

The Australian National University  
Institute of the Arts



Canberra School of Art

GRADUATE DIPLOMA of ART  
1998

Lachlan Dibden

REPORT  
PRESENTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE  
GRADUATE DIPLOMA OF ART

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### ABSTRACT

MEMORY AND MARKS: My focus has been to develop an abstract visual language using marks to imply the past and present as a metaphor for memory. My subject has been the tactile, textured and patterned environment of the Uriarra Pine Plantation. A study taking the form of an exhibition of paintings exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Gallery from February 26 to March 8, 1998 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component, together with the Report which documents the nature of the course of study taken.

Original Study Program and Update  
Curriculum Vitae  
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In the beginning of 1997 when I was contemplating my study program for the Graduate Diploma it seemed important to shift my focus in terms of subject matter. In doing so, I allowed myself the possibility of making a stylistic change in the way I deliver marks to the surface of the canvas.

The paintings are a prevalent aspect of Conbera's landscape. On heading west to the Blue Mountains I would drive through these strange and threatening environments. It was on these trips that the question of a landscape's authenticity would arise. The pine plantations are a stark contrast to my previous subject which was native eucalyptus dominated bushland.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Robert Boynes for his valuable encouraging advice and support throughout my course, particularly towards the end when he helped me with the last critical paintings.

I would also like to thank Ruth Waller who as my supervisor has given me valuable advice for my paintings and helped me with the completion of my report.

I am particularly indebted to my wonderfully understanding wife and best friend Cathy Stock for her tireless support and encouragement.

A special thanks to Michelle Nikou for the late night editing session which has improved this document immensely.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of 1997 when I was contemplating my study program for the Graduate Diploma it seemed important to shift my focus in terms of subject matter. In doing so, I allowed myself the possibility of making a stylistic change in the way I deliver marks to the surface of the canvas.

Pine plantations are a prevalent aspect of Canberra’s landscape. On painting trips to the Brindabella Mountains I would drive through these strange and threatening environments. It was on these trips that the question of a landscape’s authenticity would arise. The pine plantations are a stark contrast to my previous subject which was native eucalyptus dominated bush land.

I decided to tackle the pine plantation environment as the subject for my paintings to address the notion of an authentic landscape experience. It was important for me to challenge my experience of the “authentic” Australian bush as a motif and to test my ability to paint a type of landscape that was unfamiliar to me.

The Pine plantation is as authentic and relevant as the eucalyptus forest, as it is an integral part of our daily lives. We drive through pine plantations on daily excursions around Canberra, and we consume the eventual product in our homes, in the office and for the strainer timber I use to stretch my canvases.



## SUBJECT

The Uriarra pine plantation is located to the west of Canberra. At first I found pine plantations to be strange and unattractive places. They are farmed and managed by humans. A great degree of control is exercised over their formation and progress. The trees are planted in regular rows across the contours of the mountainous hillsides. The differing ages of planted areas can be very easily discerned. At the edges of a particular stand of trees there can be a sudden drop or rise to the adjacent older or younger stand.

From high up on a ridge top the landscape is in patches. Areas of newly logged ground are defined by strict geometric delineations. Sharp edges cut across the contours of the hills and place a strange incongruous order over the land. Strewn across the ground particularly on newly logged areas lies the waste product of the pine tree. Branches and reject logs cross hatch the steep terrain. Mulched up tree matter carpets the land and somehow strangely softens the appearance of the raw earth. Through this mulch a deep single furrow reveals the earth below.

In this torn and ravaged environment I am very much aware of the physical nature, the very essence of the living world. The raw physicality I feel when walking across these barren logged hills is heightened by the open panorama and the endless vistas experienced whilst standing at the top of a freshly denuded ridge.

Always within view is the eucalypt forest. The pine plantation adjoins the eucalypt forest in abrupt incisive lines. At this point I move across a boundary between nature and technology, old and new. This is a painful and confusing reminder of the encroaching human activity and consequent dwindling of virgin bush land.

This place of transition however, does highlight commonalities. Both pine plantation and eucalypt forest grow out of the same earth, share the same air and if mulched and reduced to raw matter, will blanket the earth and provide nutrients for renewal.

Pine plantation landscapes were new to me. Within the ridged confines of demarcated boundaries, deep gloomy recesses of the old growth pines and on barren ridge tops, I felt exposed and threatened. This is very different to the nurturing comfort I feel within eucalypt forests.

## DRAWING

Initially I made continual trips out to the Uriarra pine plantation, drawing with gouache and oil pastels on paper in order to develop a visual language that could begin to describe this strange environment.

I became interested in the intensely marked surface of the ground due to logging. Especially the furrows etched into the surface as well as the chaotic crosshatching formed by the left over pine tree debris. Small green newly planted pine seedlings were like abstract punctuations of colour.

