. Someone like Matisse, if he was feeling a bit off-colour could always just go and get the model in the room and do a painting. Whereas Picasso and Nolan sort of had to arrive at some sort of visualisation before they could start. I'm very grateful for the gouaches because if I'm feeling a bit low I can always go out in the paddock, set up the table, boil the billy, do some fairly pedestrian pictures of trees and you never know by the end of the day I might suddenly feel inspired again. Someone like Nolan or Picasso, because they only ever really worked from inspiration, if they ever lost a thread — and both of them did I think — it's very, very hard to pull themselves back to it. They couldn't be just like Matisse or whatever and sit themselves down and do a painting of a woman and then probably make love to her ...



06



05 **Bedervale South Walking**, 2005, gouache on paper, 5 panels, 75 x 275cm

06 **Hollow Tree**, 2001, oil on polyester, 184 x 220cm

For more on John R Walker:  
Utopia Art Sydney  
[utopiaartsydney.com.au](http://utopiaartsydney.com.au)