



POV

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Point of View

Gum trees

Helen McDonald

Colloquially known as gum trees, eucalypts appear wherever water gives life to Australia's ancient land. Fast-growing, fresh-scented and vigorous, they form lofty rain-forests, languorous river-side groves or sparse, brittle scrub. The variety of sub-species is immense as they are adapted to a vast range of soil and climate conditions. City dwellers and newcomers to Australia do not see this complexity. To some of them, the gum tree is boring, an untidy monoculture that runs rampant in the outback and clutters the edges of suburbia. In the 'national psyche', however, it has iconic status, featuring frequently in the foundational narratives of White Australia. The Aborigines saw eucalypts another way, of course, naming them according to a different ontology and rarely representing them in visual art. Jane Trengove's painted gum trees belong to the European painting tradition, but are not classed in terms of scientific identity or cultural ideology. Rather Trengove acknowledges the way the gum tree is represented in art according to socio-historical conventions and understood within perceptual frameworks. She shows how these cultural constructions and modernist techniques of display have their own complexity. Her serried ranks of small tree-specimens at first might seem like a botanist's selection of twigs, but they are gestural records of entire trees, all carefully individuated then painted onto the wet white ground of the four gallery walls. Neither huge and macho nor decorative and quaint, they emerge as crowds of serious marks plotting both real and fictional spaces that surround one as one enters the gallery. Connotations of roadside plantings and reforestation programmes offer a positive direction for anxieties about human intervention in the 'natural' world. The delicacy and skill with which these images are fashioned, however, evokes a fragile beauty associated with the symbolic world of art.

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