



John R. Walker; image courtesy the artist and Utopia Art Sydney

John R. Walker: The catching point

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John R. Walker is on a pilgrimage to a granite boulder halfway up Mount Gillamatong overlooking the New South Wales town of Braidwood. He's wearing a knitted dusky brown jumper that bears the scars of numerous encounters with barbed wire fences and brambles. There's nothing religious about this short trek, but for an artist walking through a landscape layered with subliminal meanings, the journey has a spiritual quality.

Walker comes here often and I can see why. Spread out beneath us are multiple canvases within a vast panorama. To the east, the massifs of Monolith Valley in Budawang National Park sever the neatly arranged ridge lines that mark the horizon. In the middle distance, Braidwood is a grid of leafy streets with a village green and a granite church exactly where they would be if this were Surrey or the Cotswolds in England. To the south, a ribbon of road disappears into the Araluen valley where summer orchards drip with succulent peaches and nectarines.

Our responses to the landscape could not be more different. I see a picturesque plateau, tamed and manicured. Walker, one of Australia's most celebrated landscape artists, whose career spans three-and-a-half decades, sees its biology and ecology, the damage rather than the beauty.

Walker visualises the landscape as it was millions of years ago, when the sea lapped at the side of escarpments that are now hundreds of metres above the coastal plains. He maps the human history. Aboriginal tribes once came here to hunt possums before moving west to feast on Bogong moths in the Brindabellas. They were followed in the 1860s by tens of thousands of goldminers who in the early 1900s made way for pastoralists.

In eroded gullies, in the bends of rivers and streams, in forest clearings, along abandoned tracks, Walker also sees what he calls 'catching points' – things such as an old fence

post, an abandoned camp site, a rusty car wreck, a strand of barbed wire, a sudden unexpected change in vegetation. 'A lot of [my art] is about points of transition,' Walker explains. 'It's about places where you go from one thing to another.'

It's also about Walker being open to his surroundings, of walking, journeying as he is today, about the landscapes finding him, instead of the other way around: 'It's really weird – it might just be a little gate hook or something. It's a catching point and, before you know, there is this great pile of things.'

That pile of things could be a torrent of brushstrokes, slurries, washes that capture the play of sunlight in a stringybark forest, or translucent detours in oil and acrylic that map the lichen growing on a mound of stones, the cracks in a dried-up dam.

'If I'm lucky, at some point something starts to gel in my head,' Walker says. 'Sometimes I'll just paint that image and hang it up on my wall and it starts accumulating like an eco system. It starts building up mulch, and once it's got enough nutrients it starts growing.'

One of these catching points is immediately behind us. A sliver of an old fence post is suspended between two strands of wire. The post was once a tree, probably felled a century ago. It has been reshaped by time and the environment – sun, rain, frost, fire. A bushwalker would probably not notice it, but for Walker it triggers an immediate response.

'I sometimes jokingly said to people that I do history painting, but these days I would say that it's connected to environmental history,' Walker says. 'Not literally, but in a certain sense the landscape is narrative, is history.'

Walker paints from memory rather than direct observation, revisiting each catching point at different times



John R. Walker, Site, 2011, archival oil on polyester, 4 panels, 177 x 776cm; image courtesy the artist and Utopia Art Sydney





Terroir: Big Land Pictures, exhibition views, Orange Regional Gallery, 14 March – 27 April 2014; images courtesy the artist and Utopia Art Sydney

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of the day, often over a period of weeks or months. The intuitive response to these locations gives his paintings a narrative quality – something that he sees as being essential to capturing the essence of the landscape.

To talk with Walker about his vision, his methodology and what has inspired him over the years is to embark on a journey that is part philosophy, part musicology, part geomorphology. In the space of a few hours he references William Blake's belief in the unity of body and spirit, the literary transition points in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the fugues of Shostakovich.

'If you're dealing with landscape in an interesting way, you are dealing with narrative,' Walker says. 'The idea of history without landscape is a bizarre one. The most predominating and powerful element in Australia and its history, economics and so on, is the land ... Australia's landscape is basically indifferent to humans. It's not cruel, but it's not nice English countryside; it can always bite. As Dorothea Mackellar said, it's "wilful, lavish".'

Most of Walker's work is created within hiking or bike-riding distance from Braidwood in the Southern Tablelands where he has lived since 2002: 'If you look carefully, you'll find sites with bits of old kero tins, fireplaces, depressions where a hut may have been, or places where Aboriginal people made tools. You find trees with a rock in a branch that someone has put there as some sort of signal.'

An abandoned eucalyptus-oil distillery just off a walking track about 50 kilometres south-west of Braidwood became the main subject for *Site* (2011), one of the most dramatic of 13 large works displayed at his solo show at the Orange Regional Gallery in early 2014. Typical of Walker's work, it blends sparsely executed, subtly different viewpoints of the same scene across a series of four panels. Wire mesh, rusty tin, the remains of a gigantic cauldron, the encroaching bush – all sifted for their essence across the vast canvas.

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* art critic John McDonald has compared Walker to a Chinese literati painter who 'roams around, absorbing impressions of Nature that are jotted down quickly on paper, giving a view of the landscape reduced to its essential features, sometimes its bare bones'.¹

The move from his birthplace of Sydney to Braidwood consolidated Walker's focus on landscape

painting and his interest in the built and natural environment: 'It was really quite fortunate that most Australian artists and the like at the time thought that anyone who painted landscapes had to be, by definition, older than [then-Prime Minister] John Howard – and more conservative. So you had an area where you could play freely.'

Walker's work often draws comparisons with the late Fred Williams. He concedes that Williams is one of his major influences, but is quick to point out that he is drawn to the 'human presence' in the landscape, whereas Williams was not.

Other obvious yet diverse historical influences include Sidney Nolan who 'manages to bang together, in a quite successful way, things that are incompatible and therefore true', and Francisco Goya for 'his stubborn insistence on painting what he's actually seen' – notably the horrors of war. Walker reserves a special place for the Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca, and in particular his masterpiece *The Resurrection* (c. 1463):

'It is an extraordinary image ... an image of someone who has been dead, who is alive, and who is aware of having been dead. It is an image that is very quiet. There is no rhetoric. It has an awkwardness, but it is the awkwardness of somebody painting something that he has never seen before, that is impossible, with total conviction.'

As we set off to return to Braidwood, I ask Walker how he knows when he has gone from the catching point to the end point, and how he measures the success of a particular work. 'You never know what it is until long after you've finished it. I'm not the person who knows what it means at all, and it's not that relevant,' he says.

'If an artwork is any good, it's far more than the sum of the person making it. I'm quite sure people like Dickens had a good idea of what they were describing, but what they constructed is something that has a life of its own.'

1. John McDonald, 'Dobell Australian Drawing Biennial 2014', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 2014; see <http://johnmcdonald.net.au/2014/dobell-australian-drawing-biennial-2014/>, accessed 20 June 2015.

John R. Walker: Here I give thanks ...' is at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, until 9 August 2015.