



Border Protection, 2005

148 paintings, oil on canvas, installation various dimensions



MABEF
MADE IN ITALY

Shadows are worth a second look: On Seeing Justice

Stephen Copland is an artist who helps us look both back and forward in time.

Copland has an eye on history and our habits of forgetfulness about the past. He is also shaping a response to one of the formative debates of our present moment. From the horizon of the past to the horizon of the future, this is a large gesture of making meaning in the complex and murky waters of present day events. In particular, Copland is concerned to address, in visual terms, how Australians fixate their hopes and fears on the watery border of the ocean, this wavering line that defines our cultural identity as an island surrounded by the teeming difference of Asia.

Looking backwards Copland takes us to the famous work by Theodore Gericault whose work, *The Raft of the Medusa*, created a new shift in French romantic painting by addressing the subject of a contemporary political event. In this grand work that dominates its setting in the Louvre Paris, Gericault offers a tragic and empathic response to the governmental corruption and incompetence that led to the large loss of life due to the sinking of the frigate *Medusa* in 1816. Gericault worked over the years 1818–1819 following the publication of the horrific story by

two survivors that involved starvation, cannibalism and despair. Gericault immersed himself in the work, sketching in mental asylums and morgues, even taking body parts back to his studio in an effort to convey the human visual affects of death and despair.

The shadow of this particular human drama and the political echoes that underlie it arise for Copland in the recent history of Australia's response to asylum seekers and boat people. The circumstances surrounding the Tampa affair in August 2001 led Copland to interview Barrister Julian Burnside about his work investigating the legal implications of how Australia deals with refugees and asylum seekers. The key work from this period involved placing Burnside in the shadow of the raft, *The Question*, 2004. Here Burnside looks out at the viewer in a way that confronts us with a challenge. This work seeks to visualise a key question of our complicity in current history, a question that was pushed aside during a debate that was dominated by fear and that focused on a need to protect borders against an apparent threat from those outside.

Homage, 2009
oil on canvas, 36 x 46 cms

The body of work in this exhibition represents therefore a kenosis, an 'emptying out', through repetition and invention this shadow of the raft that continues to find a presence in our current history. This shadow is found in Copland's work in repeated forms. Sometimes it appears like a wall, and at other times a toxic spill like bitumen or acid, an alchemical physical reminder of the reality of confronting the truth of current events. For the artist it was a decision to build a body of work based on an attempt to visualise a difficult set of political attitudes rather than the more familiar ground of forms based in art such as coherent style or artistic innovation. As Copland says 'I am a human first and artist next'. Copland recovers some sense of the attempt also made by Gericault to find a purpose for art in addressing the controversial events of the day. This approach connects ethics with aesthetics and invites the viewer to consider the habits of their

The Question, 2004
oil on canvas, 182 x 213 cms

seeing and its implications for action. It is not just about a particular issue of the day, it is about our inability to see in a way that creates a human future.

As a result of this artistic challenge Copland has produced, in this exhibition, a diverse suite of visual responses that use a variety of media and materials in an inventive play with the significance and weight of recent history. Driven by a practice based in painting, Copland has moved with a wet brush onto the surface of diverse forms of image making, an approach that is itself is a form of border crossing. In many ways this current exhibition examples the work of an artist researching the power of image through many different forms and media, from painting and drawing through print making, sculpture to digital reproduction and video. This diversity is funded by a restless energy to find connections that link art and life, to literally cross boundaries of arts practise towards a greater whole.





Raft of Oceania
linoprint on canvas, 99 x 144 cms



Blur, 2004
linoprint on canvas, 99 x 144 cms



One of the most repeated forms in this work is the fluid and shifting boundary of the ocean. It appears as a vast horizon, luminous in intensity, and at other times as a stained and toxic pool that is spilling out into the space of the viewer. One central visual expression of this key image is the video work, *Corrugated Sea*, 2009, that observes an installation of elements of the Raft on Killcare Beach, on the Central Coast of NSW. The Australian beach environment has become one of the icons of our democratic freedom and tolerance. This Raft situated in this space draws attention to possible anxieties of what lies out there past the breakers, and our need for surveillance and protection. The construction of a corrugated iron replica of the Raft of Medusa on the beach at Killcare provides an ironic and potent act of the imagination. The ocean rather than being a place of pleasure and escape is now a place where our anxieties are visualised. On the beach, on this fluid edge, we stare out at an anxious horizon.

