



Lord Byron, 2011. Oil on linen, 45 x 61cm. Courtesy the artist.

TONY LLOYD

THE EXTERIOR LABYRINTH | ASHLEY CRAWFORD

To say that the last two years were an intense period in Tony Lloyd's professional—and to an extent personal—life would be an extreme understatement. After over a decade of professional practice, in 2010 Lloyd spread his wings somewhat as one of the founders of the independent, not-for-profit NotFair exhibition in Melbourne. Whilst he had previously acted as an independent writer and as contributing editor to the website ArtInfo.com.au, NotFair, established as an alternative to the Melbourne Art Fair, was a distinctly challenging mission. To make matters worse, he had to prepare for a major solo exhibition in June, 2011, and was also about to take off for a somewhat epic journey across the Top End of Australia and then from Beijing to Lhasa... a journey which was to start the day after the NotFair concluded.

People often talk about stress. Lloyd must have had his fair share of it.

As a matter of disclosure I must admit that I was involved in NotFair close to its inception and I was also party to the somewhat insane journey Lloyd took in mid-2010, the results of which were exhibited as part of the First Life Residency Project in Landscape at the Xin Dong Cheng Space

for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2011.¹ That either makes me an ideal witness to these events or as fraught as Lloyd must have felt at times as he tackled these various deadlines.

At the same time I had been aware of Lloyd's work for a considerable period, indeed, since his third solo exhibition, 'In the Interim' (1998), at Span Galleries, Melbourne. Since that time he has held an extraordinary twenty solo exhibitions in locations ranging from Canberra to the Netherlands, to say nothing of a plethora of group shows in Beijing, London, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Rome and Australia-wide.

The works exhibited in both Beijing and Melbourne in 2011 were, arguably, his best and most refined to date. Essentially forestscapes with the occasional mountainous apparition or (comparatively) simple road image, they shimmered and shuddered with dark movement. They created the impression of being caught in peripheral vision or being the remembrance of somnambulistic dreams.

Lloyd is a difficult individual to describe. Currently heavily bearded with long hair, partially an inheritance from his bush trip to Arnhem Land, he exudes an unusual degree of self-containment. Despite a perpetual sense of humour, he becomes serious when confronted with notions of belief or superstition. When I described him as practical he laughed it off, asking whether it was practical to be an artist. Although an atheist, Lloyd wryly suggested Romantic Sceptic as his descriptor.

A keynote of Lloyd's work is its ability to exude an extraordinary element of movement. To some extent this is a balance between real-life encounters—travelling in the bush—and cinematic experience. Indeed, Lloyd's 2009 survey show was named after David Lynch's bizarre film *Lost Highway* (1997) which was peppered with scenes of driving along highways at night.

'At certain moments, due to light and atmosphere, the world seems to become cinematic', Lloyd says. 'These are the times I want to reproduce in paint. I always begin with photographs; the most recent paintings are from photographs taken in Arnhem Land, China and Tibet. The finished painting is for me the manifestation of how I felt experiencing the place, it becomes a still from the imaginary film I have in my head. Stylistically, film is a big influence on my work. When I watch films, I'm always aware of the backgrounds behind the actors, just out of focus. There is a dreamy quality to them, especially cinematic landscapes.'

Accordingly, Lloyd paints on canvases that are the same aspect ratios as film, 2.39:1 and 1.85:1 and the cinematic Point-Of-View shot is a device he clearly likes to employ, so, as he puts it, the viewer of his work becomes the protagonist in the scene.

'The blur implies movement and gives a sense of a moment where something has, or is about to happen, but the movement of the paint is also something that comes in during the painting process,' he says. 'It's me exploring the possibilities of what paint can do. The paintings usually start out far more detailed and then I push the wet paint around to find the point at which the image is about to become lost, then I repaint, and blur again. In the end you can see it as abstract brush marks and an image in the same moment.'

Lloyd makes it clear that he is decidedly committed to representational painting and he consciously aims for there to be a photographic quality to the work. 'But I also want to show those abstract brush marks. For me the most exciting paintings are the ones where the image comes into being while you are looking at it.'



