

HORIZON: TRANSCENDENT VISIONS;
TURNER TO TURRELL

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Work in progress towards an exhibition concept that celebrates visions of transformation associated with the horizon and the transfiguring power of light.

From the earliest times humans have lifted their eye to the horizon where the knowable world ends and the void begins. The horizon is the point of disappearance at the outer limit of human sensibility. Combining this existential fact with the horizon's symbolic role as the boundary of material earth and immaterial heavens ensures that it is always strongly identified with the undifferentiated absolute.

The Sublime Landscape

In the 18th and 19th century the landscape became increasingly associated with transcendent visions. The wilder and grander the view and the more the scale belittled the human observer the greater the sublime effect. In the eighteenth century the British statesman and political theorist Edmund Burke defined the sublime in landscape as the ultimate experience of divinity born of a mixture of fear, awe, and enlightenment produced by the contemplation of a powerful, terrifying nature.

Caspar David Friedrich *Reisenbirge* 1835

Caspar David Friedrich *Cross on the Mountain* 1808

In paintings of this period the symbolic connotation of the horizon is somewhat overshadowed by this appeal to the

awesome scale of nature but it is implicit throughout the romantic tradition and comes into its own later in the 19th century and into the 20th. In these paintings the sun is low in the sky, which emphasises the limit of the horizon as well as providing a dramatic backdrop to the mountains.

Cross on the Mountain 1808 illustrates the religious and symbolic dimension to romantic landscape. This work was intended as an altarpiece for a private chapel (The Terschen Altar). Critics at the time condemned his use of landscape for religious purposes as sacrilegious. Most outspoken was Wilhelm von Ramdohr, a staunch supporter of Neo-classical landscape, who published his condemnation of Friedrich in the December issue of *Zeitung fur die elegante Welt*. Friedrich responded with an interpretation that identified the natural images as symbols for religious beliefs: 'The cross stands erected on a rock unshakably firm as our faith in Jesus Christ. Evergreen enduring through all ages, the firs stand round the cross, like the hope of mankind in him.'

From a more contemporary perspective however the cross may seem to be under threat, exposed vulnerable and isolated.

Eugene Von Guerard *Mount Kosiosko* 1864

Eugene Von Guerard *Milford sound* 1877

The German romantics had a profound influence on the way the Australian landscape was first imagined. Von Guerard for example was a part of this tradition of the sublime as you can see in these two mountain scenes. These invoke the sublime through the vastness and otherness of the wild by contrast with naturalistic French landscape settings or neo classical paintings that reflect nostalgia for humanity as an enduring presence manifested in traces of antiquity, or the intensely occupied landscapes of Constable and Courbet.

Germanic visions of the unspoiled wilderness lent themselves perfectly to the exploration of Australia as *terra nullius* as they did to depictions of the discovery of the American West. At first the landscape was experienced as a terrifying and insurmountable barrier to settlement. What lay beyond the mountainous horizon was often imagined as fantastic.

The Horizontal Division

Claude Monet *View of the sea at sunset* 1862

Ferdinand Hodler *Sunset on Lake Lemman seen from Vevey* 1915

In modern painting the horizon comes into its own displacing grandiose visions of mountains and the awesome sublime with a pragmatic horizontality. In these two examples the horizon comes low in the picture plane revealing vast and unoccupied space. They are not appealing so much to our awe of the wilderness as to a conceptual interpretation of the horizon as the limit of sensibility and the point of departure for the imaginary.

In many cases the horizon is emphasised by being reduced to a strong horizontal line dividing the composition into two parts with the sky or heaven above and the earth or material plane below. There is a strong continuing influence from this landscape format into abstraction. For example Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.

Mark Rothko *Yellow blue on orange* 1955

Barnet Newman *Horizon Light* 1949

Rothko in particular saw these horizontal blocks as signifying layers of being and stages in meditation. In these mid career works there is a warmth and a sense of light that infuses the field.

