

Paradise Dream.

An Exhibition of Paintings by Mr. Andrew Sullivan,
Flinders Street Gallery, Sydney, 2nd -25th June, 2011.

An Essay, Written in Response,

by

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IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, the artist and the naturalist shared the role of prophetic revolutionary. They taught the moderns how to see beyond the canons of depiction, interpreting the vast biological tableaux opened up with the capture of the New Worlds. Digging into the deep geological record revealed by Charles Lyell, the naturalists Alfred Wallace and Charles Darwin, walked us back again through the eternal forests of Kalimaantan, an unearthing of origins that would culminate in Olduvai Gorge in one direction, and the caves of Van Diemen's Land in the other. They disclosed a human origin in the genealogy of the earth, not a just-so story, an Eden of paradise lost. The avant-garde painters taught the colonists to see beyond the classical allegory and compositional games of the salon, revealing great wild vistas in the radiant light of the frontier. They taught people to see light not as the divine word, but as the living energy of eons, the same promethean energy exploding into the future from the iron heart of the steam engine.

Evolution's random drift tore a hole in the heart of Europe's sentimental, creationist claim to land. Adam was created *ex nihilo*, out of dust, no woman, no umbilicus. But this is, of course, the familiar doctrine of *terra nullius*, of a land without people. The radical innocence of creationism, at least, was never given up. Evolution did provide a soothing panacea to the loss of a spiritual origin. Biological science lent an air of naturalness and necessity to the disappearance of those whose ways of being were deemed unable to adapt to Progress.

For the iron machines full of Carboniferous fire and the 1000 yard accurate steel-bore rifle had delivered this civilisation control over an endless frontier of natural abundance and anthropological novelty. Whole continents: living museums, waiting to be catalogued and preserved in botanical gardens or bureau drawers. A curiosity that would continue to polish the aesthetic senses of a scientific society even after the blooming, buzzing confusion of the appropriated continent had itself had been rationalized into acreage, stock, yard-feet for export, skins for bounties and purses, cedar panels for tearooms and for the halls of judgment.

And as we now admit, solemn graves in painted caves were violated.

Alongside the stuffed birds of paradise, the skulls of the vanquished dignified the collections of British public institutions of learning on the other side of the world, so that we could be free of their mute gaze. In the wake of the frontier, the valleys changed their composition. The bandicoots fled stricken before the foxes. Lantana, privet and camphor found themselves almost invincible where the canopy was broken, and have become irrevocably entwined in the future 'indigenous' ecosystems of Australasia.

There are no longer any hidden islands flourishing in the deep antiquity of an isolated being. No land exists un-denominated in debt at interest. Everywhere, the twilight of imperial sovereignty, the depredation and crisis of capitalist time.

Among the weeds in the deepening evening, monumental faces, broken artefacts of once not insubstantial powers, tilt at a sky full of portents whose meanings are obscure. On every plateau that has supported a great law of being, a metallurgical knowledge of mastery, or a subtle theology of empire; one finds a disintegration. Our Anthropocene layer, is and will be geological in scale, a strata of concrete, steel, bitumen, plastic, not to mention the exoskeletons of leafblowers and other species of gas guzzler. A lot of creatures that thrived in the Holocene will henceforth be interred in the fossil record, marked at the line that will also record the rise and fall of fossil fuelled civilisation. Our ambitions and their silencing side effects are folded into the seas, the air, into the temperature, into the soil, into DNA. Cults of the head continue to rise and fall, from Easter Island to the Chicago Climate Exchange. As always, the owl of Minerva only spreads its wings at dusk.

A greater loss lies beyond the forgotten chants of defunct territories. It is the twice-ghostly song of the territory itself. The pollen of the paperbark groves, the call of the ground bird that nested in the open, the hum of variegated insects on the wild grassland. Then, over-ploughed and desiccated in the wind.

The naturalist has become a systems ecologist, of necessity a survivalist and an engineer. No more the romantic tomes lovingly illustrated with communities of organisms. In their place, mathematics, economic valuations, diagrams of biochemical cycles.

How does the inheritor of the naturalist painting tradition contend with nature in its brokenness?

The false dawn of the dream of mastered nature haunts the landscape, and this must be grappled with if the naturalist painter is to honestly fulfill his profession, which is to give witness to life in its own budding and fluttering unfolding.

Every artist knows that he is not mortal. This is why the recording of his dream in a moment of being is crafted acid free, an enduring gesture down the generations, a human mark on a surface.

To the artist who lives amid the detritus of fallen empires, it is given to sift through, to re-animate, to sanctify common images. Not far from the rubble of broken infrastructure, ancestral voices still hum in the waterholes. Just as long as there is a seed, life's beauty can be lived with hope. Not for all time the bare Darwinian life that we had contemplated with dread and recognition. Societies of wrens go on making their invitations, weaving their synchronicities into the thickets of morning glory. Skinks will sunbake in the empty sockets.

Little birds bring messages. Some of those messages are recorded in these paintings.
