

## Spherical Consciousness in Phillip George's *Borderlands*

Let us assume that artistic practice begins with daydreaming. The place for this is normally associated with the studio. However, Patricia Piccinini once told me that her ideas for her artworks emerge and take form while driving between manufacturers in the outskirts of Melbourne. The studio is her car. I imagine that Phillip George's images come to him while sitting on a surfboard.

In the first known map of the world Anaximander presented it in the shape of a cylinder. The earth was surrounded by the heavens. Suspended in the heavens, people lived on the upper surface. Anaximander was Greek but the centre of the world was the Aegean Sea. The shores of Europe and Asia frame the edges of the then known world, but the point from which they are seen is the flowing azure. It is timely to recall such a fluid perspective.

George surfs on a daily basis. He has learnt to read the direction of the wind, he knows the tidal patterns, remembers where the hidden reefs lie, and the waves are formed through the interplay of these forces. While waiting at the mercy of the big ones, I imagine that his gaze rebounds between the rugged sandstone cliffs and the horizon, prompting tremulous thoughts about the secrets hidden in all directions. Judging by an earlier series of photographs, *Little Bay*, 1998, George regards both sea and shoreline with a heavy degree of apprehension and wonderment. In these works, he created an imaginary reception of Byzantine icons amidst the cliffs and rockpools where the local indigenous people took sanctuary after contracting infectious diseases from the white settlers, long prior to Christo's famous wrapping of the site. In this recent body of work, *Borderlands*, 2008, a similar perspective is at play.

The exhibition at Casula Powerhouse comprised an interplay between two installations. As you entered the main turbine hall there stood thirty different seven foot tall Thruster surfboards, all facing east towards Mecca, and lined upright in a strict modernist grid. Each board was emblazoned with an intricate Islamic pattern and the collection is referred to as *Inshallah* (God Willing). Some of the designs were direct reproductions of traditional patterns of the tree of life and the Garden of Eden that George had photographed in Ottoman, Persian and Arabic mosques. A few, and apparently the ones most admired by the youths from Sydney's western suburbs, included new hybrid images that George manipulated to fit the mould of the board. Each board has an exquisite quality, as luminous as the Bursa tiles and ripping with aqueous grace.

Along the perimeter of the upper wall is a twenty-five meter long photograph called *Border Patrol*. It depicts a six kilometre stretch of the Sydney coastline. The image is heavily tinted in green and conveys the night vision goggle view that is emblematic of the paranoid perspective that has shaped both the war on terror and the war on refugees. Looking at Australian coastlines through the eyes of the American military industrial complex, the cliffs and beaches merge into a murky shadow-space of repulsion and menace.

The two parts of this exhibition articulate opposing aesthetic strategies. The first part of the exhibition *Inshallah* has now attracted the attention of the global media. By combining the Islamic design with the Australian surfboard George has not just brought together two cultural practices that are normally kept apart, but also initiated a gesture of welcome. This interest in the social activity of cross-cultural hospitality, accommodation and exchange is consistent with an enduring trajectory in the artistic imaginary that is motivated by a fundamental attraction to the signs of difference, and is constantly allowing a basic form of curiosity and wonderment to test the boundaries of communication and interaction. George's surfboards have turned heads all around the world. This playful and affirmative gesture has not only offered an instance of possible cross-cultural reconciliation, but for me, it also prompted the question, why was this not already there. The fit between the surface of the boards and the visual designs seemed so 'natural' that it made me think that they must have already been there, somewhere in our cultural unconscious.



The photographic installation *Border Patrol* has by contrast almost escaped the notice of the mainstream media, and it is, admittedly quite possible to enter the main Turbine Hall at Casula and remain in sun-dazzled awe of *Inshallah*. However, this would miss the critical counterpoint that sustains the exhibition as a whole. In *Border Patrol* George deploys the oppositional tendency that is also a crucial part of the artistic imaginary, with which the artist adopts the existing codes of representation and then seeks to re-route, disrupt, or in some way short-circuit the conventional patterns of signification. George's use of panoramic photography is expressive of the desire to confront the practices of domination and the regulative techniques of surveillance in everyday life. Like many artists that have opposed the policies on the war on terror and the racist strategies that have been deployed to repel the 'invasion' of refugees, George has turned his eye onto the State's own repressive use of the visual apparatus of detection and depiction. In particular, he has adopted the use of night vision camera technique. By representing the Australian coastline in this monstrous scale and through the paranoid tint, he produces an effect that blurs any division between night and day, and the work also gives the suggestion that the very technologies, which have been mobilized to bolster border protection and convey a sense of security, have also punctured the sense of social innocence and cosmic balance that, at times, accompanies the ordinary moments of daydreaming by the beach.

For George, bobbing up and down on his surfboard, the beach is a scene that is filled with joy and dread. At one level the promise of the new surfboards is bound within a hospitable gesture. The rhythmic patterns of the Islamic tiles and the gentle tapered curls of the board's design both induce an enchanted serenity. However, at the other level, the effect of the panoramic photograph with their pallid coloration and haunted landscape, provide a stark contrast. The effect of this image suggests that the silent way in which surfers stared endlessly towards the horizon, and muted meditative pose of sunbathers has now been interfered with by the noise of foreign bodies and the nationalized vigilance against invaders. The exhibition oscillates within the disturbing tension of these conflicting signs. However, there is another perspective that is implicit in this exhibition. Unlike the polemical discourse that rebounds within the parameters of the 'clash of civilization' thesis, this exhibition also recalls a more classical way of seeing the world.

In Herodotus's account of history we must remember that his account of events is informed by the principle that everything is in eternal motion. The centre of the world is the sea. He sees things not from vantage point of specific point within terra firma, but as if he was also a traveler, a sailor, a mere passer-by. His approach towards other people and cultures is not as adversarial enemies or monstrous sub-humans, but rather as equals who have developed different values and traditions. To comprehend these differences Herodotus recommends that we observe, enquire, and relate them one's own values and traditions. Looking out towards the horizon Herodotus had no idea of what lay beyond. He did not have the vantage of an aerial perspective. There were no real maps which defined the way things were - just a simple awareness that we all have neighbours, and that our neighbours have, in turn, their own neighbours. To find out about what lay beyond he had to cross the borderlands. His only guide was the word of his neighbour's neighbour and so on. Hence, in the absence of a fixed mapping of the world, Herodotus set out on his journeys with a faith that knowledge accrues through the interaction with that which exists elsewhere. He was prepared to step out of his own place and verify the stories that had circulated like rumors. I would describe this horizontal method of inquiry, verification and narration as a form of spherical consciousness.

I see George's exhibition as an invocation to explore the world with a spherical consciousness. In between the waves there is no compass. There is only a fine attunement that combines memory and intuition. However, knowledge is never a solitary possession. It comes from your neighbours, it is never simply held tight within your own body. Like Herodotus, George surfs with the faith that all fellow surfers will pass on the sign that the big one is coming.

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