Michael Johnson *After Sirius* 1987

Patricia Piccinini *Up the road* 1998

This is a continuing theme for artists of all persuasions – take two recent examples from Australia, Michael Johnson and Patricia Piccinini. These works are not necessarily intended symbolically, however, they cannot fail to evoke experiences associated with the horizon. Johnson invokes landscape and movement such as wind in the rushes or ripples in the water rather than describing a specific scene. His horizontal division is an abstract device rather than a direct reference to the actual horizon but its symbolic connection to Rothco is clear.

Piccinini's repetition of the image acknowledges the impossibility of representing this 360° phenomenon in a single image thereby bringing in the temporal and spatial aspect of our experience of the horizon in the real world.

Mondrian *Composition London* 1940-42

Sol Lewitt *Cube* 1989

Many abstract artists took the horizon line as a fundamental starting point within the real. Mondrian in particular identified the horizontal limit of materiality and the perpendicular force of gravity as the two axes of all his compositions.

The grid that evolved as a compositional strategy in modern art is in part derived from this logic. It also reflects the rectangular limits of the paper that is then echoed in the grid.

Rosalind Krauss likens the modernist grid to a window that symbolises the other world outside our immediate material experience. This is born out by memorable images in Western art of figures sitting at a window gazing into a

void of light or an enchanted garden. Think of artists such as, Vermeer, Bonnard, Matisse, Diebenkorn, all of them strongly evoking reverie and speculations about infinite space beyond the everyday.

This interpretation seems to belie the grid's apparent appeal to logic and mathematical order until we think of a neo platonic approach to the divine.

The Human Figure As Conductor

Caspar David Friedrich *Monk by The Sea* 1809

James McNeill Whistler *Sea and rain* 1865

In the romantic tradition the small singular figure is a reminder of the vastness of creation and our relative insignificance within it. However as a vertical vector the figure also takes on a specific role of defying gravity and acting as a lightning conductor connecting the material and immaterial.

The uniquely vertical figure of a human on the brink of this void is at once an image of great vulnerability and a pointer to the heavens. This image can be taken to embody the idea of human consciousness as a bridge between the material world and infinity.

These paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and James McNeill Whistler show the isolated human figure standing against the horizon like the letter 'I' (Jehovah) or the number '1' (primum mobile) a rather forlorn but still heroic reminder of man in the image of god.

Anthony Gormley *Field for AGNSW* 1989

Anthony Gormley *Field for AGNSW* 1989 detail

Gormley also represents the figure as a sign of consciousness making a link between material and

immaterial. These figures were made from red soil collected during a trip to the bush where he had been to install another work, *Field for the great Australian Outback*. Back in Sydney simple movements of the hand formed the figures from this red clay. They are not detailed representations but seem to be metamorphosing from unformed earth into living beings. The 1100 Lilliputian figures are arranged in two hemispheres in imitation of the brain to suggest human consciousness. The viewer is invited to walk down the central aisle through the figures to the central lobe. From this position it becomes apparent that all the eyes are looking straight up at the viewer. It is a most uncomfortable feeling as if the land itself is rising up to charge us with our responsibility for the earth out of which consciousness is formed.

Caspar David Friedrich *Woman in front of setting sun* 1818
Caspar David Friedrich *The cross on the Baltic* 1815

The figure of the woman in this Friedrich painting faces away from us into an infinite landscape. It is deliberately anonymous, inviting us as viewers to take her place: with arms outstretched towards an expansive horizon and setting sun, she enacts our desired communion with the landscape as a means to a Burkean sublime. The path on which the woman stands ends abruptly a symbol of the limitations of everyday reality. *The cross on the Baltic* makes an interesting comparison with the human figure. Friedrich often uses a central figural motif it may be a tree, a window, or an architectural ruin but it is invariably an isolated vertical gesture.

In Friedrich's painting the figure is seen against the setting sun that highlights the vertical dynamic of the figure while also suggesting the mystery of the sun god's chariot that moves between this world and the next in a diurnal cycle of renewal. The rays of the sun make an arrow that point down to the horizon as a counterpoint to the vertical arrow

created by the woman's arms thereby emphasising her complementary upward movement.

