LWAG TALKS

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Ep 8: Celebrating the centenary of Sidney Nolan with Philip Mead and Catherine Noske

Published on 8 October 2017

Transcript of a public talk with Professor Philip Mead and Dr Catherine Noske on artworks by Sidney Nolan in the UWA Art Collection in celebration of Nolan’s Centenary year.

**NARRATOR:**

This podcast was recorded live at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery on September 8, as part of the University of Western Australia research week.

**JANICE LALLY (HOST):**

Just to introduce them in case you don't already know, we've got Professor Philip Mead and Dr. Catherine Noske. Now Phillip is inaugural Chair of Australian Literature in the School of Humanities and the Director of the Westerly Centre. When I looked at your CV, Phillip you’re a board member of so many wonderful things and have been fellow in many illustrious college institutions in North America and Europe and the UK. So I've just selected a couple. He is also the board member of the Perth International Arts Festival, and a member of the Australian Research Council, College of Experts. He teaches in the Australian Literary Studies and English units in the Master of Curriculum Studies English course, a collaborative course between the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education at UWA. His own research is at the intersections of national and transnational literary studies, cultural history, theory, poetics, literary education, literary regionalism and digital humanities. He's led nationally competitive research and teaching grants, and is currently the chief investigator on the ARC Discovery Project Grant for 2016/19, which is titled Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Education of English Teachers. And he's been the Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University and his book from 2009 *Networked Language History and Culture in Australian Poetry* was shortlisted for the Australian Literacy Literature's Walter McCray Russell Award, and in 2010 won the New South Wales Premiers Prize for Literary Scholarship. So we're very, very fortunate to have his company

 And Dr. Catherine Noske is a lecturer in Creative Writing in English and Cultural Studies at the School of Humanities at UWA, and she's been an editor of Westerly magazine since 2015. She too has won awards, and her creative work has twice been awarded the L. L. Mitchell prize for Rural Women Writers and her current manuscript, provisionally titled *The Call of Salt*, the subject of the Verona fellowship, and she was also shortlisted for the 2015 Dorothy Hewitt Award. She completed her own PhD studies in creative writing at Monash University in 2014. And critically her work focuses on placemaking in contemporary Australian setting, and in examining the matter in which creative writing is both a practice in the field of study contributes to concepts of national identity, and she was awarded the ad hope prize of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in 2013. So this is going to be very interesting because both very, very equipped to talk about Sidney Nolan and his influence on literature and certainly with Randolph Stow that I know Catherine's been involved with study.

Another partnership just to mention, we've got these cards on the desk, an Art Writing Prize and it's a great project between *Westerly* journal and the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery. Because if you are successful at submitting an essay that's awarded the Art Prize, you not only get $1,000 Prize, but you get the opportunity for your essay to be published in the journal *Westerly*. So please take one of those and consider submitting an essay. It's about responding to one of the artworks or exhibitions that you've viewed in this gallery in the last 12 months. And it's due in late November. So sorry about talking, but I do think you need to understand how excited I am that this is a good combination between literature and visual arts. So over to the images and over to you two.

**PHILIP:**

Thank you.

**CATHERINE (KATE):**

Thanks, Janice. Thank you for having us today. I too, would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on country of the Wadjuk Noongar people and pay my respects to their elders past and present before we begin, I think talking about landscape in particular, can everybody hear me on the back? No. Is that better if I hold it a bit closer? Okay, we'll go with that. And I just wanted to recognise that in talking about landscape and a lot of the paintings we're addressing today are landscapes. And it is important to recognise this context of indigenous ownership of land. And but what we're intending to do today is basically have a conversation and hope that you'll join in if you have any burning questions, but to talk basically about not only Nolan's artwork, but the connections and relationships that Nolan had with both Randolph Stow as Janice mentioned, but also with Patrick White as two seminal, seminally, important Australian authors operating at a similar time and exploring similar ideas in much of their work. And basically, in opening this conversation, look to examine the way in which reading literature and enjoying art can offer us a sympathetic experience, if you like, can offer points of connection and ways of understanding both those forms reciprocally. So just to begin, we're intending to, to sort of talk about the historical moment a little bit. Wait, really?

