Suburban Odyssey: Interview with Ric Spencer

April 2012

The following interview, conducted by email in the lead-up to my exhibition 'Suburban Odyssey' at the Fremantle Arts Centre, May-July 2012. The majority of works exhibited were personal paintings of local neighbourhoods from the preceding 20 years (such as the one pictured above), many of which had never previously been shown. The exhibition also included some original illustrations from my anthology Tales from Outer Suburbia, and production artwork for the animated film The Lost Thing. Part of this discussion involves explaining how I think these different works might be related to each other.
What are some of your memories of growing up in the suburbs of Perth?

Long, hot afternoons, wide and empty suburban streets, the drawl of crows, ocean air, unfiltered light, home and school: a feeling of being somewhere and nowhere at the same time, which can be both a dull and pleasant feeling. Our family did not travel extensively so my memory of Hillarys, the northern suburb in which I grew up, lacked much in the way of outside definition. It was a kind of sui genesis bubble, which may be true of many people's childhood homes, where things just are, perhaps more so in a place that was still being invented, with bulldozers working away at the coastal dunes literally paving the way for new roads, shops, schools and homes throughout the late 1970s and '80s. A world still being manufactured.

If there were any parameters here they weren't cultural or historical, but rather the bush, ocean and sky - things that were omnipresent, wordless and millions of years old. It seemed that any fresh brick veneer bled away into an ancient tangle of scrubby trees and even language evaporated under a blasting sun. You could almost feel the dissolution of meaning as you walked from the suburbs to the beach, something we did routinely as kids, sensing the fragility of our artificial lives. The receding street signs named after famous explorers - Flinders, Cook, Banks - seemed out of place, like front lawns that survived only by virtue of plastic reticulation. By comparison the surrounding coast was mysterious and everlasting (or so it seemed at the time). The old tuart trees were shaggy giants crawling with prehistoric bugs and other nameless oddities. It may be that this was one thing that attracted me to painting and drawing as a child, the fact that you can represent things without words, which sometimes seems a more realistic means of expression. I still feel that way when painting as an adult, occasionally reluctant to add a title to a picture in case it creates a boundary of meaning.

So Perth felt like a peripheral place not just physically but also in a lot of other conceptual ways. Peripheral in a positive way, implying great possibility and opportunity, a certain license to muck about in the backyard, invent your own meaning without great consequence. I often wonder if I would have felt as liberated growing up in a bigger city, surrounded by a more self-consciously artistic culture or family – maybe not.

You mention not being able to name something as an attraction of painting and drawing – I like this idea - so considering the space (both physically and emotively vast) that you have described growing up in how does observational painting and drawing work for you? Are they tools toward an understanding of this environment or rather an evocation (and enjoyment) of the ungraspable nature of what was around you – of the ambiguity of a "world still being manufactured" as you put it?

Well, all of these really; enjoyment, understanding and not-understanding too (enjoying ambiguity). Although first and foremost, drawing begins with simple evocation and enjoyment. That's quite non-intellectual and probably hasn't changed much since I was a toddler, just an attraction toward a scene or object, a fixation that may be hard to explain. In fact, the lack of explanation is probably a big part of the attraction. There's an urge to draw a line around it, colour it in, try to figure it out.

Ironically, this doesn't really lead to definition: instead the act of drawing veers toward ambiguity,
or a kind of 'focused ambiguity'. That might sound like an oxymoron, but every artist would recognize this idea: the reduction of a subject to elemental details - lines, shapes, colours - in such a way that ordinary recognition is bypassed, or at least loosened up as if you were untangling a big knot. A street becomes less of a 'street', as an everyday concept, and something less obvious, more strange and unique - it's definition becomes literally sketchy.

That in itself is a form of clarity or understanding; coming to know that reality is slippery, ordinary things are not just ordinary, but open to all sorts of possible apprehensions. When sketching, I'm constantly erasing or deforming things almost as soon as I've drawn them, testing to see holds, what gives and what resists. That slow, revisionist action forces me to stare at a thing for an unnaturally long time, it’s a form of meditation. Ordinarily, I probably have quite a short attention span, having grown up (and now working) in a culture of TV, film, comics and other fast-paced, highly visually-literate media. Observational drawing is a refreshing return to pre-literate study, especially of an unmediated reality. Just sitting in front of a thing and making marks on paper with great simplicity and patience.

