

Native Born 2001

Description of work: *Native Born*, appropriates images of Australian flora and fauna produced by first fleet artist George Raper and the so-called Port Jackson Painter to create a sculptural installation. Raper and the Port Jackson Painter's ink and water colour images are amongst the first western documentations of native fauna and flora (1788-93). The style, anatomical proportions and colours of the drawings are reproduced literally, so as to make 'real' Raper and the Port Jackson Painter's Australian universe.

Rational: In Southern Victoria, on the Mornington peninsula, where I spend my holidays at my parent's hobby farm, the colonising settler farmers, first deforested the landscape to fuel Melbourne's early settlement and subsequently set about remodelling the peninsula to resemble a homogeneous western 'environment' loosely modelled on the Welsh countryside.

Today 'New' Mornington Peninsula is a hybrid of rolling green fields carefully articulated by pine and cypress trees, orchards, cattle and horse studs in the style of the old country, and reclaimed native bush land. The local community is divided by opposing campaigns, one seeking to 'Save the Pine Trees' and the associated (perceived) western heritage of the peninsula, while others are determined to reintroduce native fauna and flora.

Archie Roach's acclaimed album, 'Charcoal Lane', a collection of stories about Archie Roach's life as a displaced and alienated young Aboriginal to his happier days as a family man, acts as a personal chronology of recent Aboriginal history and issues. *Native Born*, probably the album's most thought-provoking song, explores the theme of Aboriginal people's lost cultural and spiritual identification with the 'bush' through references to Joseph Banks and Albert Namatijara.

What initially surprised me about Archie Roach's sad songs was my family's strong sense of identification with the album. What did my middle class, immigrant French family, who spend their holidays on the Mornington peninsula have in common with Archie Roach and Aboriginal people and their history of displacement?

Native Born I came to realise, identifies a socio-environmental rupture, a lost cultural and spiritual sense of *place*, belonging to, or identification with country, systematic with the displacement of a people from their land. A phenomenon shared by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians alike.

From the invasion and establishment of Australia as a penal colony (which involved the forced deportation of criminals), to the soldier settlement programs that followed both world wars, through to the Depression and most tragically, the removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands into missions and town centres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the more recent assimilation policies, a compelling case can be made that a significant and constant theme of Australia's post colonial history is that of displacement. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra is perhaps this cultural, social and environmental phenomenon's most powerful symbol.

The Mornington peninsula and the many similar westernised Australian landscapes, from modest urban gardens popular with Greek Maltese and Italian families across Australia, to our cities formal (often Victorian) botanical parks and gardens (described in Archie Roach's song), can be viewed as an antipodean expression of a longing for a sense of place.

The first images of fauna, flora and Aboriginal people made by non-Indigenous Australians, often failed anatomically, frequently presented unrealistic naturalistic settings for their subjects and suffered from a distinct Euro-centric prejudice; resulting in a European *look* (kangaroos sometimes

resembled large upright rats or rabbits for example). These images do however, through their innocence, capture an open naivety and wonder, that encapsulates in a way not since emulated, the odd, foreign and alien experience of this strange new antipodean world.

Native Born, in appropriating a three dimensional 'reality' from these first western images of Australian fauna and flora seeks to recontextualise these images' sentiments and flawed perspectives into a number of contemporary frameworks and scenarios.

The work, in attempting to make 'real' that which clearly appears to be naive studies of indigenous animals and plants, (that once acted as pseudo-scientific documents to a European audience), questions contemporary assumptions of how we view the Australian environment.

Finally, and in a more general sense, by making 'familiar things look strange' (to paraphrase Archie Roach's song 'Native Born'), the work seeks to express cultural estrangement or a lost sense of identity with an environment; both in terms of feeling like an alien and in terms of an increasingly westernised environment being foreign to Australia's original inhabitants.