Australian mining and the national identity

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AUSTRALIAN MINING
AND
THE NATIONAL IDENTITY

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

> Silver has its mines,
>
> and gold a place for refining.
>
> Iron is extracted from the earth,
>
> the smelted rocks yield copper.
>
> Man makes an end of darkness
>
> when he pierces to the uttermost depths
>
> the black and lightless rock.
>
> Mines the lamp-folk dig
>
> in places where there is no foothold,
>
> and hang suspended far from mankind.[1]

Lake Eyre, a vast dry saltpan in remote South Australia, filled with water in 2000, the first time in many decades. I flew to Adelaide and travelled by road to Lake Eyre staying at William Creek on the Oodnadatta Track. The filling of the lake provoked a sense of excitement that had the effect of bringing the whole landscape to life and heightened the impact of the environment around me.

Along the way, I saw many of the oldest mining sites in the country - Kapunda, Burra and Tanunda where the first payable mines in Australia were worked by Cornish immigrants in the early nineteenth century. I visited the eerie dead landscape of Coober Pedy and then saw some vast open cut mines such as the massive Leigh Creek coal mine.

The outlines and silhouettes of headframes and mining buildings were scattered over the landscape. Some were new; others had been there for decades, in some instances since the nineteenth century. There is a striking beauty in the stark functionality of these buildings and structures - whether as decaying remnants and skeletal relics of past workings, or as brand-new pre-fabricated mainframes and support buildings.

These thoughts about mines had germinated a few years earlier when I made a number of trips to Western New South Wales and saw, around Cobar and Broken Hill, some of

1

the greatest mines the world has known. Whether the mines were current or disused, I was fascinated with the geometric shapes of the equipment and buildings used in both the extractive and processing stages - how they stand on, and under, the ground and relate to each other.

Everything about mining is excessive or larger than life: massive amounts of money are required; the people involved are always driven by an adventurous optimism when things are starting up or, correspondingly, by a 'devil may care' indifference or nonchalance when things turn sour and the mine fails or is stopped. On closure, all the structures and equipment are often just abandoned and forgotten, left to rot and rust on the site.

Mines are sites of impermanent, human endeavour located, for the most part, in difficult and hostile environments. Failing or closing as most do, they are wonderful exercises in energetic optimism and noble futility, resembling closely paradoxical aspects of the Australian identity.

Mining is such an enormous topic that the possibilities for a painter are endless. All aspects of the spatial environment – the landscape alone, as well as figures and structures in the landscape - can be explored in a way that enables much to be said about this complex activity.

CONCEPT

I have examined many active and abandoned mines in New South Wales and Victoria. At Cobar, there are enormous enterprises with their colossal equipment and bright, bold superstructures, such as the Peak Copper Mine and, nearby, the Pasminco silver/lead/zinc mine at Elura. The Central Deborah Mine in Bendigo and the reconstructed mines and fields on Sovereign Hill at Ballarat also provide an illuminating background to the history of mining in Australia.

For over 150 years Ophir, West Wyalong, Temora, Gundagai and Condoblin in New South Wales and Clunes, Maryborough, Daylesford and Beechworth in Victoria have each seen hundreds, if not thousands, of mines and mining companies start, stop and, sometimes, re-start again. The old mines and the few new ones that are currently operating are scattered all around these small towns and communities. Most of the mines are abandoned. Many of these forsaken sites are difficult to find because of overgrowth, poor roads and, generally, useless maps. Many are lost. By finding the overburden or the huge slagheaps, a by-product of the copper mining process, sometimes the sites can be located.

There is little left at these old sites. Ultimately, all is reclaimed by nature, although some mining relics and parts of old structures, like broken smokestacks and boilers, can still be found. Regrettably, many of these sites will soon be lost forever; either so overgrown and neglected as not to be detectable or simply levelled and reafforested by local authorities.

At all of these sites, I was able to gain some insight into the particular operation and the sheer toughness and impossibility of the local environments. For the most part, and judged from now, they appeared to be the haphazard folly of naïve optimists. But the going was so hard and the prospects so chancy that you cannot imagine any mine being contemplated, let alone established, without plenty of optimism

As Geoffrey Blainey put so well in The *Rush That Never Ended*:

> *'It is easy to forget from the remoteness of the years that mining fields can never be created without optimism, even if such optimism seems absurd after a field has failed.'* [1]

The story of most mines is a familiar one and easy to tell. The first flush of financial success is often quickly replaced by a depressing projection of future earnings and an urgent need for huge injections of non-existent capital and know-how. Small success soon turns to failure. The mine closes - disused, it falls into sad and lonely abandonment.

Much of Australia's celebrated history is underscored by failure and tragedy. Ned Kelly, the hanged bushranger, has been mythologised as a hero. His dying words, *'Such is life'*, are so instructive about the Australian spirit. The disaster of Gallipoli for the Anzacs has become part of the spiritual fabric of the nation.

This is not to suggest a dark morbidity lurking in the Australian soul but it does point to a good dose of the Camusian philosophy of the absurd in the futility of human goals. There is a dichotomy in the Australian temperament between the enthusiastic desire to achieve and the disbelief that any action to achieve the goal is worthwhile.[2] As Robert Hughes said, describing the average Australian:

> *'You do something vigorously, but not from a real faith in its raison d'etre; colloquially, 'a bloke might as well give it a burl'.... The man who knows the final absurdity of his actions is, under this aspect, the only free one.'* [3]

Despite the failures and the tragedies, there is an arresting optimism or freedom in the Australian psyche. Our sense of identity or self-worth is not tied up in the value of the end result. People are at their heroic best when, despite the likelihood of failure, they courageously press on and do not shrink from the challenge. Australian mines express

this so well. They stand as metaphors for that sense of futility, if not absurdity, found in the Australian identity.

There is an innate heroism and daring in the new, predestined mines with their bold headframes and buildings that stand confidently against the horizon and cover their awesome underground workings. Equally, on the abandoned sites are the silent and majestic, old, rusted poppet-heads and other crude, vernacular machines, buildings and underground workings which, if not an actual tomb, are a monument or epitaph to crushed hopes and thwarted ambitions.

INVESTIGATION

As part of my research, I considered the work of many artists whose techniques and ways of working were quite sympathetic to my ideas about pictorially representing mining and the national character.

Initially, this group was large. They included Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Paul Cézanne, Ferdinand Leger, Giorgio De Chirico, Piet Mondrian, Rene Magritte, Jasper Johns, Ben Nicholson, Larry Rivers, Frank Stella, Sean Scully, Saul Steinberg, Colin McCahon, Sidney Nolan, John Brack, Rosalie Gascoigne, Lawrence Daws and John Wolseley.

Certain artists such as Jasper Johns, Piet Mondrian, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Larry Rivers, Frank Stella, Sidney Nolan, Lawrence Daws, Ben Nicholson, Rosalie Gascoigne and Ferdinand Leger stood out as artists of particular note. They proved to be significant influences as they each provided information about, and possible solutions to, some of the problems I encountered in presenting my reactions about the impermanence, energised futility and dignified decay of these mining sites.

