Here I give thanks:
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DRILL HALL GALLERY

3 July - 9 August 2015
Here I give thanks
John R. Walker in conversation with Glenn Barkley

List of works

Artist’s biography

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CH crossing Shoalhaven, 2001 (cat no 8)
Over a long career John R. Walker has established himself as an expansive thinker and painter who is unrestrained by scale and subject. In “Here I give thanks,” a group of works based solely on landscape is brought together.

The exhibition title is derived from Walker’s painting “Six days at Bundanon and I give thanks to Arthur Boyd,” created within the Shoalhaven landscape which remains inseparably associated with Arthur Boyd. This work in turn recalls Colin McCahon’s pivotal painting “Six days in Nelson and Canterbury,” whose format of six panels, not unlike cells of a comic strip, Walker’s painting paraphrases.

“Six days at Bundanon and I give thanks to Arthur Boyd” is roughly contemporaneous with Walker’s move to the town of Braidwood. His 1852 home has an extensive garden as well as a studio space designed by himself.

The garden has become an important part of Walker’s creativity, a space with regularity on his blog—such as, in cycles of growth, renewal and abundance as a food source inform his workshop approach.

As for my “day in the studio,” if it is not too windy or freezing, I go for a walk, maybe do some drawing or just do looking. And then come back, make a cup of tea, walk up the back, go into the studio and do some wandering and tending (half a hectare is a fair bit to maintain).
In his great meditation on poetry and gardening Stanley Kunitz talks about gardening as a creative act akin to, but distinct from, the writing of poetry:

Almost anything you do in the garden, for example weeding, is an effort to create some sort of order out of nature's tendency to run wild. There has to be a certain degree of domestication in a garden. The danger is that you can so tame your garden that it becomes a thing. It becomes landscaping.  

There is something of this gardener's tendency to create order that flows through Waller's painting, perhaps in landscape painting generally, and in the personal space of the garden and house which, coupled with the expansive crystalline light and rural landscape surrounding the town, has reconfigured Waller's work.

His approach to large-scale, ambitious painting sees the works function as enveloping landscapes in their own right, where the artist's movements – from wrist to elbow, moving back and forth from micro to macro, detailed incident to broad gestural sweeps of sky and earth – are integrated in the artworks' creation and meaning.

The flicker and shimmer of the paintings' surfaces becomes a metaphor for walking through the landscape itself where the act of viewing and the act of painting are understood as forms of physical engagement.

The following conversation between John R. Walker and Glenn Barkley took place via email in May and June 2015.

Glenn Barkley: Can you tell me about the residency you undertook at Bundanon in 2001?

John R. Walker: At Bundanon I had the use of the Fern Studio designed by Brian Zulaikha, purpose built, functional and uncluttered. It was the first time that I had a studio like that and there were very few distractions, so I was able to focus on putting something significant together. Bundanon made me realise that I needed that kind of studio and space to push the envelope.

GB: How did you find working in a landscape so familiar through the work of another artist (Arthur Boyd) and how did you work out strategies to get around that?

JRW: When I first arrived there I thought: how am I going to deal with a place that is so full of Boyd's iconography (and Boyd's presence), but I soon realised that apart from Pulpit Rock and the immediate banks of the Shoalhaven River itself, much of the place was visually unexplored. For example, the only time that I 'painted' Pulpit Rock was when I climbed to the top of it; I couldn't actually view it, as I was standing on it, therefore it is an unseen presence in that painting.

GB: Can you talk about your own spirituality and how that might manifest in your work?

JRW: It is surprisingly hard to speak about something as complex and as hard to achieve as simplicity. There are some lines in an ancient hymn: Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise that has something of it.
Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, 
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;

And

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, 
and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.  

There is a long running theme in my work: the art of fugue. Fugues in music are made up of multiple voices that are distinct but are, at the same time, an indivisible totality. The fourteen largest paintings (and some of the Chinese folding books) that I have done over the past 15 years are fugues. I painted the first one at Bundanon – the nine-panel Shoalhaven Ridge – which is nearly 7 metres long. It was the realisation that in order to do more of these fugues, I would need a place as ‘silent as light’, and a studio that was roughly similar in size to the one at Bundanon. That was the real driver for our move to Braidwood.

GB: When did you move to Braidwood?
JRW: We moved in December 2002, a few weeks before the Canberra bushfires.