**PHILIP:**

 Yeah. Can you hear me up the back? Is that okay? Okay. Well, thank you, Janice for that introduction. And I'm very pleased to be here today with my colleague, Kate Noske. Talking about this, this fascinating topic. It began partly out of Janice’s stimulation, but also Kate and I both wrote about as part of the centenary celebrations of Nolan. This year, we both wrote about Nolan paintings in in the collection here, of which as you know, there are some, some wonderful examples. And Kate wrote about one of the paintings and I wrote about another one. And, and so we, we, we started to talk about our interest in Nolan, but also what happened fairly quickly is because of Kate's interests in Stow particular, and certainly my interest in Stow, but also in in life at Heidi, which I was interested in, and in Patrick White. We started to see connections and the research that we've done has uncovered a kind of set of connections, a network between these three Australian artists, two writers and a painter that we don't think has been fully recognised in many ways. And it's a it's a fascinating instance of artistic collaborations and tensions and fallings out and the rest of it. So what I thought I might do, as just a sort of little preface, brief preface to, to what we want to say is talk about the Australia of the 1950s, very late 1940s. And the 1950s where, where a lot of this story has, its has its origins. And without being too crude or simplistic about that period in Australian history and many of you will know more about it than me. It's just a little reminding preface that Australia in the 1950s, we tend to think of as, you know, the start of the Menzies government as quiet and quiescent, without culture and so on. But that's not quite the case is it, we need to remember that Menzies had lost the 1946 election. He had suffered. You know, he had to resign from his own party. And he was in many doubts about whether the political trajectory that he sort of started for himself was going to work. He'd had some negative experiences in England right at the end of the war, with Churchill and so on, he comes back, but it turns out that they do win the, The Liberal Party does, the new liberal party does win the election 1949.

And that happens because of basically because of the Communist threat. That That Menzies is brought back from, as I say, I'm being simplistic here has brought back from his experience in Europe. And so, the first years of the 50s are not quiet years. They're characterised by Menzies trying to get the anti-communist legislation through the parliament, which he fails to do. And the next election, what is it 1954, that's the Petrov affair. So well into the 50s This is a time of deep divisions in Australia. You know, there is deep divisions between the political spectrum in Australia and it's not a time of quiescent settlement at all. This is a time when Patrick White has arrived back from from England where he's been living for a couple of years after the war and decided to come back to Australia. It's the time when Sidney Nolan and his new wife, Cynthia Reed, they're married in 1948, February 1948, they leave Australia. And it's it's not that long before the end of this period for Randolph Stow, younger than the other two, also leaves Australia. So what we thought about in this context was this, this period of the 1950s when these artists are trying to decide whether they're going to stay in Australia, whether they can bear to leave here, or were they going to come back to Australia, in White’s case, and the complex set of trajectories between them, but it's during this time, that their work is imbued with all sorts of what becomes iconic Australian-ness if you like at this time, whether it's Nolan's paintings, Stone’s writing, White’s Voss. We'll talk about that a little bit later.

These are, Sydney Nolan's doing a trip around Australia with his new wife, too, because he's always going up to Queensland to you know go to Fraser Island and so on there. Stow is spending time up in the, you know, the very north of Australia. They're all artists. White is coming back to get in touch with Australian landscapes again, they're all artists who are sort of deeply fascinated, by the, by the landscape and the history and place Let's just call it that Kate knows about this from that angle. But that's one layer, and it produces all this iconic fascination in their works, whether it's the story of Eliza Fraser, or the story of Voss, or Stow’s stories about gold mining towns, whatever. It's producing this intense fascination for at the same time as Australia is a problem. They either have to leave it, or find some way of returning to it, and accommodating themselves to it. So I think that's the story we wanted to tell was the story of these complex and uneasiness and divisions. And it's not a story about artists who feel at ease with either their lives or their country. That's the story, I guess.

**KATE:**

Yeah. And that that tension, that uneasiness, it seems to come out for all three of them in a fierce desire and a fierce experimentation in their writing and in their art, I think. So Stow’s form and his writing is marked by huge shifts across his novels of that moment. Tourmaline for instance, is post-apocalyptic and sets up a moment in a setting which he himself described as being “so far out of reality and out of time that you couldn't point pinpointed anywhere in history”. But then in the novel, which follows Visitance, which is actually based on his time in the Trowbridge, and slightly different, there's a sort of post-modern form in his writing. So I think all of all of Stow’s work in particular across this moment is fiercely experimental, in struggling and wrangling with this tension between being in a place and coming to terms with what that place means to you.

And I think the fact that they all they all expatriated and repatriated at various points, illustrates that same uneasiness, of relationship with Australian places and spaces. So there's a desire to travel the country to see the country, to embed yourself in a place in their work, but also attention and a discomfort and an unease which comes out in in experiments in form I think Voss too shows that from Patrick White. And Nolan's painting as well in, in a way, the the one I wrote on for the Nolan 100 project, which we'll we'll come to in a moment and slideshow combines in a strange way a sort of realism and a strange abstraction of colour and construction. So I think all of these works do show that tension of that historical moment in in quite beautiful and unique ways the, the edge of that experimentation is that it's the energy in this work. It's what excites us in looking at this art and reading these novels that there is this, this capacity in them for thinking through these problems in beautiful ways.

