

Western Tasmanian Paintings Raymond Arnold



artist's



Western Tasmanian Paintings **Raymond Arnold**

DEVONPORT
REGIONAL
GALLERY

9 January - 21 February 2010 [Devonport Regional Gallery](#)

FLOW/FLUX

The first thing to be said about Tasmania's West Coast is that it is un-Australian. Australia is 'created' in a certain way; it is dressed in a suit of ideas and images that makes it just so, a country, a landscape, a culture, a history unlike any other. Australia, we know, is a dry country baked to dust by an unforgiving sun, a 'land of sweeping plains' in which the eye roams to far, shimmering horizons. Its history, its culture, is won from this wide, dusty land. It is a history wrought in the bringing of European agriculture to tired old soils, and failing often in unequal contests with the tyranny of vastness and the perennial absence of water. Lassiter. Burke & Wills. Goyder's Line. Names to sum a land, and a culture. Of course, the national imaginary is on the move. Stir into the mix the deeds of Australians in khaki upon battlefields far from Australia itself, and now, as the recipe globalises, add a large dose of beach and play and the new chic of the postmodern city.

But whichever way you twist it this is not the Tasmanian West Coast.

The iconic signifiers of the island's West are as remote from the landscape signifiers of the national myth as they are from the moon. Water here is all-pervasive – it squelches underfoot, it even finds its way over boot-tops, sliding coldly into sole and sock, it falls, it rises, it insinuates – it is eternally restless. The water deficit that seems destined to engulf the planet may one day become a fact of life here, too, though possibly not to the same calamitous degree – meanwhile, it is the *ubiquity* of water that configures the West. And as it is with the elements, so is it with the land. In place of endless plains of dust, scrub and sand and impossibly far horizons stand sharp-etched ridgelines of cold, enclosing mountains, their lower and middle slopes bedecked in a formidable spring of tangled growth.

This matters. Cold/hot, wet/dry, green/red, rock/sand, verticality/flatness – how the restless eye chooses from these stark dualities determines how place meanings are formed, mythologies created, vernacular technologies developed and deployed – and cultural expressions articulated. A prominent Australian poet once told me that Australian literature was sparse, dessicated and unadorned because that's how the land is. He was dealing in gross generalisation of course, and any number of writers can be adduced to point up the contrary, but I know what he meant. And the same might be said of the visual arts.

But now I have a question to set before you. It is this: what is to *become* of the West Coast? I do not primarily mean 'become of' in the portentous sense, though this is also important: what is to be the fate of the West as a place in which people work and live and store memories, form attachments, and construct their place-specific personal identities? Its communities' futures have always been contingent on the continued abundance of the ore deposit, the fish, the power and the timber – and on the viability of market forces and technologies. But all ore seams are finite. Fish stocks experience ecological crash. Power generation technologies continually shift. Timber harvesting techniques and outputs blow with the political winds. Even tourist projections go awry as visitation fashions change. The West Coast has endured these catastrophic shifts to a greater degree than any other region within the island, and will probably go on doing so. It is a continuous work-in-progress with no guarantees, and indeed, the factors that will determine how the West 'becomes' are not, in the main, locally sourced. The only inevitability is that change *will* come. On the West Coast, all is flow.





All is flow. And this is so, too, even if we ignore the portentous connotation of that question: what is to *become* of the West Coast? Forests grow and die, species successions follow each other in the natural order of things, storms roll through, the climate shifts... all is flow.

Raymond Arnold knows this. He brings the extraordinary perspectival contrast of years of living and working in the City of Light, the city of Manet and Monet, of Degas and l'Autrec, of Renoir and Cézanne, of the Revolution and the Commune, of Robespierre and Louise Michel, of the Moulin Rouge and the Baron's Boulevards, of Sartre and Camus. The Bayeux Tapestry and the battlefields of old and bloody Europe have commanded his creative intelligence – and this but recently.

