

# WRITING LANDSCAPE



PHILLIP GEORGE











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#### Gallery Opening Hours

Tuesday to Saturday 10am - 5pm.

Sunday 12 – 5pm

Closed Monday and public holidays

Admission to the centre is free

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# Mapping the Landscape

by

Uros Cvorc



Fredric Jameson uses the term 'cognitive mapping' to describe the process through which we situate ourselves within the cultural and ideological coordinates of our world.<sup>1</sup> Jameson draws on the work of urban theorist Kevin Lynch, who articulates the way in which people navigate their way around urban spaces by using particular landmarks. Conversely, the absence of landmarks can lead to a sense of estrangement stemming from a lack of situational knowledge. Jameson uses this idea to develop an understanding of how individuals situate themselves within social systems, within larger networks of knowledge that may escape our immediate or material experience. According to Jameson, with the rise of globalization, we have lost our ability to cognitively map our world, in particular its economic and political systems. Today we exist in a space between our repetitive and mundane everyday reality and larger (and distant) events that determine it.

This symbolic gap between our reality and larger events that shape it lead to a sense of alienation and confusion, which is preyed upon by political manipulation. The use of terms such as 'unaustralian' and more recently 'team Australia' attempt to introduce a sense of order, albeit through division and exclusion. The complex functioning of a whole society is reduced to a sense of belonging to an ambiguous group or a sport team and recognizing (or inventing) the enemy.

The images in Phillip George's exhibition *Writing Landscape* collectively provide rich, poetic and powerful cognitive maps. They present a symbolic network that spans continents and centuries, connecting the world through a shared history of coexistence and conflict. The titles of the works emphasize a sense of location, balanced against a sense of dislocation arising from their aesthetic similarity. Some of the images can be located by their name – 'Mt Sinai', 'Mt Nebo' – while others refer to abstract notions of location: 'Habitat', 'Trace'. Looking at these landscapes, we feel that something important has happened there, even if we are not sure what (or where) that may be.

In this sense, George's work is not interested in giving us a history lesson (or art history lesson for that matter), even if the artist is passionate about history. His images are aesthetically rich and evoke a range of associations, from landscape painting, through war and reconnaissance photography to tourist panoramas. His images are equally historically rich and depict sites of temples, ruins and battlefields: all traces of conflicts that still haunt the present. Yet I would argue that his images are perhaps less about ichnographically reading those sites than encountering them as spatio-temporal maps.

Spatially, images in *Writing Landscape* operate somewhere between landscapes and maps. They are all taken from elevated spots. It is as if George is producing topography of the unfamiliar and often barren terrain. In this sense, his works operate to alleviate the anxiety of being lost, the fear induced by the ambiguity of the unknown (suggested by Jameson). Mapping and surveying of the landscape as a cultural and political activity is deeply imbricated in narratives of national identity and their foundational myths. World War I was one such instance, where surveying was followed by military conquest for control of territory.

George's landscapes present a formalized aesthetic language that translates the power relations of these spaces into a language of geographic taxonomy. Reading these images means reading into the power relationships (wars, conflict, histories) that have enabled their formation. It means reading them as both historical documents of past events. It also means reading them in terms of political and economic ownership. Finally it means reading them as aesthetic documents: their embodiment in signs and symbols that are embedded within a culture.

In terms of temporality, *Writing Landscape* indexes earlier times, yet because the history that they represent and the present have a highly charged and tenuous relationship, the landscapes embody series of temporal tensions. The first level of temporality relates to the function of these sites (temples, ruins, memorial sites), which is to connect a historical event to an imagined future. This is the historical time. Yet because the future that these sites indexed failed to materialize, they also function as the monuments to the end of historical time. Because of the end of socialism they descended into what Mikhail Yampolsky called 'temporalization': the insertion into historicity of what was previously experienced as timeless and as 'eternity'.<sup>2</sup>

The second level of temporality has to do with their social function. These sites function as markers and sites of celebrations and markings of anniversaries – as indexes of cyclical time. Yet in images such as 'Trace', cyclical time is also marked by repeated conquests – that continue in the present – thus effectively normalizing war as a marker of time.

In this respect, the Gallipoli section is of particular relevance. 2015 is the centenary of a military campaign that has served as one of foundational myths for a particular idea of Australian national identity. The mythology of Gallipoli in Australia sees the foundation of the nation in narratives

steeped in notions of militarism and masculinity, and events that happened on foreign soil.<sup>3</sup> George plays on these notions by capturing landscapes (15 000 kilometers from any Australian beach) that recall works by Australian painters Tom Roberts and Charles Conder. Unlike colonial landscape painting, which sought to create a familiar environment by populating it, George's Gallipoli is empty of human figures. Yet, he embeds the lived experience of the landscape through perspective that provides the two vantage points. Similar to Clint Eastwood's World War II companion piece epics *The Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, George's images urge us to consider the aftermath of the event from two perspectives. 'Gallipoli Landing – coordinates 224 G' captures the location where the first Australian troops set foot onto the sand at Gallipoli 100 years ago. The panoramic image shows the beach, with its translucent indigo blue water and Mediterranean sky, as seen from the perspective of the troops approaching the shoreline. In the corner of the frame is the Coat of Arms of the Ottoman Empire, steadfastly moored to the base of the image, like a sea mine ready to explode. 'Anzac Cove' and 'Z –Beach' document the same vista of Mediterranean light, sand and water, only from the viewpoint of the defenders. The familiarity of the scene – which could well be a representation of many parts of Australia on a summer day – is what gives its beauty an unsettling quality.