As for an appreciation of a specific suburban environment (getting back to your question) that's maybe a secondary layer of thinking that comes after hours of such meditation, plenty of time in which to question my original attraction. Inevitably, it all comes back to ambiguity, but here thematic, relating to my sense of belonging to a place like Hillarys, Mount Lawley or Brunswick (the three suburbs in which I’ve lived). In each place I’ve experienced fondness and familiarity, as well as feelings of displacement and distance. That might relate to the unresolved tensions between land and culture I mentioned, the ‘newness’ of suburbia. It might also relate to my mixed-race heritage, the result of several cultural transplantations within only a few generations (Chinese, Malaysian, English and Irish), and then all of the usual life transitions that constitute growing up. But beyond than anything very biographical, there's just a pervasive feeling of being somewhere and nowhere, of lacking some conceptual bearings.

Many of my paintings are quite empty landscapes, populated by a few crows, creeping shadows, a train or cloud passing in the distance. But there's also some pleasant resolution here too, they are not unsettling pictures. The landscape is not actually empty either, because by looking carefully, I become part of it, and vice versa, and so is the viewer. The act of painting does not so much express any existing relationship with a subject, it creates a relationship. It’s less self-expression than self-reflection. You could even say, in my case, that it resolves into a feeling of belonging through the simple action of staying still, looking, feeling and thinking (while holding a brush). Painting is a reconciliation of sorts, which is also true of my work as a writer.

You describe many of your paintings as "empty landscapes" and as "ambivalent" and that in your paintings "a street becomes less of a street... and something less obvious, more strange and unique". There is ambivalence in the work but also I think crucially a sense of a shared journey. Much of your work offers a route through it, a place to enter and exit and it’s as if you’re offering your hand in invitation to the viewer. Apart from using your studies as sites in your books I think this sense of sharing a journey (and this is maybe just intrinsic to the history of narrative in Australian landscape painting) and the camaraderie that comes from this seems a constant through your work?
Yes, that’s a good way of putting it, and perhaps this is what makes me a 'narrative painter' which I think is a better definition than the diminutive label of 'illustrator'. That sense of a journey in every picture. Some are quite literal journeys, others are implied, particularly through my habitual representation of bending roads and receding pathways. I don't know why I have such an attraction to these lines, which often veer uphill and hook away, obscured by trees, shadows, hills or some dissolving blur. I just love painting them, writing about them (in stories such as Our Expedition) as well as spotting them while out walking or driving.

And yes, I’ve also been drawn to, and inevitably influenced by, other Australian landscape painters who I notice enjoy the same device, from Lloyd Rees' tiny masterpiece The Road to Berry, to Brett Whiteley's serpentine highways and creeks, Jeffrey Smart’s curving highways, even the zig-zag grassy trails implicit in the landscapes of Arthur Streeton, the first artist I ever studied closely as a teenage student. You see these winding or disappearing narrative also trails in the work of Nolan, Olsen, Boyd, footnoting the significance of roads and journeys in a country as expansive as Australia; and even more fundamentally in Aboriginal landscape painting, where land, path and story all become synonymous.

I suppose my own stylistic ‘winding roads’ do not really pay homage to these artists very consciously, but come from a pretty simple need to puncture a picture surface with depth. What better way to break surface tension than to send the viewer’s eye off on a trip, foreground to background, with a lot of interesting wandering in between? A way into the picture, a meditative ramble, and then a way out: a kind of journey.

