



Stephen Bush

WHEN I WAS HERE I WANTED
TO BE THERE

Natasha Bullock

Painting for the west wing, 1998
 Oil on linen, 198 X 144 cm
 J.L. Stewart Collection, courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Open 278-9
 Open baggies, 2010
 Oil and enamel on linen, 66 X 85 cm
 Private collection, courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne



MORE OR LESS EVERY DAY DURING HIS 1996 RESIDENCY at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, Stephen Bush drew a potato. At the end of the day he would eat it, and over the course of his residency he had drawn (and eaten) more than seventy potatoes. At the conclusion of his Paris stay the project's cycle of expenditure and consumption came full circle when the artist tossed 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 'Pomme de Terre', rendered in distinctive emerald-green monochrome. Without knowing about the potatoes we might think it strange that Bush would choose to paint rubbish bins. And perhaps knowing the backstory gives too much away? However, for an artist who understands the rhetoric of reinvention this final performance, an act of defiance, is as typical as it is amusing.¹

For more than three decades Bush's painting practice has openly articulated a self-imposed set of parameters in which the act 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 personae reveal much about the artist's creative process. His characters variously chart new lands, circumnavigate Australia, rollick on mountaintops and, more recently, poison weeds. Even his alpine painting with a Beaumont mayonnaise packet floating in an expansive blue sky alludes to the absent mountaineer (*Desiree*, 1997). In all these examples there are traces of the performer – in Bush's approach to painting, in his methodology and in his inventive characterisation 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 reiteration or the push and pull between imitation

and imagination.² This ongoing dialogue provides a rationale for Bush's painting of Babar the Elephant more than twenty-eight times since 1992 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 'Pomme de Terre' work. The painting *Potato art museum (venetian red)*, 1993, depicted the nineteenth-century Paris Salon with wall-to-wall canvases of potatoes hung in the grand classical interior. This kind of self-referential gesture was repeated in 1995 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 'Venetian Red'. There, in Bush's very own symbolic Potato Museum, the sources of inspiration for his visual lexicon and canny methodology were prefigured.

A telling work in the artist's back catalogue is a conceptual project he created for the group publication project 'Ideal Work' in 1998.³ '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 shacks on new lands. Along the way various personae have been constructed to either harbour or cloak the adventure in mystery and pantomime. In each instance, such strategies disturb the sediment of received histories, which is an important part of the work and of the pun.

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, foreshadows, in realistic colours and forms (oil drums, crane), the notions of development and excavation that occur early in his practice; *Big eye beams*, 2003, amplifies the digging metaphor in the form of a bright green underground cave; and *Tallow-wood*, 2005, shows how these ideas are recouped and reworked 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 gentrified 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 adapted colonial Australian paintings such as Augustus Earle's *Portrait of Bungaree, 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 attires, which were also inspired by Elvis Presley's ubiquitous gold suit, all knowingly cleave 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 1994. *When I was here I wanted to be there* depicts people dressed in elephant suits romping around in a 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 theatricality, 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 momentous 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 sculptured head of an Indigenous man in an arid landscape (*Claiming*, 1989, is a wink at the mountain sculptures of American presidents at Mount Rushmore, and a witty swipe at history); or when he stacks bee-boxes in impossibly high columns within an ocean of pink waves (*Brighten my northern sky*, 2004); and when he places a round log cabin, a modernist house and headless man in a turgidly hyperreal 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 performative 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 work: from *Sure 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*, 2009 (from a song by American folk musician Will Oldham); and *Shout on the hills of glory*, 2008 (from a gospel song). Yet these titles do more than simply cite music; they suggest another sophisticated layering of his





opposite
Lady Campbell Weed Duke of Normandy, 2010
 Oil and enamel on linen, 76.5 x 76.5 cm
 Private collection, courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

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Grasshaust, 2008
 Oil and enamel on linen, 183 x 183 cm
 Private collection, Melbourne, courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

working process. Bush's titles are often subjective; they incorporate the use of pronouns and can function as a form of personification, and in a wily 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 weeds (*Vipers bugloss, 2010*) and mountain pines (*Delivering pinus mugo, 2010*). From music, literature, photography and art history to film, mass media, botany and horticulture, Bush's oeuvre riffs across time and through a vast array of sources.

From 2002 landscape emerged in Bush's practice as a monumental form both in spatial terms and with respect to his foray into a world of psychedelic abstract colour. Bush, for whom consideration of the act of painting within art history is a central tenet of his work, made the decision to combine representation with abstraction in order to amplify the pre-existing contradictory 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 honestly revels in paint's liquid virtuosity. As he recently wrote: 'Orange. It's a special moment opening a fresh can of fummy, glossy, slinky enamel ... all that possibility. Somewhere within this stew, moments appear.'¹ The paintings combine oil and enamel and their unique syrupy appearance is innate to the enamel's plasticity. The initial expressive process is difficult to control, resulting in swirls, drips and passages of mixed and vivid colour before the layering process again comes into play. With each painting the results proffer 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 same unknowable

motifs now bask in spectacle, which further perverts their hidden significance. The unreal colours and unusual perspectives express the painted world in a state of spatial and psychological unrest – which is not so far removed from the garbed explorer standing incongruously in a foreign land.

Bush continues to shuffle the cards. Babar has returned, as have ladies dressed in nineteenth-century attire, children, and forlorn settlers looking out over iridescent pastures. Are the settlers Bush himself? Has he stopped for the moment to observe his surroundings and take in the mountain air like the goat in *Lady Campbell Weed Lord Adelaide, 2011*? If so, it is not his sole occupation as Bush is also simultaneously painting monochromes and spectacular hallucinogenic environments and enjoying the fallout as he propagates a new series titled: 'Lady Campbell Weed'. Interestingly, Lady Campbell Weed is another name for Paterson's Curse – a rampant pasture weed that in parts of rural Australia is as common as potatoes.

1. A number of the ideas presented in this text have been further developed from a previous essay about Stephen Bush published in *Wilderness*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2010.
2. See James Elkins, 'From copy to original and back again', 1993, www.jameselkins.com.
3. Conceived by Richard Grayson and Steve Wigg and curated by Grayson, 'Ideal Work' was presented at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, in 1998.
4. Email correspondence with the artist, 6 October 2011.