During this period I was working as a part time gardener weeding flower beds. Weeding is a monotonous process, pulling out one plant at a time, methodically covering the allotted area of ground until it is clear. It occurred to me one day that I could lay down the marks on my drawings as methodically as pulling out weeds.

I would begin a drawing by placing a short regular straight mark across the surface of the drawing, once covered I would start again working back across what was already there. I would cross hatch in a regular pattern so that in time organic textures. I also started using more earth colours in my palette which to a certain extent reflected my growing interest in the ground itself. The physical and at times intoxicating presence of exposed earth was becoming quite overpowering.

To structure the agitated marks I put in place vertical lines or edges. These reflected the strong and often abrupt edges formed by the plantation layout across the hills. Lines were indicated by the edges of eucalypt forest adjoining planted and non planted areas of pines. These strong physical transitions became the key to structuring my drawings. In chaotic areas of intense marks I inserted these edges vertically to echo the edge of pine trees. In later paintings I have introduced a curved edge which alludes to the edge of a mountain or hill.

Towards the end of the year I recycled earlier drawings by tearing them up into small physical marks and glueing them onto new works. These small physical reminders of the past acted as keys, by giving a sense of the actual place, supplying a physical component and resulting texture. The torn fragments also gave a strong physical edge to the drawings. After glueing the small fragments onto the surface of the new drawings, I worked back over them with oil pastels in deliberate and methodical patterns. Layering marks over marks until the resulting ground started to "breathe". The surface came together

from different textural and procedural starting points, giving an organic quality to counter the rigid vertical structures.

In the case of the stretched paper drawings I would take three primed supports out to the plantation at a time. The patterning and structures would flow across the surfaces from one work to another. These small drawings informed one another in form, texture and structure and on appraisal seemed to make one work. The edges supplied by grouping the three works together echoed structurally what was happening within the drawings. Over a period of weeks I made four sets of drawings in this manner. Once again when I put the twelve drawings together the group became one work. They all echoed each other formally and by repetition reinforced the patterning process.

This accumulative way of achieving pattern and consolidating the work is one of the keys to relating the drawings and paintings back to the subject. It reflects the process of plantation farming and the form the land takes as an outcome of repeated logging, ploughing and planting, all of which involve repeated mechanical actions.



## PAINTINGS

This process of repetition and accumulation also helped me to cope with the challenge of making large paintings whilst retaining the intensity of the small drawings. The order and disorder created by the shifting densities of marks echoed what was happening on the surface of the land, and is a source of pictorial tension. For this purpose I started painting with oil paint because of the medium's slow drying rate and ability to be manipulated over a period of time. I found that I could scrape back into the surface of the painting to alter the structure and the developing texture as a result of repeated sessions of applying paint.

The slow drying nature of oil paint also helped me to keep the large oil paintings in progress for much longer than it usually takes me to complete a work. Working on the painting over a longer period has a sedimentary effect, producing a quiet but no less intense surface quality as well as a very physical appearance.

The ideas for the paintings seemed to make themselves clear through the process of painting. I found this difficult because I was not so much working on a single idea but rather progressing, through faith, in order that an idea would reveal itself. Large paintings have taken months to complete. The surface of the paintings are thick with paint, very textural and rough to touch.

The issue of representing space became increasingly important, given the feeling of overwhelming exposure I feel in the recently logged areas of the mountains. I responded to the dramatic transition between the textured and patterned land and the infinite sense of space in the sky. I felt the importance of looking at this duality as a way of evoking a spiritual experience. I felt the overwhelming physical sensation of matter in relation to the spiritual sensation of infinite nothingness, and the growing sense that as I stood on the edge of the mountainside so too was I standing on the edge of the universe.

I have sought to evoke this experience in the large paintings in particular by making a dramatic transition of gritty dark paint to a slightly freer expanse of white paint. It was important to relate the two areas as if they were made up of the same matter.

Into this equation is the third element of living material, trees, foliage etc. I attempted to describe this by using higher key and intense colour as well as reflected colour from the sky or the earth.

## INFLUENCES/CONTEXT

The major influences on my work have been John Peart and Jasper Johns. Both artists employ patterning across the surface of their paintings. Johns delivers his patterns in a cool and calculated fashion, most often derived from a feature he has seen in his urban environment. Johns for example will use a distinctive pattern painted on a motor car's duco. Johns also adds tension to his pictures by making the viewer aware that the painting is an illusion. By leaving paint drips or adding found objects or images of other paintings from history, by quoting or by incorporating real objects the viewer is reminded that the painting is an illusion.

In my painting, I have used the physicality of the paint on the surface of the painting in relation to what is underneath as a method for setting up surface tension. Real solid paint that is used to express air or earth and finally solid paint again.