And, but we should probably to discuss a little bit The reason we've chosen to focus on Stow and White and Nolan together. And that's because in several ways their lives were interconnected. And they were all in correspondence with each other. For instance on several occasions Nolan and White, I think probably for longer than Stow and White or Stow and Nolan, Stone knew the Nolan's before he knew White and but, Nolan painted covers for each of them, which we have here, Patrick White’s Voss with a cover from Nolan. And, again, the Outriders suite of poems, which included paintings by Nolan within the publication, and actually up in the doorway of the galleries as you’re going out you'll see one of the paintings from that collection, as well as a portrait which Nolan painted of Stow.

Which shows that you know, this this communication correspondence between them wasn't simply on the level of, of friendship or even simply in terms of Letters discussing ideas and sharing thoughts, but artistic as well and exchange which operated on that level of artistic engagement with each other, with their thinking, with their work, as they produced it, particularly in that period I think. I mean, there's quite a lot of crossover between all three of them, isn't there really?

**PHILIP:**

Yes. And you can't, you can't help it. I mean, literary critics, for example, have been very willing, obviously, to think about White and Nolan together because White describes himself doesn't he, in one of his few autobiographical pieces as a painter manqué as someone who wanted to be a painter, and who was interested in painting his whole life, and who wrote, great novels about painters like *The Vivisector* for example. Hurtle Duffield is the hero of that novel is a, is a painter and there are many other kind of painterly aspects to his work which critics have been interested in. That's - running parallel to that, is a relationship with Nolan which of course ends in, ends in discord and, and, and so on because of White’s perception of Nolan's career in England, and he's kind of, White’s sense of him is selling out accepting a knighthood and so on. But also there's a deeper personal element in there. Patrick White was very close to Cynthia Reed. They were very friendly. And she of course, was a novelist as well, and White liked her novels and he liked her personally, and Nolan's - the slightly ghastly details about the end of that relationship, Cynthia Reed, Cynthia Nolan and Nolan himself were something that White found difficult to, to counter. Anyway, that's a, that's a sort of famous little story about Australian artistic relations.

But just going back to Kate's point there about the way in which these artists are thinking about landscape and place and what they actually produce. 1947/48 White, of course, has been in the Australian forces during the war. He's been an intelligence officer in North Africa and so on. Earlier than that he's been in the Blitz in London and he writes about this in his fiction. And after the war, he stays in London for a while and in fact, his mother, Ruth, wanted him to stay in London. They wanted to settle down in London and stay there, but White didn't want to do that. He wanted to, he wanted to come back to Australia. And part of that story is his having read, having read the, the journals of Edward John Eyre, the explorer, and some other historical material around that, in London during the Blitz, the idea of what will become what (in) *The Voss* has kind of has happened to him. Now that gets modified because later on he goes to North Africa. And he says that, look, the idea is maturing and seeing the North African desert and thinking about what he calls the sort of the maniac who was ruining everyone's lives at that time, Hitler, he started to develop the idea of what would become Voss.

So that sort of complex set of things with White brings him back to Australia, he decides to come back to Australia. And to some extent, that's a difficult decision because he's met, he's met Manoly. He's met Manoly Lascaris who will be his partner for life. They've met in Alexandria. And they immediately, you know, fall in love and think of themselves as you know, partners for life, which is what happens. But it would have been easier in some ways for White to stay in London, and to, to bring Lascaris there, but that's not what happens. He comes back to Australia. And in this period 1947/48 he's, he's involved in the bureaucracy of getting Lascaris out from Greece, to Australia, and that takes quite a long time. In fact, however much, his mother, White's mother might have disapproved of what was going on there, she did actually help, interesting enough with the with the visa stuff to do with Lascaris coming to Australia. But what's happening is that White is sitting in The Mitchell Library in Sydney in 1948, reading the reading the Leichhardt diaries, and is reconceptualizing what will become the Voss story. It started off about being a little germ about air. And then it gets sort of inflected by the experience in Northern Africa. Then, he comes across the Leichhardt diaries. And of course, he knows German. He's good at German. He studied German at University. He's been to Germany, when he was a student,

and has loved Germany and German literature, actually. So then, it starts to really come together as a story that becomes *Voss* from having read the Leichhardt diaries. Voss was a kind of version Leichhardt if you like. But, as Kate was pointing out, the elements of this story are not, they're inflected by the Australian landscape and the experience of Australia, because sitting there in the Mitchell Library all White is thinking about his, his partner Manoly Lascaris, and he's having what he calls a kind of telepathic relationship with him across the world. What happens in *Voss*, a telepathic relationship between Voss and Laura Trevelyan back in Sydney, which is imprinted on this narrative about the Australian landscape in ways that have continued to fascinate readers, I think, bound up as it is in various ways with someone disappearing into the Australian landscape, and yet being connected to someone back in the city. You can see how this has complex and fascinating biographical aspects to it, but, but it's also profoundly inflected by, by the places.

