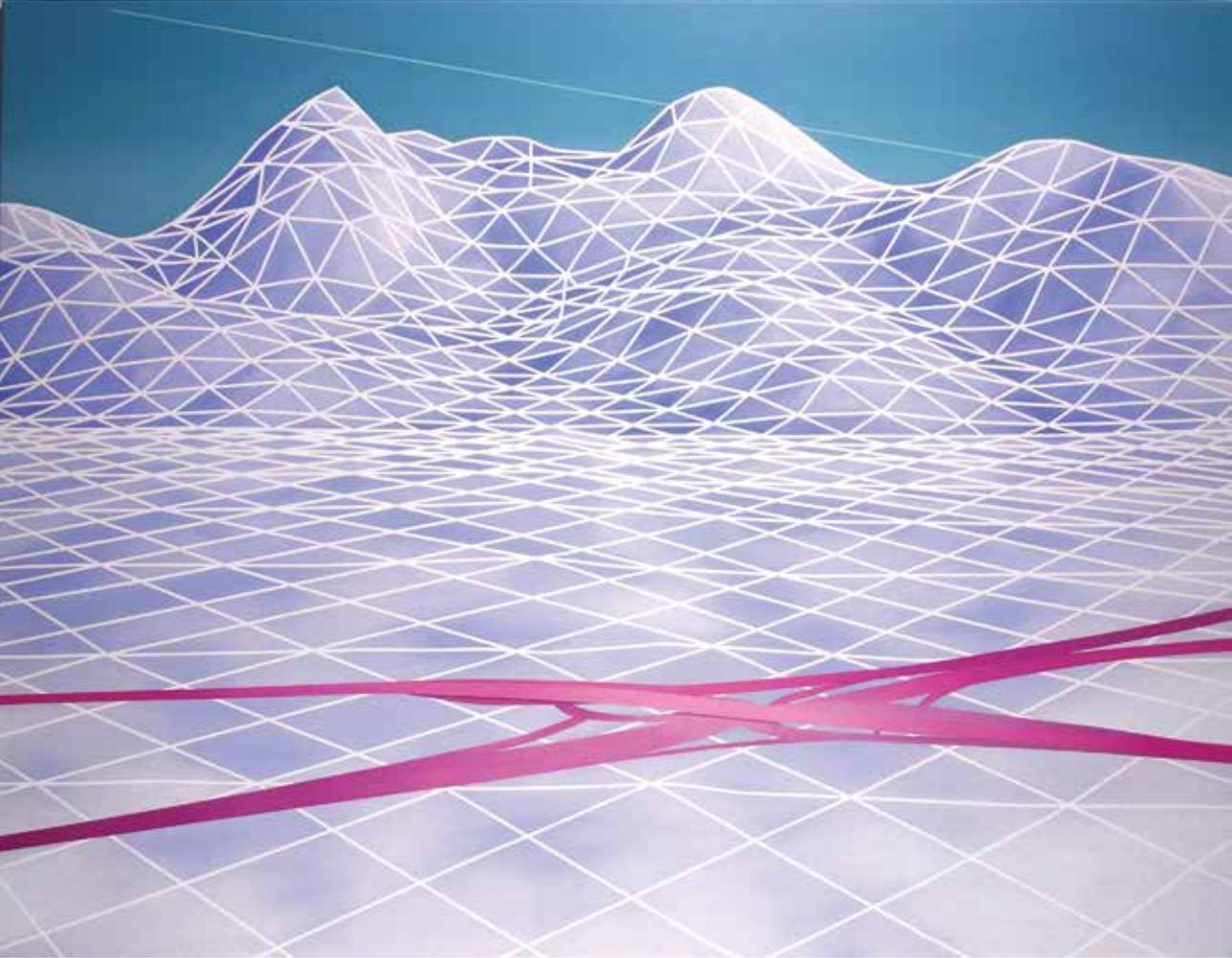


New Horizons







FUTURE PROOF

Simon Gregg

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I was always disappointed that the future never happened. At least, not the future promised to us in science fiction films, animated cartoons and literature. A future where materials dissolves in light, where transport is instantaneous, and the horizon glows like a neon light. The film *Tron* (1982) is the ideal exemplar of this future we will never have, and will remain forever fictitious and ungraspable.

It seems my disappointment is shared by a number of current Australian artists. While acceptance of the resurgence of landscape painting in Australia is now widespread, these artists are not so much continuing this tradition as smashing it to pieces and starting over again. More than an evolution of landscape painting, this is a landscape painting revolution.

Each artist in *New Horizons* reconfigures the natural world. The world as we know it has become artificial, constructed, synthesised, magnified, distorted, and unreal. While still retaining connections to the familiar, *New Horizons* proposes an alternate reality where things are rarely what they seem. While a digital aesthetic dominates, each of the works are hand-painted—often painstakingly so. *New Horizons* seeks to amplify the distinction between digital and analogue processes, and plays on the absurdity of creating artificial vistas of the natural world, which in turn are recreated through a traditional painted approach.

