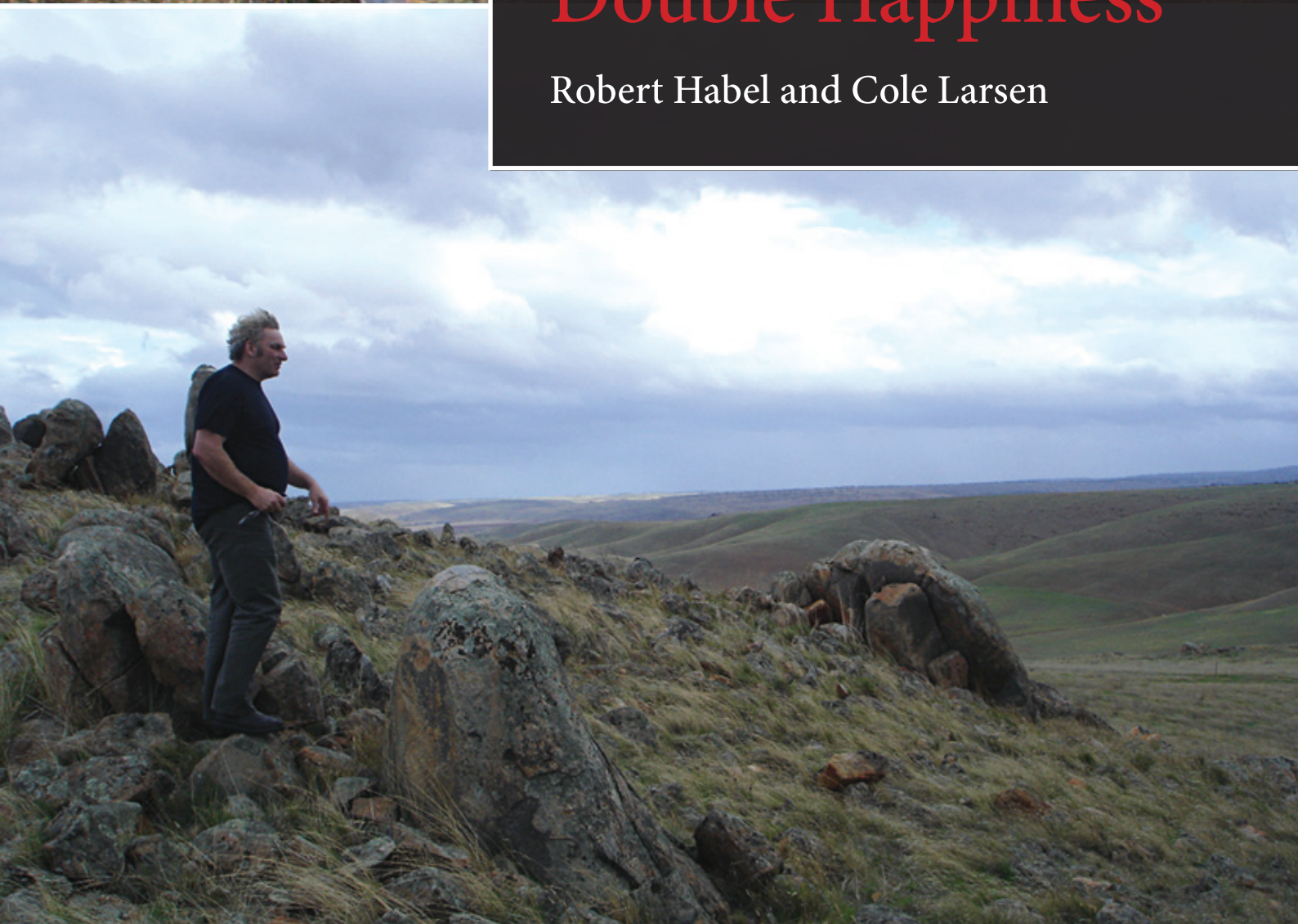