**KATE:**

Yeah, I think leaving out those relationships diminishes our understanding of the complex conversations that were happening between these people in thinking through all of these ideas. We'll, we'll come back in a moment to Cynthia Nolan's travelogue *Outback*, which is another example of Cynthia's involvement in Sydney's painting as well, and their journey together is influencing his artwork too.

But the reciprocal example you could draw from Stows writing, for instance, comes after he has expatriated from Australia, and he's living and writing in England for instance, working on his English novels, the *Suburbs of Hell* and the, the one which comes first *The Girl Green as Elderflower* and there is this beautiful passage in *The Girl Green as Elde*rflower where the hero Crispin is walking from a train station back towards his house. Crispin's life echoes Stows very very closely in many respects. It mentions Crispin's childhood in Western Australia and his schooling there. But this passage describes the journey of walking back through the English countryside as walking past pastures and crops sewn in, which is spread golden across the landscape. And it describes walking along a tree lined river, passing a red brick church with a square tower flying St. George's Cross and brick diapering decorating the tower. And, and for anybody who's been to Guildford and seen Guildford grammar, and also seen St. George's college just across the road over here, that that scene of a red brick building with a square tower and St. George's Cross flying will be remarkably familiar. So even when he's writing an English landscape, there are layerings and elements of Australians spaces from his life that Stow is writing over and writing through and I think probably wrangling with as well in his expatriation, wrangling with how he should deal with or how he should think about these memories of Australian places. So, there's, in this connection between these three artists there is this constant thinking through of place, either from a distance like that in expatriation, or through the telepathic relationship between White and Lascaris struggling with how to know a place, how to see a place or how to be in a place, and thinking too of these questions of colonial engagement with places as well I think. So you have with in *Voss*, the German explorer coming in representing colonial ways of thinking, colonial thought, in that space and coming to encounter the indigenous occupants and struggling with that relationship. But also seeing himself in some way as the, the heir apparent of that landscape taking on this moment of, of transcendence in in owning it in some way, which is both beautiful and deeply problematic, deeply troubled and uneasy for the character. But, but in all of this imagining of place and space there is, there is this struggle with how we should know it, how we should be in it, how colonial thinking occupies Australian spaces and how we can reconcile with that history in existing in and writing about and painting those places. But to come back to that idea of travelling, they all travel extensively, as you said, and we've got some pictures here from Cynthia Nolan's travelogue. This is a map she drew into the Preface, which shows the extent of their journey. Nolan and Cynthia together with their daughter. Yeah, Jinx.

It's interesting that she's overlaid Australia with that, that England or the European landscape. It's not just showing the scale, but also those two different ways of thinking put over the place. But the scope of their travels is very dramatic there. As you can see, it covers a large swathe of country, the original there's slightly easier to read. And but we've also got photos from Sydney Nolan throughout the book particularly this one, the somewhat abstract, but very dramatic cow in a tree, how do you describe that. Do you want to talk a little to that one Phil, because I know it particularly appeals to you, that photo.

**PHILIP:**

(Laughs) Yes it does. So this, so just before I forget though, just to underline what, what those general comments that Kate was making there about place and lives and so on.

It's, it's interesting as we've thought about these artists that it's, it's important to, to realise some really fundamental aspects of this story and that is that Stow and Nolan never come back. There's a couple of little brief, you know, sojourns back, brief, very brief, but they never come back. White decides to come back. And that's part of the, the story that we've been puzzling about and trying to understand and so on.

And before he goes directly before he goes this 1948 this trip around Australia that he and Cynthia, newly married and Jinx, her daughter by a previous relationship, make around Australia according to that map you just saw, is really important to them. This this desire to go out and get to know Australia and to see it - and he's been up to Queensland the year before, in the same spirit - to see as much of Australia as possible, but within a year, he's gone. He's gone to London where he will live for the rest of his life, basically. And the the travelogue *Outback* by Cynthia now isn't published until 1962. I think it's a bit later. But it's she was a very good writer Cynthia Reed, Cynthia Nolan andthis travelogue is no no exception, is terrifically well written. It's very detailed and interesting as a piece of writing. And she acknowledges in the in the front, that some of the photographs that she uses in the travel includes in the travelogue, indeed by Sidney and this is one of them. So for those of those of us who first saw Nolan's paintings and saw you know, birds flying upside down, or, you know, combine harvesters on top of hotels, or sheep stuck in trees and you think ‘oh well what sort of weird surrealist stuff is going on there?’. This is a, this is a picture that Nolan himself noticed in his travels around Australia. About the caption is I think “Elevated, fantastic.” A part of the landscape as a result of the last, last, the last season's wet. So the landscape that that Nolan is seeing, the real landscape has bizarre and surreal aspects to it, that that he will work with and and adapt in his paintings in various ways that you would know, that you recognise. But that's part of his getting to know Australia, part of it is to, to experience this, this weird and surreal landscape.

