

# Andrew Sayers

opening address

Drill Hall Gallery

2nd July 2015



Andrew Sayers

Kirsten Coelho's *In the falling light*

John R Walker's *Here I give thanks*



The two exhibitions here tonight Kirsten Coelho's *In the falling light* and John Walker's *Here I give thanks* – are distinct and individual exhibitions in a kind of conversation with each other. The two artists have created meditations on the Australian landscape. Though their mediums are different (having different possibilities and histories), their subject is a shared one and their works really do seem to talk to each other. As we move through the Drill Hall spaces we carry the artists' sensibilities from room to room, and we can add the experience of Sidney Nolan's *Riverbend* in its side chapel. *Riverbend* painted exactly 50 years ago, a painting in front of which I have spent many a joyous hour of contemplation, shares something with the work of the two contemporary artists who are tonight its temporary neighbours. *Riverbend* is episodic – its 9 panels are both continuous and discontinuous, time gently flows through it, there are moments of drama, but it is as still as a Japanese screen. So, don't miss the *Riverbend* room; there are two of John's 'concertina' books placed in dialogue with Nolan's masterpiece.

Kirsten Coelho, *In the Falling Light*

I have encountered Kirsten Coelho's pieces before, but today was the first time I have seen an entire exhibition of her work – this exhibition expertly curated by Karen O'Clery. My first reaction was: how right these pieces are for a Canberra winter where the light is bright with reflected snow and the landscape pale as limestone. There's a kind of rarefied quality, a reserve in her work that matches my memory picture of Canberra. Light is Canberra's greatest triumph. Kirsten's title encourages us to see her work in terms of light, the fall of light and shadow modulated with great subtlety. Light, yes, but form as well – forms of varying type, redolent of history, gathered together to create small universes.

Wendy Walker's catalogue essay tells us what we need to know to give context to this body of Kirsten Coelho's work. She writes about the richness of white objects; she writes of the artist's interest in finding a vocabulary of Australian historical forms (ink-bottles, pans, oil-cans, tea-caddies); she writes of the grip on the artist's imagination of the last journey of that marvellous artist Ludwig Becker, who funnelled his wonder into the vessels of meticulously rendered drawings as his own light was dying.

I can't meaningfully add to these words - in the presence of the work we are invited into its quietude.

Silence is the best condition for contemplation.

Clive James is very good on light. I recently read his poem *The Light As It Grows Dark* and it seems apposite not only to Kirsten Coelho's work, but also to John Walker's (for he, too, has sought the light effects at different times of day from before dawn to dusk).







John Walker has been well served over the years by writers on his work and you can read lots of insightful pieces linked to his website. And in the catalogue for this show Glenn Barclay has undertaken an interview with the artist that teases out many of the ideas that underlie his approach to the landscape and sets out the recent history of his painter's life in Braidwood.

Again, I don't think I can meaningfully add to these words, except to observe that this exhibition is another leg of the journey into the landscape that John has been on now for many years. The title of the exhibition signals that this leg is bathed in the light of benediction.

There's no doubt in my mind that the biggest event in John's life as a painter was his deep engagement with the landscape that culminated in his move to Braidwood. I remember John's work before that move. When I was studying at Sydney University in the 1970s I lived with Perry (who I later married) in Leichhardt, just a few doors away from Stephen Mori's gallery, then called The Student Gallery. That's where I first saw John's work – he had his first exhibition there in 1979.

John R Walker, *Here I Give Thanks*



Some years later, as curator of drawings at the NGA, I visited him in his studio in Stanmore and bought some large, free flowing watercolours for the collection. In the 1988 survey of contemporary drawing that I curated, mounted here in the Drill Hall, two of these watercolours were included – an untitled female nude and a view of Annandale seen through the window of the studio. Thanks to some sleuthing work by the staff of the NGA, I have been able to confirm the accuracy of my memory of that installation – a huge black Tim Maguire hung on the wall to our right and a big Mike Parr charcoal drawing to our left ... and set like a keystone in the middle of the wall opposite the two John Walkers. (Yes, Terence, the Drill Hall has long been a very valuable space – and continues to be so – for the display of contemporary art).

Then there was a twenty year gap during which I followed John's work, but from a distance. In 2007, now older and wiser, we reconnected in Braidwood. I was captivated by his original vision of the landscape – I said at the time that compared with my first studio visit the scene was less of engorged flesh – everything was now bony, stretched out, linear, scrawny. He had found in the landscape a kind of untidiness that can be seen everywhere in rural Australia. From his studio in Braidwood, John has continued to be the chronicler of the big histories in the landscape, from its geological structure to the incidents of human interaction emerging from and being drawn down into the earth. That's what this exhibition celebrates.

Celebrates is the right word. After all, the exhibition's title is about giving thanks. Here I give thanks to John for his opening my eyes to a way of seeing the local landscape. I can no longer drive the Kings Highway, from the Manar turnoff in the west to where the road plunges down the forested escarpment without seeing it as a series of John Walker landscapes.



And I give thanks, at a personal level, to John and his wife Anne Sanders, for their friendship and their encouragement of my own coming out as a painter. I'm sure John has his own list of thank-yous and I'm sure that in the front rank of those is Christopher Hodges and the unfailingly delightful team at Utopia Art Sydney. When I visited John in Stanmore all those years ago, Chris's gallery was on the floor below. It's been a great partnership.

And the curator, Glenn Barkley – we thank you, not only for making a selection that gives us new insight into John Walker, but for giving the work space! It is the most difficult thing to do as a curator – to include just the amount of work that will tell the story; that has been achieved here – the paintings and works on paper are allowed to breathe.

Glenn chose the title of the exhibition. It comes from the 2001 painting called Six days at Bundanon and I give thanks to Arthur Boyd. Yet in 2015 the artist's thanks surely go well beyond gratitude for the vision of the great painter and by extension all the painters who have given us visions of the Australian landscape. Here, finally, he gives thanks to God.

What Glenn has subtly pointed to in this exhibition is John's Christianity. Increasingly I think the key to understanding art is to understand it in the context of belief. Here, as we enter the Drill Hall we are confronted by a great religious painting - a landscape of Sandhills Road – an Easter painting, full of nails, barbs and chains – a bush Bosch, in which the objects left in the landscape speak poignantly of tragedy.

I was talking to Kirsten Coelho earlier today and she spoke of objects found in the landscape as providing starting points for her work. So, again, in opening this exhibition I open myself - and we are all invited to open ourselves - to a more profound understanding of Australia and the histories of its landscape.

Andrew Sayers

Utopia Art Sydney  
+ 61 2 96992900