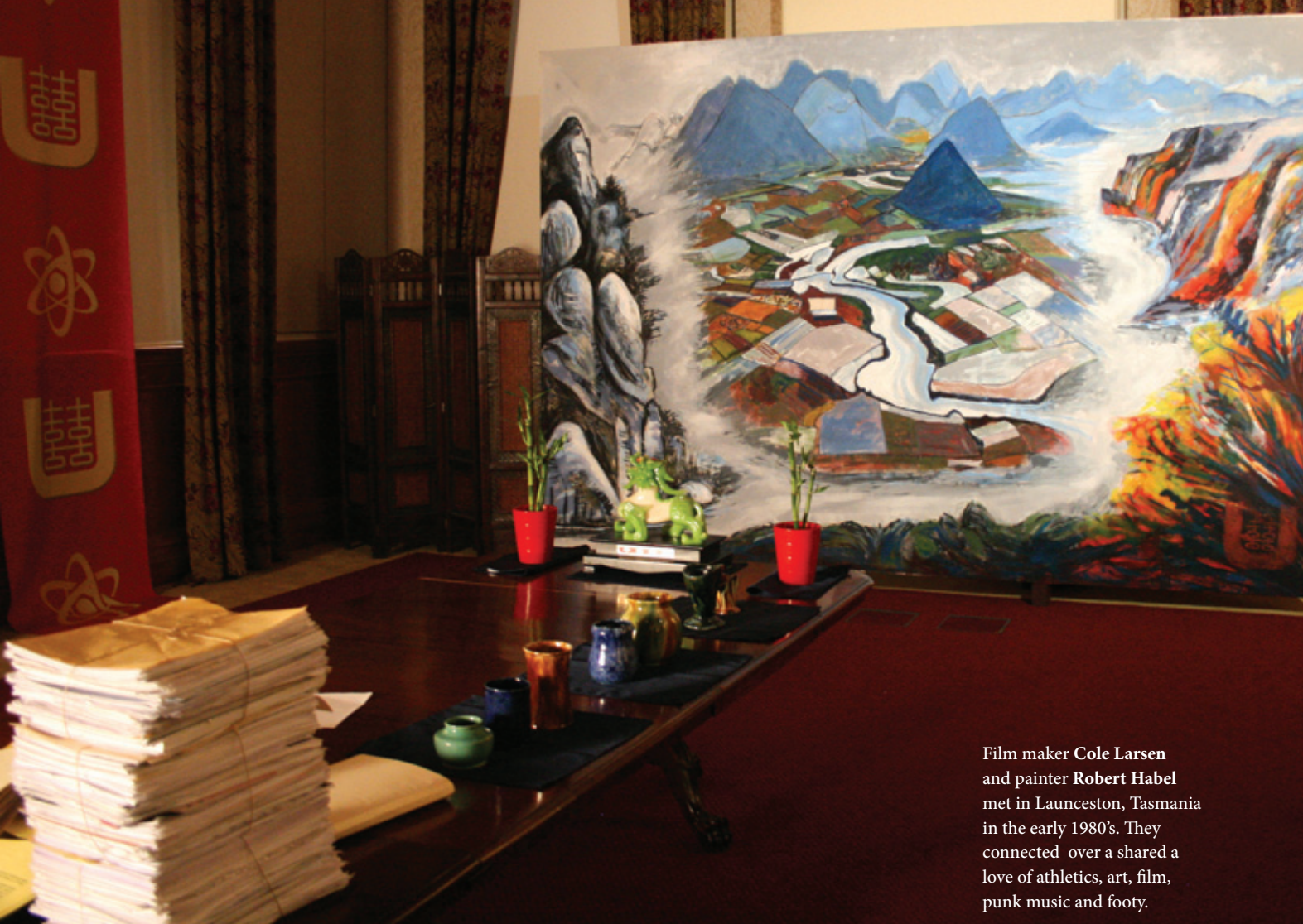




