

Fractured, Fragmented Hill

A painting by Paul Borg

Wesley Uniting Church
March 1 - April 16 1995

Welcome again to all of you to the preview of Paul's latest exhibition. I am very pleased to be here speaking to you today about Paul and his work. The bonus to me is that not only is this a pleasurable and interesting task to be asked to perform, but I also find myself and all of you here in this soothing and impressive environment situated in the heart of the city. I work in this city and, caught up in the hectic pace of festival production and management, I don't often take the time to continue to explore the city for places such as this.

So, thank you Paul for bringing us together here.

I owe Paul another thanks. It has been almost three years since I left my work in Melbourne's western region to take on my current role. Prior to this I had spent some years in the very interesting position of regional arts officer, regularly traversing the district as I visited artists such as Paul in Deer Park and the MREAM group in Footscray.

One of the best parts of the job was the driving that had to be done, because the area offered such great visual stimulation. Some of these sites would be known to most of you. For example, the road under the Westgate leading into Newport where the size and nature of the bridge really hits home and the contrast between the huge steel columns and the last remaining mangrove swamps is most telling. Another well known view is that of Altona's industrial sector at night. Most impressive when seen from the window of the Melbourne to Geelong train, at night all sense of concern about pollution or limited resources is forgotten when the big flame and the lights on the superstructure are on show.

Since leaving that job, my trips to the area have been limited to boundary visits to Footscray or the quick run down the Geelong Road. However, last Friday night, thanks to Paul I drove out the backroads between the Geelong and Ballarat highways. I left South Melbourne 20 minutes before sunset after a day of telephone calls, budgets and computer screens. Straight over the bridge with the quick view of the west from Williamstown and the mouth of the Yarra way across to St Albans, and then down into big industrial roads which take you out to the "fringe" country where you find Paul's studio.

This countryside is at its absolute best at dusk or sunrise. Then the flat expanses soften and the man made images become monuments rather than impositions. It is a powerful, and to me, very Australian landscape. By the time I reached Paul's studio at ICI's Deer Park factory I was in exactly the right mood to look again at his work and, in particular, this piece **Fractured, Fragmented Hill**.

I don't know how many of you have visited Paul at his studio, but for those who haven't, it is a place where Paul has produced very good work. The old industrial buildings and the scale of the site seem to suit him, and he is obviously well liked by the hard hats running the site. Last Friday as Paul and I sat looking at his work a security guard pedalled up on his bicycle (that's the kind of place it is) and very comfortably took part in the viewing. This is not a common experience for studio based artists and Paul seems to relish being constantly on show to people who aren't normally found amongst regular gallery visitors.

On that night I had the opportunity to look at earlier works by Paul which led up to this piece. Paul is a thorough practitioner, every one of his finished works can be traced back through a "family" of paintings sitting in his studio. This impressive work will no doubt not be the last of a series because it represents Paul's major interest as a contemporary painter.

Two constant themes are be found in Paul's work. He is a prolific interpreter of the impact of European settlement in the western suburbs and surrounding farm land and he loves tackling the issue of progression and change. The former is a very straight forward summary of Paul's catalogue of well known series such as his new housing development and early scotch thistle paintings.; the latter is what takes us into a discussion of this work and which also requires further reference to Paul's work as a painter in Melbourne in the 1990's.

Paul believes he is an example of multiculturalism alive and well in Australia, and I agree with him. However, multiculturalism is one of those words which has been so over used that it has become far too generalist in nature to convey any concise message about Paul's work.

I prefer to think of Paul as an Australian painter with a good knowledge of and affinity with classical European art and an obvious love of the Australian landscape. Most importantly, what brings these two powerful painterly interests together is Paul's very sophisticated understanding of both personal and cultural evolution. Or, to put it more simply, Paul tackles head on the reality of life, death and decay.

I am not about to interpret for you each of the gum tree sculptural images spread across Paul's western district hill. Firstly I am not a classics scholar, secondly it is fun for you to see how many you recognise, and thirdly I respond most directly to the context within which the images are placed rather than the images themselves.

Although this painting was inspired by Paul's travels in Europe where he observed many broken and scattered sculptures in the cities and countryside, as a viewer I believe it draws its strength from his Australian heritage.

Every district in Australia has its "one tree hill" and every member of my and earlier generations of Australians is familiar with the grey ghost paddocks resulting from the practice of ring barking. Farmers, particularly the soldier settlers after both world wars, were encouraged and instructed to clear their land via this method.

This practice now seems brutally wasteful and stupid in a land where trees are precious to our long term survival. However whatever your view of it, it did have a dramatic impact on our recognition of the landscape. In addition, and this may be a personal view not shared by others, it is one of the indicators of the unending hard work undertaken by farmers in their attempts to shape the countryside to their needs.

I say it may be a personal view because as a young man I fled the city and university to discover the "real" Australia. I spent years working as a labourer in rural Australia, and although I never became a very skilled labourer, I did achieve an understanding of the physical effort required to leave a mark on the landscape.

Hence, although I am glad those labouring years are behind me, I still regularly look with amazement on the efforts and achievements of people in the bush. I drive through the farmland counting the kilometres of fencing, the railway lines laid by hand and simple machinery, the millions of power poles and the countless roads.

To bring those thoughts back to this painting, just as Paul was stunned by the signs of decay of European antiquity and the almost irrelevant presence of symbols of the past, I look at this painting and see in the hill the already decaying efforts of very recent generations of Australian farmers. Fencing that takes huge physical effort and hard earned money to erect will tumble down within a few years; the ringbarked trees will fall and rot and the paddock's vegetation, so beautifully painted by Paul, will become weeds and bare dirt. The small farm will become swallowed up by a bigger farm or the new suburbs of the city; the farmhouse will disappear along with the neighbours' farmhouses; the country school will close and that will weaken the bonds of the community and impact on a whole host of other activities.

In an ancient country we are experiencing rapid change. In fact, the two hundred years of white settlement here has been all about phenomenal change at speed.

Paul looks at old and new and wonders what will remain. I can't answer that. Obviously humans need to make a mark and we do, but very soon most of those marks disappear. Symbols of our European heritage do remain with us, unlike the little bush towns of three generations ago now completely reclaimed by the bush, but Paul then questions their importance to us. What he looks to when he thinks of multiculturalism is, I think, a necessary and fresh approach to understanding our place here. We need to be both humble and impassioned during our short lives here, and maintain a sense of awe about the absolute dominance of time and erosion. Somewhere there we also need a good sense of humour.

I think Paul has achieved this and congratulate him and look forward to more good work from him.

Chris Reidy

1/3/95