Even in some of my most claustrophobic images there’s a bending road, a little patch of sky or cool shadow, an ‘exit’ that’s not just optical relief, but has something to do with a liberation from familiarity, an opportunity to move outside the picture. That idea strongly drives a story like The Lost Thing for instance, and connects it intimately with some of my landscape paintings. On the surface these might seem to have little in common: one is an absurdist cartoon-like world, fussily rendered in miniature; the other a serious study of real and expansive things. To me they are born of the same impulse to compare closed and open spaces. The connection is obvious when you notice that the observational painting North Beach informs the coastal architecture in The Lost Thing, with it’s defined concrete wall against an endless ocean, our protagonist perched precariously in between. There is also an 'anonymous gap' that opens into a second universe in The Lost Thing, a place without definition that’s playful, chaotic and impossible to explain. These unknowable places are also a shared destination with any possible audience, because while the familiar world might be experienced differently according to culture, age, education and experience, an unfamiliar world is a very equalizing one.

I enjoyed your suggestion that "Observational drawing is a return to pre-literate study, especially of an unmediated reality.” Looking over your work in Suburban Odyssey, how do you think the relationship between observation (of an unmediated reality) and the world of imagination has grown and been fostered by you and – further to this - how important do you think imagination is in the world today?
I was recently in Sweden visiting different institutions associated with the children’s writer Astrid Lindgren, I came across a much repeated quote: ‘Everything great that ever happened in this world happened first in somebody’s imagination.’ This struck me as very simple and obvious as most good quotes are and applies to everything from politics to smart phones, and even ethical behaviour. So you could reasonably argue that the ability to imagine things, to empathise with other viewpoints and consider alternative realities, is a skill above all others. That ability can grow or atrophy according to how it’s value. And when you consider current problems, from the personal to the global, any hope for the future depends on our ability to imagine alternative ways of existing. The foundation of such ‘play’ is cultivated in childhood, often beginning with the most trivial stories and drawings.

I do think about this quite a lot when I’m working (The Lost Thing is basically an illustrated thesis on this subject), rationalising the link between serious observation and amusing stories about non-existent creatures and so on. I think that this relationship between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ might be described as dialectic, constantly testing conjecture against reality, the basis of all imagination. Of course, perception already has an element of conjecture: the mind sees what it already imagines, and any subsequent representation is somewhat fictional, ‘the lie that tells the truth’. Conversely, even the most outlandish, crazy vision is fuelled by some objective experience of the real world. So all image-making really comes from different points along the same spectrum. This might explain the twin strands of my drawing that have run parallel since childhood: a desire to represent things faithfully, and an equal desire to radically re-imagine them, embracing everything from carefully observed still life to rampaging robots and monsters.

These instincts evolved more clearly into ‘painting’ and ‘illustration’ in the last 15 years, delineated in part by school, job opportunities and institutional divisions, the gulf between galleries and publishers for instance, as well as other cultural segregations: fine art, illustration, science fiction, literary fiction, comics, animation and so on. It would be a mistake to say that I followed a canny artistic direction here, or even a philosophy. My career has been far more pragmatic: responding to whatever job opportunities were available, from cartooning to painting covers for fantasy novels, whatever pays the bills! In the lulls between very irregular freelance jobs, I returned to painting, but for personal rather than commercial reasons (which is why many of the paintings in this exhibition have not been shown before). I always wanted to keep this area of expression protected from any of the compromises I experienced as a commercial illustrator, which were often artistically frustrating. I also needed a counterweight against the introversion and fussiness that illustrative work can engender. With my more personal paintings, I’ve always allowed myself time to experiment and make mistakes, to free up a little.

After the commercial success of some early picture books, I won a certain license to breathe some of that experimental spirit back into my more ‘commercial’ work. I’ve tried to take advantage of this by drawing separate strands of painting, writing and illustration into a more unified practice, or at least one that’s interwoven, less separated. Picture books are an ideal art form for this, given that they sit halfway between painting and literature, and able to drift in and out of conventional language. The fact that they have been largely restricted to an audience of very young readers is, I
think, a big cultural oversight, but one that also presents interesting opportunities.

These days I continue to work in a dialectical way, moving between observational paintings – mostly of local suburban landscapes or places I’ve visited while traveling – and the more absurdist tales of the mind’s eye. I imagine this work pattern might shift and change over time, but it’s likely to follow the same instinctive habits, looking for those nice moments of intersection between fiction and reality, and trying to pin them to a surface.