Palmer Landscapes **Double Happiness**

Robert Habel and Cole Larsen





Film maker **Cole Larsen** and painter **Robert Habel** met in Launceston, Tasmania in the early 1980's. They connected over a shared love of athletics, art, film, punk music and footy.

Robert Habel and Cole Larsen, Collaborative visual art practice

Selected exhibitions

2011 *Palmer Landscapes Double Happiness*
painting and moving image
Murray Bridge Regional Gallery, South Australia

Energy Landscapes: the new frontier
painting and moving image
RiAus, Adelaide, South Australia

Cairns: in the company of strangers
painting and moving image
Tanks Arts Centre, Cairns, Queensland

Travelling East in a real AND imagined way
public art moving image projection
Adelaide City Council, South Australia

2010 *A Night Painting at Point Lowly*
painting and moving image
Santos, Adelaide, South Australia

In Partnership
painting and moving image
Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania, Launceston,
and Devonport Regional Gallery, Tasmania

The Jetty
moving image
Artroom 5, South Australia

2009 *The Cedars Revisited*
painting and public art moving image projection
Heysen Festival, Hahndorf, South Australia

2009 *Santos Factory at Night*
painting and moving image
Adelaide festival Centre, South Australia

2008 *Skylarking and other Serious Pursuits*
moving image
AV-Central, Adelaide, South Australia

Peeling Walls
painting and moving image
SALA Festival, Adelaide, South Australia

2007 *Travels Through Topical Landscapes*
painting and moving image
Flinders University Art Museum,
Adelaide, South Australia

Havin' fun in the sun
painting and moving image
Poimena Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania

2006 *Singapore Landscapes*
painting and moving image
Sculpture Square, Singapore

2004 *Gillman in the CBD*
painting and moving image
South Australian Museum

1997 *On the Land at Gillman*
painting, photography and moving image
Community Arts Centre Gallery, Port Adelaide

They moved to South Australia in December 1988, where Cole studied film making and Robert, visual art. They have worked together making art since the mid 1990s collaborating in painting, filmmaking, and moving image works for galleries and public spaces.

Murray Bridge Regional Gallery
27 Sixth Street
Murray Bridge
4th Dec 2011 -
15 Jan 2012





Robert Habel, Palmer Landscape 1
2011, oil on canvas, 140cmx200cm



Robert Habel, Palmer Landscape Trail 2
2011, oil on canvas, 70x160cm



Robert Habel, Palmer Landscape 2
2011, oil on canvas, 140cmx200cm



Robert Habel, Palmer Landscape Trail 3
2011, oil on canvas, 70x160cm



Robert Habel, Palmer Landscape 3
2011, oil on canvas, 140cmx127cm



Robert Habel, Palmer Landscape 4
2011, oil on canvas, 140cmx127cm



Robert Habel, Palmer Landscapes
(clockwise from top left: Yellow, Blue, Indigo & Red)
2011, oil on canvas

Palmer Landscapes: Double Happiness

Palmer Landscapes: Double Happiness is a waypoint in the journey of an ongoing, long-term collaboration between two artists: Robert Habel and Cole Larsen. Over the years, using the mediums of paint, film and performance art, the artists have interacted with and responded to their chosen environments. This exhibition combines the artists' work in three ways: extracts from the feature film *Double Happiness Uranium*, Robert Habel's paintings and Cole Larsen's films of Robert Habel painting.

Location is significant in this exhibition. Palmer is set in the south eastern Mount Lofty Ranges that fall away to the Murray River plains. Here sculptor Greg Johns has established the Palmer Project on 163 hectares of land that Johns refers to as rain shadow country. The Palmer Project explores issues relating to ecological and cultural sustainability through the medium of art and is the site of a growing collection of artworks produced in response to the physical, mythical and spiritual sense of the landscape.¹ In this exhibition, the site of the Palmer Project plays host to the artists and their explorations.

The experience of visiting the property can be intense and challenging. There are dirt roads, steep hills and rocks to navigate; biting winds or searing heat often add to the discomfort. While located in a low rainfall section of the Mount Lofty Ranges, when the rain does fall, the site can be impenetrable. Habel's works were created on Johns' property and *Double Happiness Uranium* was to be filmed there until a downpour immediately prior to filming mired vehicles in thick mud and forced a change of location to a nearby property.

This is a landscape that imposes itself on the viewer and elements of *Palmer Landscapes: Double Happiness* align themselves with the 19th century landscape painting genre known as the Romantic Sublime. This tradition depicted the natural environment as awe-inspiring, overwhelmingly vast and far more powerful and significant than humans. In an echo of Caspar David Friedrich's *The wanderer above the sea of fog* (1818) one of Larsen's screen works shows Habel walking over the treeless hillsides, looking out over rocky outcrops that overlook more treeless hills. The only sounds are the incessant wind, the artist's footsteps and his increasingly laboured breathing. While the landscape has been shaped by grazing, loss of vegetation and resulting erosion there is scant evidence of human habitation in these scenes and an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation.

In Habel's *Palmer Landscapes 1 and 2* this panoramic outlook is reduced to basic forms – the shape of the shadows, cracks and crevices of the undulating land – which are depicted in solid, contrasting colours of red, black and blue. In this series the artist is less concerned with a realistic representation of the view than the communication of less tangible elements. In representing only the shapes made by these folds and crevices the artist allows a dark side of the land – a sense of menace and foreboding – to enter the work, in much the same way that the silhouette of a tree, harmless by day, casts the shadow of a threatening monster into a child's bedroom after dark.