This image of the sun that represents heavenly power also seems to dissolve the boundary between Heaven and Earth.

The Power Of The Sun To Dissolve The Divide

Turner *Margate from the sea* 1835/40

Turner *The Angel standing in the sun* 1846

The sun not only navigates the divide between the living world and the void, it sometimes seems to dissolve the boundary in a unifying glow or a flash of light. J.M.W. Turner is particularly well known for this effect. In some cases Turner made this spiritual inference overt as in *The Angel standing in the sun* 1846 where the light of the sun not only dissolves the boundary of heaven and earth but also an angel appears in the midst of the illusion.

Monet *Morning haze* 1888

Lloyd Rees *Misty morning McMahon's Point* 1982

Monet and Lloyd Rees have also created visions of this moment. The paintings create a light infused atmosphere that appears to be filled with mysterious veils that dissolve the horizon line allowing light and atmosphere to soften the edges of material being and provide a glimpse of the power of light itself. This is an effect that is often most remarkable late in an artist's life as they prepare to make the ultimate journey themselves.

Vincent Van Gogh *The Sower, Arles* 1888

Vincent Van Gogh *Sower with setting sun* 1888

In the late nineteenth century the power of light is most associated with the visionary artist Vincent Van Gogh. He followed the sun to the south of France where the blue

skies and searing mid day sun glare over the bone white limestone and cast colours into vivid relief. While the sun brings life to the earth it also burns and its secrets are not to be stolen. Bataille identified Vincent with Prometheus who stole the secret of fire from the sun only to be hideously punished by the gods. For Bataille Vincent was a sacrificial figure and indeed beyond the glorious fiery disc there may be ashes and the void.

Describing this painting of the Sower in the letter to his brother, Theo, in August 1888 he says:

‘I think of the man I have to paint, terrible in the furnace of the full ardors of harvest, at the heart of the south. Hence the orange shades like storm flashes, vivid as red-hot iron, and hence the luminous tones of old gold in the shadows’.

In another letter later the same month:

‘And all the same to feel the stars and the infinite high and clear above you. Then life is after all, almost enchanted. Oh! Those who do not believe in this sun here are real infidels. Unfortunately along with the good God Sun, three quarters of the time there is this devil of a mistral.’

Identification of the sun with the divine occurs in many cultures and the parallel inevitably leads to the possibility that celestial incandescence may destroy mere mortals. It is dangerous to approach the divine. Icarus flew too close to Apollo’s chariot and was destroyed. Gazing on the sun literally blinds us. Van Gogh is famous for his sunflowers that literally and metaphorically capture the awesome energy of the sun. His writhing yellow brush marks translate this power into a personal ecstasy that carries him to the extremes of human experience and from such heights

there is always the threat of a fall into darkness perhaps it is the excess of light that blinds him.

Anselm Kiefer *Sol Invictus* 1996

Anselm Kiefer *Sol Invictus* 1996 another version in progress in the studio

Like Van Gogh the German artist Anselm Kiefer has moved his studio to the South of France where he also paints the sunflowers that are still grown there. Unlike Vincent he waits till the end of the season when the flaming yellow turns to a vortex of black seed. The great black heads appear as an after image of the light of the sun and the scattered seeds form dark galaxies in the heavens. Both these artists describe the power of the light and demonstrate the dangers for mortal men who aspire to transcend the material world by approaching too close to the source.

Anselm Kiefer *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe* 1985

Anselm Kiefer *Studio Shot of work in progress*

Anselm Kiefer became famous for his paintings of the horizon in a European landscape blasted by warfare with charred fields sweeping up to the lowering sky. Kiefer's colours are ashen and yet the lead he habitually uses has within its dead grey surface a strange luminosity that seems to imply the existence of 'bound up' energy. Kiefer is fascinated by the history of ideas associated with transcendent aspirations but growing up in the aftermath of the holocaust he is burdened with direct experience of utopian visions gone horribly wrong.