I initially examined the work of two Australian artists, Sidney Nolan and Lawrence Daws.They had each done a large body of work based on mining.

Sidney Nolan's work in this area can be broken into two periods. In 1948, he painted many sad and lonely mining scenes where the accent is on the strange feebleness of the venture. Later, in 1972, he explored the squalor and brutality of mining when he painted a number of works based on miners in the Hammersley Ranges of North Western Australia[1]. Obviously, his earlier work is of greater interest to me as it has more in common with my central concerns.

Paintings such as *Pretty Polly Mine* (1948)[2] (Figure 1), *Abandoned Mine* (1948)[3] and *Little Dog Mine* (1948)[4], whilst dealing with mining in a more illusionistic way than appealed to me, suitably captured the use of mining materials and the tenuousness of the man-made structures in the landscape. In each of these paintings, the structures on the landscape are wretched and improvised. Although two of the three paintings have a

Figure 1 Pretty Polly Mine

figure, one notices more the broken-down impermanence of the structures. Spare scratchy lines defiantly propose crude little constructions which speak so well of the lonely futile efforts of the claimholder.

Daws, in a series of mining paintings concerned with the 1913 Marvel Loch disaster in Western Australia, combined large emblematic mining structures with the awesome and unforgiving brutality of the mining environment.[5] Paintings such as *The Labyrinth I* (1970)[6] (Figure 2), *The Omen Bird IV* (1970)[7] and *The 1913 Mining Disaster II* (1970)[8] efficiently use the basic geometric forms and shapes of mining structures with a strong sense of the divide between the worlds above and below ground. These painting all carry some menace. Hundreds of tiny scurrying figures appear in many of these paintings to illustrate the hapless frailty of human efforts to govern the environment. His colours are mostly dark and earthy with washes and scumbled paint to suggest the grit and dust of these hostile locations.

Having absorbed both the Nolan and Daws approach, I thought that, if I was going to successfully suggest my concept of mining, the paintings I was about to undertake would need to draw upon a significant collection of diverse mining references.

By the juxtaposition in a painting of generic mining workings and by linking geological maps and references with the geometric shapes and the iconic forms of the structures and machinery, the painting would be able to show something of that uncontrived courage and liberating energy found in the national psyche. At the same time, to capture the sense of failure, the painting should also contain elements of mining systems and symbols as well as the lonely abandoned headframes and broken down mining structures, as statuesque reminders of the dignified absurdity of the Australian outlook on life.

At base, this polarity of courage and failure involves matters of the spirit and of enduring human values. Mondrian had been able to invest his geometric abstractions with a '*spiritual significance but without external reference*' (emphasis added).[9] In many of his works, such as *Composition with Red Yellow and Blue* (1921),[10] he had:
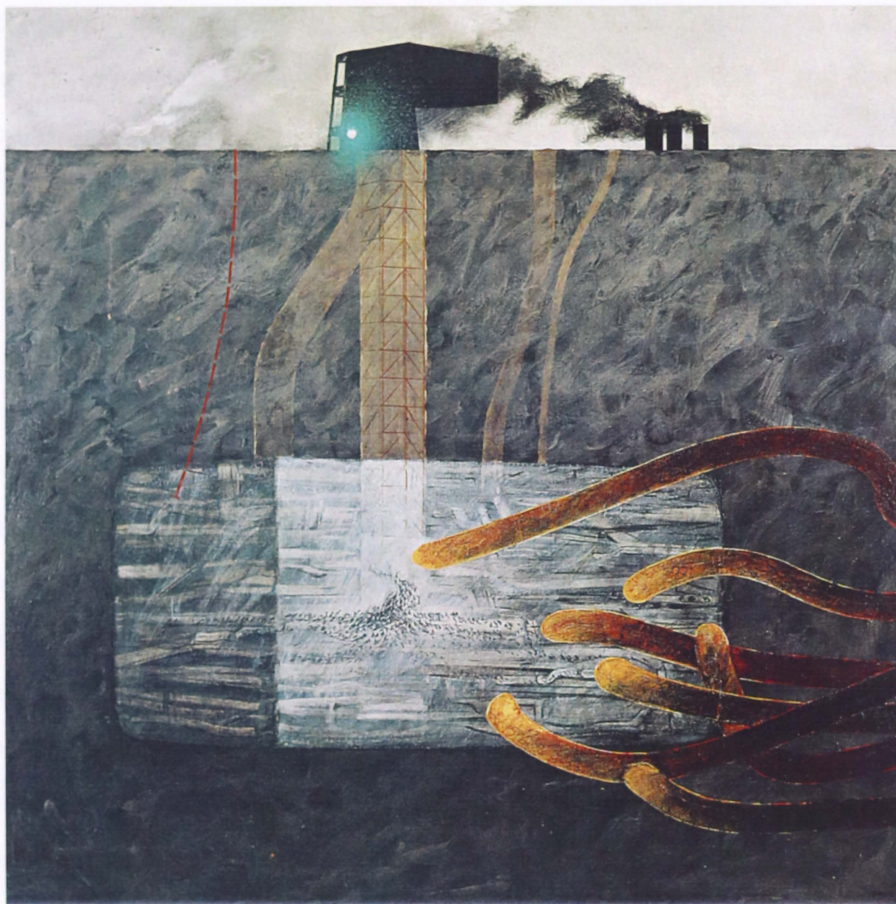
Figure 2   The Labyrinth I

> *'expressed (the spiritual) in such pure plastic terms as the primary*
> *colours and the contrast of dark and light, of vertical and horizontal.'* [11]

With mining structures having strong geometric overtones and references, Mondrian's ability to fuse the geometric with the spiritual was instructive.

At many mines, indeed, as suggested in the three Nolan works already mentioned, the structures, particularly the empty buildings, seem to merge with the land so as to be part of it. Moving between abstract and figurative styles, Ben Nicholson used a similar approach in many of his landscapes. As in *Italian Wall* (1955) [12] and *Dec 61 (Greek & Two Circles)* (1961) [13]:

> *'...the way Nicholson integrated (pencil) lines with areas of broadly*
> *painted colour allowed the motif to exist on the same plane as the*
> *background. This contribution to the mechanics of space is critical to*
> *appreciating Nicholson's art.'* [14]

Bringing the subject up to the picture plane, using pencil diagrammatically and removing or reducing reliance on perspective so that the figure–ground relationship is blurred, has the effect of blending the object in the landscape. They merge as part of an all encompassing continuum. This fusion is, of course, very much to the point with my view of Australian mining. When a mine falls into disuse and when seen in the context of the surrounding landscape, all the above ground structures seem to lose a sense of separate existence and take on a sense of weird loneliness like much of the Australian landscape itself.

An artist who made a considerable impact on my research is Jasper Johns. His ability to synthesise incongruent elements in his work, as well as his overall feelings about his art, have provided many useful insights into how to represent this unwieldy subject and also how to resolve apparent contradictions in the imagery I intended to use.

