

# Everything and nothing: Chris Langlois' landscape paintings

Rosemary Hawker, *Everything & Nothing, Land Sea Sky* exhibition catalogue, Metro Arts, November 2001

A commitment to representing the landscape has come to be about the “loss” of landscape in the twentieth century...that is, about its necessity and impossibility at the same time. (Ian Burn)

[...] for what I ought to have found in the image itself I would discover only between the painting and myself, namely a charge that my heart addressed to the image, a claim which was barred by it. [...] but where I strove to look with all my heart, the sea persistently failed me.[...] In its uniformity and absence of shore it has but the frame for a foreground, and when one looks at it, one has a feeling one's eyelids have been cut off. (Heinrich von Kleist describing Casper David Friedrich's “The Monk Beside the Sea”, 1809-10)

It is hard to imagine paintings more able to indicate the longing of looking and the viewer's relationship with the image than the landscapes of Chris Langlois. His views of horizons, the sky, the sea, mountainous landforms and fields of colour that could be water, air or a leaf, represent the most universal aspects of the natural world. But what strikes us is not so much the generality of the description but that these landscapes are strangely unanchored. While they are like our visual experience of the world, they do not fulfil typical expectations of landscape representation. Langlois' paintings are unconcerned with the identification of the particularities of place. There are no strikingly shaped bays or headlands, characteristic plant life or vernacular buildings that the paintings recall to us, there is no particular ‘there’ to which we might wish to go. In this way, Langlois aims at a generic approach to landscape, which by not referring to identifiable, mappable terrain would have us consider the problems of painting as a whole rather than individual successes or failures in representing place. This is landscape as opposed to Australian landscape, or at least that is the works' ostensible claim.

In looking to landscape as he does, Langlois addresses one of the most persistent subjects in the history of art. Yet, it is also generally understood that landscape has fallen from fashion, that as a genre, it is judged to be so benign as to have been given over to the Sunday painter. A serious commitment to landscape in this climate becomes, strangely, one of the more risky undertakings that a contemporary professional artist might make. It is, of course, naïve to not recognise that landscape can refer to complex conceptual and technical issues for painting and art more generally, but how can this recognition be broached?

Traditionally, part of the role of landscape has been to provide a visual record of place that communicates something of its specificity and difference from other locations. The fact that Langlois works from photographs might reasonably lead us to expect considerable correspondence between his images and recognisable places. And, in fact, his use of photography means that many of the paintings are ‘realistic’ in the sense of having a high degree of verisimilitude between observable phenomena and the painted image. Yet what is represented is sky, sea, light, as broad categories of visual experience and thus these landscapes are simultaneously compellingly realistic and unidentifiable. They refer, at once, to anywhere and nowhere.

This quality is explained in part by the artist's process. In working from photographs to produce landscape paintings, Langlois' work finds strong parallels in the landscapes and issues of German painter Gerhard Richter. Like Richter, he sees the use of the photograph as freeing him from certain artistic decisions, the choice of subject matter and composition. Langlois is careful to only select photographs that allow for an

anonymity of landscape and is entirely unconcerned with the fidelity of the painting to the photograph. In some cases he combines elements from across a number of landscape photographs to produce a composite, fictitious landscape. His subject becomes the genre of landscape painting rather than any place in the world. To paint a genre in this way is to shift attention from what is shown and instead to address painting as such, to ask what painting is, what it can be used to do. By insisting upon the generic rather than the particular, Langlois is effective in opening the question of painting things and places onto the broader issues of the relationship between painting and looking. Contrasting high realism and low identification is affecting for the viewer, but it also refers to the history of art and the meaning of art media. The challenge that Langlois frequently sets himself in painting cloud and seascapes is famously frustrating and technically difficult. Painters from Titian to Turner, Monet and Suerrat have formed these same difficulties into a diverse range of issues around the relationship of perception, representation, and the image and its audience.

Nevertheless, while unmistakably painterly and revelling in the potential sumptuousness of the painted surface, Langlois' images clearly reveal their photographic origin, and thus the particularity of painting as a media is also challenged here. The fact that these are ambiguous works that oscillate between figuration and abstraction would normally be judged to be at odds with their photographic origins, but it is not despite this that they are indeterminate but rather because of it. The occlusion which Langlois' paintings refer to and rely upon is thoroughly grounded in the photographic. It is because of the confounding connection between painting and photography, that Langlois is able to engage so effectively with historical and contemporary issues for landscape painting and the present circumstance of the place of painting in art in general, an art which seems today to be becoming more generic and less based in media.