LLOYD DOESN'T FEIGN INTEREST IN CAPTURING THE 'REAL' IN THE TRADITIONAL SENSE OF LANDSCAPE PAINTING, BUT THE 'REAL' REMAINS AN INCENTIVE FILTERED THROUGH PERCEPTION, MEMORY AND IMAGINATION.



from top: *All that is solid melts into air*, 2011. Oil on linen, 120 x 213cm; *The void is form and form is the void*, 2011. Oil on linen, 3 panels, 120 x 666cm; *The void is form and form is the void* (detail), 2011. Oil on linen, 3 panels, 120 x 666cm. Courtesy the artist.

Alongside his fascination with such filmmakers as David Lynch and David Cronenberg, conversation with Lloyd often turns to his predilection for fiction of a perhaps not surprisingly dark nature, particularly such descriptive writers as H.P. Lovecraft, Joseph Conrad and Jorges Luis Borges.

'As a painter I empathise with Lovecraft's constant struggle to express the inexpressible. I used to want to paint like Conrad's writing. English was not his first language [Conrad was born in Poland



'LIKE SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT, PAINTING HAS THE ABILITY TO BE BOTH ALIVE AND DEAD AT THE SAME TIME.'



from top: *A short history of last time*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 33 panel polyptych, c.150 x 300cm; *Give me just a little more time*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 100 x 280cm; *Distant relations*, 2008. Oil on linen, 23 x 30cm. Courtesy the artist.

and finally settled in England] and his prose is full of unexpected adjectives and metaphors. I'm also attracted to the weightiness of his thinking, such as the difference between what can be known and what can be understood which he explores in *Heart of Darkness*.

'Lately I've been thinking of my work in terms of Borges's two central themes of the labyrinth and the mirror. He reinterpreted the labyrinth in various forms, as an endless library, or a house with an

infinite number of rooms; and the mirror as a map so detailed it is on a 1:1 scale, or as a point in space from which all other places and times can be seen. He even observed that if you hold a mirror up to a mirror you create a labyrinth.'

'The roads I depict are all passages within an immense labyrinth and of course, as representations of the world, they are like mirrors, creating a second labyrinth.'

When I described Lloyd as practical (and was subtly rebuked) I realised a part of that description was his ability at tackling 'real-life' problems—building a wall for his studio, pitching a tent, mounting outside signage for an exhibition. But what I had also been referring to was his attitude towards spirituality. Lloyd is quick to scoff at most religious belief (although he does relish a good conspiracy theory). 'If I was practical I would not try to make my living being an artist!' he responded. 'Nor do I pragmatically depict the world. The curator Simon Gregg describes me as a Romantic and I think he may be right, I tend to reshape the world to conform to what I regard as some kind of ideal. On the other hand, painting is a constant process of problem solving and as such it is a very pragmatic art.'

The First Life journey had allowed encounters with extreme religiosity, both with Aboriginal folk and the experiences in Tibet—especially witnessing a Sky Funeral—thus it seemed fair to ask whether such experiences shook what might be termed Lloyd's 'spiritual conservatism'.

'The Tibetans lead far more practical lives than I would ever want to do as an artist', he says. 'Feeding their dead to vultures fits in with their belief system, but is also a pragmatic act. The ground is too frozen to dig graves in. There is no fuel to burn the bodies. Using vultures to dispose of the dead prevents predators and disease. The sky burial was an extraordinary thing to see, it was both macabre and mundane, what I found strangely beautiful was the idea of one species feeding itself to another.'

'I felt as though I only dipped my toe into the indigenous culture here. I saw a lot of Aborigines leading what looked like a fairly difficult existence in Gunbalunya [Oenpelli]. And I saw a small community in Bulukadaru living in a minor paradise. I was shown fantastic rock art and heard some of their origin myths, which I didn't really understand. I did get some insight into their animistic view of the world. Sam Leach and I had long discussions about the parallels between their animistic view and science. Physics says we are all made of the same stuff and that the distinction between us, rocks and air only exists in our consciousness. I really don't know enough to speak about indigenous epistemology but I got the impression that this description would not be incompatible with their beliefs.'



