

Ruth Stone exhibition *The Space Between*

A Hill End Artists in Residence Program exhibition at BRAG (1 July – 14 August 2016)

Catalogue essay by Andrew Flatau

In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama argues that landscapes are “constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock,” noting that the very word *landscape* entered the English language from the Dutch *landschap* and arrived with connotations of human occupation and our “shaping perception” of the land.¹ In Schama’s view, landscape painting is “the work of the mind,” an expression of perceptions, myths and culture, and “its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.”

In her exhibition *The Space Between*, Ruth Stone explores a landscape which at first glance may seem familiar and comfortable. In these pictures, however, all is not what it seems. Indeed, they explore an uncanny space – in which the comfortable is rendered mysterious, the sky and ground are inverted, and bare winter branches nest the memories and fragments of lost lives. It is neither night nor day, and diaphanous spectral figures float in the interstices of the landscape – a space of dichotomies – between the material and the spiritual, sound and silence, life and death.

Ruth Stone took up her artist’s residency at Hill End in the early spring of 2014. The first thing she noticed was that “for all its apparent isolation and quietude,” there was a certain restlessness about the place. After a spooky first night – the place was “full of ghosts” – she felt safe and at peace, and although spring blossoms were in the air, the work for this exhibition was the work of the following winter. It could only be that way. As Brett Whiteley once observed,² winter was the time to ‘see’ Hill End and its natural and built environs – “the harsh winters laid bare the tough old bones of the place” – and other artists, such as Jean Bellette, also found the winters at Hill End more conducive to their practice.

For many artists, the marks of human occupation lend significance to the landscape. In writing to Donald Friend, Russell Drysdale remarked on Hill End’s “real and significant beauty to an artist” as being linked to its “sense of history” and the “life of contrast that its roots in the past give it.”³

It is absorbing to read what literary accounts we have of life in the Australian goldfields, but perhaps the most relevant to the work in this exhibition is Ellen Clacy’s book, *A Lady’s Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia in 1852–53*.⁴ Although somewhat rambling and anecdotal in its discourse, it nevertheless brings into sharp focus how difficult it was for women and children who did what they could to sustain the diggers’ gold-rush ‘fever.’ Clacy reports a tragic story of a deserted mother and her baby, both of whom drown, and she herself rescues a 10-year old orphaned girl called Jessie, whom her company found lying next to her dead grandfather.

In another grim account of life in the Victorian goldfields, William Howitt⁵ lamented the loss of so many ‘diggers’, who lie in “nameless graves” or buried under collapsed or deserted mine shafts, with loved ones back home somewhere in Europe, Asia or America oblivious to their fate; Howitt emphasises that “the number of unrecorded dead, who are found and put

into a hasty grave, without anything frequently being known about them, is something frightful.”

Nearly a hundred years later, Donald Friend and Donald Murray were so troubled by the lack of local knowledge of Chinese graveyards at Tambaroora, near Hill End, they explored a presumptive graveyard, and in one diary entry,⁶ Friend recorded that they had found fragments of inscribed Chinese headstones lying “in the middle of the desolate bush on the side of a hill riddled with old mines . . . about the only remaining relic of thousands” who had come here and “left nothing at all besides these stones.” Friend surmised that these prospectors came here “without women” and this had also been the perception of the artist, William Strutt, who had arrived in Melbourne in 1850 and wrote about the conditions in the Victorian goldfields, noting that all the men had “left their wives, daughters and sweethearts to carry on the prosaic home affairs”.⁷ This was not Ellen Clacy’s experience and Ruth Stone herself notes in her artist’s statement regarding conditions at Hill End in the 1870s that in one year about 179 children from Hill End School died, and asks: “What happened to all the bodies?”

What Ruth Stone has achieved during her BRAG Hill End residency at Murray’s Cottage, and in her creative response to this historic site, is to restore the frightful, the uncanny, and the human loss in the landscape. She also records the gestures of search, hope and despair of the women and children caught in the goldfield life. Her story is an open-ended narrative, in which traditional guardians, symbolised by the owl and the bare-footed angel, bear testimony to the sorrows and dilemmas, but perhaps they are just as powerless as the ‘watchers.’ In *Lost*, a crucifix has fallen, lying impotently in space. We know from the literary accounts that clergymen were sent to the goldfields, but what did they do? The obvious question that arises is: ‘Couldn’t anyone do something more than watch?’ The safe imaginative solution for the viewer is to invent a redemptive narrative and retreat in passive hope that the guardians and angels are able to grasp a hand, but more challenging narratives are also conceivable.