In terms of concepts of landscape, Langlois' paintings position themselves in relation to Edmund Burke's Romantic sublime. This is, of course, due to their subject matter, the vast expanse of sea, sky, and limitless horizon in works such as “Ocean (Green, Grey, and Violet) No. 10”, 2000 and the tenebrous foreboding of the looming mountainous forms of “Nocturne No. 21”, 1996, and “Landscape (Blue and Green) No. 8”, 2001. In each of these works the grandeur and beauty of nature is underscored by a sense of disquiet or even fear. Landscape may be a product of culture, where nature is contained and controlled through its representation, but the sublime landscape painting would have us remember just how separate and different to nature we are. This point is clearly articulated by Richter, when he writes, ‘Nature, [...] in all its forms is always against us, because it knows no meaning, no pity, no sympathy, because it knows nothing and is absolutely mindless: the total antithesis of ourselves, absolutely inhuman.’

It is in this knowledge of our alienation from nature that the sublime undercurrent of Langlois' paintings is located. Burke also tells us something of their mechanism when he says: ‘In reality a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy of all enthusiasms whatsoever.’ Langlois could well put himself under the star of JMW Turner who once said ‘obscurity is my forte’. Yet again the photographic origins of Langlois' work mark a significant difference here. In Langlois' work the obscurity of the image is not just expressive of the struggle to see or to paint, but also of the more mundane and technical errors of a camera out of focus, or an exposure time so long that it reveals the movement of the finger on the shutter release.

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In eliding clarity Langlois refers to, rather than represents, landscape. He does not aim at a depiction of objects or places but rather of relations, of positionality rather than position. In these landscapes it is not a question of finding something within the image, or recognizing a particular landscape, as would usually be the case, but rather of entering a relationship with the image. The viewer is forced to concentrate on this relationship with the image rather than what is shown in the image. Heightening this effect is the fact that these are featureless, unpeopled landscapes and therefore of indeterminate scale. While the landscape fills our gaze, the emptiness of that landscape returns our looking to us. In *The Optical Unconscious* Rosalind Krauss, while describing John Ruskin's fascination with the sea, locates this quality and its potential for art:

*The sea is a special kind of medium for modernism, because of its perfect isolation, its detachment from the social, its sense of self-enclosure, and, above all, its opening onto a visual plenitude that is somehow heightened and pure, both a limitless expanse and a sameness, flattening it into nothing, into the no-space of sensory deprivation. The optical and its limits.*

In drawing our gaze the expanse of nature satisfies a desire to look into a field (sea or sky) of limitless possibility and yet returns nothing, that is no object, to us. Our gaze, unable to fall upon a discernible object, the prize of our looking, continues to interrogate that visual field, perhaps on the pretext of a vain and naive hope of seizing upon something, but, in fact, so as to be lost in looking. Whether historically, in the origins of modernism, or for each viewer of each canvas, this is a shift, a transformation in the viewer's expectations of an image. The relationships of representation that Langlois' paintings address through eliding visual clarity and referring to landscape as limitless and unboundable belong to the very structure of the human gaze and help us to consider the relationship between reality and image.

Langlois' paintings intriguingly reveal the optical and its limits in an inescapable obscurity. But, again, it is important to consider this obscurity as not entirely generic but borrowed from photography. With clouds (and we could also add sea) as subject matter the depth of field characteristics of photography collapse foreground and background relationships, they are both figure and background. In paintings like "Storm (White and Grey) No. 1", 1998 - 99, clouds are simultaneously near and far from the 'camera', and as such are necessarily both in and out of focus. Their lack of focus is as much a defining quality of the forms as their clear definition. While this might be the case with other images of large objects that recede into the picture plane, clouds recede, advance and recede again across their form and the impression is far more abstract and ephemeral. In fact, the nearer one approaches clouds the less visible they become, a condition that tends to reverse the usual perceptual expectations associated with proximity, clarity and form. In this way, images of the sky, clouds and sea are evidence of an opticality which threatens to lose its object, while of the 'real' world, they are also ungraspable, not least because they are without limits, without edges. The reflection and refraction of light necessary to vision seems so essential a constituting process for the subject of these images as to make them at once fragile and ephemeral and yet sublimely inalterable in their presence. In all these ways Langlois' paintings provide infinite contemplation through limited and limitless visual information, satisfying and denying our longing for looking with everything and nothing at once.