The works share a common futuristic outlook, which may have less grounding in any actual future, than a kind of nostalgia for a future that may never be. Environmental concerns dominate, as does a blanket rejection of landscape as an expression of ownership. Instead, we are presented with a range of constructed and imagined vistas, whose purposes are uniformly related to the artists' need to overcome figural description, and to engage with audiences on a new level.

Alice Wormald, for instance, creates paintings that borrow elements from the natural world, but distorts them to such an extent that they appear entirely alien. Wormald proposes a new kind of natural world, where the laws of gravity and scale have been thwarted, and the life that carpets the forest floor is flourishing unchecked. That her subjects are mostly small in scale, floral in nature, and excised from magazines is little comfort, for they lurch and leer at us in a most disconcerting manner.

Upon first encounter her works are disorienting but beguiling; small-scale plant specimens loom threateningly, their leaves and flower petals curling forward and seemingly beyond the picture surface. There is a spatial illusionism that has nothing to do with traditional perspective. Instead, there is a sense of layered flatness, with the depth achieved through the delineation of the edges of the forms. We move as though in a mythic landscape, where the lurid veils of petals and leaves may just vanish at the slightest touch or a shift of the glance. We find ourselves hypnotised, trying to compute the arrangement, but failing at every turn.

In a similar way Sam Leach subverts the small-scale and docile, by cross-pollinating seventeenth century Dutch landscape painting with an absurd synthetic proposition. His precise oil painting, *Fracture Landscape*, executed in meticulous detail and encased in resin, draws parallels between scientific progress and art history. The piece revisits the beginning of The Enlightenment, but accelerates our rate of learning with an unexpected and implausible outcome.

Fracture Landscape is one of a series of landscape paintings that draw directly from seventeenth century painting—in this case a work by Jan Both. Leach has altered the view by replacing the landform with a geometric structure. He writes of this work: 'My painting reflects on the construction of landscape, in the sense of the aesthetics of the depiction of landscape and also in a literal sense of physically altering the land to meet an aesthetic ideal. This work is more architectural, focussing on the construction of the environment rather than arrangement'.¹

Peter Daverington is another who loots from art history to supply grandiose visions of the future. He creates direct links between nineteenth century Romanticism and a future composed of mathematical grids and technological hyperbole. The grid is in part a product of Daverington's immersion in Islamic culture, which extends to science, music and mysticism. In both *Through the Looking Glass Chamber* and *The New Colony*, Daverington presents us with a series of floating steps that lead into the picture. Notions of infinity abound, with complex mathematical structures forming unlikely pairings with Romantic mountain imagery, to fuse logic with emotion; reason with reaction.

The historical references are less pronounced in Stephen Bram's hard-edge paintings, but lurk within their ongoing dynamism between figuration and abstraction. Bram uses two-point perspective to create spatial illusion, as a means of testing perception and reality. The 'landscape' in his paintings has become reduced to a set of flat shapes to suggest rather than describe form.

Like Daverington, Bram employs mathematics, perspective and geometry to compose fictional landscapes with a futuristic appearance. The figurative aspects have been eliminated to pare the work back to the essential problems of colour, form and composition. Through the use of two-point perspective the works betray a prominent horizon line, which orchestrates the rainbow of angular shapes and rhythms buzzing above and below.

Stephen Haley shares Bram's concern with space and depth created from flat, angular shapes. In Haley's luminous technoscapes, virtual forms have supplemented the natural, to place us in a dystopian fantasy world. This is a future where mountains have been reduced to a synthetic binary code, measurable in megapixels rather than altitude. The extremes of the natural world, once sublime and awe-inspiring, have become encoded within digital technology, apprehended through the computer screen.

The six works here form part of the artist's ongoing concern to express the tension between real and virtual space, and attest to the effects of too much technology being absorbed by a biological species still in its evolutionary infancy. Haley's works are littered with virtual pollution and societal absolution, and document the simultaneous acceleration and decay of humankind.

Darren Wardle's hyper-real paintings of a discordant Modernity explode with bloated fields of luminous colour. Seductively volatile, these are the post-apocalyptic remains of humankind's playgrounds; the residue of the rich and famous sucked into a vortex of virtual ectoplasm. Dystopia has never looked so good—the abandoned sites gleam with a sterile urgency and they function as landscape paintings for the precise reason they are not.

Both *Hyper Vigilance* and *Valley of the Dawn* present a kind of toxic utopia, where the clean modernist lines are being enveloped by invading storms of pink and red. The imposing beauty of these works is tempered by the imminent threat of catastrophe, as synthetic consumes synthetic in a blitzkrieg of blistering mayhem.

Stephen Bush's vision of the future is no less fearsome. His *Oberhornsee* is landscape painting on a bad trip; the by-product of an alpine expedition and an active imagination, the work presents an absurd yet strangely coherent spectacle. Bush's paintwork bleeds and pulsates, like a living thing. Swirls of pink and purple suggest interiority, be it a subterranean cave or a psychological state. Yet, perversely, the interior rises above the exterior, inside becomes inside, and Oberhornsee—an actual Swiss mountain peak—becomes a dyslexic Dr. Seussian fantasy.