Every painting is a metaphor. Even if the artist is content to render the subject in a realistic or literal way, the painting is never the subject contemplated. Not *being* the subject, nevertheless, it tells us something *about* the subject. However, the more

illusionistic the painting or drawing, the more it seems to detract from the power of the metaphor.

Johns' attitude to his work implicitly recognises this principle and can be summarised as:

> '*The practice ... of tenaciously grounding the cognitive in the physical, and then conversely of metaphorising from the physical toward larger issues of time and spirit....*'[15]

This practice encapsulates my approach to this research: to be able to move from the literal '*toward larger issues of time and spirit*'.

His early paintings like *Diver* (1962)[16] and *According to What* (1964)[17], each a large multi-panelled work, are quite revealing about how to convey my general concerns about mining and the Australian character without being too illusionistic or exacting about any particular mine.

Both of these paintings have large areas of highly expressive painting counter-posed with some tight, hard-edged areas. They also each have an interesting interplay of basic shapes such as circles and colour-graduated rectangles that are quite apposite to the iconic forms found at mining sites. The passage and movement from one large area to another is clear and quite abrupt such that the surface geometry of each of these works is, overall, very appealing. The use of strong diagonals, horizontals and verticals resonates well with the idea of mining buildings and structures in the landscape.

In Jasper Johns' work, we see his ability to fling together a great number of seemingly random, disparate images in a visually appealing way. This, of course, will only succeed when a painting works as a whole. Johns' great strength is the clever way he presents '*a fruitfully unresolved tension between iconic wholeness and disjunctive fragmentation*'.[18]

I felt that any painting dealing with mining, in the macro sense, would need to use as images the generic mining shapes and forms and, at the same time, reveal also this

confronting dichotomy between wholeness and fragmentation found at mining sites in the landscape.

In *Untitled* (1972) [19] (Figure 3), we see another good example of Johns' incongruous imagery coming together in a discordant but attractive way. [20] There are no seamless links here. Schematised, multi-coloured patterning on the left panel borders red, white and black flagstones in the middle panels that, in turn, abut bas-reliefs of raw timber struts and collaged material on the right panel. Again, the surface geometry is excitingly activated and the spatial depth through the picture plane is obvious. The calm, reflective white of the flagstones contrasts with the very close energised patterning and the geometry of the timber struts. This interplay in the painting, between the natural and the man-made, was a very useful device for my paintings as there is always a similar tension between the natural and the constructed on any mining site.

In 1985, Jasper Johns painted four large paintings based on the seasons of the year, namely, *Summer,* [21] *Fall,* [22] *Winter* [23] *and Spring* [24]. Each is divided into distinct sections: either bisected, as in *Summer* and *Winter,* or, into three, as in *Fall* and *Spring*. Using the large silhouette of a human figure, they also share other imagery such as a clock-like device, ladder, stonewall, heavily patterned areas, small geometric shapes and some domestic paraphernalia.

These paintings, taken as a whole, suggest the existential participation of any life caught up in unceasing change. The indicia of a life are generalised and then rearranged in each painting to reflect the changing seasons or the different concerns over the life span of an individual. [25]

These paintings are compelling on two levels. First, Johns' witty stylisation of the concept resonates well with my contention that Australian mining is a metaphor for the absurdity of action to achieve an end result whilst enduring the ever-changing fortunes of life. Secondly, as to the contents of the paintings, his use of constructed objects or building site aids, their assemblage and the linkages between them, as well as the sense of gravity (pulling everything down, like the shafts of a mine), provided me with a helpful methodology.

Figure 3 Untitled 1972

Another significant Johns' painting that made an impact on my approach to my larger works is *Untitled* (1992-5) [26] (Figure 4). This is a large work that uses some of the imagery from earlier paintings such as the ladder, the geometric shapes and some patterning, as well as a floor plan and a fallen soldier. The juxtaposition of these incongruent images, the spatial layering and the almost uniform use of sober greys give a sense of a constructed environment. In this work, the possibility of a complete lack of meaning is always present but never triumphant. It is overcome by the complex symphonic orchestrations of sophisticated painterly references to a personal narrative and other issues of time, memory and art history. [27]

The difficulties encountered in representing mining subjects included how to reduce the imagery so that there was some cohesion and simplicity and yet, at the same time, some expression of the shambolic monumentality found at most mining sites.

Larry Rivers had faced similar issues in his large history pieces. His *"dense, didactic and fascinating assemblage-painting, "*[28] *'History of the Russian Revolution: From Marx to Mayakovsky' (1965)* [29] has, with other pieces, been described as:

> '*Marshalling a range of representational modes from the antique frieze to the comic strip plus renderings of old photo fragments, the expansive narrative rewards - and indeed, requires - close attention.* '[30]

My contemplated large narrative pieces would be as expansive as Rivers' assemblages with their diverse interplays of styles and materials. But I did not want them to be as hysterical as his historical works. I found many of his large history pieces were too distracting with their exuberant assortment of clutter.