His work epitomises late twentieth century ambivalence. In *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe* at AGNSW a propeller is lying in ruins on a rock shelf with the sea on the far horizon. It is a work that relies on the German romantic tradition and the horizon is working here as a metaphor. In place of the figure that connects heaven and earth Kiefer shows a

propeller – a man made machine for transcending the boundary of heaven and earth.

This work carries many layers of meaning each of which contains its opposite. The propeller is a symbol of flight and therefore of transcendence yet it is made of lead and cannot take off. If it were to fly it would describe a helix, this is the shape of DNA but it is also a Dionysian symbol for transcendence. This double spiral appears in the form the snakes on the Caducean staff carried by Hermes the messenger of the gods and the bringer of healing from the other side. These and many other clues reveal Kiefer's constant theme, raising questions of being, of mind and matter, spirit and body, and impossible dreams of transcending the material world.

The three blades of the propeller are inscribed with the three virtues; faith, hope, and love. Three is repeated again and again in the composition. He has attached three lead rocks; it includes reference to the three elements of earth, fire and water, as well as the land, the sea and the sky. Three is a number with mystical connotations and multiplied by itself it gives the order of the celestial hierarchies. Kiefer first called this work *The Order of The Seraphim*.

The Blinding Light

Edvard Munch *Preliminary painting of the sun* 1909-11

Ivan Kluin *Red light spherical composition C.* 1923

There are many dazzling images of the sun in modern art. These celebrate its boundless energy and contribute to the dynamic of movements such as Expressionism, Futurism, Rayonism and Suprematism. Many artists have explored excess of light and the equal and opposite visual effects it produces. On the one hand there are images of blinding whiteness and on the other there are visions of the void.

Both of these effects deal with a passage between waking consciousness and reverie leading to withdrawal into the unconscious.

If this exhibition were to be realised the viewer may imagine the after effect of being dazzled by the sunburst then experience the blindness of white surfaces and imaginatively pass through this momentary blindness to experience the infinity and pregnant darkness of the void. Paintings of blinding sun would be followed by a room of white paintings selected for their dazzling effect and then by their afterimage in works that invoke the experience of infinity.

Kasimir Malevich *White square on white* 1918

Wladyslaw Streminski *Unist Composition 14* 1934

The Suprematists wanted to soar above the material plane transcending materiality and eliminating the narrative of traditional art in the process. It was an historical moment of supreme optimism on the brink of disaster. This white painting has eliminated almost all conventions and aspires to pure sensation and the spiritual corollary of that sensory experience.

The Unists were a Polish group inspired by Malevich who worked with Achromes to try and capture a unified field of experience and pure light.

Gunther Uecker *Silver spiral II* 1957

Gunther Uecker *White phantom* 1962

The German group Zero also reduced their palette to white and Uecker shown here included relief motifs using nails to produce swirling rhythms and dazzling effects.

Robert Ryman *Winsor 34* 1966

Agnes Martin *Untitled #8* 1977

Ryman also uses a tactile surface to bring life into otherwise unrelieved white surfaces. In some of his paintings the paint writhes like a view of minute organisms under the microscope or images of magnetic activity on the sun itself.

Agnes Martin's subtle grids provide a quiet space for meditation. She has described them as providing a still place, an oasis of calm in a noisy universe that allows the viewer to concentrate on making their own inward journey.

The Void Beyond

Kasimir Malevich *Black square* 1915

Nikolai Suetin *Black square* early 1920's

From these images of sublime luminosity and physical blindness the exhibition would then turn to the void itself. There are many interpretations of the void in modern art. Malevich exhibited a black square in 1915 that can be thought of as an infinite space of meditation. Before the light there was the void but it was not empty it was the source of all things and it is the condition to which everything must return.