And then, suddenly, he is living in Queenstown, on Tasmania's wild and remote West Coast, as far from the City of Light, in real and spiritual terms, as it is possible to be without leaving the planet. The flat-earth troglodytes of Tony Abbott's Liberal Party may have cornered the market in cognitive dissonance – but Raymond Arnold's relocation constitutes a circumstance that would better excuse such sustained disconnection. Instead Raymond has slipped deftly, unerringly, into the wild spirit of the West Coast. All is flow, and he recognised it so. He is drawn to the Iron Blow and the results are memorable – but the Iron Blow, they do say, is critically unstable. Its state is one of becoming. At the Queen Valley mill the sawn logs, fussily geometric, are in transformation to something else. Raymond sometimes depicts it from the other side of a wire-mesh fence, and the fence dramatically stoppers flow – not, I think, because the artist yearns for the futility of stasis, but to effect the pause that draws our attention to the very liquidity – the intrinsic transience – of the water-solvent wash that is the becoming of the West Coast.

Time, though, for a small complication. All flows — but it may be that not all changes.

‘When I am painting’, Raymond has written, ‘my nose prickles at the Huon pine perfume which is heavy in the air’. The West Coast flows, but within this flow there are constancies, certainties. Huon pine, for one. Growth rings in venerable Huon pine logs have been examined — in Canada — for the light they can shed upon this old earth’s changing climate. And on Mount Read a stand of genetically-identical Huon pines, all naturally cloned (apparently) from a single male survivor of the last Ice Age, defies the human dynamism of today as it has defied the evolutionary hazards of its improbably lived ages.

Flux is the West Coast condition — but there are enduring marvels that anchor time within it. It is potent, passionate — a place entire unto itself. The fierce, creative intelligence of Raymond Arnold is at home here.

Pete Hay, 2009





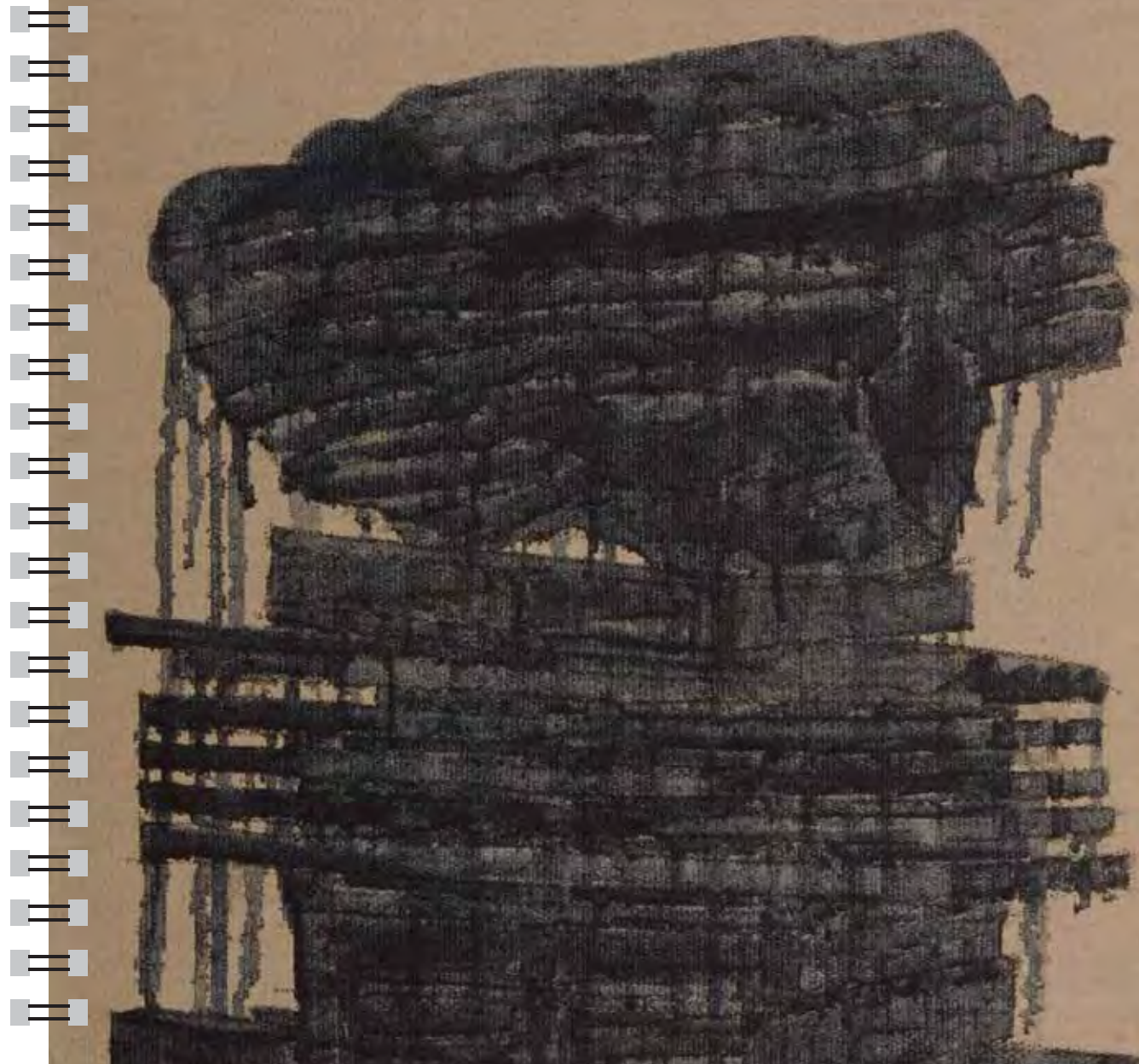
Synecdoche III, 1988 multi-panel, oil on canvas, variable dimensions. Private collection courtesy of Australian Galleries.

