Stephen Bush

When I was here I wanted to be there

Natasha Bullock
HERE OR LESS EVERY DAY DURING HIS 1996 RESIDENCY AT THE
Galerie Internationale des Arts in Paris, Stephen Bush drew a potato.
In the end of the day he would eat it, and over the course of his
residency he had drawn (and tattooed) more than seventy potatoes. At
the conclusion of his Paris stay the project’s cycle of expenditure
of consumption came full circle when the artist traded all the
potato drawings into a set of wheelie bins. Bush documented
this final act which then became the inspiration for his 1997-99
painting series ‘Potato de Terre’, rendered in distinctive emerald-
green monochrome. Without knowing about the potatoes we might
ded it strange that Bush would choose to paint rubbish bins. And
perhaps knowing the backstory gives too much away! However,
for an artist who underestimates the rhetoric of reinvention this
final performance, at an act of defiance, is as typical as it is amusing.

For more than three decades Bush’s painting practice has
openly articulated a self-imposed set of parameters in which the
art of painting is often imaginatively translated into performative
representations. This is evident in the various and recurring
characters that populate his canvases – from the children’s
storybook creature Babar the Elephant, to colonial explorers,
caretakers and beekeepers. The precarious activities of Bush’s
painted personas reveal much about the artist’s creative process.
His characters variously chart new lands, circumnavigate Australia,
rolick on mountaintops and, more recently, pose for selfies. Even
his recent painting with a Beamsense mayonnaise packet flitting in
an expansive blue sky alludes to the absent mountaineer (Deerly,
1997). In all these examples there are traces of the performer –
in Bush’s approach to painting, in his methodology and in his
innovative characterisations of the ‘painter’.

Repetition remains one of the hallmarks of the artist’s work.
Rather than being interested in exploring the differences
between repeated canvases and subjects, Bush is attracted to
the act of repetition or the push and pull between imitation
and imagination. This ongoing dialogue provides a rationale
for Bush’s painting of Babar the Elephant more than twenty-
eight times since 1994 in his ‘Lure of Paris’ series, working from
memory and in only two colours black and white. It also helps
explain why potatoes made an appearance in Bush’s practice
several years before the ‘Potato de Terre’ work. The painting
Potato art museum (Venezia Red), 1995, depicted the nineteenth-
century Paris Salon with wall-to-wall canvases of potatoes hung
in the grand classical manner. This kind of self-referential gesture
was repeated in 1993 for a larger exhibition at Robert Lindsay
Gallery, Melbourne. Images of majestic tractors, still lifes, grand
landscapes, white waterfalls, broken computers and beehives were
all coloured like Potato art museum in the exhibition entitled
‘Venezia Red’. There, in Bush’s very own synthetic Potato
Museum, the sources of inspiration for his visual lexicon and
canon methodology were prefaced.

A telling work in the artist’s back catalogue is a conceptual
project he created for the group publication project ‘Ideal Work’ in
1998: ‘The Tunnel Project’ outlined the hypothetical construction
of a tunnel under five of Australia’s state galleries and the national
gallery. Suggesting a ‘white glove’ digging method, each tunnel
was to be excavated without making contact with the museum’s
foundations or collections. ‘The Tunnel Project’ is tongue-in-cheek,
even ironic, and thus certainly a reflection of the postmodern times.
In many respects, Bush has always figuratively drilled different
types of holes and shafts or tended the earth, building viewing
platforms, bridges, huts, log cabins and shocks on new lands.
Along the way various personas have been constructed to either
harbour or cloak the adventure in mystery and pantomime. In each
instance, such strategies disturb the sediment of received historical,
which is an important part of the work and of the poem.

In this way Bush is as much an excavator as he is an explorer
and his overground and underground speculations are inevitably
centred in the landscape paradigm: Yellow, 1984, foreboding, in realistic colours and forms (oil, crayon, graphite), the notions of development and excavation that occur early in his practice. Big eye beavers, 2001, amplifies the mining metaphor in the form of a bright green underground cave, and Yellow and black, 2005, shows how these ideas are reconceptualised as structures and pipes extend across a lurid and open landscape. Even Babar the Elephant is a story based on a shift from one landscape terrain to another. As the story goes Babar was discovered in a city, donning a bright green suit, before eventually returning to the jungle to dress his fellow elephants (and later become famous). The story of Babar and Bush’s other painted incursions into the topography of the United States and Australia are mainly read in postcolonial terms, which is not surprising given the irreverent manner in which the artist has worn the period costumes of colonial explorers, or adopted colonial Australian paintings such as Augustus Earle’s Portrait of Barangaroo, a native of New South Wales, c. 1826.