Habel's approach to art-making is almost ascetic: no easel, no stretched canvas and definitely no little painter's chair. No shady place to comfortably view the environment, just dirt, grass, sun, wind or rain. Habel expresses a preference for tackling problematic landscapes as opposed to portraying utopian scenes that "make people feel comfortable." The work itself is particularly uncomfortable to make. He works directly onto an unstretched canvas spread out on the ground and held down with rocks, allowing the work to collect the dust and debris of the surroundings. His marks are made against the resistance and texture of the land beneath the canvas, the surface itself developing hills and valleys of its own as the paint is applied.

This approach to making art, in which the conditions and materials of the environment impact on the artwork, has been described by painter Caroline Rannersberger as challenging the artist "to enter the abyss, the void, to lean into chaos and catastrophe, and to express that which cannot be seen; to render visible the invisible".² There are few comfortable, easy landscapes within that territory.

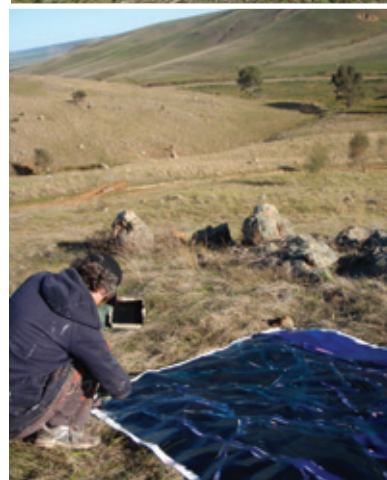
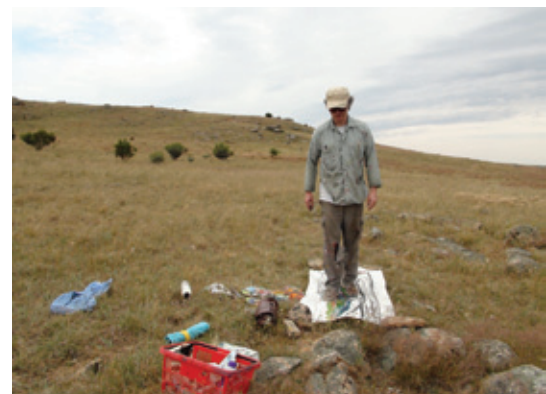
Hand in hand with Habel's willingness to subject his artwork to the vagaries of the elements is his awareness of the formal qualities of painting and his ultimate control of the finished product. Yet he approaches each work with little in the way of preconceived ideas and notions of representation. Design elements and mark making are informed by the subject: "I like to see my trips to paint, and the work itself, as an adventure, a visual travel diary. The idea of discovery is important in the work: discovery of something new in the subject matter, something new in my response to an environment and something new in the design decisions made while making the work." As a result of this constant seeking, Habel's overall body of work displays a diversity of approaches from thinly applied subtle layers of colour to thick, textured, brightly coloured surfaces and complex compositions; from abstracted forms through to realistic representations of place.

The lens of a camera is often relied upon to record realistic representations and Larsen's filming of Habel suggests the tone of a documentary, tracking the artist at work and looking over his shoulder as he paints. Yet his films contain no narrator to explain the thoughts and actions of the subject and there is scant narrative to provide meaning beyond what the viewer can observe. Often the artist simply finishes his work and walks away from (and sometimes across) his work, leaving the landscape as untouched as it was before he arrived and delivering a slight sense of anticlimax for the viewer.

Just as Habel is constantly seeking out ways to represent the environments he enters, Larsen is constantly exploring ways to document Habel interacting with these environments. The camera follows Habel, it waits patiently for him to arrive and creeps furtively behind him like some curious but silent presence in the land itself. Larsen describes his work as "very much interested in Robert's interaction with the landscape, human made objects, humans and even animals. I

often depict him, the artist, as the performer and pointer to the landscape, providing the viewer with an opportunity to see further than the one dimension, or one direction, of the painting."

An alternative dimension, or reality, forms the basis for the feature film *Double Happiness Uranium*, in which South Australia is the new



Middle East and uranium is the new oil. While the segments included in *Palmer Landscapes: Double Happiness* form a disjointed narrative they are also a unifying factor of the exhibition, containing Larsen's input as filmmaker, Habel's contribution as production designer as well as Habel's artworks that feature in the film. And, of course, the film was shot in the Palmer landscape providing yet another interaction with the site.

Habel and Larsen will no doubt continue their collaborations: some people go fishing or bushwalking – these two go into landscapes and do stuff. Painting and film, films of painting, art and collaboration: the double happiness will continue.

Melinda Rankin
November 2011

¹ *Palmer Sculpture Biennial* website, palmersculpturebiennial.com

² Rannersberger, Caroline, 'Metaphysical Territory', *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 230, June 2010, p. 23