GB: You seem to have become more interested in the landscape since moving to Braidwood – do you think that’s true? What is it about the landscape there that draws you to it?
JRW: There is a saying: ‘There is no Zen on mountain tops, you go there to see what you have brought with you.’ In truth I was always passionately interested in environmental history (and history in general), evolutionary history and theory, and would ‘go bush’ at every opportunity. Moving here simply brought all this into focus. There is something about the light and the big sky quality in this high, dry cold place that sparks for me.
GB: You are interested in the places where culture (farming, dumping sites, roadside verges) meets nature – what is it about these types of sites, often (seemingly) ugly and derelict, that attracts you?

JRW: Culture (or the Human) and Nature are like the ‘two’ sides of a Mobius loop – at the same time opposite and one. Landscape is as much a human artefact as it is ‘natural’; Humans – which Stephen J. Pyne calls the “walking firestick” – have been reshaping the world for tens of thousands of years. With a few exceptions, untamed wilderness really means humans do not live here anymore.

For some reason it is easier for me to make poetry out of the ugly, damaged and abandoned than out of the more obviously beautiful. Points of change, places of transition and abandoned places grab me for some reason. I do not really know why.

Yeats knew a thing or two:

It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. 

GB: Has being able to expand into the studio at Braidwood been one of the most important things about living and working here?
For me the process of painting, of building a work over time, is embodied thinking. Paintings are intrinsically coded and embodied ‘representations’, (a kind of isomorphism), and they only fully ‘exist’ when another mind-eye reinterprets that representation or code back into an image, a movement of mind, constructing a representation of that representation. As Douglas R. Hofstadter has famously said “content is fancy form”.

GB: I recently saw a very dark figurative drawing of yours from your first show that was claustrophobic, spiky and intense. I just wonder if that sort of ‘ugliness’ is possible for you anymore? It was from your first show so you have changed a lot as a person but does your work now set a different tone or do you think you are still fundamentally the same?

JRW: That is a hard question! Obviously in one sense I am the same person I was, and obviously, I am also not the same. In those days I suffered from, at times, fairly extreme anxiety-depression. While it never completely goes away, I am much less subject to the black dog these days. Perhaps my work reflects that change. Another aspect to this is that quite a lot of the work I have done has not been publicly exhibited (or exhibited once only). Much of my work has gone directly into private collections and some is in my personal collection.

GB: The paintings in Here I give thanks are often cinematic, all enveloping – even the concertina books seem to be a way to carry around a large landscape.

JRW: In terms of the cinematic, when I was a teenager I would go on the weekends to the Sydney University Union to watch the great classic films by Kurosawa Orson Welles, Jean Renoir and so on. I think that they, much more than art, have had a profound influence on how I think visually. It was also an escape from the boredom of Peakhurst on a weekend.

Kurosawa’s Rashomon in particular had a lasting effect on me. And in general I really love the way Kurosawa constructs time, space and memory in his films.

GB: I’m interested in the idea of viewing as participatory not just a passive thing.

JRW: Author Paul Carter in his book Ground Truthing, meditates on the Mallee as place and as history in a way that resonates with me.

‘A Humean event is [ likened to] a metallled crossroads’. (where) ... “the past of the travelers who might meet at this crossing is annulled: all that counts (that will enter history) is the event…” In contrast, in a Moivrean event, history is a tangled, recursive skein of time, place and memory.

Carter concludes: ‘In this kind of history the whole “tree” of ramifying might-have-beens is kept in play. These other scenarios of imagined community, replenished bush, reconciled spirits and benevolent meteorologies, are what is marked in the scythe of the bush. They lie in its ground patterns, in the multiply-stemmed mallee trees, in the “crooked” ways through the scrub, and in the strangely coherent eidetic grammar of the place - where bars of cirrus cloud, the impression of a hawk’s wing and the charcoaled traces of mallee twig on skin seem to be phrases from the same score.”

When I first read these words I thought: that is so close to what I see.
GB: Do you feel part of a different kind of community in Braidwood?

JRW: Living in a small town like Braidwood you get to meet and know a greater range of people across a broad spectrum of economic levels and political views: the sane and insane, pastoral and service workers. It's different to life in our cities, where housing costs mean that postcodes are quite accurate shorthand for fairly homogenous demographic groupings. There is also a fair bit of edge to living in the country: bushfires, droughts, floods, death and poverty are much more palpable. And the closer-knit nature of community means you are more likely to know people who are struggling than in the anomie of the city.

GB: As an artist do you feel isolated? Isolation can lead to developing your work – living in your own head – but Braidwood is quite urbane in its own way.

JRW: I do not feel any more isolated, or alone as an artist, here than I did in Sydney. And yes, Braidwood is not too isolated and has some very good food, coffee and friendly conversation. It is not very hard to get to Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. We do travel – and there is a surprising amount of connectedness between Braidwood and Sydney/Melbourne. Living in Braidwood, I feel that I am able to be ‘present enough’ in Sydney or Melbourne, and yet not too easily seen or distracted by the noise and trivia.