Costume plays a complex role in Bush’s paintings. Babar’s three-piece suit, the colonial period clothing, the caretaker’s and the beekeeper’s attire, which were also inspired by Elvis Presley’s ubiquitous gold suit, all knowingly weave paths through history and landscape in loaded masquerade. These characters remain on rotation and, importantly, in a perpetual state of transformation. Babar, for instance, made a newfangled appearance in 1984. When I was here I wanted to be there deities people dressed in elephant suits romping around in lush green alpine vista. The title of this painting is drawn from Francis Ford Coppola’s classic war film Apocalypse Now (1979) when Captain Willard says: ‘When I was here I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle’. For all their joyful theatricism, Bush’s furry elephants remind us of the impossibility of living in the present moment. Considered metaphorically, Bush’s use of costume points to what we see and what remains hidden, what is perceived and what is unknown in the work.

Another oblique film reference for Bush is Werner Herzog’s Fitzcarraldo (1982), the epic drama of a man determined to build an opera house in the Amazon jungle. While this film can also be viewed as a postcolonial narrative, it is a wild and stunning spectacle of moments of ambition that at one point includes a ship being dragged over a mountain. Similar extraordinary feats and juxtapositions are presented in Bush’s paintings when he situates two versions of himself as a colonial settler in front of a large sculpture of an Indigenous man in an arid landscape (Clarence, 1989), is a work at the museum sculptures of American presidents at Mount Rushmore, and a witty swipe at history; or when he stacks boxes in impossibly high columns within an ocean of pink waves (Brighten my northern sky, 2004); and when he places a round log cabinet, a modernist house and headless man in a旅游业-inspired landscape of green, pink, red and yellow (Salvation Jane, 2010). Like digging tunnels under the nation’s state galleries, these jarring examples describe in equal measure impossible ambitions and fervent dreams.

The indomitable resolve at the heart of Fitzcarraldo mirrors Bush’s own bold imaginings as a painter, and Herzog’s film further reveals another major reference point for Bush, that of music. Here, the performance is included in another guise as music is referenced with many of the artist’s titles. A memoir based on music could easily be charted through his works from Sera nuff yes I do, 2004 (from a song by Captain Beefheart); to the aforementioned Brighten my northern sky (from a lyric by Nick Drake); I am still what I meant to be, 2003 (from a song by American folk musician Will Oldham); and Mount on the hills of glory, 2008 (from a gospel song). Yet these tales do more than simply cite music; they suggest another sophisticated layering of his
working process. Bush's titles are often subjective, they incorporate the use of pronouns and can function as a form of personalization, and a wry kind of way they often act out ownership. Bush's linguistic mode is reflective of his conceptual concerns, as his other titles have more recently suggested woods (Vipera berus, 2000) and mountain pines (Dendrobaena pentapoda, 2010). From music, literature, photography and art, history to film, mass media, botany and horticulture, Bush's oeuvre sifts across time and through a vast range of sources.

From aera landscapes emerged in Bush's practice as a monumental form both in spatial terms and with respect to his fiery into a world of psychedelic abstract colour. Bush, for his monumental treatment of the act of painting within art history is a central theme of his work, made the decision to combine representation with abstraction in order to amplify the pre-existing sensory logic of his paintings. In so doing these works demonstrate the fusion of two long-established painting traditions: gestural abstraction and pictorial realism. Whereas before he aimed for mimetic representation or employed a reduced palette, Bush's process now involves pouring bright paint onto the canvas ground. There is a sensual abundance to the surface of these canvases that reveals an artist who honours revels in paint's liquid virtuosity. As he recently wrote: "Orange, it's a special moment opening a can of creamy, glossy, shiny enamel ... all that possibility. Somewhere within this new, mysterious appears." The paintings combine oil and enamel and their unique, evocative appearance is imbued with the enameled's plasticity. The initial expressive process is difficult to control, resulting in swirls, droplets passages of mixed and vivid colour before the layering process again comes into play. With each painting the results prefer a new and single experience for the artist; he later adds 'realistic' references from past work, weaving signs and symbols of history and the contemporary into the liquid abstract surface. And so Bush's owned unknowable