

Guido Maestri and the river bend of memory

Borne of water, this new body of work by Guido Maestri was made for Mudgee. It was fermented in flood – the recent floods that followed fire. Guido remembers the Cudgegong River on Wiradjuri Country in deluge more than forty years ago. He also remembers *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek*, the children's picture book written by Jenny Wagner and illustrated by Ron Brooks in the year before his birth. He remembers its dense and detailed illustrations, its gothic undertow. He remembers his first feelings of melancholy too when the book was read to him as a child. Melancholy is an emotion best described by Sigmund Freud as grief for a loss that one can't fully fathom.

Like Guido's paintings, the Bunyip is a creature borne of water. It lives in rivers and creeks where the water spirals and swirls – where it is unsafe. For many Aboriginal people, the Bunyip keeps community and Country safe, it keeps young children away from dangerous waterways and it protects those waterways from human impact. *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* is a big story – arguably the biggest. It is about the search for identity, with the Bunyip's relentless refrain 'What am I?' ringing out plaintively across the decades since it was penned. This is a book that quite possibly wouldn't be written today, with its loose appropriation of Aboriginal ontologies. However, it signifies a cultural confusion and a fraught sense of belonging that still lingers in contemporary Australia.

Berkeley's Creek, the setting for this quest for belonging, is named in tribute to the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley, who believed that physical objects do not exist unless they are perceived. For Berkeley, to *be* is to be perceived. Like Berkeley, Guido is an empiricist. He too believes that knowledge happens through the senses. Immersion in the landscape has been key to his practice and central to his success. He has spent more than a decade painting outdoors, *en plein air*, even winning the NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize in 2013. But this time he has made his canvases too big, too cumbersome, too sculptural, to be painted outdoors. Memory has to do the heavy lifting here and painting becomes a way of extending memory – the ultimate memory tool or mnemonic. By making these paintings too large for the landscape, they must succumb to a new ontology – to a new way of being. 'What a pity,' I hear you mutter, echoing the Bunyip's murmur. But no condolences are required. Out of the mud arises a new beast in which his memories of the picture book and his memories of Mudgee are co-mingled.

A river runs through this exhibition. Paint is pushed across canvas like silt across the river bank. Control duels with chance and paint pools, blurs and bends its way across Country. Heavily textured, quasi-abstract and almost collage-like in their compositional fragmentation, these paintings are made not with conventional brushes but with found offcuts and repurposed objects. The brush is the enemy of the painter in this series. And just as Guido has maximised the scale of his work to alter his practice, he has consciously introduced new ways of applying paint to halt gesture, generate artifice and court contrivance. Guido's decision to work on French polyester with its smooth, slippery and sensitive perfection – as opposed to the rigors and catches of Belgian linen – extends these contrived conditions. When he was a student, his mentors at the National Art School in Sydney counselled him against contrivance – they told him to avoid it at all costs. But landscape painting is the ultimate contrivance, and by embracing new manoeuvres in mark-making, he has created landscapes to inhabit, not just to behold. In this new realm, Guido can wander about in his own paintings, he can inhabit the river bend of memory, and so can we.

Divulging his early training in sculpture, these paintings are worlds that one can step into, and yet they were made in the artist's Marrickville studio. In *Return to Berkeley's Creek*, a painting sits within a painting – extending from the river's edge is a second landscape, framed in a manner reminiscent of a proscenium theatre whereby an archway frames the action on stage. With its earthly hues, the painting's palette appears to become more naturalistic as the painting become more contrived. This

framing device not only borrows from the visual language of the picture book, to which the painting owes its title, and reperforms the tension between naturalism and artifice, but it also cautions us to question the appearance of things, to ask 'What am I?' This approach to 'framing' was one favoured by colonial landscape painters such as Eugene Von Guérard, who blended empirical observation with Romantic sentiment. His delicate oils were often framed within a gilded alcove as though to highlight the artifice of looking. This colonial hybridising of observation and the imagination chimes with Guido's practice as a contemporary artist. Furthermore, he is all too aware that as an Australian landscape painter, he is part of a white, predominantly male, European lineage that includes painters like Von Guérard. Through this body of work, landscape emerges as a creature as inchoate, as vexed *and* as compelling as the Bunyip itself.

Guido is now a parent and his son Augie is the same age that Guido was when he left Mudgee. *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* is a book that Guido now reads to Augie. We relive our own childhoods through our children, and history begins at home.

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