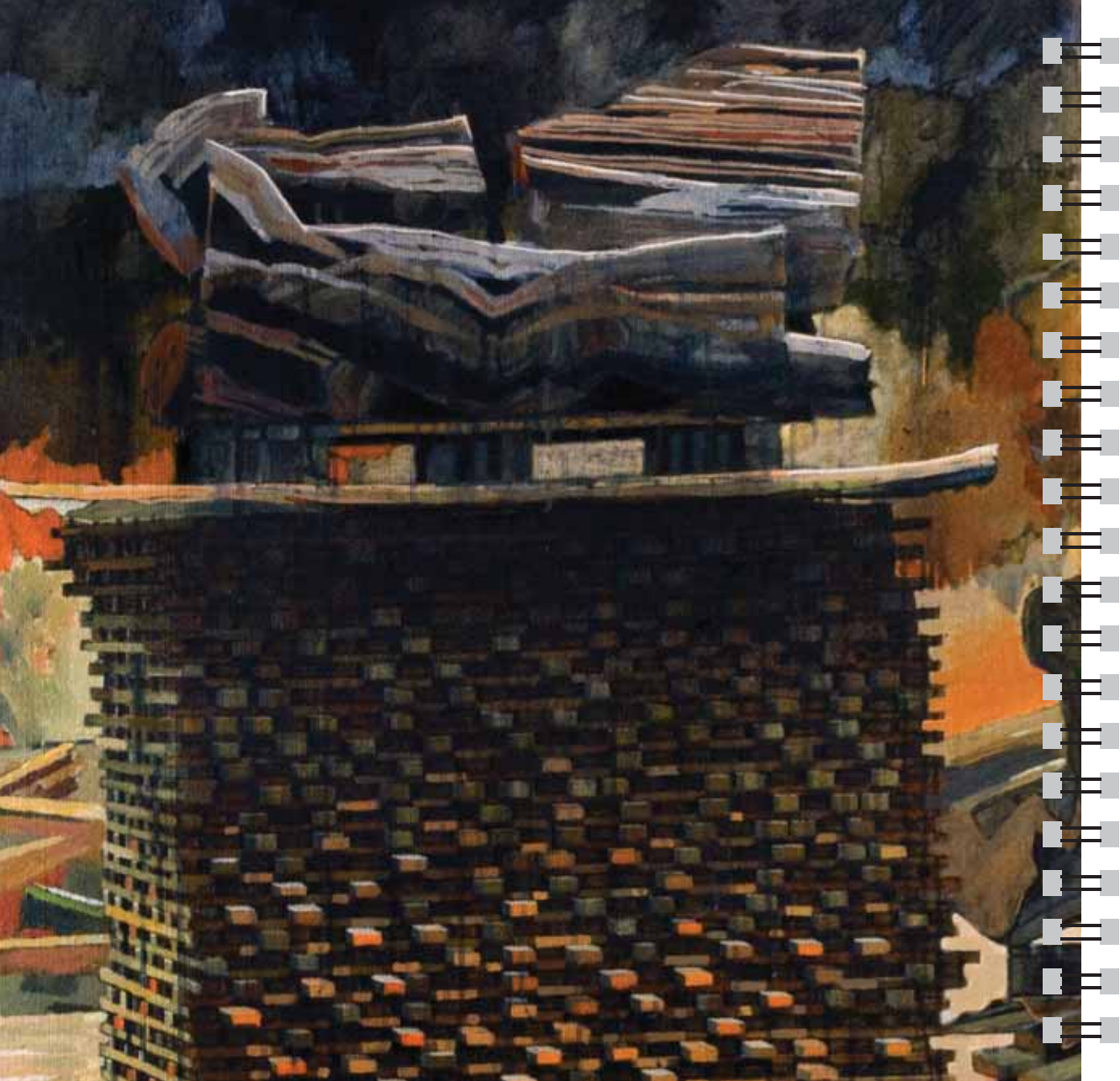


Mine/My site, 1996 multi-panel, acrylic on canvas, 101 x 101cm. Collection: Sally and Gerry McGushin.



Huon pine BC/AD, 2006 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 40.5 x 71cm





Growth rings – the dynamics of Nature and Culture, 2006 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 146cm