In this sense, *Writing Landscape* operates as a reminder that Australian identity was always global, always articulated through events that crossed continents and spanned centuries. Yet, even more importantly, it reminds us that historical heritage can get monopolized and manipulated for political gain when we lack the cognitive map to grasp the workings of our larger reality. In a year of anniversaries and celebrations, and in an age where digital images are fast becoming our heritage, this is a timely warning.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Fredric Jameson *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1991, 51
- 2 Mikhail Yampolsky *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia* (Ed) N. Condee, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, 97
- 3 Margaret Anderson and Andrew Reeves 'Contested Identities: Museums and the Nation in Australia' in *Museums and the Making of Ourselves: the Role of Objects in National Identity*, (Ed) Flora E.S. Kaplan, Leicester University Press, London, 1994, pp. 79-124



'Mt Sinai', 2008, Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 264 cm, edition 4



'Mystras', 2014, Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 264 cm, edition 4



'Trace # 1'- 2005, Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 230 cm, edition 4



'Mt Nebo'- 2006, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 230cm, edition 4



'Temple'- 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 254cm, edition 4





'Habitat'- 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 230 cm, edition 4



'Armageddon'- 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 240cm, edition 4



'Burnout 1, bugged up country' 2014,  
Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 50 cm, edition 4



'Burnout 2, bugged up country' 2014,  
Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 50 cm, edition 4



Burnout 4, 'buggered up country' 2014,  
Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 50 cm, edition 4



Burnout 5, 'buggered up country' 2014,  
Medium C type print, size 70 cm x 50 cm, edition 4



'Antioch' 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



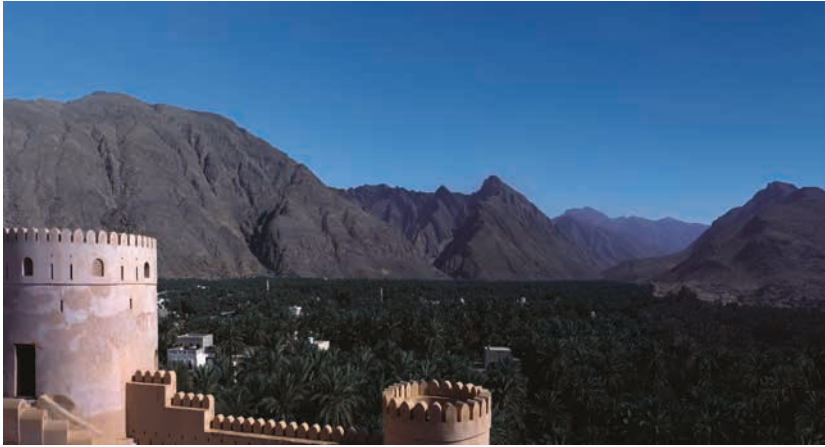
'Resistance Masada', 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



'Al Haram Al Sharif - Ground Zero', 2014  
Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



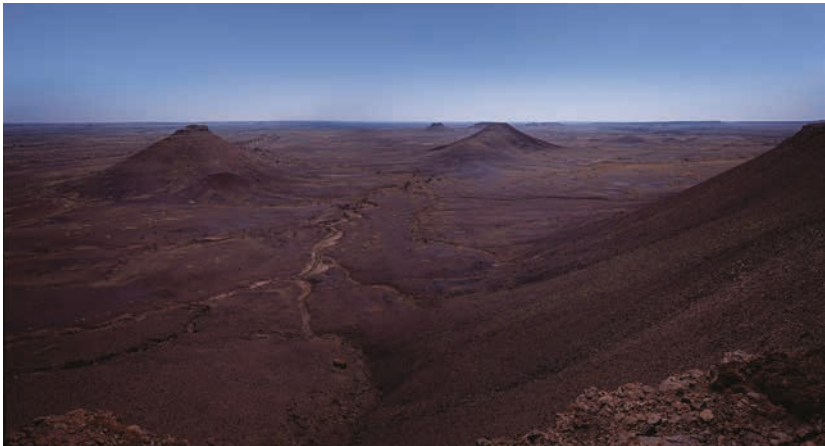
'Resistance - the South' 2006, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



'Secret Water Oman' 2005, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



'Zarathustrian' 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



'Secret Water Australia' 2003, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



'Lycian Trace' 2014, Medium C type print, size 70cm x 130 cm, edition 4



'Gallipoli Landing coordinates 224 G'- 2014, Medium C type print, size 113cm x 264cm, edition 4



'Imagining 4.05 am, 25 April 1915' - 2015, Medium C type print, size 113cm x 264cm, edition 4





Detail -'Imagining 4.05 am, 25 April 1915'



'View down to Anzac Cove' - 2013, Medium C type print, size 50 cm x 160 cm, edition 4



'Z Beach Ottoman view of the Gallipoli Landing' - 2013 , Medium C type print, size 50 cm x 160 cm, edition 4



'Ottoman View points'



'The other side of Lambert' - 2013, Medium C type print, size 50 cm x 160 cm, edition 4