Charcoal Sky, 2004

charcoal, paint, ink on paper, 120 x 170 cms



Migration, 2002
oil on canvas, 210.4 x 167 cms



Voyage, 2008
Beeswax, 50 x 45 x 12 cms

This element is again picked up in the large installation of paintings depicting every lighthouse around the coastal fringe of Australia entitled *Border Protection*, 2005. Such architectural forms on the edge of the continent are strong reminders of safety and physical haven. But in this context they also echo aspects of surveillance and the fluid anxiety that needs to fix a clear line of demarcation when faced with issues of difference. In this case questions arise about who is in and who is out, and in turn how this very fluid border will be negotiated for those wanting to pass through to safety. This finds further echoes in the sculptural works rendered in wax and bronze, as well as the delightfully playful works in twigs and shells. These have been inspired, in part, by a study of the ocean maps rendered in sticks and shells that are used by mariners from the Marshall Islands and other Pacific communities. These fragile hand maps aesthetically express the direction of tides and wind shifts on the high seas. These works draw attention to Copland's underlying conceptual interest in critiquing the map that is currently being put together to guide our responses to terrorism and the real or imagined threat to national security.

Jigsaw, 2006
oil on canvas, 130 x 176 cms





Trackless Domain, 2005
twigs, paper, shells, sand,
photo, canvas, 30 x 60 x 40 cms



Fibro Sky, 2004
collage, 15 x 19 cms

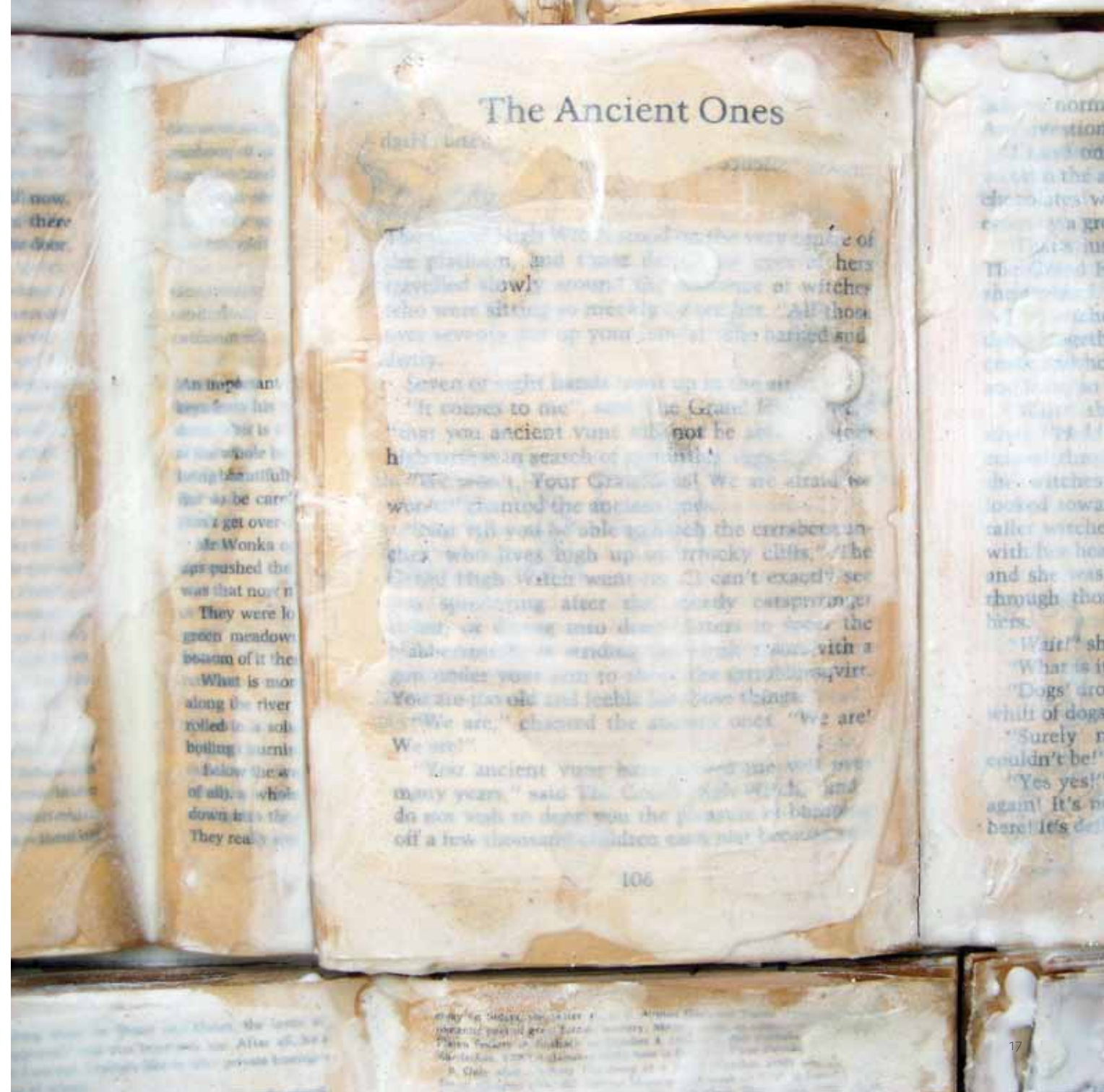
Much of the materiality of the work is a reminder that art provides a membrane that can be peeled back. It provides a model for crossing borders and seeing through the dark gaps of seamless rhetoric. One of the oft-quoted historical responses to Gericault's painting is the statement that 'All humanity is on the Raft of Medusa'. Copland is similarly looking to make these larger connections between visual representation and the mapping of our current time. This is a process of double seeing, where we see the work at first glance and are then invited into a deeper visual enquiry. Rather than functioning at a simply political or one-dimensional level, Copland's images invite us to confront this wall, barrier or shadow that he sees present in our recent history. He asks us to 'deal with it'. It is a barrier that must be negotiated to find the future. This exhibition provides therefore an important point of enquiry and it situates the role of the artist as one who might help us see more truthfully in that process. Copland draws our attention to the unseen shadow as a point of departure. After all, the tides are shifting and anxieties are increasing.