Warp and weft, 2007 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 153cm

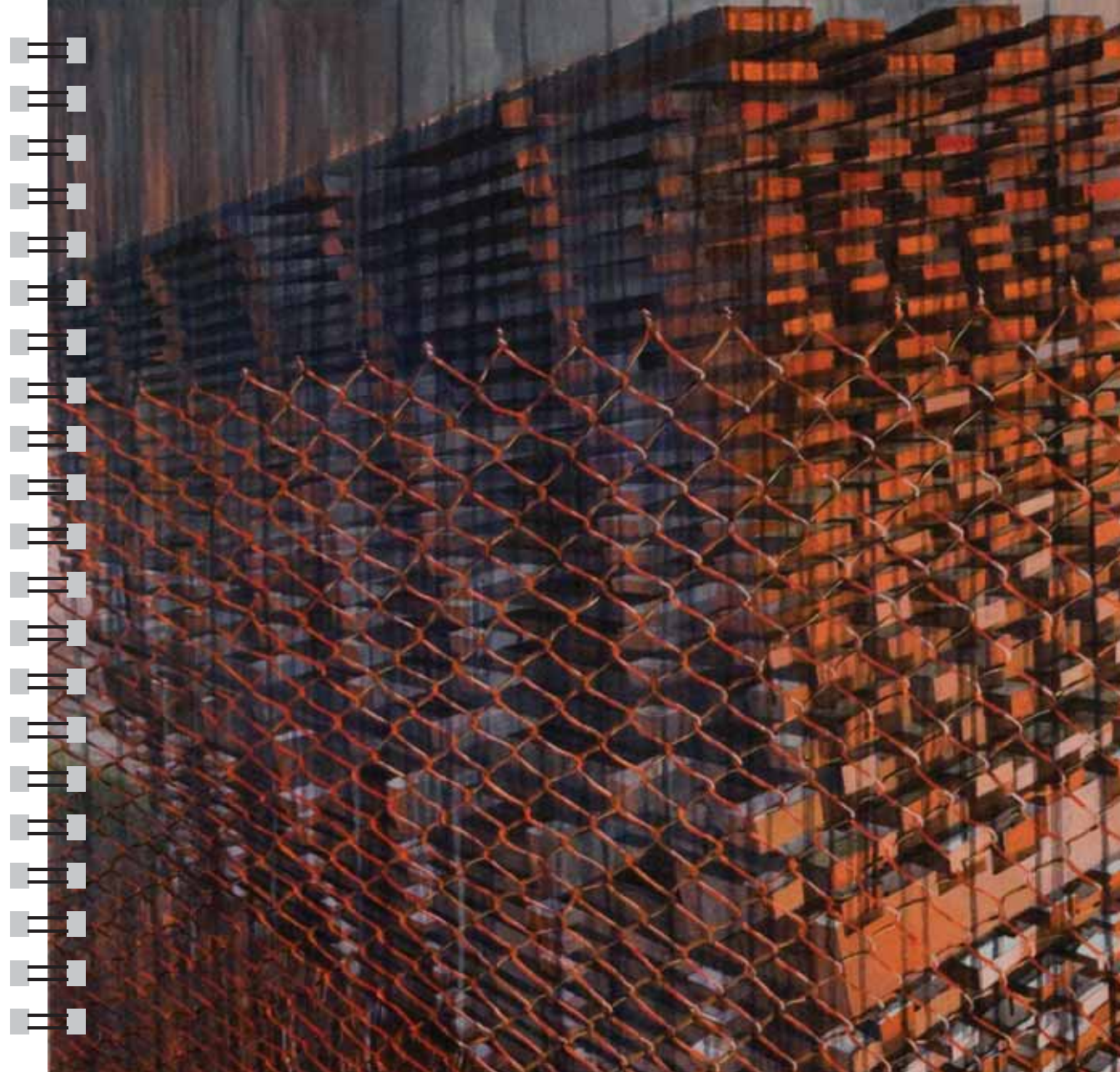




Specialty Timber III, 2008 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 153cm



Specialty Timber IV, 2008 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 153cm

