



TRAVELS THROUGH TOPICAL LANDSCAPES.

Robert Habel and Cole Larsen



Flinders University Art Museum is pleased to host **Travels through topical landscapes**, videos by Cole Larsen and paintings by Robert Habel.

These South Australian based artists bring a fresh eye to depicting the landscape. As a former journalist and documentary film maker Cole Larsen now teaches digital media and production in the Department of Screen Studies in the School of Humanities at Flinders University, where he also continues his research interests.

Working collaboratively with a long time friend and painter Robert Habel, they travel together through the landscape producing both video art and paintings that address contemporary environmental issues. The work reflects the conditions of the physical site as well as being a response to the political and social context of the surrounds.

We are delighted to feature **Travels through topical landscapes** in the Flinders University City Gallery. For me, this work continues my own long association

with the Tamar Valley and Tasmania and its much contested environment. The exhibition also provides a unique opportunity for the Art Museum to work collaboratively with staff from the Department of Screen Studies. We trust that this project will signal the beginning of a closer association and lead to many future undertakings.

Gail Greenwood
Director, Flinders University Art Museum



Travels through topical landscapes brings together highlights of our past two years of collaborative art practice. We have been involved in art projects since the mid 1990s, when we started combining our interests in film and painting to create outdoor adventures. This collaboration has pushed us beyond the studio, exposing the processes involved in the development of our ideas and techniques in video and painting.

We aim to bring to these works some of the experiences of working on site, such as a restlessness to make quick decisions, inventions, the play of chance, fluctuating weather, interpretation of scale, the influence of outside elements and often personal discomfort.

This exhibition has paintings, drawings and videos made in South Australia and the Kimberleys, and from recent residencies in Tasmania and Singapore.

The locations were chosen for their variety and accessibility, and because they were fun and stimulating places to visit and make work in. They are also environments where issues about land use and abuse are at the forefront of political and community debate, and they often feature in the media.

Topical issues such as drought, land development, the impact of heavy industry, and the impact of tourism are important in our landscape art projects.

These issues and locations have provided an embarrassment of riches in regard to imagery and we will no doubt continue to delve, pry, agitate, and enjoy our future travels.

Robert Habel and Cole Larsen

The artists would like to thank: Flinders University Art Museum for hosting this exhibition at Flinders University City Gallery, Director Gail Greenwood and Program Manager, Dr Janice Lally. **Dr Mike Walsh**, Head of Screen Studies for opening our show. The Australia Council for the Arts for funding our Singapore residency in 2006. **Sculpture Square**, Singapore for hosting our 'Singapore Landscapes' exhibition, 2006. Poimena Art Centre and Gallery, Launceston for hosting our residency and exhibition 'Havin' fun in the sun' in 2007. **Jane Deeth** for her catalogue essay. The Solar Shop for sponsoring this catalogue. Our friends and families for helping out on many of the projects.

It might seem obvious to say that Robert Habel is a painter and this is an exhibition of his paintings — luscious swathes of pigment re-making the solidity of the land; ethereal washed out traces; and overdrawn, dense multi-directional observations. In this context the videos by Cole Larsen that are also in the gallery space could simply be documentaries on how this particular artist makes his work, ostensibly continuing the Romantic tradition of landscape painting. Because the canvases are painterly aesthetic objects there is a sense of familiarity — this is 'proper art'. Landscape painting constitutes the bulk of art making activity in the nation if the art society shows and art prize entries that are the mainstay of amateur and regional art practice are anything to go by. Estimating the number of watercolourists and oil painters who pack up their paints and head out into the country for creative recreation would no doubt be in the thousands. In this environment of weekend master classes and summer schools, showing a video on the techniques used would not be out of place. But this exhibition is not an amateur event for hobbyists, it is an exhibition in a university

gallery that has a commitment to contemporary art practice. In this context it is unusual to have biographical or contextual videos about a living artist who is in the show. Support material of this ilk is usually reserved for exhibitions of art history. Contemporary art by contrast is expected to stand up for itself. Given this, Larsen's videos cannot be separated from the materiality of Habel's paintings. In this exhibition, the videos show us things that just looking at the surfaces of the paintings cannot. And by this I don't just mean that they are about how crazy the artist might be because he punctuates the painting by running in the heat of a South Australian summer's day, or chooses to keep on painting even though the heavens have opened and torrents of rain are washing the pigment away. The videos give us the process of making the paintings as well as these seeming strange and incongruous behaviours. This is a collaboration in which the materiality of painted and moving images combine to construct a dialogue that is more than the sum of the parts. Between the two forms of communication a more urgent and vital game is being enacted. On the surface there is nothing strange with artists painting out of doors. Painting *en plein air* is one of the things that 'proper' artists have done for quite a long time. The continuum extends from Constable's palpable sky studies in the early 1800s; to Manet's women in flowing frocks cavorting in the dappled light of Parisian gardens; to the fragmentation of light on the pond in