**KATE:**

But to seek it out in a sense to I think, as well as, White and Stow doing in the same ways, to deliberately seek those aspects in landscape which speak to that ambivalence intention that they, I think, potentially feel in those spaces as well.

**PHILIP:**

Absolutely.

**KATE:**

And the, the…

**PHILIP:**

That's there in White too, in his descriptions of paintings, for example, in his the works of ekphrastic, you know, non-existent paintings that he describes in some of his work.

**KATE:**

Yeah. So, our argument basically is that there is a sympathy of reading between literature and art in this context and that examining Nolan's work in this frame or reading, White and Stow alongside Nolan's work actually gives us access to some of these ideas about how the abstract is, in a sense, a realist depiction of that tension too, how it speaks to the reality of those sensations in that place. And how it's now paradoxical in a sense that we, we read these paintings as iconic in representing Australian art. How that, that that history and that iconography that they draw on in, in representing very totemic scenes, in a sense. The gatherings in the bush dwellings that we have here, with the gamblers in the pub and, and the scenes in in Nolan's pub paintings, in particular, the Ned Kelly scenes, how all of these things have become incredibly symbolic for us, but in a sense have actually emerged out of feelings of ambivalence and excitement and experimentation, yes, but also tension and unease in many ways as well. That they're now symbolic and iconic of those spaces is something really interesting to wrangle with when reading the literature alongside the artwork. But that idea of expatriation the fact that both Stow and Nolan stay away, that they never come back is in a sense, speaking to the darker side of that, that tension, that that difficulty with being in that place in space. What-

**PHILIP:**

Just a footnote there Kate, sorry to interrupt, but remember the little detail there about why, what happens with Nolan is that Sir Kenneth Clark, the eminent English art critic and historian, comes to Australia and he hates it. He says it's deplorable country. He can't stand it. He's got a kind of chauvinist English attitude towards Australia. But he sees a Nolan painting. And when Nolan’s living in in Wahroonga, with Cynthia, newly married, and he likes it, and he gets in touch with Nolan and he says, ‘look, you must get out of this dreadful country come to England and you will be a success and I'll give you a hand’, which is what happens. So it’s worth remembering that little detail.

**KATE:**

Well, the similar thing could be said of Stow too. His first publication was in the UK. *To The Islands* was only published in Australia when Penguin re-released it with the Nolan cover. It's, it's, the recognition of these artists working in this space was often from that distance and in the European scene.

**PHILIP:**

That's right, Kate. And part of that story is the really, you know, contentious relationship between these artists and some aspects of the Australian cultural scene, of Australian cultural life. Don't forget that Patrick White, you know, thought of himself as despised, as attacked by critics. And he in turn hit back by describing you know, the only thing that's valued in Australia is dung colour realism. And, you know, part of the friendship with with Cynthia Nolan, Cynthia Reed, was no doubt forged by her experience with, with critics of her novels, and also her kind of the journalistic response to her situation with Nolan. She was basically attacked and despised in similar kinds of ways and White felt much you know, kind of sympathy, empathy for her in that situation so, and, and you know, Nolan was somehow persuaded by Clarks, you know, point of view that Australia is no place for true artists. It's a, it's a deplorable, that was his word, it's a deplorable place. White he says, he would agree it is a deplorable place, but he's decided to stay there. So these artists are in this deeply conflicted relationship with, it's not the landscape we're talking about here, that's a slightly different thing, but with artistic community and discourse in Australia I guess.

**KATE:**

And finding in, on the other hand, a much more receptive community, in that expatriate community. So for instance, in the 70s, you have Stow positively reviewing in the *Times* literary supplement in London. The the *Fringe of Leaves*, *A Fringe of Leaves* by Patrick White, which was a response in turn to Nolan's Eliza Fraser paintings, and which Stow built into his review, recognising Nolan's paintings. So the connections between them on that level, in a personal sense, quite rich, but also shows the reception of that community externally from Australia too, receiving and responding to their works in ways which is favourable and acknowledges the importance of what they're doing.