'THE ROADS I DEPICT ARE ALL PASSAGES WITHIN AN IMMENSE LABYRINTH AND OF COURSE, AS REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WORLD, THEY ARE LIKE MIRRORS, CREATING A SECOND LABYRINTH.'



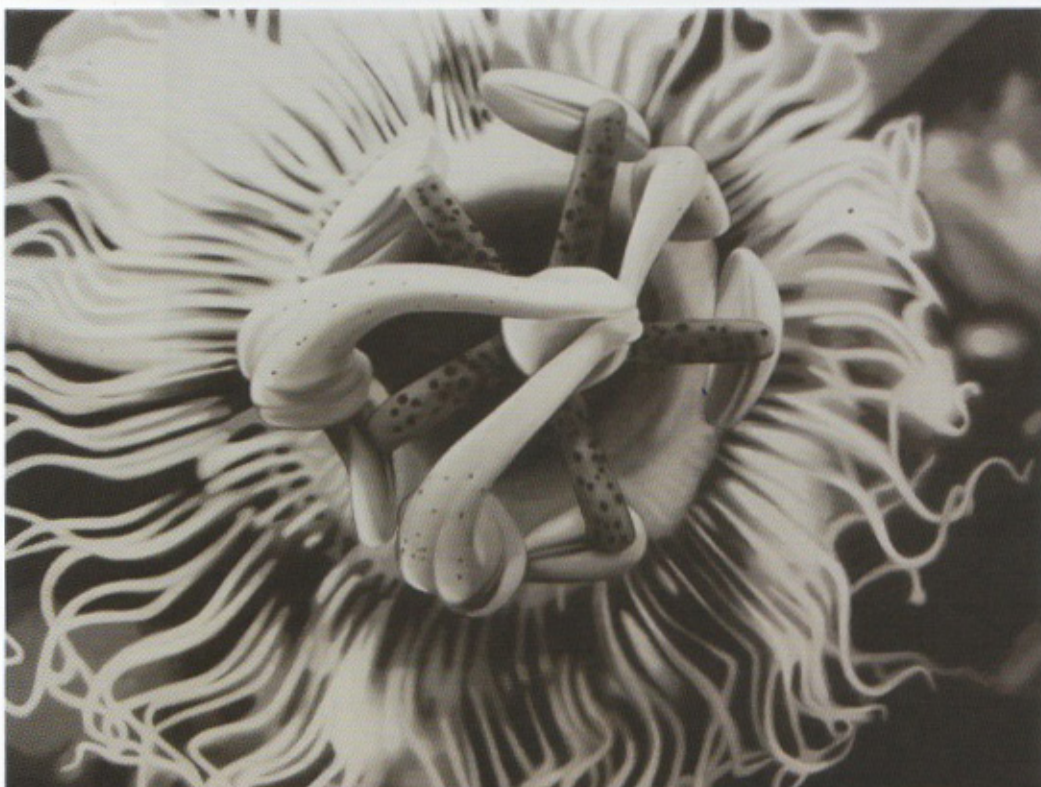
from top: *A winter's tale*, 2010. Oil on linen, 95 x 240cm; *La belle apocalypse*, 2010. Oil on linen, 95 x 240cm. Courtesy the artist.

Lloyd describes himself as 'curious about almost everything'.

'When it comes to understanding the world I prefer the scientific method which means that what we think we know today may turn out to be wrong tomorrow. As an atheist I am curious about why people want to believe in Gods. I think there are usually quite understandable reasons for religion. I saw a lot of religion in

Western China and Tibet and I saw a lot of people living hard lives. If I lived as they do I'd probably start longing for Nirvana too.'