Monet's garden at Giverny. Australian artists too have made painting *en plein air* their milieu. Australian Impressionists Charles Conder, Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton set up camps in the countryside outside Melbourne and basked in the bright light of this new land and its golden summers at the end of the 1800s. Painting directly in the landscape is often talked about in terms of honesty to the real world and capturing the qualities of light at a particular moment. Such a direct relationship with nature can be compared with the imaginary and inventive processes that go to conjuring up a landscape in the studio. I would suggest that it is truth and honesty that are at stake in this exhibition. For most people art ended with Impressionism. Ironically it is this version of truth to nature that maintains landscape as the brand of radical environmental politics. In the painter's self-inflicted battles with the weather and the light that Larsen captures, we become aware that most paintings of this type are made on very select days — that is in dry, still, and hospitable conditions with good lighting in the main and a good glass of red off to the side. If the wet look is what the artist wants, then protection can be found from the balcony of a Paris apartment overlooking the boulevard. In some respects therefore, painting *en plein air* is just as much a manipulation of 'truth' and 'honesty' as working in the studio from sketches or photographs or simply from the imagination. In other words, art is all about

TRAVELS THROUGH TOPICAL LANDSCAPE



Painting **directly in the landscape** is often talked about in terms of **honesty to the real world** and capturing the qualities of light at a particular moment.

making choices. By undertaking ridiculous battles with the elements and fading light, the works bring to light the usually unspoken drama of this artform. In doing so they provoke thoughts about what landscape is made from, where landscape has come from, what landscape is for, and why anyone should bother to both make it and engage with it in the first place.

There are Australian artists who show that there is more to landscape than the fresh purity of light and colour. John Wolseley for example, engages the complexity of climate and incorporates the physicality of a place literally into the paper. But it is Clarice Beckett who has a more direct connection with work in this exhibition. In the few moments she could steal from her duty-filled existence, Beckett caught on canvas the dampness and mist of Melbourne mornings and died from pneumonia as a consequence in 1935, the winter air entering her lungs and literally drowning her. For years her work was all but forgotten. Her alternative image of Australian urbanity and introversion was 'wrong' and ensured her invisibility until the 1990s. Beckett's story shows that landscape painting not only seeks to represent the

world but also frames what is represented, sometimes by inclusion and sometimes by exclusion. Returning to Constable we can notice the landscape just out of the frame — industrial England encroaching over the hills and valleys bringing irrevocable change. In this exhibition this flip-side of landscape is less subtle — the proposed pulp mill in Tasmania's Tamar Valley and the Santos Gas Refinery near Whyalla are placed upfront and centre. Here the atmospheric that landscape painting articulates so well offers more than aesthetic contemplation — the air is a potentially deadly brew of invisible toxins; the light that generates colour also dessicates the land with its equally invisible heat. These works thus activate a broader conversation. To the extent they are images made in response to the landscape they are engaging art history. However, this is not an illustrated history lesson but rather an opportunity for viewers to reconsider how the definition of truth in art has been co-opted to the service of upholding what is false — to turning a blind eye.

Painting can be a pleasant activity but art does not make for a polite and pleasant space. The videos draw attention to art as an unstable and dynamic opportunity with opposing voices vying to be heard. In this exhibition, through the combination of painted image and video documentation, the alignment of landscape with truth and aesthetics is literally thrown into nature and falls to the canvas and screen exposing ideology in punctuated edits, running paint and eroding surfaces.

Jane Deeth

LANDSCAPES



Robert Habel **A Day Painting at the Bungle Bungles**, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 170cm



Robert Habel **A Day Painting at the Salt Plains**, 2006
acrylic on canvas, 140 x 160cm



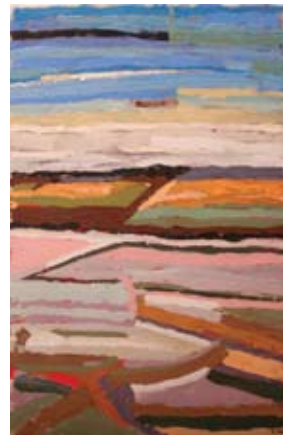
Cole Larsen **The White Man Dreaming**
Bungle Bungle Ranges, Western Australia, 2005
Duration 15:00 Format Digital Betacam



Robert Habel **Metal Gillman**, 1992
oil and cement slurry on tin 30 x 40cm



Robert Habel **Mid North Dry Paddocks**, 2005
acrylic on canvas, 92 x 122cm



Robert Habel **Salt Plains**, 2006
acrylic on canvas, 96 x 63cm



Robert Habel **Desert Suit**, 2005
paint on fabric suit, 100 x 55cm



Robert Habel **Wet Red Sand**, 2005
acrylic on canvas, 22 x 122cm



Cole Larsen
The Man in the Sunday Suit
Near Port Germein,
South Australia, 2005
Duration 07:34 Format DV Cam