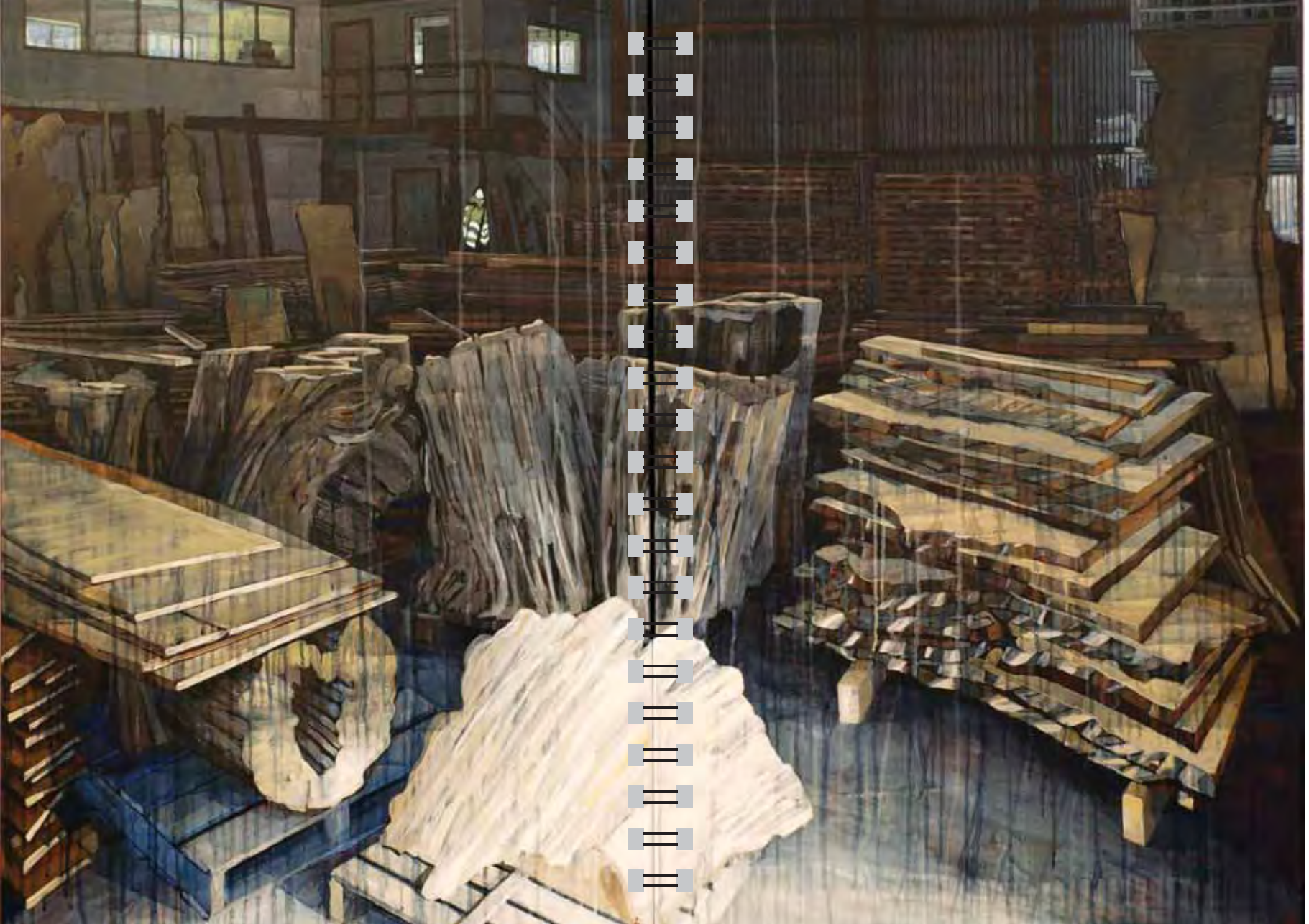




Old wood/New wood – Study, 2009 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 112cm



Old wood/New wood, 2009 dipych, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 153cm



Night watch — West Coast mill, 2009 dipych, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 153cm. Collection: Burnie Regional Gallery.



King Billy pipeline stack – study, 2009 diptych, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 102cm





REAL PAINTS AND IMAGINARY LANDSCAPES

The thinnest man I have ever met gave me my first set of real paints when I was 15. His name was Bob Burton and he had been in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. I grew up with these men, a generation of workers and soldiers, through the 1950s and 60s, damaged and making the best of it. My father somehow missed the Second World War conflict being both young and ensconced in the timber industry which was deemed vital for the war effort. His best friends, however, had been Bren gunners in New Guinea, sailors on destroyers in the Mediterranean or members of the occupying army on the Japanese mainland. Apart from my father they are all dead now! My best memories of my father are of watching him working at his painting and decorating trade using his maulstick and fine sable brushes, particularly the dagger liners, to create typographical/pictorial tableaux. He was an intuitive designer of graphic images for application to objects such as trucks, boats and advertising signs and he seemed to work all the time. He had followed his father into the sign trade and they were craftsmen! The timber industry remained with him, however and was expressed to me in terrible tales of industrial accidents with saw blades and dagger like flitches of wood. Those 20th century war generations were also the *mutilé*, as the French would say, and my family history bears testimony to that. My great-grandfather lost both legs with the AIF in France during the First World War and my grandfather lost an arm and then subsequently a leg to industrial accidents — chaff cutters and guns! I heard Kurt Vonnegut speaking on the radio recently and in the interview titled 'The Brush or the Pen? Great Writer Artists' he said he was a 'picture designer... I can't draw very well but I design pictures'. I thought that this was an interesting way of describing what I might also do and how it follows on from what was my father's approach to his work.

