

Altitude

A conversation between Jonathan Nichols and Helga Groves, August 2009

- JN** In this exhibition you are referring to a number of normally intangible scientific terms for particular zones of the world and putting images in their place.
- HG** There is something remarkable in the way science describes the world with such resolve, even the things that are hard to grasp, and these definitions for me are visually appealing. The titles for a few of the works in the show have a scientific reference—for instance the paintings called *Stratosphere* and the Perspex cylinder piece titled *Above sea level*.
- JN** A term you have spoken of but didn't eventually include as a title is 'altitude'.
- HG** Altitude is unusual, I could have used it but now here it is as the title for this conversation. Although it is commonly used to describe height above sea level, in geography, elevation is the word used for height. Altitude is therefore not a set position. It also sometimes colloquially refers to getting distance or height on something. In the same way, and this is central to the images I am using in these works, the position of the horizon is not set but is dependant upon the relation of one's own position and perspective. So horizon and altitude have similar ambiguous atmospheric qualities, and I'm trying to visualise these terms. Their only verification is a relational physical one. There aren't any default settings that can stand in place.
- JN** The sense of depth and space in these paintings oscillates; it takes a little while to *feel* precisely what we are seeing. That's part of it?
- HG** The time of day is very acute; it has to be. It is not when the sun first drops away but later. I live in the city now but earlier I lived in a rural environment. I've observed this time of day over and over again back home. The vibrancy of this transitional moment is very particular. There is something about the spaces out there. When the sun has dropped and the bleaching has stopped the light initially accentuates and draws forward contrasts and alternate colours. But after this there is the later twilight when it changes again. The light is sucked away and the land blurs and loses detail and the atmosphere seems to halo and balloon up and there becomes a sense of scale and volume and physicality in space. That is the time in these paintings.
- It is a moment where there is depth and volume and monumentality coming forward in the last light. Smaller details recede and the land starts to look like one thing entirely and the sky another. Details merge into blocks of colour, becoming one. It's usually still or seems so even though the wind might be up. You are much more optimistic at the beginning of the day, and there is something about the effect of light on human beings and darkness and this moment of transition that is sad and reflective. You sense a cycle and time passing.
- The title for the five-panel work is *Last light*. I hope it fits.
- JN** The colours of the late evening are not the same everywhere are they?
- HG** No, it does depend. It can be different every day and a colour is hugely reliant on the density of the atmosphere, the stratosphere. If you look at the light each day, the blue hues change, your experiences of a site change. It doesn't have to be blue either of course. With the paintings, the multiple panels allow for movements in time and light, and the horizon line does locate the particular place and the time remains at that part of the day when light is fading to darkness and everything seems to become still. The paintings are of these shifting dominant blues that create space and seem to recede into the distance, overcoming the last light.
- I was in Berlin a little while ago now and it was summer and the sky was an incredible blue that apparently only happens on such summer evenings there. The friend I was with said this late summer sky was called a Berlin *Zimmer* blue. I have transposed something of that same blue with these paintings too; I've transposed the memory of that brief experience.
- JN** There is something symbolic in what you are saying at a level, even though I know you are cautious about the utility of signs in art, but it's not just an optical thing. You feel it in someone like Blinky Palermo's work too, whom we have talked about before. Where does it come from do you think?

HG I think it comes from a very emotional sense of experience. Palermo didn't speak much about what his work represented. I imagine he didn't think you could say much. I have to understand my work myself too. I know it comes from an experience of viewing something that is also—there is an honour there—so personal.

JN **There is an honour in accounting for the experience.**

HG I think it actually opens questions. It doesn't explain anything. It's always existing there if you have that opportunity to look at an expanse, nature, which is changing before your eyes, because light changes. It can be such a strong visual experience that there is a sense of beauty. We just live within it.

About the question of opticality you raise, these later works have changed to be more to do with the transitions either side of an horizon line. Optical effect is still there but at a different level, whereas with the earlier paintings (from the last show in Melbourne), it was more determined by the arrangements of colour and the process—the hatching marks on top of one another—and the systems of chance. With these new works the surfaces are quite different, more open, more matt and powdery, not glossy or reflective at all. There is no medium, just layers of accumulated pigment, a surface of residues. They photograph really badly, it's impossible.