When a painting induces a kind of reverie the viewer may be thought of as entering the space it represents. There are descriptions of this experience of absorption from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Diderot describes losing himself completely in the landscape represented before him. Michael Fried describes Courbet's self portraits as putting pressure on the surface of representation. On the one hand the figure is pressed right up against the surface as if about to burst through and then the subject is often half asleep as if about to slip into unconsciousness.

Imaginative merger with the subject implies slipping through the surface into reverie and unconsciousness of the world this side of the canvas.

Francois Salle *The Anatomy class at the Ecole des Beaux Arts* 1888

Lucio Fontana *Concetto Spaziale 'Attesa'* 1960

In this painting from the AGNSW you can see another kind of reverie or withdrawal into the void represented by a black rectangle. The male model is half naked and is being examined as if he were just a piece of flesh. In spite of his cocky stance, his sturdy muscled torso and rough trousers attest to his lower class status thus rendering him available for objectification by the gentlemen at the academy. The model's standing as a specimen is enhanced by his juxtaposition with a flayed figure, human bones and anatomical charts.

The man has removed his shirt in the theatre since it is draped over the near by stand. His trousers are unbuttoned and are presumably the next to go. In any case the open fly makes him unusually vulnerable. This vulnerability would be unthinkable for the students themselves. Presumably their social distance from a lower class male was so great that no conceivable threat was posed to their own dignity. The student in the foreground stares at the model with no hint of embarrassment. It was as if the man did not exist as a subject in his own right and even in the unthinkable event that he return the gaze it would be of no consequence.

The man himself has his eyes closed. He is removing himself from the possibility of meeting the intrusive gaze of the students. He has withdrawn into himself, into a state of reverie perhaps. I have worked as a model myself and found it common for other models to talk about this state. They would sometimes even practice spiritual meditation or Yoga while posing.

The blackboard that is behind them frames the figures of the doctor and the model. It is of course a literal depiction of the Academy as it still is today but the coincidence of the man's reverie and the black space behind him is striking. While Duval, the anatomy lecturer, leans out towards the students and the theatre lighting illuminates his baldpate, the model leans back, his dark hair merging with the black field. It is as if there is a struggle going on between consciousness and unconsciousness.

This psychological interpretation may not be as fanciful as it seems given the fact that Duval was a friend of Dr Charcot who publicly demonstrated manifestations of hysterical behaviour and swooning. His subjects were working class women and prostitutes in Paris. Duval has been represented as participating in these displays and although I have no evidence that Salle was directly aware of these experiments he was certainly present in the academy at the same time.

Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale* series on the right gives material expression to this imaginary passage through the surface to reveal the dark luminosity of the void beyond.

Blackness is one way of visualising the void and yet somehow it is necessary to impart the immense potential it contains.

Ad Reinhardt *Abstract painting, black* 1954

Mark Rothko *Earth and green* 1955

Reinhardt's compositions are in the form of a cross that is defined by subtly different hues of black that only appear on sustained contemplation.

The deep space in this painting by Rothko is enhanced by the glow of blue behind it. Although Rothko's most

profoundly melancholic late works are almost unrelieved the darkness still radiates a kind of luminous power.

Yves Klein *Monochrome IKB48* 1958

Yves Klein *Leap into the void* 1961

Blue is also associated with the void, the French scientist-come-philosopher, Bachelard, writes of it as the colour of the sky and of poetic reverie. Yves Klein in his monochrome paintings of the void picked this up. Klein was also interested in capturing pure sensation – his monochrome paintings were saturated with pure colour and in the case of the blue it embodied the effect of the void. Klein used a particular Ultramarine blue. In order to preserve the vivid luminosity of the pigment he often avoided the use of any binder and went to great lengths to find a medium that would have the least dulling effect on the colour. This blue that he named IKB or International Klein Blue is very similar colour to the chroma key that is used as a background for transposing images in video. It literally disappears in the process of double exposure. It is also the colour Cézanne used around forms to give them a feeling of space. Bachelard also wrote about blue as the colour of the spiritual void. Quite simply blue is the colour of the sky and creates the sensation of deep space.