**PHILIP:**

It's another interesting facet of the story Kate isn't it, that Nolan gets interested in the in the Eliza Fraser story in 1947 quite early, on a trip to Brisbane he makes. And there’s a friend there called Barrett Reed who was connected to the Heide crowd, later on associated with *Overland* magazine. And Reed has been in the library, in the State Library of Queensland reading the Eliza Fraser materials and he tells Nolan about it, and Nolan himself goes in to read it because he's fascinated too. And he goes in to read that material as well. And he and Barrett Reed make a trip to Fraser Island and so on. So it's 1947 and he does some of those paintings when he goes back and you know, there's a, there's a I don't know how persuasive it is. But there's a there's a critical view within the art historical world, which is not my world, about how the Fraser, the Eliza Fraser paintings are inflected by the breakdown of the relationship with Sunday Reed, which is happening at Heide, between Nolan and Sunday Reed and that turns nasty Not long after that, and some of the depictions of Eliza Reed, Eliza Fraser, kind of read if you like, as I don't know so much about that. But But it's interesting that those paintings that are done in those years those early years 1947/48. It, It's 1974, before White publishes his novel, *A* *Fringe of Leaves* about the Eliza Fraser story that's 30 years of whatever, of distance there and but he's been fascinated with those paintings of Nolans, and stimulated by them obviously. But it's not until 1974. And then, and the novel has a first edition has a as a reproduction of a, of the, one of the Nolan Fraser paintings on the cover.

**KATE:**

So, what we thought we'd do to finish today and bring all this to really show that that point of connection between all of their work is we've, we've gone through some of the paintings of Nolan's and paired it with extracts from the writing of either Stow or White, just to describe and detail some of the synergy happening in those scenes. And the way in which both art and literature speak to each other in this sense in opening up those conversations around landscape and around Australian society and place to I think. So this scene here *The Gamblers* we compare quite easily with work from Randolph Stow in *Tourmaline* and quite a lot of *Tourmaline* for anybody who's read it, you know, it's it's takes place in the pub quite regularly. And the law, the narrator, reflects both on the golden days of the settlement he's living in, in the way in which the pub was a central meeting place but also the ramshackle, derelict thing that it has become. And there's a line here I particularly love “Kestrel’s Tourmaline Hotel of stone and rough plaster, once whitewashed, but now reddened with dust. The roofing iron is also red and advertises a brand of beer no longer brewed. The windows are closed and painted inside, it's dim in there.” These this depiction of the pub is having sort of sunken into this red haze sits really beautifully against the sheen of the ripple in Nolan’s painting. The sort of closeted sensation of being I think almost contained by this slow degradation of both the building and the hardship of the life that it encompassed.

The next one we have here, we’ve paired with a letter that Stow wrote to his mother when traveling in the early 50s to Forest River Mission, working there which is what he drew from in writing to the islands of course. But this scene here seems to meet rather beautifully with is description in his letter to his mother, describing how it takes generally twenty four hours to get to the town and back from here because you have to wait for the tide to come up before you can get out of the river and into the gulf and if theres anything to load in town it can only be done at high tide, otherwise the launch gets left high and dry against the jetty. And he comments quite regularly in his letters his letters to his mother are beautiful and full of rich descriptions. He continues to be a correspondent with her this way all his life. The descriptions he has in particular of the characters of that area are wonderfully emblematic of the sorts of types that he sees as existing in that community and he describes Bill Jamieson: “he thought he might’ve been a bit annoyed about having to send the launch to get me. He didn’t have too, but not him, he couldn’t have been more cheerful about it.” And the idea that Nolan regularly too populates his paintings with a lone character or a person who stands in for that life or that community, who offers that point of access to the landscape in a sense as well.

The next one I think we have, This is the painting I wrote about in the Nolan 100 series and for me this really speaks particularly to Nolan’s use of Ripolin the house paint, and its sheen that it creates on the face of the paintings. This was a technique that he used in many of his works I believe. The use of it is a very common material, something everyday, mundane, but repurposed in his work in this way and the gloss that it creates in this painting to me lifts the painting from being a static scene, to something with a sort of shimmer of heat or movement. When you’re viewing it in person the play of the light sort of mimics if you can see in here, it might be a little hard to see on the screen here, the foliage in the bottom in the foreground of the painting is quite feathery, quite light and that play of light off the Ripolin too, sort of mimics the lightness of that touch and creating the landscape through those little points of foliage in the foreground. The other interesting thing I think in this painting is the contrast between the realism, as I was saying earlier, of the hills in the background and the middle ground stacking of rocks in abstract colour and the way in which that speaks to this tension of how we create this place, how we know this place, and the energy between different ways of knowing it, a quite experimental technique in his work. You were speaking Philip too of that photograph the cow in the tree the way in which makes the realistic seem somewhat abstract, so it might well be that the details we assume are abstract in his work are actually based more realistically on his experiences in those places than we would otherwise imagine.

This is from the travelogue *Outback* by Cynthia, do you want to talk to this one a little Philip?

