Revisiting landscape and identity with Anne Zahalka

Jacqui Durrant, Albury

In the early 1980s, Anne Zahalka broke onto the art scene with a series of subversive photomontages, ‘The Landscape Re-presented’ (1983–85). At a time when postmodernism was new to Australian art, Zahalka was busy reconstructing culturally iconic paintings (predominantly by the Australian impressionists and their ilk) to challenge dominant discourses surrounding Australian identity – particularly that part of Australianness bound up with the nature of our belonging to the landscape. Needless to say, reworking famous images has since become a mainstay of Zahalka’s now substantial artistic practice – a modus operandi which has lost none of its edge over time.

Almost 35 years on, and prompted by a major Tom Roberts exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (shown over the summer of 2015–16), Zahalka has once again felt compelled to wrench Australian audiences from the outdated mythologising of local identity writ large in the work of the Australian impressionists. The result is ‘The Landscape Revisited’ – a new exhibition at Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA) – which re-presents her earlier groundbreaking images alongside newly minted companion pieces.

Hung salon-style on pale green walls, the curatorial design of ‘The Landscape Revisited’ is a conspicuous throwback to an era in which our federating nation was so intent on whitewashing its identity that it would enact the White Australia policy, and embed racial segregation in the various versions of the Aboriginal Protection Act. Against this literal backdrop, it is satisfying to revisit how thoroughly Zahalka first interrogated notions of Australian identity in the mid-1980s: in the standout work of ‘The Landscape Re-presented’, she registered objections to the relentless masculinity of the Australian relationship to the bush by placing a female rider as the central figure in Tom Roberts’s Down on His Luck (1889). In Outlawed! (2017), the Kelly figure has been reconfigured as a young woman backwards-astride a horse, dressed in a burkini swimsuit with a biker face-protector under her hood. A red circular ‘banned’ symbol across her chest virtually doubles as a target, signifying her social status in Australian society: at best, a figure to be vilified as ‘fundamentalist’; at worst, to be stereotyped as ‘terrorist’. The image hangs an inescapable question over the notion of cultural tolerance in contemporary Australia.

Anne Zahalka has never been historically revisionist in the nebulose sense that would open her up to claims of ‘political correctness’. Three decades after her original series, Zahalka’s re-population of the art of the Australian landscape with figures who were present all along – Aboriginal, multi-faith, multicultural, and equally gendered – is no less relevant. In doing so, she restores to Australian identity its true humanity and complexity, and at a time when it is needed more than ever before.

‘Anne Zahalka: The Landscape Revisited’ is on display at Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA) until 5 November 2017.
Anne Zahalka, *Outlawed!*, 2017, archival pigment ink print, 90 x 121cm; image courtesy the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne

Anne Zahalka: *The Landscape Revisited*, exhibition install view, Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA), 2017; photo: Anne Zahalka