As Matisse once said, “Solitude and silence; only the mediocre need fear it”.

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1. The title of the exhibition also references Colin McCahon’s Art: Give Thanks to Heilbrun (1962).
3. email to the author 1/6/2015
9. Douglas: Hasselblad on the external hard, CTR. Classic. Both: An eleven-coloured exhibit: William first wrote in 1960 and it has been important in his thinking about representation ever since. In his book Theatre and Ash Veil, Hasselblad, while commenting on CBB, accedes himself to some measure and meaning. “Semantics is an emergent quality of sample spaces, which back traces to my earlier work in the Post-Structuralist’s Chart 1: namely, Cooinda’s Asymmetry.”
Doughboy Hill, 2013 (cat no 2)
Sandholes Rd, Easter, 2014 (cat no 1)
A walk at Hill End, 16/6/2002 and 3/7/2002 (cat no 16), details shown page 36–37
List of works

1. Sandholes Rd, Easter, 2014
   archival oil on polyester triptych, 176 x 517.5 cm overall

2. Doughboy Hill, 2013
   archival oil on polyester 173.5 x 217 cm

3. Meik, 2011
   archival oil on polyester 182 x 235.5 cm

4. Table under trees, 2008
   archival oil on polyester 180 x 391.5 cm

5. Revisiting the boat on the bank, 2002
   archival oil on polyester 184.5 x 209 cm

6. Six Days at Bundanoon and I give thanks to Boyd, 2001
   oil on canvas 183 x 221 cm

7. The boat on the bank, 2001
   oil on canvas 188 x 286 cm

8. CH crossing Shoalhaven, 2001
   archival oil on polyester 237 x 178 cm
   Private Collection, Sydney

9. Chain of ponds, Gilmating Creek, 2013
   gouache on paper 112 x 76 cm

10. Wunnamura, 2012
    gouache on paper 168 x 76 cm

11. Bank’s heap, 2009
    gouache on paper 110 x 76 cm

    gouache on paper 110 x 75 cm

13. Grid, 2009
    gouache on paper 110 x 76 cm

    gouache on paper 110 x 76 cm

15. Monkittai east ridge, 2009
    gouache on paper 110 x 76 cm

    concertina artist book (gouache on paper)
    32 x 621 cm (unfolded)

17. Caydir Plate, October 2014
    concertina artist book (gouache on paper)
    35 x 650 cm (unfolded)

18. Tanja, April 2013
    concertina artist book (gouache on paper)
    25 x 459 (unfolded)

19. A walk at Hill End, 16/6/2002 and 3/7/2002
    concertina artist book (gouache on paper)
    26 x 621 cm (unfolded)
    Private Collection

(all works Courtesy of Utopia Art Sydney unless stated otherwise)
SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014 Terroir: Big Land Pictures, Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
The End of All Our Exploring, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
Recollections, Moree Plains Gallery, NSW
Winter in the Fire Forest, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
Space & Time: 15 Years in the Landscape, Maitland Regional Art Gallery, NSW
Site, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2010 The Skeal, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2008 Journey through Landscape, S. H. Ervin Gallery, NSW
Gekleis Gate, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2007 Working in the Landscape, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2005 Colours, Roads, Dry Lands and Forests, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2004 Dry Land Paintings, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2003 Paintings from Tallangatta, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2002 Paintings (new Banklow), Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
2000 Gully, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1999 Paintings (for a New Republic), Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1997 The House of the Slave, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1994 Pictures from Home, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1994 New Paintings, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1992 Recent Works, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1991 Australian Paintings, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1990 Drawings, Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1989 Utopia Art Sydney, NSW
1988 Recent Painting, Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne, VIC
1987 Extinct, Dickie & Frenchacoe, Mori Gallery, Sydney, NSW
1985 Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne, VIC
1984 The Family, Mori Gallery, Sydney, NSW
1982 Mori Gallery, Sydney, NSW
1979 The Student Gallery (later renamed Mori Gallery), Sydney, NSW