With his seemingly endless roads and barren, majestic mountain passes there is certainly something timeless about Lloyd's works. Certain of Lloyd's viewers have described his work as carrying a sense of melancholia or longing. Indeed, in one work executed for the First Life exhibition in Beijing, Lloyd co-joined Chinese birch forests with Australian eucalypts, but barely discernible amidst the foliage could be glimpsed a grimacing Death's Head, a reflection of part of the travels, but so subtle as to be missed by many viewers. Without a doubt there is in Lloyd's work a sense of the ambiguous, the sense of the obscure, and perhaps pointless mission where one might wonder upon the possible outcome.



clockwise from top left: *Night of the hunter*, 2011. Oil on linen, 30 x 40cm; *The Glorious Revolution*, 2011. Oil on linen, 45 x 61cm; *The Day Without Yesterday*, 2011. Oil on linen, 45 x 61cm. Courtesy the artist.

‘I wouldn’t describe them as melancholic, I know that some would, I don’t fully understand why,’ Lloyd responds. ‘I don’t equate darkness and ambiguity with sadness and depression. I think of these qualities as intriguing, and enticing. I think it is crucial for a painting to have some ambiguity. This gives the meaning of the work flexibility so that its message can shift over time.’

‘I choose images that are beautiful and poetic, but in another way they also function as universal metaphors; we don’t know what is around the corner, we can never see the world in perfect resolution, what we know will always be overshadowed by what we don’t know. These truths don’t depress me—they are the reasons we explore new roads, climb mountains and build Large Hadron Colliders.’

To this extent, landscape as much as anything, becomes a tool for a larger narrative. Lloyd doesn’t feign interest in capturing the ‘real’ in the traditional sense of landscape painting, but the ‘real’ remains an incentive filtered through perception, memory and imagination. ‘I think that my recent travels have consolidated my desire to work from the landscape,’ he says. ‘I am very interested in art history and in landscape depiction and the more I know of it in all its diversity, the less I know how to see it as a tradition. “Tradition is the illusion of permanence” as Woody Allen said.’

‘I don’t have a single notion of landscape, I like to experience the world, I like to convey something of that experience in paint. To misquote Fred from *Lost Highway*, I like to paint the world the way I remember it, not necessarily the way it happened.’

Like landscape as subject, painting itself has seemed to play a secondary role in recent decades, often subsumed by more conceptually-based works, a trend often prodded by both the art schools and the institutions. That trend, in the last decade, seems to have shifted. Lloyd cites his admiration for such painters as Stephen Bush, Louise Hearman and Andrew Browne and notes the potent skills of his peers such as Amanda Marburg, Sam Leach, Juan Ford, Darren Wardle and David Ralph.

‘Painting may go in and out of fashion, but people don’t stop doing it or appreciating it’, Lloyd notes. ‘Like Schrödinger’s cat, painting has the ability to be both alive and dead at the same time. When I was at art school in the late ‘90s I was actively discouraged from painting. One lecturer told me that he liked painting, but that it didn’t have much currency, as though it were a superseded industry!’

‘I think it’s an undeniably impressive mode of expression, like the Novel, like Film, it will always be around. The digital world with all of its image producing abilities is a tremendous boon to painting. I can’t paint without my digital camera, my computer, and with the web I have an international audience for my work.’

But beyond the camera and the computer there is the Road, and Lloyd is clearly still following its strange, meandering path into the unknown. ■

note

1. The project ‘A First Life Residency Project in Landscape’ included Chinese and Australian artists, Cang Xin, Shi Jinsong, Wu Daxin, Sam Leach, Tony Lloyd and Ben Armstrong. It was organised by 24HR Art, Darwin. The artists travelled by road through the landscapes of northern Australia visiting remote regions and communities in Arnhem Land and the Kimberley. They then undertook a road trip through south western provinces of China, from Lanzhou to Lhasa. Finally they underwent an intensive studio session in Beijing to produce new works in response to their adventures for an exhibition which was part of the ‘Year of Australian Culture in China’. The exhibition ran from 15 May – 30 June 2011 at Xin Dong Cheng Space for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

Ashley Crawford is a Melbourne based writer.