I also connected this thought to a memory of a book published in 2002 by Helen Verity Hewitt. It was titled *Patrick White, Painter Manqué*¹. In it White is quoted as saying, 'I always see most of what I write, and am, in fact, a painter manqué'. I am not making this association between these two great literary figures and their propensity to integrate something of the artist's world into their working lives to make claims for such genius. What I would like to consider is the idea that I am also a type of painter manqué, more renderer than instinctive painter. This 'shadow boxing' around purposeful activity is interesting to me. The dynamic German sculptor Leni Hoffmann introduced herself to an audience in Hobart in the early 1990s as a 'printer' and I am interested in establishing a similar trans-artisanal claim – I am also a printer, maybe a weaver, certainly the renderer and definitely a designer working with paint. A well-known art curator once described me as 'the etcher', a term that conjures the chemist more than the painter.

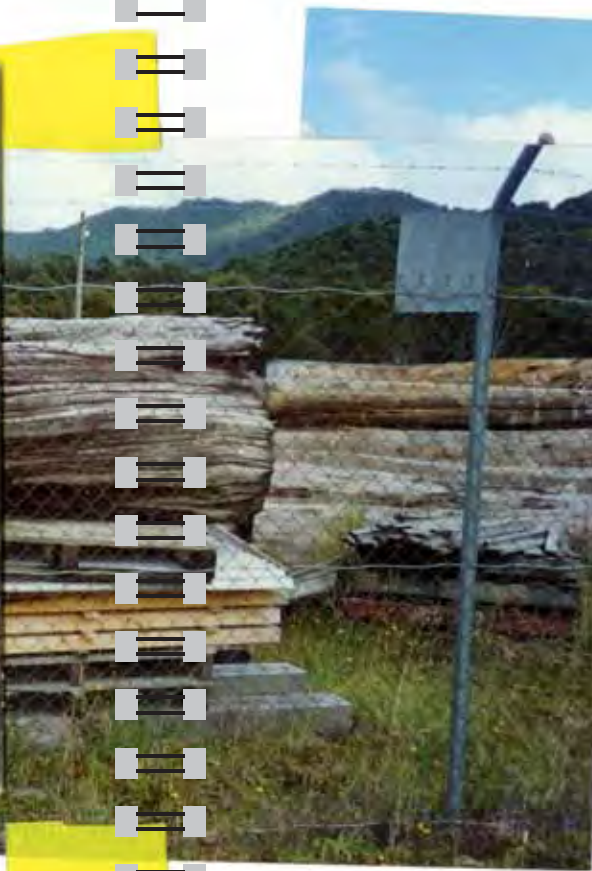
I have been designing pictures and seeing most of what I paint since those mid-teens. I worked laboriously and for many hours on their finely wrought painted surfaces as my father had worked with his own 'signing regime'. Indeed for a period of time in the 1970s my pictures were of sign written trucks in the manner of the Photorealist Americans, Estes and Goings and in keeping with the vehicles being processed through my father's paint shop.

Eventually my father developed vascular dementia and stopped functioning in the coded world of signs and symbols. I found his paint hardened, neglected brushes on a visit back to his home and tried to rescue them for re-use in my own work. Now he is in 'secure care' in Burnie. In looking at his scabby sun-scarred arms on a visit the other day, I could make conversation with him about his work and its consequences. Ah! There's his work, their craftsmanship and our nostalgia – the men and times that have gone.

1 manqué – that which might have been but is not, that missed being

For the last 20 years I've been painting at dam sites, electrical sub stations, factories, ports, convict ruins, mines situated here on the West Coast and also on a container ship returning from Europe to Australia – the pursuit of industrial fetish and type of 'beauty'. Most of the sites are remote and as such represent imaginary realms containing complicated technological interventions into natural areas. Geometry in search of an absolute is a phrase that the writer Barbara Novak uses to characterise the development of the railway in the US during the 19th century in her book *Nature and Culture*. She goes on to discuss the technological sublime within the context of a nature rhetoric. These terms certainly elevate the utilitarian, developmental impulse into 'heady' discursive terrain but at the same time the melancholia associated with this milieu is as palpable as the smell and mouth texture of the diesel plume clouds it cultivates. Decaying infrastructure and rusting machinery (lost worlds) are also manifest in the West and, in fact, chart the bust and boom economies. The constructing impulse carries within its DNA the figurative lack of order or predictability. The verb stacking of objects and the welding of steel morph into rusting pile nouns as gravity and entropy take hold!