Ferdinand Leger is renowned for his narrative, geometric, industrial paintings that move between Cubism and Abstraction. His paintings are not sensual, but compositionally sound and harmonised. Through his use of discs, rectangles and triangles, paintings such as *Les Disques* (1918), [31] *Composition murale* (1926) [32] and *Le Transport des forces* (1937) [33] put forward dynamic physical energy and grandeur:
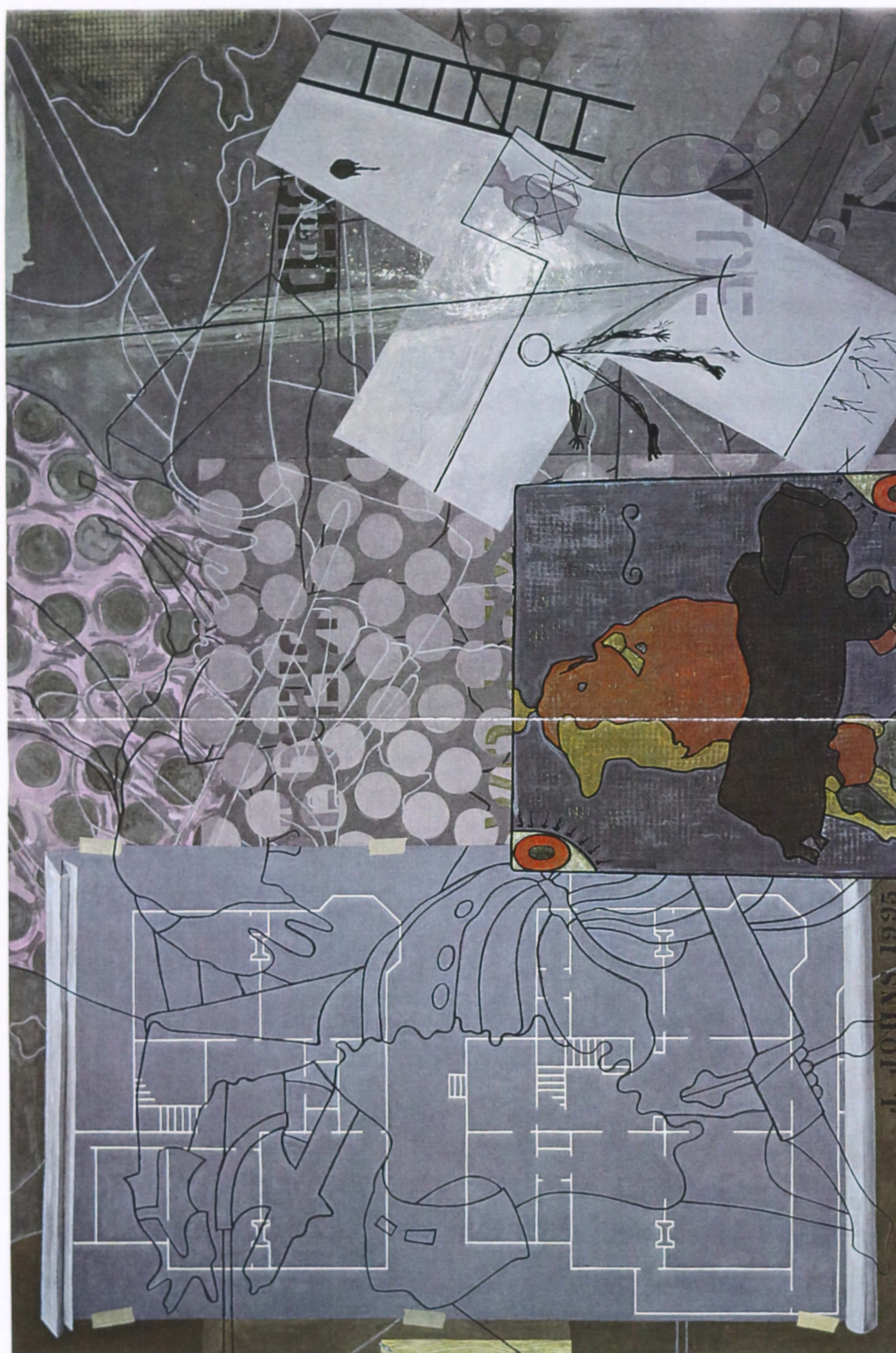
Figure 4   Untitled 1992 - 5

'They do not stoop to meeting the needs of individual people, they rise above personal contingencies. I could just see them in a laboratory, a hospital or a school.' [34]

It is this ability to enliven, and yet also de-personalise, the subject matter in his paintings that allows Leger's compositions to operate as excellent templates for mechanical and industrial subjects such as the mining process.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the eighteenth century architect and archaeologist, had with his etchings, almost single-handedly, documented the whole of ancient Rome. He had certainly been a witness to the reconstruction of *Forma Urbis*, the ancient fragments of a marble plan of Rome. [35]

From these fragments of marble, he created exquisite etchings of the plans and diagrams of the old city. These etchings, with their depiction of monumental ruins and majestic remnants, couple together very well feelings for both the loss of a civilisation and the technological perfection and the immense, organic order of Roman architecture. [36] In his etchings, such as *Fragments of the Marble Plan of Ancient Rome* (1756-61) [37] and *Map of the Neighbourhood of the Theatre of Pompey,* (1770) [38] one very easily detects the moods of loss and grandeur which distinctly underlie my ideas about mining.

RESOLVED TENSIONS

Initially, with various drawings and studies, I explored elements of mining using a variety of responses and ideas about the subject matter and particular mining sites. I needed to see how readily the images combined and worked together before undertaking the generic pieces that I considered as ultimately being the appropriate vehicle for expressing the heroic element of the subject matter.

I commenced by making a number of charcoal drawings and collages based on an excavation site at Coober Pedy, South Australia that had been shored up in a beautiful mosaic of earth, shaped stone and brick. It provided a wonderful cross-section of above and below ground activities.

In the drawings *Coober Pedy I* [1] (Figure 5) and *Coober Pedy II,* [2] I attempted to explore the interaction between miner and nature. The drawings were worked over extensively. They both took weeks to complete. Each holds, as palimpsest, the remnants of at least six drawings of the same subject. Energetic scrappings of the paper were erased or wiped out to leave a scar or smear of the mark or hand, much like a miner at his work. In *Coober Pedy II,* to add mass to the geometric shapes and organic flows of the soil and clay, I added collaged material that I then worked and reworked. *Coober Pedy III* [3] was also heavily worked, although the structures are more refined and simplified. In this drawing, I wanted to show the sense of containment and closeness below the ground as against the open expanse aboveground.

In an effort to reduce the literalness of the scene, eight collages, *Site I-VIII,* [4] were then made using paper, cardboard and leather. I used these collages as an opportunity to carry forward this idea of the cross section, to the point where all the forms were flattened and reduced so that the surface geometry dominated the surface/spatial context. I was as much concerned with the negative spaces as with the forms themselves. Working with the flattened forms and the interconnectedness of these forms on the picture plane, the excavation site took on a metaphoric sense. Where, in *Site I,* there is an obvious reference to the drawings and the site, by the time I had made *Site V,* *VI, VII* (Figure 6) and *VIII,* the site was almost not recognisable and the forms had

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Figure 5 Coober Pedy I

Figure 6 Site VII

become more reflective of mines generally with their strong verticals and horizontals and suggested mining structures.

My first painted works in this research were two canvasses of mining sites around Cobar and Broken Hill.

Cobar I [5] is a work that I have continued to develop over the past two years. Initially, it was a combination of a limited number of objects using the concrete rampart at the Great Cobar Mine site to suggest the stark, raw strength of mining structures. In front of the rampart is the silhouette of a conveyor and hopper. I then affixed to the canvas a piece of ply on which I painted a fictive geological map with its legend. The colours are limited and muted. The grey and earthy washes of the rampart abut the burnt umber of the industrial equipment. For compositional reasons, I later added the silhouette of the drill.

The second canvas, *PIL,* [6] is an attempt to show, in a more confined space and closer to the picture plane, the interconnectedness of many of the structures at mines. Buildings overlap and parts of some buildings are seen through others. The buildings have a ghost-like quality, as though dissolving or insubstantial. At this time, I had been looking very closely at Nolan's *Pretty Polly Mine* (1948)[7] (Figure 1). In that painting the intense, vibrant golds and vermilions of the earth and mining buildings contrast very strongly with the limitless blue of the sky and the ghost-like appearance of the Mine Manager at the abandoned site. The picture exudes abandonment and melancholy. *PIL* has some of these qualities. Using similar colours, but without any figures, I sought to express the fragility and sad impermanence of these man-made objects.

On many trips to mining areas in western New South Wales, I have always been drawn to the imposing Thompson's Shaft on the British Mine at Broken Hill. The numerous buildings stand intact, although dilapidated and forlorn. Elevated on a hill, the timber headframe sits within one end of the very large galvanised iron building. The structures have simple, clean lines and functionality. Devoid of ornament, both nevertheless have grace and monumentality. These building are the quintessential mining structures.