**PHILIP:**

Yes so this is an interesting moment in the travelogue where part of the trip around Australia, a lot of it was by plane, by aircraft, sometimes it was by truck. Coming down from Broome they went on the steamer, coastal steamer down to Perth, but one of the interesting aspects of 1948, interesting aspects of it is the way in which a lot of it the trip, the description of it is from the air. And the ways in which obviously is influencing Nolan’s understanding of the Australian landscape. And this is an interesting moment where Cynthia

notices, makes a point of noticing that “Sidney gazed with his mouth open and his tongue pushed between his teeth as he does when painting with the greatest intensity, until we straightened out and flew back across flat country to Mt Connor, now a green piecrust descending into long flowing lines.” So this is flying over the Northern Territory and it’s a very interesting moment isn’t it, in terms of Nolan’s perception of the Australian landscape as a painter. And it makes you think about oh okay, of how much we tend to think of Ned Kelly looking out on the world through that letterbox of Kelly’s mask, but there’s also another Nolan which is looking at Australia from the air.

**KATE:**

And showing too in this one I think in the way in which you can’t turn that off, that he’s travelling and I think this is the same for Stow, given how much of Stow’s life and Stow’s travel creeps it way into his novels as well. The way in which that travelling and that engagement with place, those experiences have to be thought through in the art, there’s an impossibility of engaging with the world in any other way. He has to view it as he would when he’s painting, that’s how he’s understanding, how he’s thinking through his own experiences in those terms.

**PHILIP:**

That was Uluru in the Northern Territory that they described there. I think they fly around Uluru.

**KATE:**

The rock. This painting struck me because you can see, to the left of Huggard’s building there, the horizon meeting with the lip of the building, and it’s a bit of an optical illusion here in that every time I look at this it takes me a moment to adjust my eyes to the fact that that is an open space to the horizon, rather than the front of another building. Again it seems to be pointing to that impossibility of understanding the landscape and how we can let our gaze flick over it, but then allowing it to sneak in to paintings too in a sense, creeping in as a horizon here and there in unexpected ways

And again another except here from *Tourmaline*, which is a little later in the novel, where the law is remembering a pub that he used to frequent when young and he’s now imagining as broken down entirely, overtaken by time and by the landscape. “And is now just stone and plaster walls dust red and the concrete piles that once supported floorboards with detritus from the establishment between them. By the empty front doorway was a painted board saying ‘meal hours’ and underneath you were asked to be punctual.” So time there has become something which both consumes the building and is reminded as a regimen for engaging with it, really beautiful contrast.

But the final image is what interested me in terms of the painting there. It’s the image of “On the road to Lacey’s Find where a pub once stood, there was and is still perhaps, if it is not buried, a billiard table solitary in the desert with a tall anthill growing through the centre of it. I have played on it, I remember when Tourmaline Hotel was so crowded that men queued at bar windows for a drink.” And this idea of the billiard table alone in the desert landscape with its anthill all growing through it I think speaks really sympathetically to the matter in which Nolan sneaks the landscape or the horizon into his paintings of the pubs in general and the way it is always a force there, sort of encroaching on the boundaries of the painting, ready to consume that space before it falls into a derelict status. Philip you wrote about this painting for the Nolan 100 didn’t you?

PHILIP: (speaking about Nolan’s painting ‘Agricultural Hotel’)

Yeah this is one of those paintings that was the result of this travel in outback Australia that he does. And you know it’s a fascinating painting it’s beautiful in its colours and so on. The Agriculture Hotel and then on top of it is this reaper, reaper combiner, which is what, a kind of dream figment of the Agricultural Hotel’s proprietor? We don’t know, but once you know Nolan and his sense, as we were trying to establish, his sense of the surreal aspects of the real Australian landscapes you think ‘oh that’s ok, that’s fine you know having a bit of agricultural machinery on top of the hotel’. I can see how someone would respond to a landscape like that, but what is it? Is it a dream figment, is he dreaming about being a purveyor of agricultural equipment? There’s not a lot of evidence that the business is going very well.

**KATE:**

It doesn’t look like there’s much growing in the landscape to be threshed.

**PHILIP:**

If you look at that painting, upstairs is the original, have a good close look at it, his shirt is spotlessly white and nicely ironed and he’s got a very well-groomed moustache.

**KATE:**

The others we’re going to skip a little bit ahead so that we have time for questions and discussion if there is any.

But we’ve paired in a couple of places Voss’s descriptions of the desert in particular, the grey grass and hummocks of red sand with his outback paintings in particular, is speaking to the same scenes, the same approach to understanding those spaces and in particular of course *Perished*. The famous *Perished*, articulating that relationship with landscape which Voss experiences so drastically and so dramatically in White’s novel. But coming back to the place we find ourselves in, the Western Australian wildflowers, the everlastings. Anybody that has driven up Beaufort St recently will see that they’ve planted median strips out with everlastings as well and they’re currently coming into bloom. One of the roundabouts near Matilda Bay just down the road here is filled with the same flowers. This idea that this isn’t just a space that Nolan and White and Stow are wrangling with and discussing, it’s a space that we live in, it's a space that we encounter everyday, and that we through these novels and this artwork are forced to think about ourselves and our own relationship with our place in the same way. But on that point we might finish with five minutes or so of questions if anybody does have anything they would like to ask or contribute?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