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015 Chroma: the Jim Colak gift, Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
2014 Drawing Out: Didier Dunell Australian Drawing Biennial, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
Redlands Koichi Miyoshi Art Prize, National Art School Gallery, NSW
Amaze Gallery, State Library of New South Wales, NSW
The Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
2013 Big Scope: painting and place, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, NSW
2011 Salon des Refuses, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, NSW
Up Close and Personal: works from the collection of Dr Peter Elliott AM, S. H. Ervin Gallery
Flaxman Art Prize, McLaren Vale, SA
2010 The Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
KIAF 2010, Korea International Art Fair, COEX, Seoul, Korea
2009 The Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
Eustick Memorial Still Life Award (the EMSL) (toured by Bundanon Trust)
Harbour Regional Gallery, NSW
2008 The Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
Salon des Refuses, S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, NSW
2007 The Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
2006 Bring at Bundawen, Mosman Region Art Gallery, NSW (toured by Bundanon Trust)
The Archibald Prize 2006, Art Gallery of New South Wales and touring, NSW
Chroma Collection, Macquarie University Art Gallery, Sydney, NSW
Truth and Likeness, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, ACT
2005 The Sydney Biennale, Art Gallery of New South Wales, NSW
2004 Vivid, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and touring, ACT

Artist’s biography

John R. Walker (b. 1957, lives and works in Braidwood, NSW)
Forests (exh cat), Utopia Art Sydney

Most: Australian Watercolours (exh cat), National Gallery of Australia


Paintings from Bundanoon (exh cat) Simeon Kronenberg, Utopia Art Sydney

2001 Gore Bank (exh cat), Jennifer Hardy, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, NSW

Beyond the Fatal Shore (exh cat), Rena Redfearn, Art Monthly, November 2001, #45


'Interview with collector, Hugh Jamieson', Australian Art Collector, Issue #2

Drawn from Life (exh cat), Deborah Clarke and Andrew Sayers, National Gallery of Australia

Contemporary Australian Painting from the Alice Allen and Hevesey Collection (exh cat)

Communicative Abstraction/Philosophical Reflections, Rudolf Talmacs, Utopia Art Sydney

On the Dark Side (exh cat), Belinda Cotton, New England, Regional Art Museum, NSW

Images of Religion in Australian Art (exh cat), Rosemary Crumlin, Bay Books

Australian Contemporaries Drawing: Relevance and Reflections, Arthur McEvoy, Bungarribee Press

Best of Young Australians Exhibition from the Budget Collection (exh cat), National Gallery of Victoria

Drawing in Australia: Contemporary Images and Ideas, Janet McKean, Macquarie, Melbourne

Backlash: The Australian Drawing Revival 1976-1986 (exh cat), Ted Gott, National Gallery of Victoria

6th Biennale of Sydney: Oriengetiivity / Beyond (exh cat), satellite exhibition, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney

1994
Drawn from Life (exh cat), Deborah Clarke and Andrew Sayers, National Gallery of Australia

1992
Communicative Abstraction/Philosophical Reflections, Rudolf Talmacs, Utopia Art Sydney

On the Dark Side (exh cat), Belinda Cotton, New England, Regional Art Museum, NSW

Images of Religion in Australian Art (exh cat), Rosemary Crumlin, Bay Books

1991
Australian Contemporary Drawing: Relevance and Reflections, Arthur McEvoy, Bungarribee Press

Best of Young Australians Exhibition from the Budget Collection (exh cat), National Gallery of Victoria

1990
Drawing in Australia: Contemporary Images and Ideas, Janet McKean, Macquarie, Melbourne

Backlash: The Australian Drawing Revival 1976-1986 (exh cat), Ted Gott, National Gallery of Victoria

1985
Pleasure of the Gaze (exh cat), Art Gallery of Western Australia

1984
Australian Art Review, Leon Parissien

1983
Australian Perspectives (exh cat), Bernice Murphy, Art Gallery of New South Wales

AWARDS AND COMMISSIONS

2009 Winner Eutick Memorial Still Life Award (EMSLA)

Coifs Harbour Regional Gallery, NSW

2002 Highly Commended, Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales

1998 BT Australia, 400 George St, Sydney

1990 Windsor and Newton Painting Prize, Coventry Gallery, Sydney

1988 Savage Club Drawing Prize, Melbourne

1982 Tamarisque Prize, Alexander Mackie College, Sydney

SCHOLARSHIPS & RESIDENCIES

2002 Hill End Artist in Residence (invited artist)

2002 Bundanon Trust Artist in Residence

2001 National Art School Staff Travelling Scholarship

1999 New England Regional Art Museum Artist’s Travel Scholarship

John R Walker is represented by Utopia Art Sydney
The Drill Hall Gallery, Glenn Barkley and The Curators’ Department would like to thank: Ivan Muñiz Reed and Holly Williams at The Curators’ Department; Christopher Hodges, Bryan Hooper and Chloe Watson at Utopia Art Sydney; Andrew Sayers; Mel Douglas, Charlie Higgins and Luka Douglas Higgins; and Dr Anne Sanders and the artist John R. Walker for his insight, conversation and amazing work.
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Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
3 July - 9 August 2015
Curator: Glenn Barkley