I made a number of cardboard maquettes of the British Mine. I wanted to break the imperative of the literal and change the scale of the structures. From these maquettes, I did a series of paintings using marine ply and a limited palette and in which almost all the perspectival aspects were excluded, as seen in the paintings *Thompson's Shaft I* and *II* [8] (Figure 7). Conversely, in *Thompson's Shaft III*,[9] I used multi-point perspectives to heighten the strange melancholy around these workings.

I wanted these three paintings to take on something of the feel of Nicholson's landscapes, not only to elicit the relationship between architecture and ground, but also to have them take on a diagrammatic weirdness; close to the picture plane and toneless. Echoing the original drawings of these buildings, I wanted them now to be seen through the perishing veils of time and abandonment and to communicate a sense of the noble futility of most mining schemes.

What had also struck me at these mining sites was not only the forlorn grandeur, but also the vital part that signals and communication systems play in mining, both for efficiency purposes and basic safety. Catastrophe is always close. On one of my field trips, I was very taken with the semaphoric drawings of tunnels and belts that I saw at the Lithgow Coal Mine. They appeared on a building as painted rectangles and triangles. I thought how elemental or iconic these shapes were in depicting the critical structures at these sites. I painted a number of small works on ply combining these signals code with the safety devices.

The first three paintings, *Lithgow I, II* and *III*, [10] are a series. They each contain references to Piet Mondrian's geometric abstractions, employing horizontals and verticals along with the rectangles and triangles of the Lithgow code.

It seemed eminently right to employ some of Mondrian's abstract compositional devices, so as to depict in these works something of the enduring human spirit; but also, by way of contrast, to show alongside these abstract shapes, ephemeral and mundane safety equipment. *Lithgow I and II* attempt to combine the enduring signals code with, in *Lithgow I*, a gas-masked ideogram and, in *Lithgow II*, the carrying-case for the gas mask.

Figure 7 Thompson's Shaft II

Lithgow I uses the red and pink of flesh and blood, suggestive of damaged lungs and asphyxiation. *Lithgow II* uses the funereal blacks and greys to suggest the sombre reality of the innately difficult and often fatal occupation of a miner. *Lithgow III* (Figure 8) returns to the wholly abstract, to show how the semaphoric rectangles and triangles are more than simply signals; they are timeless shapes that truly act as mining symbols, viz, they are the foundational shapes for the grids and struts of every headframe found at every mine.

To the sense of safety, I then added one of the earlier concepts I had explored, namely the extraordinary differences between the worlds above and below ground at mines. These differing worlds, in themselves, also act as symbols for the contrasts of optimism and ineffectiveness that are found in Australian mining.

Still using the Mondrian concept of the rectangles and squares, but in a more literal way, *Square-Set Timbering,* [11] in the bottom half, shows the ordered and regular support sections and beams of the hot, claustrophobic underground workings so reminiscent of an inferno. As a counterpoint, and painted with a gestural expressiveness, the top half shows the chaotic, but benign, aboveground world.

Underground & Surface [12] (Figure 9) uses the board that holds the nametags of working miners to indicate whether they were on the surface or underground. Again, this painting uses recognisable references to mining, but also relies on Mondrian's suggestion of the immanent by his use of swathes of pure colour. [13] The board is bisected lengthwise, with one half red (underground) and the other green (surface). Lead discs showing the names of mining people, places and metals are scattered over the two halves of the board. This work expresses the extreme contrasts of the above and below worlds, human vulnerability and the need for a shared language on the sites.

Having made many works dealing with aspects and characteristics of mining and its systems, I wanted to move from the smaller drawings and studies to larger, more expansive works. Only by doing so would I be able to adequately express the failed heroism and monumentality of mining as well as the Johnsian tension between '*iconic wholeness and disjunctive fragmentation*' [14] which are both fundamental elements of the subject matter.
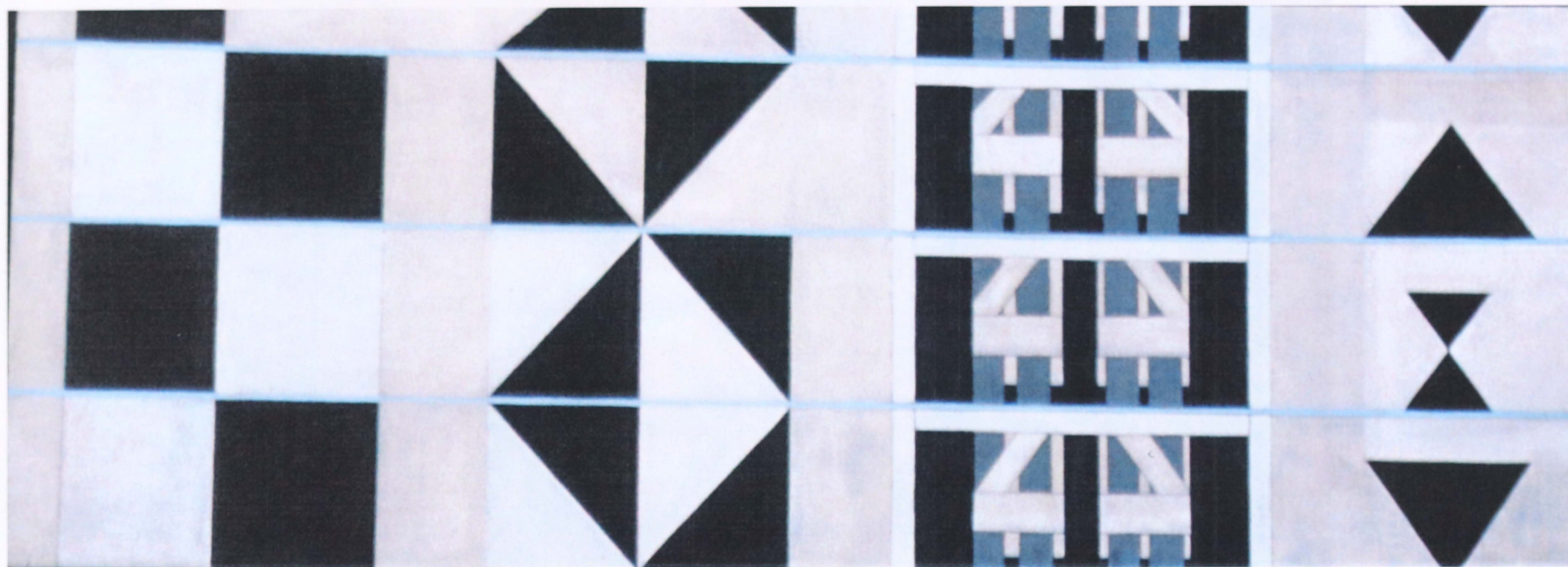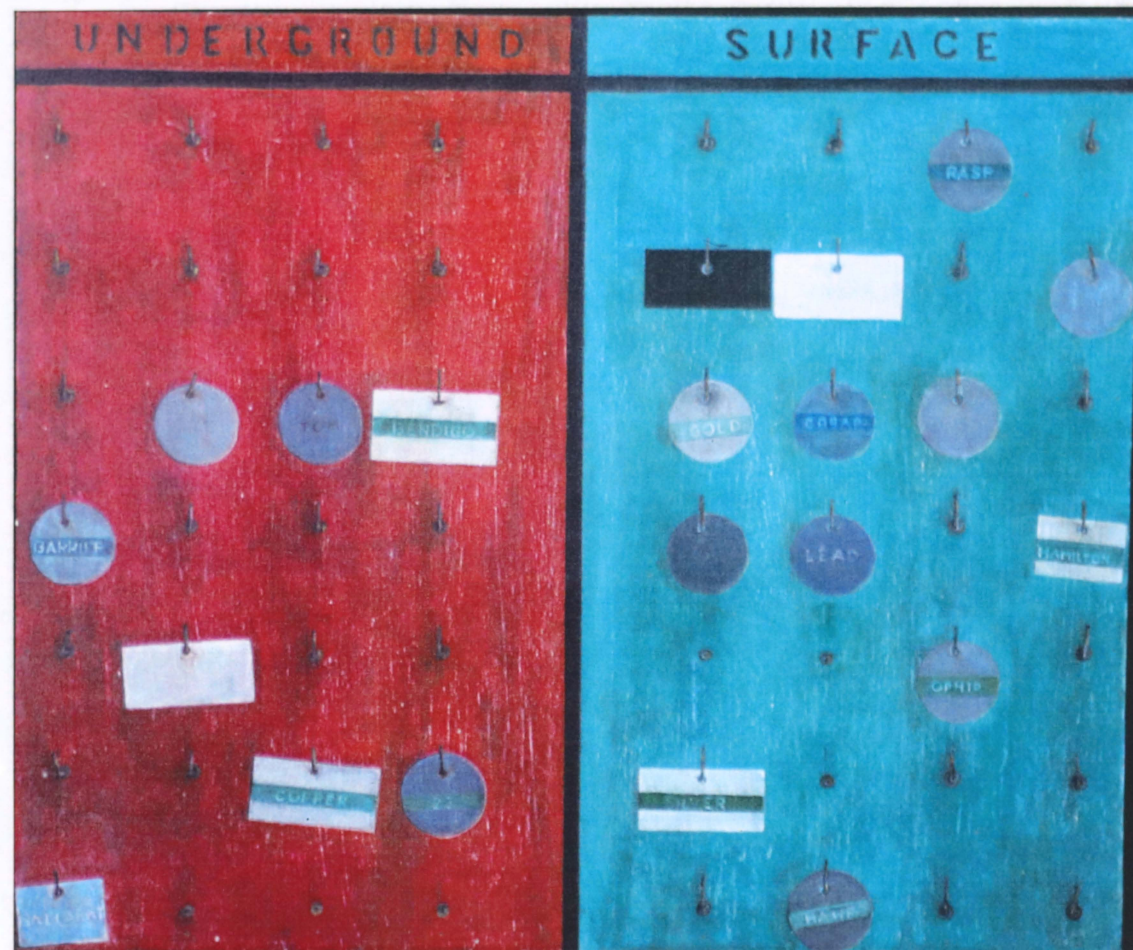
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Figure 8 Lithgow III

