



John R. Walker: painting from the landscape

SASHA GRISHIN

IT WAS ABOUT A DOZEN YEARS AGO that John R. Walker turned seriously to painting the landscape. It may be true that since early childhood, bush walking and being in the landscape may have been part of his experience of growing up, but it has been only just over a decade that the natural environment became *the* major subject of his art.

Like most artists, when pressed for an explanation for decisions taken intuitively, Walker hides behind an anecdote. He tells of an incident when he was teaching as a painting lecturer at the National Art School in Sydney. He had decided to take a group of his students to the Art Gallery of New South Wales to discuss a number of preselected paintings, but found on arrival that the paintings which he had selected for discussion had all been taken off the wall and he ended up discussing Arthur Streeton's juvenile masterpiece *Fire's on* (1891). When he examined the painting in all of its radiating beauty with its luminous sky it convinced him that a landscape could be the subject for a 'tough painting', which basically is code for saying that it could be a worthy subject for a contemporary painter. The final step in his conversion to becoming a serious landscape artist came in December 2002 when he abandoned Sydney and his studio on busy Parramatta Road, and moved to rural Braidwood where he built an extensive studio. Locally it was called 'Baghdad', the mother of all studios, with huge walls for large paintings and enough space to allow viewing works at a distance.

A survey exhibition covering about a decade of John Walker's landscape art was held last year at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney and this provided an excellent opportunity to follow the paths which he has taken in exploring the landscape. As a landscape painter, Walker is basically an unreformed, old-fashioned Romantic, one who subscribes to the theory that you need to experience the place and have it enter your veins before you can recreate it in your own work. As a youth, he probably would have been attracted to that apocryphal story of J.M.W. Turner being strapped to the mast of a ship to experience the full fury of a storm at sea so that he could paint it with a sense of authenticity. This idea of painting only the landscape which you know like your backyard, historically popularised by the Barbizon School of painters and their countless followers, has resulted in Walker painting pictures which convey drought, heat and the glare aesthetic, as well as intimate views of often visited and much loved locations.

Walker would also agree with the famous aphorism by German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich: 'The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however, he sees nothing within him, then he should also omit to paint what he sees before him.' For Walker the landscape is a felt experience, one encountered in the flesh in nature, which the artist later recreates in the tranquillity of the studio. Unlike Mary Tonkin who takes the idea of working *en plein air* to extreme lengths and straps her large canvases to cherry pickers so as to preserve the authenticity of the experience of working in the landscape, Walker may sketch and paint gouaches in the landscape, but then hops on his bike and returns to work in his studio. In this he is not dissimilar to William Robinson, who spends days walking in the landscape to become aware of it from all perspectives, its smell and the feel of it, but then paints his major canvases in the studio to the sounds of Bach.

Andrew Sayers, Director of the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra and a long-term supporter and advocate



of Walker's art, describes him as a 'visceral painter'.¹ This has all the connotations of someone who is intuitive and instinctive in their process of art making, one who paints through a gut response, more with their loins rather than the intellect. In Walker's paintings there is certainly no shortage of passages of emotive, gutsy brushwork with paint applied thickly to leave the traces of the artist's performance on the arena of the canvas, but frequently there is also a distilled quality and, in the finest works, something approaching a Zen-like meditation. In fact, the exhibition at the S.H. Ervin Gallery seemed to tug in two directions. There were the very light, floating landscapes, including *Ridgewalking* (2008) and *Bedervale looking East* (2005), both of which tantalisingly negotiate the boundary between being and non-being, where the ground is allowed to breathe and the

P 36: 1/ *Bedervale South Walking*, 2005, gouache on paper, 5 panels, 75 x 275cm overall. Private collection, Perth.

2/ *Gully*, 2000, oil on board, 5 panels, 122 x 552cm overall.

THIS PAGE/ *On the side of Little River Road*, looking south, cold morning, 2008, gouache on paper, 168 x 76cm, Private collection, Sydney.

All images this article of work by John R. Walker. Images courtesy the artist and Utopia Art Sydney.

vegetation has the quality of suspended transparency; and those heavily worked canvases that are tight, even a spot claustrophobic and airless, such as *Gully* (2000), where you certainly get your money's worth in paint and which are strangely reminiscent of the paintings of Frank Auerbach from the 1960s.

At first sight there may be a perceived incompatibility between the Chinese inspired calligraphic landscapes, where the brushwork is employed more for self-expressive rather than mimetic purposes and, as in Chinese art, the rocks, shrubs and trees become objects of spiritual meditation. Xie He in 5th century China spoke of 'spirit resonance' as the most precious quality in landscape art, where the artist's spiritual energy and vitality became incorporated in the very personal calligraphic marks which denoted landscape forms. In contrast, there are the Romantic awe-inspiring slabs of the sublime and picturesque, and the majestic interpretations of the moods of nature. Conscious of both traditions, it seems that Walker tries to negotiate both the oriental sensibility with its minimal mark making and a gutsy Romanticism.

Walker's survey exhibition in the somewhat cramped and unsympathetic space of the S.H. Ervin Gallery was uneven and did not speak with a single voice. In some of the paintings he paid homage to Arthur Boyd and commemorated his two residencies in Bundanon in 2001 and 2002. He also included some afterthoughts on the heritage of the Heidelberg School painters, as well as some of the paintings in which he explored his engagement with environmental concerns. However, more than anything else, this exhibition documented a struggle to establish a personal language in landscape art – a personal calligraphy and system of mark making. It is interesting that Walker, unlike very many contemporary Australian landscape painters, appears largely unaffected by Aboriginal art in the mapping of his canvases, mark making and in his colour range. Nor is he particularly interested in the tradition of Fred Williams and his structuring of the picture space or the schema which he developed for depicting foliage and the landscape elements, even though like Williams he combines the practice of making *plein air* gouaches and studio oils. Williams and Walker are artists of totally different temperaments. For 'Freddy' the landscape was a subject that he set out to tackle and conquer and he expressed little personal empathy for the bush. For Walker the landscape is also a passion, a commitment and something worthy of spiritual meditation.

Curiously, Walker, who made his first trip to Europe in 2007 and who has never visited China, endeavours in his work to combine the European Romantic tradition with a peculiarly Chinese sensibility. This is not attempted as part of some sort of anachronistic historical resuscitation, but within the full conscious knowledge of contemporary practice. Possibly the finest painting in the exhibition was the large gouache *On the side of the little river road looking south, cold morning* (2008). The title could easily belong to a John Constable painting, but in the execution there is a wonderful spaciousness, possible memories of the great W.C. Piguenit painting in Sydney, *The flood in the Darling 1890* (1895), as well as an oriental lightness of touch where form is hinted at rather than clearly articulated.

The ranking of artists is for posterity. It is not the prerogative of contemporaries, particularly when assessing the work of a young (early fifties) artist like John R. Walker. As a landscape artist he is clearly demonstrating his intention not to follow popular conventions, but to pave his own path where he combines the specificity of a landscape, one which he knows intimately well, with an abstract meditation on its spiritual forms.

Notes

1. Andrew Sayers, 'John R. Walker landscape', catalogue essay for *John R Walker: Working in the landscape*, Utopia Art, Sydney 2007, pp.6-7.

The survey exhibition *John R. Walker, Journey Through Landscape* was shown at S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 9 May to 15 June, 2008.

Professor Sasha Grishin AM, FAHA is The Sir William Dobell Professor of Art History, Australian National University.