

ANNE ZAHALKA: LANDSCAPE REVISITED

Curated by Rita Lazauskas

In the 1980s Anne Zahalka's series *The Landscape Represented 1983-1985* was an early example of post-modernist practices where appropriated images were invested with new meaning and where the boundaries of the photographic medium were extended to become a tool of expression and subversion beyond the documentary or narrative.

In 1985 in the Sydney Morning Herald Max Dupain wrote about the works:

“...Zahalka...revamps, without hesitation or reverence, the pioneer landscapes of Heysen and Gruner in terms of motion picture interpretation mixed up with the sad symbols of contemporary society. She defiles Heysen and Gruner for the sake of a cheap stage effect and for which she may have to answer in due course.”

Perhaps in answer to Dupain, Zahalka has continued to work on the theme for over three decades. *The Landscape Revisited 2017* continues to explore representations of Australian identity through iconic Australian art including many of the Heidelberg School of the late 19th Century, together with 20th Century Modernist works by Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan.

Initially Zahalka replaced the stereotype of the pioneer bushman as depicted by Fredrick McCubbin and Tom Roberts with new immigrants from Europe but in 2017 the changing face of immigration now includes references to the Middle East, Africa and our own unrecognised first Australians.

Many of the original intentions of the series are maintained, including an ongoing critique of the predominately Anglo-centric image of Australia national identity. She explores the idealising and romanticising of the bush with its heroic pioneers, bushman and new settlers through the national discourse which remain inextricably woven into the Australian mythology. Now, with the ever growing global incidence of migration and displacement, and a disturbing resurgence of nationalism Zahalka's work becomes evermore relevant.

Employing models and props, Zahalka's working method resembles that of film production where storyboards and research notes set up the aims and parameters of each theme. Original reproductions of the Heidelberg School paintings are utilised to find similar locations and to reference colour and light. However, personal experience also plays a large part in offering new narratives. Drawing on Zahalka's own background as a first generation Australian and child of Jewish/Catholic migrants, the recent images also often incorporate the unique stories of the models she works with.

In her new version of *Down on his Luck*, Zahalka looks at a young man who chose to pursue a career in the performing arts and developed a suitable persona and personal style that goes with working in the music industry, theatre and circus and how that has ultimately brought with it direct experience of the prejudice and harassment aimed at the foreign 'other' and minority groups. As the subject of the reenacted McCubbin painting his identity is ambiguous. Is he a Jew or a gypsy, a hipster, a juggler or a vagabond? He returns to his native landscape, his early childhood playground in the Beechworth Historic Park. Struggling to find a place in the competitive arena of the art world, he has now dropped the juggling balls – a symbol of both his trade and the challenges that life throws his way.

Tom Robert's painting of 1886 titled *A Summer Morning Tiff* presented a 19th Century woman dressed in the restraining female fashion of the time, standing alone in the bush. In garments inappropriate for survival in what was perceived as a hostile landscape a sense of vulnerability is intimated. Now dressed in a 'haik' – the white robe often worn by the Muslim women of North Africa - the image refers to the restraining female fashion of the Islamic faith, while also drawing on the experience of the model who, working between Australia and Morocco, has direct experience of gender inequalities and her own displaced identity.

A reenactment of Sidney Nolan's iconic 1946 painting of Ned Kelly titled *Outlawed!* was also photographed in the heart of Kelly country in North East Victoria and portrays a young woman dressed in a burqini swim suit with a bikie face protector underneath her hood. She sits backwards on a horse holding a monopod used for a camera which is thrust out of its satchel having the appearance of a gun. A red circular ban symbol is emblazoned on her chest a sign suggesting the vilification of Muslims as terrorists in the current political climate. Through the celebrated figure of the villain/hero Ned Kelly who also suffered discrimination and perhaps unfair judgement the two figures are united.

Conscious of speaking for, and of others the stereotype of the Muslim (in this case seen as a terrorist, fundamentalist and extreme) is both provocative and subversive and Zahalka believes "it is important to state that the woman in the image is not Muslim but stands in defence of women who choose to identify themselves as such by wearing degrees of head, facial and body covering. The ban symbol of a red circle with a line through it indicates that this dress code is not permitted and that women wearing it are subject to discrimination and are targets of violence".

The image is intended to initiate dialogue in the portrayal of Australian Muslim women who have to fight against their demonisation. Trapped by her appearance just as Ned Kelly is forever defined by his armour, so women who choose to dress according to their faith are often associated with terrorism and extremist views. And as Nolan's Ned Kelly appears to be facing both ways, or with eyes in the back of his head/helmet, so too the young woman who rides backwards to defend herself from discrimination rather than being 'shot in the back'.

So whether one believes, like Max Dupain, that the images are irreverent and defile our iconic Australian art works, Zahalka has never hesitated in her resolve to expose the myths of our contemporary society. Using whatever means available, she continues to develop new narratives, taking the pioneer landscapes and the personal stories of the contemporary people around her. Making "cheap stage effects" work in her favour, Zahalka has nothing to answer for as her consistent art practice encourages honesty and challenges our preconceptions about art, about photography and about human nature.