Figure 9   Underground & Surface

To pull together the iconic mining shapes and emblematic imagery into bigger more conceptual paintings seemed the way to best represent the ordered, futile chaos of all mining. These large works would concentrate on the generic shapes that typify mining rather than on any particular site.

Apart from two earlier canvasses (*Cobar I and PIL*), all my work had been done using marine ply. Ply had been an excellent material for expressing the labour and effort of mining. It is tough, comparatively inflexible and able to be scrapped, gouged and dug into, such that the resultant surface adds a quality to the overall end result that is very much compatible with the subject matter. It seemed ideally suited to these larger generic works.

For *Mining I*[15] (Figure 10), the contemplated transitional work, I used three panels of marine ply as a triptych. Throughout my painting of this work, I added and culled some of the imagery used in my earlier paintings to see how it would respond to the change of scale and different arrangements.

Just as Johns,

> '*examine(d) how meaning is conveyed through structure- how images function when "drained of illusionism, reduced to pattern"* ',[16]

I decided that some abstracted mining shafts, the Lithgow rectangles and triangles, along with some geological plans and formations would form the background of the painting over and against which would be a large, silhouette of an old headframe. All the cladding and cover has been removed so that the headframe takes on a skeletal form, like a decaying vestige. Needing to show a strong connection with the ground, the headframe has some phallic-like structures thrusting down into the earth, behind some of which I painted some rough, textured layers of earth and a dyke at the bottom left of the work.

Compositionally, there were areas that needed to be considered before *Mining I* would come together. In dark sienna, I painted naively some emus at the top of the work. I then over painted two of them. I wanted to suggest the partial obliteration of the

Figure 10 Mining

environment; it is always partial with mining, as nature always 'wins' in the end. I also added in a silhouette of a drill, not only because of the iconic shape of this underground machine, but also to lead the eye into the work and enliven the comparative, schematic calm of the maps and plans in top section of the right panel.

Two basic colour schemes were used to reflect the imposition on the landscape of these functional, fabricated structures. The colours of the man-made are industrial greys and dark umbers and these are contrasted with the natural earth tones of ochre, sienna, olive and pale pinks.

Having concluded *Mining I,* I felt that the subject matter could be translated to an even larger panelled triptych. I thought of this new work as linking across the work, without interruption, fragments of schematic patterns, plans and structures to the geometric abstractions of the Lithgow rectangles and triangles.

Mining II [17] (Figure 11) uses the sturdy silhouette of realised mining buildings and equipment as well as the physical play of the surface to suggest the constructed aspects of mining. Strong verticals and horizontals are used to echo the substance of these edifices in the landscape.

There are also large areas of the work that have been scrapped back and chiselled out to imply the geological and geometric concerns of mining. These geometric aspects of the work as a whole have also been reinforced by the Lithgow rectangles and triangles and by the use of large dots of grey or red at the junction points of these shapes. Like linking joints between steel girders and struts, this pattern of dots also appear as mined holes throughout the work, helping to bind the whole piece together. Similarly, as in *Mining I,* the use of industrial greys and blacks for the structures and equipment and the considered use of various, juxtaposed tones and hues of earth colours simplified many of the shapes and areas throughout the whole painting.

Yet, for all this, *Mining II* was in fear of reaching a point of dense stasis. It needed to be both energised and simplified.

Figure 11 Mining II

As William Rubin usefully described bas-reliefs in Frank Stella's work:

> *'Aside from implicitly fixing the image's orientation to the viewer at a right angle, (these) planar structure(s) permit the development of figure-ground relationships of a pictorial order.'* [18]

Accordingly, to create a reaction of immediate presence and solidity and yet maintain the pictorial command of the triptych, bas-reliefs of timber, board and paper were used in the piece as symbols or representations of the ubiquitous smokestacks, shafts and rudimentary buildings found at all mines.