The Ancient Ones (Mesopotamia), 2005 (detail)
wax and books, 119 x 100.2 cms

During 2007 and 2008 Copland worked at the University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. He worked with students and staff from Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, countries that evoke the shadow of fear for Australians. During this period Copland completed a number of works for this exhibition including several made from twigs and other ephemeral material. On arriving home to receive his transported belongings he was contacted by Australian Customs and advised that these works were materials that could not be brought into Australia and were therefore assigned to be destroyed. While such policies protect our natural habitat this series of events poetically remind the artist of the nature of border protection and its perhaps malignant underside that finds it necessary to, in this case, burn visual representation. If we are concerned to see clearly then Copland reminds us, in these works, that shadows are worth a second look.

Rod Pattenden

Dr Rod Pattenden is an art historian and independent curator.



“When thoughts originating in different domains can engage together, the result is an almost limitless capacity for imagination.”

British archaeologist Steven Mithin
The Prehistory of the Mind, 1996



Stephen Copland

Brief Biography

Stephen Copland (b. Sydney), studied at the National Art School, Sydney (ASTC Diploma in Painting, 1969 – 1972), in 1988 was awarded a Graduate Diploma in Education (University of Technology) and a Masters of Fine Art from the University of New South Wales (1995).

He was visiting lecturer at Darwin University, Northern Territory (1993), Université Saint Esprit de Kaslik Lebanon (2004) and Assistant Professor University of Sharjah, UAE (2007 – 8) and has conducted various lectures in Australia, the Middle East, Cuba, Europe and North America.

Copland's research as an artist is interdisciplinary with a strong basis in drawing and the identity of a book and its cultural, social, poetic, or aesthetic functions. Of Lebanese, Cuban and Scottish background, his art has focused on the themes of cultural identity, heritage, Diaspora and human rights. Since 1986 he has had 29 solo exhibitions, including exhibitions in museums in Cuba, New Zealand, Slovakia, Austria and Lebanon, and been represented in Art Fairs in Italy, Turkey and Melbourne. He has been a finalist in the Sulman, Wynne and Blake Prizes.

His Migration Series 1992 – 2002, a project of international exhibitions earned him a Commendation Award from the Consulate General of Lebanon. (1999) He is the recipient of a number of awards and cultural grants including a Migration Heritage Grant, an International Programs Grant from the NSW Ministry for the Arts, Critics Prize "Create To Advocate" Parliament House, and a Vermont Studio Center Artist Grant and was a finalist in the Australian Day Awards (2003).



Empty Shadow, 2005
twigs, shells, digital prints,
20 x 100 cms

In 2006 he was invited to conduct workshops on migration heritage at Art Education Models and Perspectives, Grazer Congress Graz, Austria and Europe Compact V Paedagogische Akademie Graz Austria. The multimedia CDROM Migration Series was presented at the Symposium, New Media and the Global Diaspora 2007, Roger Williams University, Bristol, Rhode Island. In 2008 he was invited to present at NAFSA Annual Conference & Expo Shaping the Future of International Education Washington, DC, USA as well as present a workshop at the 32nd InSEA World Congress at the international Society for Education through Art in Osaka, Japan.

In 2009 Copland was keynote speaker at the International Congress for Art Education ITATE Graz, Austria, He was also selected for the 5th International Artist Book Triennial Vilnius shown at Leipzig Book Fair, Germany, Gallery "Arka" Vilnius Lithuania, Seoul International Book Art Fair, Seoul Korea and Art Center Silkeborg Bad, Silkeborg, Denmark

Group exhibitions Transit at Virginia Commonwealth University, Doha Qatar in 2009 and Modern Pilgrimage in Turkey at Cannakkale University will further develop his Longitude/ Latitude series.

www.stephencopland.com.au