I was very struck by your first couple of comments about the 1950s and I just immediately did my own. 1951, Jubilee of Centenary it was a big thing around the place you know we are 50 years old as a Commonwealth. But at the same time that year and the year before and the year after there were so many people, certainly arriving at Fremantle and by the time we were all at Uni they were called very politely and entertainingly of course, they were called the Lats or the DPs or the Refos and then we all kind of teased them a lot saying oh you are new Australians. So it just struck me as extraordinary that at the moment of you know friends like Mick Stow leaving and never coming back there were all these bundles of other people coming to Australia. I just thought that was a funny juxtaposition.

**PHILIP:**

White was returning to Australia at exactly at that point too, or a year or two before then.

**KATE:**

It's a juxtaposition too, it's not only a national level and in those ideas of nationalism and the society at that moment, but on a personal level as well, that it's existing for these men in their relationship together in their lives and operating on those two levels at once, absolutely.

**PHILIP:**

There will be DPs and Refos in White's fiction too in various parts.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

Thank you. Can you tell us something about Nolan and Stow in the UK, how close, were they close while they were there? And secondly, is there a sense in which Stow was traumatised by his looking into the abyss as it were in New Guinea particularly? Thankyou.

**KATE:**

I'll take that one if it's alright. Yes, to answer your second question first, there's absolutely deep sense of trauma I would argue in his novels. I think part of his constant shifting in approach in writing is dealing with that, trying to find new ways in every novel of coming to terms with his experiences and how he could know them, how he could understand them. *Visitants* in particular which he refers to as his fever novel alongside *Girl Green as Elderflower* speaks to that experience in the Trobiands. But the most recent research I did on Stow was based on the *Girl Green as Elderflower* and the way in which time in that novel is turned upside down, in the way in which he embeds those very old English myths into the middle of that contemporary story and what that does in terms of how he is thinking through his own history, how he feels his own history is embedded in contemporary life and the way in which it re-articulates time as a process for him, and turns it upside down in a sense. So yeah I think absolutely there is a deep trauma running through his novels. Not only in terms of his own experiences I'd argue, but in terms of the sort of national and social trauma in dealing with Indigenous characters in particular, and in terms of the colonial trajectory that his life followed in a sense, returning to England via a colonial posting on behalf of a colonial government, so a social trauma as well. But he knew the Nolans quite well. There was correspondence between them on a regular basis, there's several mentions of him spending time with them in London in particular and it was Sidney Nolan who encouraged to apply for the Harkness Fellowship which took him on his travels to America which Sidney Nolan had also undertaken. From the recommendation of the Director of the fund it seems that it was pretty much Nolan's recommendation which got Stow the position more than anything else. They describe his interview as quite shy and retiring type but also a very, I think the phrase was a ‘seemingly a very adept artist in his own right’. So that relationship I think was quite close and one which was formed in a sense that they both promoted and supported the work of the other, with some respect of their individual work.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

I don't know whether people are aware but Nolan has a very strong connection with this gallery. In the early 1950s, the University purchased 15 of his pictures, a number of which is shown here and as a result of the 500 pounds that he got for the pictures, he went to live in England. The University unfortunately wasn't particularly fond of the pictures and sent them off to the state gallery for 2 years and they sold 3 of them to get back the 500 pounds spent. And as a result of that early connection we came to have the Wildflower series which the City of Perth didn't want and a Big Serpent which hangs on that wall in here which MoMA have a larger example of. So I think we're very lucky, and I think overall we have 150 of his pictures which is probably one of the most significant collections of Nolan's works in the country.

**PHILIP:**

And to fly a flag of some kind here, it was a professor of English who was responsible for those original purchases of the Nolan paintings. Professors of English have taste.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

I just might entertain you, can you hear me alright, it sounds very echoey to me? There was a Royal Commission into the administration of this University in 1941 and one of the, they enquired from the various faculties what their wishes would be, what there needs were, amongst other things, and Professor Edwards had three, he said well you know, he had a very sardonic way of speaking, “we would really need a gramophone because we have had records given to us by the Carnegie Trust and we can't play them. And we need a Roneo machine because of course it's wartime and we can't get any text books. And thirdly we need a theatre.” Justice Wolfe replied, “Well I'm sure we can find something to do about a gramophone and perhaps a Roneo machine but a theatre is totally unimaginable.”

**PHILIP:**

So this is talking Jones talking about Alan Edwards who was Professor of English here. Kate you'll remember the detail more carefully than I will but there is in fact a Stow Edwards connection as well isn't there? It's important.

**KATE:**

Yeah I think there is. (Recording Ends)