Adding to *Mining II* some dark struts, placed diagonally from the middle panel to the left panel and some triangular shapes and rectilinear bars in the bottom of the right panel, the three panels were made to better interact. I also affixed a bas-relief of a drill with its cylindrical hosing, not only to build the iconic repertoire in the painting, but also to act as a link from the calm of the map area on the left panel to the darker intense middle panel.

Finally, to better maintain the sense of sad abandonment and futility, I affixed above or on a stylised head stone a number of cheery and slightly odd names of former mines. Names like *New Chum*, *Queen Bee* and *Mount Boppy* that speak of hope and plenty are now mere names on a map or grave. The name *Pretty Polly* is also used in the work to echo that poignant melancholy that one keenly feels in Nolan's eponymous painting.

After *Mining II*, I wanted to paint another work in which there would be less narrative and where the imagery would again be further simplified.

A work that has a number of smallish white areas scattered over a dark background can be very evocative in its simplicity. Colin McCahon had shown how in *Oaia and Clouds* (1975) [19] as indeed had Rosalie Gascoigne in the wall piece *Clouds I* (1992). [20] In each work, the 'clouds' are separated from each other and taken to the edge of the piece so that there is a strong sense of containment and, contrastingly, of the limitless sky.

Remnants I [21] (Figure 12) was painted using the triptych format and Piranesi's concept of both loss and awe, but without his stage set perspectival designs. The painting relies on the suggestion of constructed space in a mining shaft, using a pictorial approach similar to the 'clouds' of McCahon and Gascoigne. In the work, large rock boulders (the raw marine ply), scarified with disjointed, bold, architectural plans of mining buildings and headframes, are lost as they cascade down the three mining shafts. The boulders are placed in a rough circle over the whole painting so as to avoid the sense of being bottom heavy, and also to take the viewer's eye all over the work. The background of the two outer panels is stripped with dark greys and blacks to suggest the dark unlocked earth. The middle panel is stripped in orange and white to emulate access to natural surface light.

I painted *Remnants II* [22] (Figure 13) using the same imagery and format but without the line drawings of the plans, as I wanted to concentrate on the shafts, gravity and the implication of the shaft's access to natural light. There are also differences in the colour and width of the stripes to suggest the different moods and atmosphere that can be found at mines.
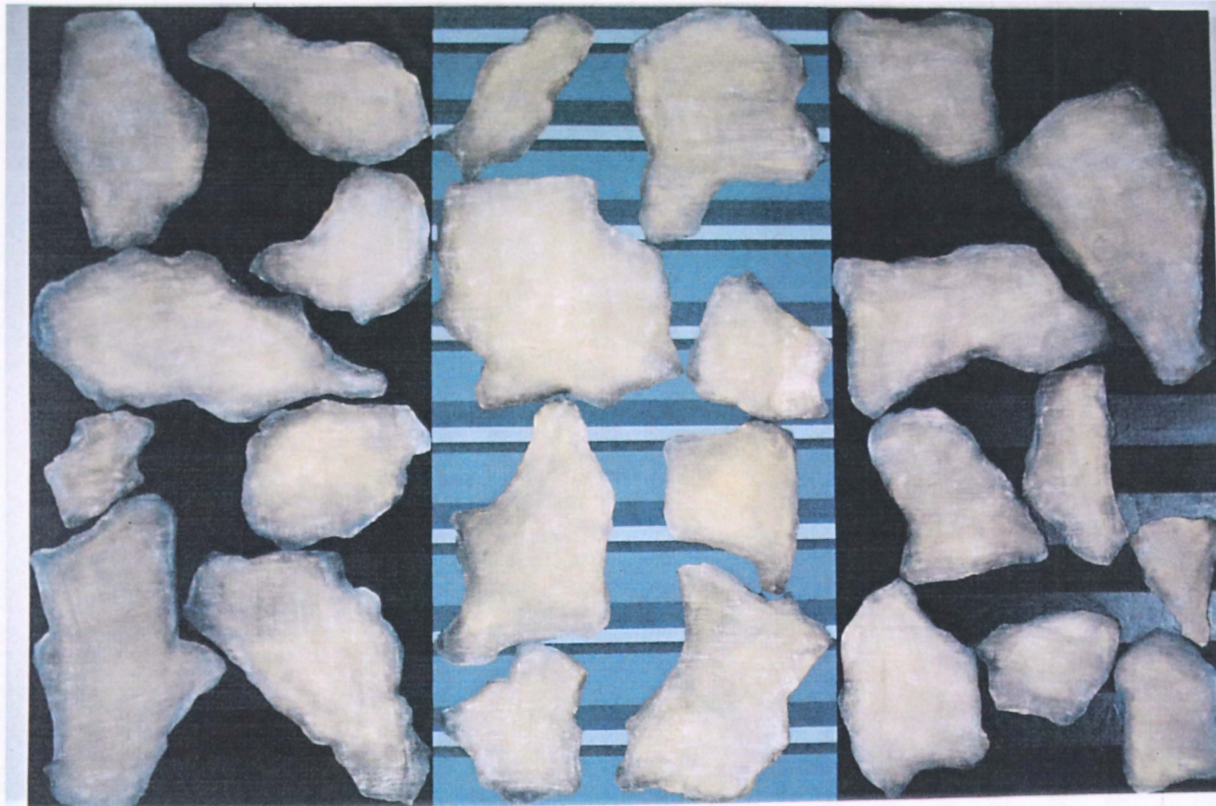
Figure 12 Remnant I

Figure 13 Remnant II

CONCLUSION

Whether old or new, the statuesque headframes, the lean and efficient mining structures along with the communication systems and safety devices have proved to be an enormous and fascinating resource for an artist.

The knowledge of the final absurdity of a person's actions is said to be liberating. Such actions must also include the attempts themselves, to highlight that absurdity. It follows that I must, therefore, be content with the knowledge that I may not have succeeded in this endeavour; that my attempts have been ultimately futile. But it does not matter whether one subscribes to the Hughesian [1] view of liberation because, for the maker (artist), there is always a freeing up, a release in the making or bringing into being of something (a painting or drawing). As Merleau-Ponty said:

> *'(Painting) offers the <u>gaze</u> traces of vision, from the inside, in order that it may espouse them; it gives vision (to) that which clothes it within...'* [2]

or, as paraphrased by Michael B. Smith, *'the painting is the inside of the outside (that "imaginary texture of the real", the essence we discover within the thing, all the facettes of which present themselves as expression)'.* [3]

Through my paintings and other work about mining and its processes I have sought to give expression to the stark beauty and monumentality of the mining structures in the landscape and to encapsulate the enthusiastic optimism and noble tragedy found in the national character.