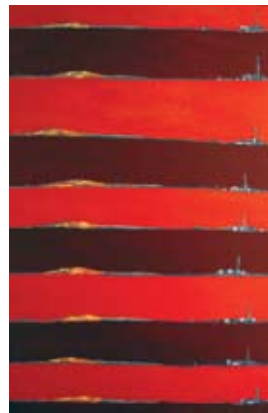


Robert Habel
Wetlands, 2007
oil on canvas 120 x 150cm



Cole Larsen **The Last Days**
Port Germein, South Australia, 2005
Duration 10:00 Format DV Cam

Robert Habel **Desert Industry**, 2007
oil on canvas, 122 x 72cm



Cole Larsen **The Difficulties of Drawing in Water**
Port Germein South Australia, 2005
Duration 02:45 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **A Night Painting at Point Lowly - East**, 2007
oil on canvas, 160 x 260cm



Robert Habel **A Night Painting at Point Lowly - West**, 2007
oil on canvas, 160 x 260cm



Cole Larsen **Point Lowly Carnival Nights**
Point Lowly, South Australia, 2007
Duration 5 x 02:00 Format DV Cam



Cole Larsen **Dry Paddock Run**
Near Snowtown,
South Australia, 2005
Duration 13:27 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **Dry Paddock Run**, 2005
acrylic on canvas, 92 x 122cm



Cole Larsen
The Spirituality of Shopping
 Orchard Rd, Singapore, 2006
 Duration 02:40 Format DVCam



Cole Larsen
The Dilemma of Financing Art
 Colonial and Financial Districts
 Singapore, 2006
 Duration 09:58 Format DVCam



Robert Habel **Two Soft Buildings**, 2006
 ink on paper, 137 x 70cm



Robert Habel **Soft Building 1**, 2006
 ink on paper, 137 x 70cm



Robert Habel **Soft Building 2**, 2006
 ink on paper, 137 x 70cm



Cole Larsen
Sexy Beast on Sentosa Island
 Sentosa Island, Singapore, 2006
 Duration 02:06 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **Boon Lay Intersection 1**, 2006
 ink on paper, 70 x 137cm



Robert Habel **drawing on site** Boon Lay Intersection, 2006



Cole Larsen
Boon Lay in 17 Seconds
 Boon Lay, Singapore, 2006
 Duration 00:17 Format DV Cam



Cole Larsen
Another Building in 15 Seconds
 Boon Lay, Singapore, 2006
 Duration 00:15 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **Boon Lay Intersection 2**, 2006
 ink on paper, 70 x 137cm



Robert Habel **Waterstripes**, 2006
watercolour and ink on paper, 105 x 225cm



Cole Larsen **The Man with the Bag on his Head**
Bugis, Singapore, 2006
Duration 02:04 Format DV Cam



Cole Larsen **An Afternoon with Mossad and Singapore Vice**
44 Dalvey Rd, Singapore, 2006
Duration 09:50 Format DV Cam



Cole Larsen **The Subtle Nuances of Poolside Business**
Orchard, Singapore, 2006
Duration 02:47 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **Five Views of the Mosque**, 2006
charcoal on paper, 104 x 75cm



Cole Larsen **Five Views of the Mosque in Charcoal with Rain**
Kampong Glam, Singapore, 2006
Duration 14:35 Format DV Cam



gallery installation
Sculpture Square Singapore, 2006



Robert Habel **Tamar Monuments- control room**, 2007
oil on canvas, 40 x 60cm



Robert Habel **Tamar Monuments- lookout**, 2007
oil on canvas, 61 x 46cm



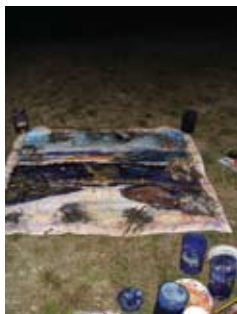
Robert Habel
Tamar Monuments- truck, 2007
oil on canvas, 50 x 61cm



Cole Larsen **Graffiti Landscape**
Mount George, Tasmania, 2007
Duration 10:08 Format DVCam



Robert Habel **I Light Fires**, 2007
acrylic and fire remains on canvas, 120 x 140cm



Cole Larsen **I'm an Australian and I Light Fires**
Mowbray, Tasmania, 2007 Duration 08:48 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **Nights at Poimena series**, left to right
river, 2007, oil on canvas, 61 x 46cm **river lights**, 2007, oil on canvas, 40 x 60cm **dusk**, 2007, oil on canvas, 50 x 61cm **raining**, 2007, oil on canvas, 56 x 61cm



Cole Larsen **The Man in the White Chemical Suit**
 Cataract Gorge, Tasmania, 2007
 Duration 02:05 Format DV Cam



Robert Habel **Gunns River Tamar, the new shine**, 2007
 oil on linen, 35 x 122cm



Cole Larsen **For Whom the Belle Tolls**
 Bell Bay, Tasmania 2007
 Duration 09:38 Format DV Cam