These same qualities allow the works to oscillate between abstraction and figuration. Relationships of figure and ground, foreground and background, on which such designations depend, are collapsed not

just in the indeterminacy of the images but also, in paintings such as "Landscape (Mars Black) No. 1", 1998, and "Landscape (Cadmium Red) No. 1", 1998, in their uniformity. Such paintings are at once all ground and no figure, and yet still gesture towards a possible emerging presence, a form almost, but not quite, coalescing out of the nothingness. This impression is pushed furthest with Langlois' "Study for Colour Blend" paintings, such as "Study for Colour Blend" (Violet and Red) No. 1, 2001, which topple into abstraction and relinquish any hope or aim of settling upon an object in our looking. The same to-ing and fro-ing between the abstract and the figural is achieved from a radically different direction in "Ocean (Green and Blue) No. 22, 2001, where the horizon line becomes so insistent as to transform the canvas to Minimalist flatness. The limit and limitlessness of Langlois' horizon allows it to act as both content and composition within his paintings. That is, within the space of the canvas is both the depth of the space of the sea as it recedes into the distance and nothing but the shallow support of the canvas on which two flattish fields of colour divide upon a horizontal line. Despite the artist's insistence upon the generic and a seeming disinterest in locating his work within the history of Australian landscape painting, these qualities cannot help but return us to that history and some of the most interesting and important debates engaged there.

Australian landscape painting, was, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, characterised by European modes of representation that produced an Australian landscape uncannily like the English countryside. Much of the history of Australian landscape painting has been taken up with throwing off the distortions of this view and in establishing the specificity of Australian landscape as predicated upon demonstrating the marked otherness of the antipodean. This can be seen to be at least part of the agenda of artists as diverse as Heysen, Roberts, Nolan and Williams. In their generic address to landscape, Langlois' landscapes are apparently outside of this agenda. However, it is the very fact that these paintings are of anywhere and nowhere, of everything and nothing, that situates them firmly within the Australianness of Australian landscape painting. Australian painting, and Australia more broadly as a cultural topos, has had two moments in its relation to Europe. As Paul Foss argues, this relation moves from Australia being positioned as other to a European tradition, to the creation of Europe as 'other' to Australia.

Rex Butler argues from this idea that Australia is more accurately located between these two states of representation, that Australia would neither be the same nor the other but the very space between them. 'It is not an "Australia" that is to be found anywhere on the map as anything represented, but an "Australia" that is at once everywhere and nowhere, the map or representation itself.' This is of course consistent with the unanchored quality of Langlois landscapes. Butler pursues his point through an examination of Fred Williams' landscapes, and it is again telling that many of his descriptions of Williams' paintings can equally apply to Langlois' works despite the diversity of their styles and apparent aims. '[A]fter all, what more do Williams' paintings try to capture than a certain void, a certain nothing, a certain distance or gap between things? Would it not be in this void, this absence, this nowhere, that Australia is to be found?' In claiming a lack of specificity in the defining quality of the Australian landscape, Butler argues that as Williams' landscapes became more abstracted, and therefore less obviously connected to the particularities of place (the otherness of Australia) the more quintessentially Australian they became. Williams himself articulates the strength found in this generality, a generality which we might also find in Langlois, when he says, 'This is how a landscape should be, even if it isn't. It doesn't refer to any particular country any longer.'

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i Ian Burn, "Notes on 'Value Added' Landscapes", in Ann Stephen (Ed. and curator), 1996, *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, Power Publications and Monash University Gallery: Melbourne, p. 8.

ii Heinrich von Kleist cited by Jean-Philippe Antoine, 1995, "Photography, Painting and the Real: The Question of Landscape in the Painting of Gerhard Richter" in G. Koch, L. Lang, and J. Antoine, *Gerhard Richter*, Éditions Dis Voir: Paris, p. 74.

iii Edmund Burke, 1757, 1990, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

iv Gerhard Richter in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, (ed.), 1995, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, trans. D. Britt, Thames and Hudson and Anthony d'Offay Gallery: London. p. 124.

v Burke, "Of the difference between clearness and obscurity with regard to the passions", p. 56.

vi Rosalind E. Krauss, 1993, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT: Cambridge, Mass., p. 2.

vii Paul Foss, 1996, "Teatrum Nondum Cognitorum", in R. Butler (ed.) *What is Appropriation: An anthology of critical writings on Australian art in the '80s and '90s*, IMA and Power Publications: Brisbane and Sydney, pp. 119 – 130.

viii Rex Butler (Ed.), 1996, "Introduction", *What is Appropriation: An anthology of critical writings on Australian art in the '80s and '90s*, IMA and Power Publications: Brisbane and Sydney, p. 23.

ix Rex Butler, lecture, "Australian Art Now", Department of Art History, University of Queensland, July 2000.

x Fred Williams in Keith Broadfoot, 1999, "Landscape as Blank: Australian art after the monochrome", *Australian Journal of Art*, vol. XIV (2), p. 70.