In 1994 Peter Wright was invited to stay as Artist in Residence at Haefliger’s Cottage, but in the catalogue for an exhibition of Wright’s Hill End work,⁸ John Olsen wrote eloquently of Wright’s spiritual approach to the landscape, the “unconscious yearnings filtered by the mind’s eye,” and the curator Brenda Gray also noted how the artist’s work was “always touching on the personal and universal” and presenting the viewer with “a renewed and relevant conversation with the landscape.”

Ruth Stone’s studies and paintings in *The Space Between* are also the product of imaginative observation and an immediate response to the landscape. In her pastel pencil drawings, which are superimposed on photographic images of the landscape, there is no discernible academic reference to the art and mythologies of Hill End: on the contrary, and as is her natural inclination, the drawings emerged as spontaneous responses to images that presented themselves to her as she reflected on the photographs. The owl “appeared in the photo,” as did the shrieking woman and her child. In this work, therefore, the artist is sensitive to the narrative rather than imposing it on the compositions. These drawings then served as studies for the paintings and the challenge for the artist became one of retaining the freshness and spontaneity of the former as she “pushed and pulled” the medium in the

latter. Although the paintings are ethereal and appear effortlessly composed, they are in fact the products of a most thoughtful and patient technique, and in a way her painting in this exhibition is symbolic of the care with which she has received and embedded the figurative images in the landscape.

Ruth Stone has developed a reputation as an abstract landscape painter, but her practice has actually been diverse and reflective, as evidenced by her MFA thesis at the College of Fine Arts, entitled *An Act of Reflection* (2003), in which she prefaces her thesis with a nod to Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*). Although she has been concerned with perceptions of the landscape, the figure has always been there or thereabouts either in fragmentary forms or in her much admired portraiture. In *The Space Between*, however, Ruth Stone has reintegrated figurative motifs in her landscape practice, and, with great assurance, explored the difficult terrain of pictorial and imaginative space. In doing so, she encourages the viewer to suspend disbelief and judgment and to experience the uncanny for themselves. Comfortable with mystery, she has received and embedded transient or reconstituted memories within the very fabric of nature – in such a way that the figure takes on new life, intertwined subtly with the branches of trees and the shapes of clouds. Without consciously addressing Simon Schama's thesis that culturally shaped perceptions determine landscape composition, Ruth Stone has nevertheless demonstrated in her work just how cultural memories and perceptions can interact with and shape our land.

Notes

1. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (HarperCollins, 1995); for a discussion of the etymology of the word *landscape* in the context of artistic perception, see Schama, p.10.
2. Brett Whiteley, Personal communication to Gavin Wilson, 10 June 1992, cited in Gavin Wilson, *The Artists of Hill End: Art, Life and Landscape* (Edited by Lou Klepac, Beagle Press, Published by The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1995) p.105. For a discussion of the inspiration of the Hill End winter landscape on Jean Bellete's "sombre themes", see Wilson, p. 80.
3. Russell Drysdale, Letter to Donald Friend (undated c. 15 April 1948), cited in Lou Klepac, *The life and work of Russell Drysdale* (Murdoch Books, rev. Ed., 1996), p. 96.
4. Mrs Charles (Ellen) Clacy, *A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia in 1852–53* (Hurst and Blackett, 1853). Full text available at Project Gutenberg Australia: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks/e00017.txt>. Also available in paperback as part of the Cambridge Library Collection, History of Oceania (2011).
5. William Howitt, *Land, labour, and gold; or, Two years in Victoria. With visits to Sydney and Van Dieman's Land* (2 vols. Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855). Full text of the second edition (1858) available at: https://archive.org/stream/landlabourgoldor00howirich/landlabourgoldor00howirich_djvu.txt. Also available in paperback as part of the Cambridge Library Collection, History of Oceania (2011).

6. Donald Friend, Diary entry (19 October, 1947), cited in Wilson, op.cit. p. 48.
7. William Strutt, Journal entry, cited in Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History* (The Miegunyah Press, 2013), p.89.
8. Peter Wright, *Turon to Tambaroora: Contemporary Hill End Landscapes* (Foreword by Brenda Gray, Introduction by John Olsen, Orange Regional Gallery, 1999).