Klein was a keen Rosicrucian and followed rigorous spiritual exercises combining this with his considerable expertise in judo to work towards a literal physical transcendence. In 1961 the year before his untimely death he made a gesture that acted out this metaphysical aspiration by leaping into the void from a second floor window. He believed that the material world was approaching an end and that by diligent spiritual exercise mankind could hasten the advent of the spiritual domain.

This is an image of extreme optimism, utopian, crazy, but an act of faith to demonstrate the truth of human longing that breaks through conscious suppression into our dreams.

There is a long and engaging story to be told about the contradictory evidence Klein leaves for his public about the authenticity of all his acts and indeed the technical authenticity of this print; but in this case the authenticity of the image as image is all that counts. His arching body and strained expression are convincing evidence of his aspiration to transcend here and now.

In his homages to Yves Klein, Anish Kapoor's greatest achievement has been to manifest the experience of the void in an extraordinarily concrete way.

Anish Kapoor *Untitled* 1992

Anish Kapoor *Void field* 1989

Anish Kapoor is an Indian artist living in London. He grew up in the state of Kerala but went to school in Bombay. His background incorporates Hindu, Jewish and European traditions. While doing postgraduate work at Chelsea in England he created pigmented forms that suggested the cycle of birth and death. He adapted the shapes of seeds and fruits and human generative organs while the bright colouring was applied by sprinkling raw pigment over them. This quasi-ritual installation invoked tribal festivals and celebrations of harvest and fecundity in India. The use of the unfixed pigment was also a conscious homage to Yves Klein.

In 1989 Kapoor discovered a new way to imagine the infinite. He created a portal onto the void within blocks of incredibly dense and ancient Cumbrian sandstone, possibly the oldest sedimentary rock on earth. At first glance the spots on top of these great stones seem like applied black velvet but on closer inspection they are revealed as holes in

the rock. There are no apparent sides to the holes and there is no visible end to the space. He has created the experience of a black hole within matter by hollowing out the stone leaving only a thin shell at the top at the brink of the void. The hollow has been lined with a dark blue pigment to give spatial depth to the darkness.

The American critic, Thomas McEvelley, wrote for Kapoor's catalogue at the Venice Biennale in 1990. He played upon Kapoor's Indian background to characterise these black holes as the womb of Kali. More recent variations on the theme make it apparent however that this void is like *Black Square* 1915 by Kasimir Malevich. This painting of a black square has become a powerful symbol in modern art for a portal onto the infinite. It is a deep space for contemplation in which we project our imagination of the unknown.

James Turrell *Arcus* 1989

James Turrell *Light House at Echigo Tsumari* 2000

James Turrell is an American artist whose installations use light to create a sensation of infinity. He has achieved this by building houses in which the sky is framed to produce a rectangle of literally endless and ever-changing blue, he has even modified a volcano to allow the viewer to lie and look up at a vast framed circle of infinity. These are artworks that require the viewer to participate and to spend time with them. In some of his works it takes half an hour for the eyes to adjust and for the image to appear. In others he invites the viewer to spend the night in the space in order to experience the passing of time and the changes of nature.

Some of the most extraordinary are built into gallery walls and give the initial appearance of luminous blue paintings – however on closer inspection they begin to appear as space beyond the wall. The illusion is profound and even from close up it is impossible to resolve the sensation of depth.

There is no visual interference from walls or backboard detectable. The viewer experiences a degree of disorientation or of floating in space. In time it becomes a manifestly meditative experience realising the imaginative space of Agnes Martin or Rothko in more literal form.

The prevailing theme in this talk has been to show works of art that induce experiences that might resonate with profound but often unspoken desires. As an habituated agnostic I am still plagued by vague intuitions of the unknowable and by dreams that simply will not go away. This collection of diverse artworks captures something of these dilemmas for me. These are artists who wish to share experiences in the real world of sensation rather than to depict them second hand. I hope a little of the excitement of this came across even though a slide show must be a very poor second to an exhibition of real objects.