

## Valley of Labours and Joys

*We inhabit the Biogea, valley of labours and joys, but [we] also frequent a place . . . in order to relativize our passions for possession, our stupidities of control, our cruel decision to objectivize the beings and things of the world . . . our libido for belonging and will to appropriation . . .*

Michel Serres, *Biogea*, Univocal, Minneapolis, 2012, 51

To paint while an image is emerging is an evocation of an unseen object. It's a surprising thing when the last turning of the shape and the division of the field is suddenly unfurled into view-and so only then is it apprehended for the first time by the artist-as for anyone else. Then there is a moment (perhaps of wonder) in this orientation: in locating oneself in relation to the new. For the (artistic) imagination to depart however it must proceed as if there is something to find: a desirable potential that one is compelled to pursue to its consummation.

So too there is, in a discoverer's pioneering voyage by sea or by land, a certain expectation; a mind preset often based on very little knowing.

Such were the earliest imaginings of the Southern Hemisphere by the ancient Greeks that foretold of the existence of a large southern island eons before European voyagers and colonisers were there to witness its existence. What the actual discoverers and European colonisers of Australia assumed was certainly influenced by politics. There were political benefits in relocating the burgeoning English population including the undesirables [sic] and by pre-emptively conditioning the spin to that end. It is likely that there were no expectations of an Indigenous human presence of any consequence or worthy of consideration. It was a pre-determined "empty" topography already fabricated by expansionist expectations.

Somehow though as we learn from recent archaeologists the stories of settlement and migration of ancient Indigenous Australians long before, seemed to filter into the consciousness of the European inhabitants of the Northern Hemisphere.

Ian McLean notes that even in classical geography, place was emblematic of self-an internal space and with it as counterpoint was the unknown or strange external space.

It is . . . evident in Ptolemy's maps, which depict the known world surrounded by ocean. If . . . Ptolemy imagined a large land -mass on the other side of the Ocean, it was an emblem of the unknown of the non-identical. Thus Ptolemy named it *terra incognita*, a theoretical land which at least

until the late Roman times, has also been called the Antipodes.<sup>1</sup>

Christobel Kelly's large canvas paintings might be in the order of a conjuring act - an uncovering and playing out of the sustained and ubiquitous unease of the unexpected encounter. In Kelly's images ambiguous semi-abstracted forms may suggest land and sea mass and the mitigating conditions of discovery- through the effects of atmospheric haze, wisp-like veins and feathered edges. There are "voyager" tropes like the sailing ships formed as if they were rod-wielded marotte puppets hovering above and entering in from the composition edges. In this reading, it is as if those incumbent with the task of settlement must approach the cove as theatre rehearsal, while directing it from a position of privilege and control. The brooding absent-presence of the Indigenous Other persists as smoke-trails from distant campfires in the dreamlike atmospherics of the cove. As Australians we struggle with the undeniable force of the gradually unfolding stories of great sorrow and loss in our past. But fortunately our Indigenous people are still there. Our land and sea encounters exposed the inflection of a self /internal and other/external conception of the world – a conception of ownership/entitlement imposed on Indigenous cultures with no comparable conceptions. However, one must be aware of the dangers of orthodoxies or hegemonic settled truths and importantly of encountering art as if there is only one way to make it. This is but one reading and likely through a conversation there is much more to discover. There is also joy and wonder in diversity.

Julie Henderson 2016

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge university Press: Cambridge, 1998, 1.