These opposing aspects of the Australian character may never be reconciled. But that is beside the point. Mining and its long history demonstrate one of the passions of this Continent. In being so, this subject has been a fitting medium through which to articulate the larger preoccupations of time and spirit.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1, pp. 6 & 14. *Pretty Polly Mine*, 1948, by Sidney Nolan, ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91 x 122.2 cm, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney.

Figure 2, p. 7. *The Labyrinth I*, 1970, by Lawrence Daws, oil on hardboard, 122 x 122 cm, Dr. and Mrs. Leigh Wallman, Toowoomba, Queensland.

Figure 3, p. 10. *Untitled*, 1972, by Jasper Johns, oil, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 183 x 490 cm, Museum Ludwig, Ludwig Donation, Cologne, Germany.

Figure 4, p. 11. *Untitled*, 1992-5, by Jasper Johns, oil on canvas, 198.1 x 299.7 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift of Agnes Gund.

Figure 5, p. 13. *Coober Pedy I*, charcoal on paper, 80 x 120 cm, 2001.

Figure 6, p. 13. *Site VII*, collage on paper, 15 x 21cm, 2001.

Figure 7, p. 15. *Thompson's Shaft II*, acrylic and pencil on board, 40 x 61 cm, 2001.

Figure 8, p. 16. *Lithgow III*, acrylic on board, 33 x 87 cm, 2001.

Figure 9, p. 16. *Underground & Surface*, acrylic on board, 60 x 70 cm, 2001.

Figure 10, p. 17. *Mining I*, acrylic and pencil on board, 122 x 182.5 cm, three panels, 2002.

Figure 11, p. 18. *Mining II*, acrylic and collage on board with objects, 180 x 270 cm, three panels, 2002.

Figure 12, p. 20. *Remnant I,* acrylic, pencil and pigment ink on board, 122 x 182 cm, three panels, 2002.

Figure 13, p. 20. *Remnant II,* acrylic and pencil on board, 122 x 182 cm, three panels, 2002.

ENDNOTES

Prologue

1. A. Jones (ed.) *The Book of Job, The Jerusalem Bible*, Darton Longman & Todd, London, 1966, Chapter 28, lines 1-4, p.758.

Concept

1. G. Blainey, *The Rush that Never Ended, A History of Australian Mining*, 2nd edn., University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1969, p.140.
2. M. Harris, *Morals and Manners*, in 'Australian Civilisation', (ed.) P. Coleman, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962, p.64.
3. R. Hughes, *Art of Australia*, Penguin Books, Victoria, rev. edn., 1970, pp.164-165.

Investigation

1. T. Rosenthal, *Sidney Nolan*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, pp. 134-136, 189-198.
2. Ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91 x 122.2 cm.
3. Ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91.5 x 122 cm.
4. Ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91.5 x 122 cm.
5. N. Weston, *Lawrence Daws*, A.H.& A.W. Reed, Sydney, 1982, pp. 95-106
6. Oil on hardboard, 122 x 122 cm.
7. Oil on canvas, dimensions not available.
8. Oil on canvas, 173 x 173 cm.
9. A. Bowness, *Abstract Art*, in 'A History of Art', (ed.) Gowing L., Macmillan, London, 1983, p.875.
10. Oil on canvas, 80 x 50 cm.
11. A. Bowness, op. cit., p.875.
12. Oil on canvas, 62 x 51 cm.
13. Oil and pencil on carved and incised gessoed board, 47 x 85 cm.
14. B. Gregory, *Ben Nicholson*, catalogue essay for exhibition September-November 2002, Annandale Galleries, Sydney.
15. K. Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns, A Retrospective*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, 1996, p. 29.
16. Oil on canvas with objects, five panels, 228.6 x 431.8 cm.
17. Oil on canvas with objects, six panels, 223.5 x 487.7 cm.
18. K. Varnedoe, op. cit., p. 108.
19. Oil, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, four panels, 183 x 490 cm.
20. K. Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, Reaktion Books, London, 1994, pp. 24-25, 77-87 and K. Varnedoe, op. cit., p. 269.
21. Encaustic on canvas, 190.5 x 127 cm.

22. Encaustic on canvas, 190.5 x 127 cm.
23. Encaustic on canvas, 190.5 x 127 cm.
24. Encaustic on canvas, 190.5 X 127 cm.
25. K. Varnedoe, op. cit., p.337.
26. Oil on canvas, 198.1 x 299.7 cm.
27. K. Varnedoe, op. cit., pp.13-15, 359.
28. E. C. Baker, *Larry Rivers (1923-2002)*, 'Art in America', October 2002, p. 47.
29. Mixed media construction, 437 x 989 x 45 cm.
30. ibid.
31. Oil on canvas, 240 x 190 cm.
32. Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm.
33. Gouache, 62 x 101 cm.
34. S. Fauchereau, *Ferdinand Leger*, Ediciones Poligrafa, Barcelona, 1994, p. 25.
35. L. Ficacci, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the Complete Etchings*, (trans.ed.) B.B.Dick, Instituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome and Benedikt Taschen, Koln, 2000, p.19.
36. ibid., p.17-18 & 27.
37. Etching on paper, 36.5 x 23.5 cm.
38. Etching on paper, 46.5 x 38 cm.

Resolved Tensions

1. Charcoal on paper, 80 x 120 cm.
2. Charcoal and collage on paper, 76 x 120 cm.
3. Charcoal on paper, 80 x 120 cm.
4. Collage on paper, each 15 x 21 cm.
5. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 91 cm.
6. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 91 cm.
7. Ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91x 122.2 cm.
8. Both acrylic and pencil on board, both 40 x 61 cm.
9. Acrylic and pencil on board, 40 x 61 cm.
10. Acrylic on board, each 33 x 87 cm.
11. Acrylic on board, 60 x 87 cm.
12. Acrylic on board, 60 x 70 cm.
13. J. Milner, *Mondrian*, Phaidon Press, London, 1992, pp. 158-164.
14. K. Varnedoe, op. cit., p. 108.
15. Acrylic and pencil on board, 122 x 182.5 cm, three panels.
16. R. Bernstein, *Seeing A Thing Can Sometimes Trigger the Mind to Make Another Thing*, essay in K. Varnedoe, op. cit., p. 52.
17. Acrylic and collage on board with objects, 180 x 270 cm, three panels.
18. W. Rubin, *Frank Stella 1970-1987*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1987, p.18.
19. Acrylic on paper, 109.2 x 72.8 cm.
20. Torn Composition board on plywood, five panels, 124 x 67, 123.7 x 62.3, 124.3 x 78.5, 123.3 x 64.5, 123.7 x 89.8 cm; 124 x 391 cm overall.
21. Acrylic, pencil and pigment ink on board, 122 x 182 cm, three panels.
22. Acrylic and pencil on board, 122 x 182 cm, three panels.

Conclusion

1. R. Hughes, op. cit., pp.164-165.
2. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* in 'The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, Philosophy and Painting', (ed.) Johnson, G.A., (trans.ed.) Smith, M.B., North Western University Press, Illinois, USA, p.126.
3. M. B. Smith, *Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics*, ibid., p. 209.

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