

Interview

Brett Ballard & Chris Langlois 2007

The paintings of Chris Langlois are of the sea, land and sky but in certain respects are of no one place. Some paintings of the sea have the effect of total atmosphere; crepitating waves are coloured subtly green with touches of violet or magenta and above the skies hang grey and torpid. This is weather. Other paintings by Langlois of land may appear blurred, as if snapped from a moving car or train, their colours bled in horizontal motion.

There are also the aerial views of wisped clouds and distant hills to consider, paintings which from their high view point, establish broad panoramas and vast distances. Langlois' landscapes evoke what we might think of as a speechless image, one engendered by the portrayal of a vast and empty nature. Here the viewer will find no people, nor have an anchor in a particular location. What is apparent though in a Langlois painting is a sense of longing and a manifest beauty which correlates with collective memory and the unconscious.

When I first visited Chris Langlois in his studio, I ventured ideas about the relationship of photography and painting. Langlois suggested that the photographs he worked from should look more like his painting and not the obverse: the paintings looking like the photographs. Here was an astute reply and suggested to me that Langlois was a painter in touch with his working aesthetic and the coordinates and ideas that went to form his work.

What follows is the outcome an interview which we have published here to accompany Chris Langlois's survey exhibition at Moree Plains Gallery (19th July – August 24, 2007) and his first solo exhibition at Rex Irwin Art Dealer (September 11 – October 6, 2007)

Brett Ballard: I wanted to ask you first of all about the relationship of photography to your painting, not only in a conceptual sense but in the way that photography might determine some of your painting process, and even perhaps the look of the finished pictures.

Chris Langlois: Initially my landscapes were based on things that I had seen and experienced and brought back to the studio through memory. The landscapes were often invented or made up and were of nowhere, yet for me, they captured the essence of landscape and how it made me feel while being within it. It was a process that was intuitive and allowed for ambiguity.

While working from memory helps reduce unnecessary detail, it also has flaws in limiting the amount of subtlety and information that is required to give an image its multitude of dimensions in colour, composition, tone, scale and so forth. I wanted to bring those added dimensions into my work and the options were either to use sketches or notes made on location, or to work entirely on location. Using photography seemed to work best and was in keeping with my initial intention of painting landscape, to depict landscape in a non-specific

and ambiguous manner. It became apparent to me quite quickly that the camera could be used more as a sketchbook and be manipulated to compose a preliminary image or sketch.

BB: How then do the titles come about? They are pragmatic and partially descriptive. Has this always been the case?

CL: The titles are pragmatic because my images are not of a narrative nature. I like to think of them more as music. As in music, I want to achieve an illusion. The titles then reflect that they are not of a specific place, and are not narrative in nature. They are of anywhere and are places that draw on the viewer's memory.

Some titles may contain a reference to a place. In this instance the name I choose is obscure, so that you recognize that it is of a place but that place is generally unknown and could be anywhere. I also choose to do this so that I don't enter a debate about whether my depiction of a place is accurate or not.

BB: Are the paintings then a meditation on the image and issues of landscape painting?

CL: The process is not a meditation, in fact quite the opposite; the process is one of frustration with glimpses of almost feeling in control. At the end of the process, you could say that the paintings have a meditative effect.

BB: Do you see your work connecting with the tradition of Australian landscape painting. Is there an affinity there in an historical or contemporary sense?

CL: There is a strong tradition of landscape painting in Australia, and in a broad sense I do feel that I am participating in that tradition. My paintings are not quintessentially Australian in a way that, say Fred Williams' paintings are. It is interesting though that when you grow up in Australia, being part of the Australian landscape, seeing it but not seeing it, taking it for granted, and then learning at art school how others (generally Europeans) have interpreted the landscape. You find yourself looking at artists and then interpreting the way they look at landscape into the way you look at and interpret landscape. You look at landscape through entirely different eyes. It's hard to see the landscape any other way. You look at the ocean and you can't help but think of Turner, Lister or Richter. Look at the side of a hill and can't help but

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think of Williams, Boyd, Roberts or Gruner, look down a valley and think of Streeton. See lights on a river at night and see Whistler and so on. As a landscape painter, the history of landscape painting does make it difficult to look at our environment without considering that history. Whether consciously or not our affinity to that history feeds into what we do as contemporary artists.

BB: How important are issues of atmosphere and weather in your paintings.

CL: Atmosphere and weather is certainly something I have enjoyed exploring and continue to explore. The effect that atmosphere has on colour, space and distance is something I am pushing and in the aerial series it is pushed as far I have taken it to date. This series touches on what Streeton and Nolan have with their high vantage point panoramas and aerial images but also explores the transparent and opaque qualities of our atmosphere. From the vantage point in a commercial plane, you can literally see for hundreds of kilometres, where the landscape disappears into a void of violets, blues and browns in the far off distance. Instead of seeing a landscape framed by sky, two-thirds land, one-third sky, our entire environment is seen as one.

Previously I have used weather to add drama to an image and as a compositional device. The atmosphere is a wonderfully difficult thing to paint: to make a cloud have volume and at the same time transparency and lightness. There are countless ways in which water or water vapour, wind, temperature, air pressure and light, combine to form an endless array of atmospheric effects. Even a cloudless sky can take on varying form of transparency and colour.

BB: Is the concept of Beauty critical to your paintings? Is one of your aspirations to achieve beauty when you start a painting? Is beauty for you a necessary part of a successful image?

CL: I try and create something that is aesthetically pleasing. That does not mean I am in search for beauty in a work, although that is often where I end up. I don't believe necessarily beauty to be an essential factor for a successful painting.

BB: Chris what is exciting about this show is the inclusion of the outdoor pictures. Please tell me how these came about and your motivations for working in a way which is counter to your normal studio practice.

CL: It's one way of throwing a spanner in the works, as it is counter to my usual studio practice. Especially as I am used to working in a private and comfortable studio, I find it challenging and difficult to pull off. Working like this is the opposite to using a viewfinder to help compose an image; instead you have all of the landscape in front of you, and you can't fit it all into a tiny rectangle. The challenge then becomes all of the issues of painting all at once in a difficult painting environment. It forces you to look at the landscape and after several days of working out of doors I become hyper sensitive to its colour, and that is what I'm looking to take back to the studio. The paintings are executed quickly and the end results are raw and honest. Most of the sketches fail, but some do hit the mark and are resolved in the studio. I certainly have more to explore and it will be a continuing process.

BB: Chris, in light of these affections, are you in art terms more a Romantic or a Realist?

There are elements of both romanticism and realism in my work but I would say that I was neither.