Bush, like the other artists here, betrays only a passing interest in reality. Painting today seeks the spectacle of unreality. It presents the intangible, using paint to ply the artifice away from edifice. Far from being ready to lie down and give up, landscape painting is probing the possibilities of a future still unravelling, that may yet conform to expectation.

Tony Lloyd, for one, is far from giving up. He effortlessly mines the medium to create startling new visions of the world. His shimmering paintings of mountains present the immensity of nature through a narrow, cinematic lens. Lloyd has been painting mountains since 2007, with his earlier works—including *Tomorrow Follows Yesterday*, featured here—drawn directly from early twentieth century books on photography. The works are quasi-Romantic, quasi-mystical, and reveal that what was once insurmountable by man is now easily negotiable by jet. The future is looking good.

More recent works, such as *Expanded Sphere*, are drawn from the artist's 2010 visit to Nepal and the southern Himalayas. Both paintings discharge a strange sense of silence and immensity. Lloyd introduces surreal elements to many of his works, demonstrating a welcome contempt with reality.

Of all the works here, Kate Shaw's is the closest to synthesising an organic, natural environment. *Liminal Dawn* is helplessly, hypnotically luscious. So luscious it practically oozes out onto the gallery floor. Its sticky flecks of brilliant colour blaze out of an ocean of milky pinks and blues, sealed within a semi-opaque veil. Like Alice Wormald, Shaw constructs her vast and complex landscape dioramas out of montage elements, scattering and sifting the pieces until they fall just so. This silken surrealism is at once patently feminine, and fiercesomely adroit. Shaw achieves a transcendent beauty by exploiting the physical forms and shapes of nature, attesting to the enduring and boundless possibilities of the medium.

These nine, while longing for a future that has evaded us, seek solace in the world of painting. Within their glowing reappraisal of the landscape tradition we discover that the past is not merely undead, it has given life to the future. ■

1 Sam Leach, email to the author, 25 February 2011

Cover/ Stephen Haley, *Mesh*, 2006, oil on linen, 152 x 183cm, Collection of the artist **1/** Tony Lloyd, *Tomorrow Follows Yesterday*, 2008, oil on linen, 95 x 240cm, Collection Gippsland Art Gallery **2/** Stephen Bram, *Untitled (Two Point Perspective)*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 385cm, Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne **3/** Stephen Bram, *Untitled (Two Point Perspective)*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 76.5 x 56cm, Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne **4/** Stephen Bram, *Untitled (Two Point Perspective)*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 101.5 x 76.5cm, Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne **5/** Darren Wardle, *Valley of the Dawn*, 2011, oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122cm, Private collection, NSW **6/** Darren Wardle, *Hyper Vigilance*, 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 213cm, Courtesy Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne **7/** Stephen Bush, *Oberhornsee*, 2003, oil on linen, 198 x 234cm, Private collection, NSW **8/** Alice Wormald, *Untitled (#5)*, 2012, oil on linen, 112 x 76cm, Collection of the artist **9/** Alice Wormald, *Untitled (#6)*, 2012, oil on linen, 112 x 76cm, Collection of the artist **10/** Alice Wormald, *Giddy Heights*, 2012, oil on linen, 122 x 89cm, Collection of the artist **11/** Peter Daverington, *Through the Looking Glass Chamber*, 2010, oil and enamel on canvas, 122 x 91cm, Collection Port Phillip City, Melbourne **12/** Peter Daverington, *The New Colony: From Beirstadt to Neuromancer*, 2008-9, oil and enamel on canvas, 183 x 183cm, Collection Gippsland Art Gallery, Purchased with the assistance of the Robert Salzer Foundation and the Gippsland Art Gallery Society, 2011 **13/** Stephen Haley, *Present*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 183cm, Collection of the artist **14/** Stephen Haley, *Precession*, 2006, oil on canvas, 152 x 183cm, Collection of the artist **15/** Tony Lloyd, *Everything Near Becomes Far*, 2011, oil on linen, 120 x 213cm, Private Collection, Melbourne **16/** Tony Lloyd, *Expanded Sphere*, 2012, oil on linen, 107 x 92cm, Collection Gippsland Art Gallery **17/** Sam Leach, *Fracture Landscape*, 2010, oil and resin on wood, 25cm diameter, Collection Gippsland Art Gallery, purchased with the assistance of the Gippsland Art Gallery Society **18/** Kate Shaw, *Liminal Dawn*, 2011, acrylic and resin on board, 120 x 240cm, Courtesy Fehily Contemporary, Melbourne



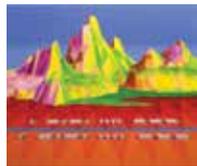
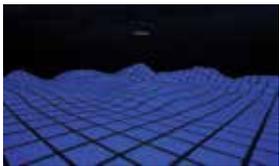
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