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A New Landscape

Melbourne artist Juan Ford's hyper-real paintings of flora and figure re-imagine the Australian landscape.

By Dan Rule, 7th September 2012



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Juan Ford never saw himself as a landscape artist. "Coming out of art school, I always wanted to be a cutting-edge contemporary painter," he says.

"It's almost as if in the context of contemporary art, you're not allowed to deal with certain, more traditional subject matter," continues the Melbourne artist, whose new solo exhibition opens at Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects in Fitzroy tomorrow (Saturday September 8). "But I just thought, 'Stuff it, there are no rules'."

While he still frames his work – which spans hyper-realistic oil paintings and seemingly makeshift sculptural installations and architectures – as adhering to a contemporary patois, the landscape has certainly made an incursion. "What better way than to take the daggiest elements of traditionalism and make them contemporary," he laughs.

It was 2007 when Ford first decided to follow his urge to "re-engage with the Australian art canon" and try his hand at rendering the land. But Ford's investigation of his surrounds was hardly a conventional one. Eschewing the archetypal cues of the land, horizon and skyline, his landscapes isolated particular fragments of the landscape and flora and "mashed" them with figurative elements.

In one suite of works, he rendered the stark shadow of eucalyptus branches creeping across human subjects and the jarring image of a human skull perched in the crook of a gumtree. "It was borne out of being surrounded and immersed in the landscape," recalls Ford, who lives and works in Eltham. "We were still in the middle of what was quite a scary drought and I became really interested in the idea of the landscape imposing on us.

"A lot of the Australian landscape tradition has been about ownership; it's been about possession and this rugged individualism and conquering," he continues. "In the case of the drought, the myth that we can control the

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Ford's more recent paintings – which led him selected as a finalist for both the Wynne and the Archibald Prize this year – see intricately detailed, colour-rich, “psychotropic” renderings of native Australian flora covered by oozes of lurid paint and other interruptions such as stickers and tape. Though taking a different form, they continue a similar strain of post-colonialist critique. “One of the ideas is that when you stand before a landscape painting and then you go and stand before an actual landscape, the two experiences are absolutely nothing alike, to the point of absurdity,” says Ford.

“Pouring paint over the plants is about the beautiful absurdity of representing this landscape and the urge to do so,” he continues. “A lot of the traditional forms of representation are pretty silly, yet there's still this want to carry them through. That's a sort of common starting point for me, sort of questioning this need to represent.” Indeed, Ford's work isn't so much an attack on the native landscape but a sign of reverence for its strength. “I'm trying to cast an almost polar opposite to that rugged individualism and ownership,” he says. “I know that a tree is going to keep growing – I know that I can't stop it with my feeble interventions.”

Juan Ford opens at Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects this Saturday September 8 and shows until October 13.

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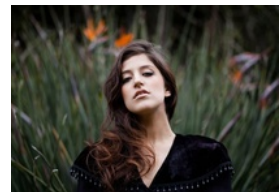
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