This exhibition represents three generations of artwork on the West Coast of Tasmania. Over two residencies during 1987 and 1989 I worked from a studio at Savage River in North West Tasmania. Most days I would go onto the mine site and paint a scene or object that interested me. I would later develop the picture in my studio long into the night. Other paintings came from experiences in transit between Hobart and my temporary home and still further work evolved from my interactions with local artists, who were mainly women. I later exhibited the kaleidoscope of small oil panels in sets of pictures reflecting a panoply of objects in the compressed space and purchased time of Western Tasmania.



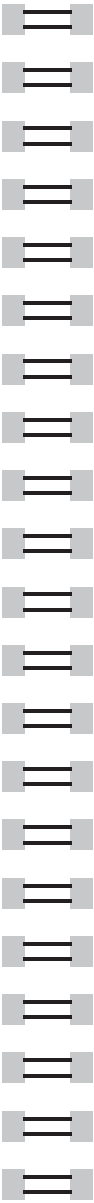
The second body of work came out of trips to Queenstown during the 1990s with my Hobart Art School students and includes large hard ground etchings.

The third and predominant body of work has evolved from my interest in the Huon pine timber mill near Queenstown where I now live. I have been working with images derived from that mill for three years.

I can see stacks of peachy wooden planks in the yard of that mill and in particular I am drawn to the tree-stump crowns being used to bring stability and order to the recently cut flitches – a type of oriental balancing act, and they have intrigued me. While I am painting at the fence my nose prickles at the Huon pine perfume, which is heavy in the air. It's so distinctive.

Ian, one of the Special Timber mill's operators, tells me that samples of his large, ancient salvaged logs are sent to Canada for climate change research. Sections of logs reveal timelines in their annular rings that coincide with events from history – European settlement of Australia back to the birth of Christ and beyond for example. I paint in a type of museum as much as cemetery! Growth rings and ordered geometric stacking through labour are similar phenomenon – types of aggregation over time and the conversion of one thing into another. The pictures in this exhibition represent another step in this 'flow' and hopefully a type of 'buffer' against the wasting away and collapse of things.

Raymond Arnold, Queenstown, Tasmania



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Devonport Regional Gallery

45-47 Stewart Street
PO Box 604, Devonport
Tasmania 7310 Australia
Telephone: +61 (0)3 6424 8296
Facsimile: +61 (0)3 6423 5305
Email: artgallery@dcc.tas.gov.au
www.devonportgallery.com

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RAYMOND ARNOLD

Born in 1950, Raymond Arnold studied teaching and art in Victoria before relocating to Tasmania in 1983. Over the last quarter of a century Raymond has helped run an artist's co-operative in Hobart, lectured at the Tasmanian School of Art, printed 1000s of screenprint posters for community groups, worked as an artist in residence in mining towns, schools and universities, completed public art commissions and served on Arts Tasmania and Australia Council committees. He received a Federation Medal for services to the arts community in 2002.

Since 1993, Raymond has regularly travelled to Europe to research the intaglio print medium and has refined his own etching technique at the famous Parisian studio of Lacourrière et Frélaud.

He has held over 47 solo exhibitions and participated in many group shows in Australia and overseas and is represented in the collections of the Imperial War Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Musée Courbet in France. In Australia, the National Gallery, the Australian Parliament House and various state galleries have his prints in their collection.

He currently lives and works in Queenstown, Tasmania where he has set up the regional art space LARQ – Landscape Art Research Queenstown which fosters exhibitions, workshops, residencies and forums.