JN **The way you make these paintings, you move backwards and forwards across a surface and colour range, until it feels right.**

HG Feeling is the same as resolve. The under-layers come through. For instance, here with the moons [the painting *Day and night moon*], I'm imagining an old plate suspended; the moon is hanging above the land like an old plate.

JN **Before I came here I was thinking about Vija Celmins in relation to your work, and especially how you are now clearly constructing images in the paintings where you were not before. Like Celmins you have initially used photographic documents. Celmins' images are always second-hand, used-up, handled and dealt with—left with no demonstrative need, no remark about their origins. The finished works don't depend for their affect on references. I like that. Nothing can hold one image over another in the sense of a hierarchy. Her natural order takes back images rather than separating them from nature. It's super-nature again, not about separating out culture and mediation from nature.**

Like you, the attention of Celmins' work is directed to the surface and its specific physicality in a way that draws attention to the duration of time and the 'insanity' of memory. I've always thought remembering presupposes loss—you don't remember until you are just about to lose something. To remember a thing announces the bringing of its loss.

One of the immediate points of reference for your paintings is that you started by taking documentary photographs of the place where you grew up as a child in Queensland, and that area will become an open-cut coal mine soon.

HG There are too many immediate things that might overtake the point of painting. The place has very specific personal connections but will soon no longer exist, sure. But it is misleading to exclusively speak of a documentary relation (as you say); as paintings their implication is more independent, they don't just follow an event.

They were initially based on documentary photographs of skies or moons or distant landscapes. Nonetheless each painting, within each series, allows for different moments too. Not in the way it comes from the past, with a particular photograph or via a particular memory, but in the way it exists now as a painting. Each work anticipates an accumulation of cycles, independent of immediate sources or associations. I think that in this way, more than a single relation or in a nostalgic way, they honour a different sense of time and recollection of the past.

JN **The title of the triptych, *Like the night accompanies the day into its shadow as time passes*, alludes to what you are saying.**

HG It comes from Blinky Palermo again. Another quote I like is, 'every image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that surrounds it', which comes from a book called *The culture of time and space* by Stephen Kern.

I do think of Palermo—I suppose that's my artistic licence—how with his work there is something incredibly sad and yet silent, very difficult to place in the context of concrete reality or in representational thinking. He had such a straightforward manner of

making a painting—back then you could do that I suppose—just coats of colour plainly applied. But what else is there to think?

JN He wasn't interested in the moves of discourse; for instance, say, taking a 1970s German minimal position in relation to what was then a predominate American modernism.

HG Palermo is sad and so incredibly light at the same time; he asks for nothing. There was no nonsense. His paintings were so quickly undertaken but the attitude is about depth and quietness—it's a passive sensation in the same breath as nature. The romanticism had 'altitude' but nothing heroic—quite the opposite—his was the reverse of a grand narrative.

You can't help but notice the affect though. Symbolism is a silly thing these days but the paintings slowed the world down to fewer moving parts. You can't talk too much (even in your own thinking) so you learn to skirt round thoughts that can't help.

JN I think the original Symbolists were always more about what was unknowable than making funny pictures with hidden meanings.

Joseph Beuys said Blinky Palermo was like the 'cornflower dust that blows away in the wind'. I always think of Palermo as a sort of abstract pilgrim. But 'abstract' isn't right, it doesn't say enough any more and it's overused. It has lost so much of its first meaning for what was true.

HG Abstraction is something incomprehensible.

When you mentioned abstract pilgrims though, I was thinking of another blue abstraction. I have an old book on colour by a woman called Victoria Finlay that I keep in the studio. Colour theory has always been such a fragile idea. Anyway, there is a story in it where she dreams of going to Afghanistan to seek out the mountains where there are the veins of lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli is an exotic mineral that was once used to make ultramarine paint (ultramarinus literally means 'coming from beyond the sea').

When you were talking I could visualize the way she described the mountains. She hadn't actually gone to Afghanistan at that point. It was rather the way she imagined it to herself: walking to the mountains to find the veins of blue mineral.

JN It sounds like a very Blinky Palermo thing to do. The Americans do their pilgrimages to Smithson's Spiral Jetty or James Turrell's personalized volcano and the German artists like Palermo and Imi Knoebel dress in cowboy hats to journey to the Rockies and unearth the mountains of 'pure' pigment in Arizona.