Peart's patterned surfaces derive more from a meditative process of mark making and building up of the surface. As Peart has commented:

Often I begin a painting with an overwhelming clamour of colour filling the whole surface. Then the superimposed ground expands to create and whittle away at shapes. Although the process may sound abstract, the results can lend themselves to associations with places, people, objects and so on.<sup>1</sup>

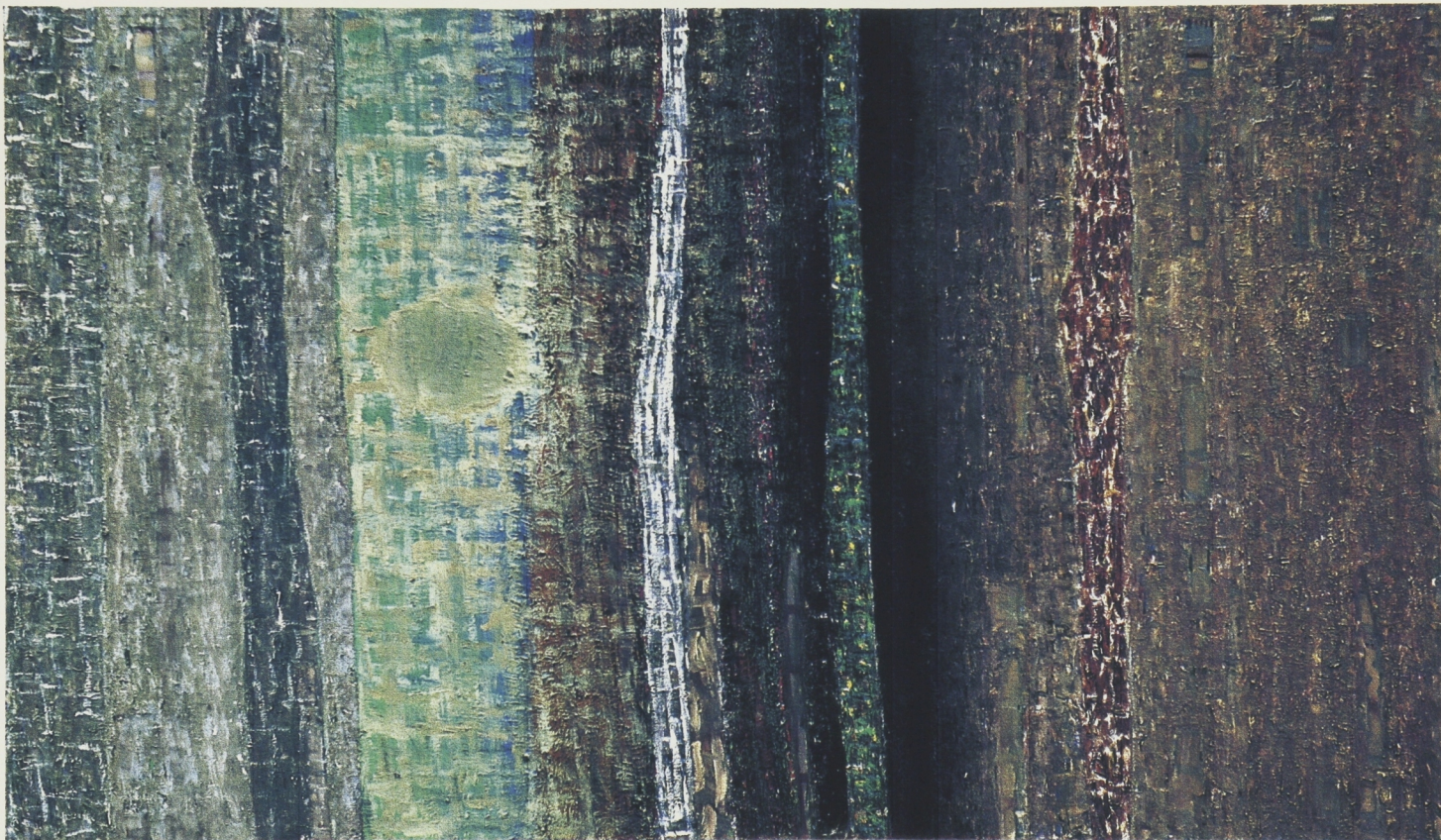
This process is close to mine! However Peart does not use the landscape as a direct subject although he is happy for associations to be drawn there. I like to focus on the landscape more directly and if other associations appear, figurative for example, it is secondary but still important to the final work.

Peart makes very large paintings and generally constructs these from small scale marks. I find this relationship between the scale of mark and the size of the canvas helpful in quietening down the surface and giving an expansive presence to the painting.

I am working within the context of painting from the landscape, however I am not using the traditional conventions of landscape painting. I am rather trying to express the physical experience of being in the landscape environment through the physical mark and repetitive patterning. Interweaving marks and building up a tactile surface to suggest the integral relationship between the body and the matter which is the trees, soil and air.

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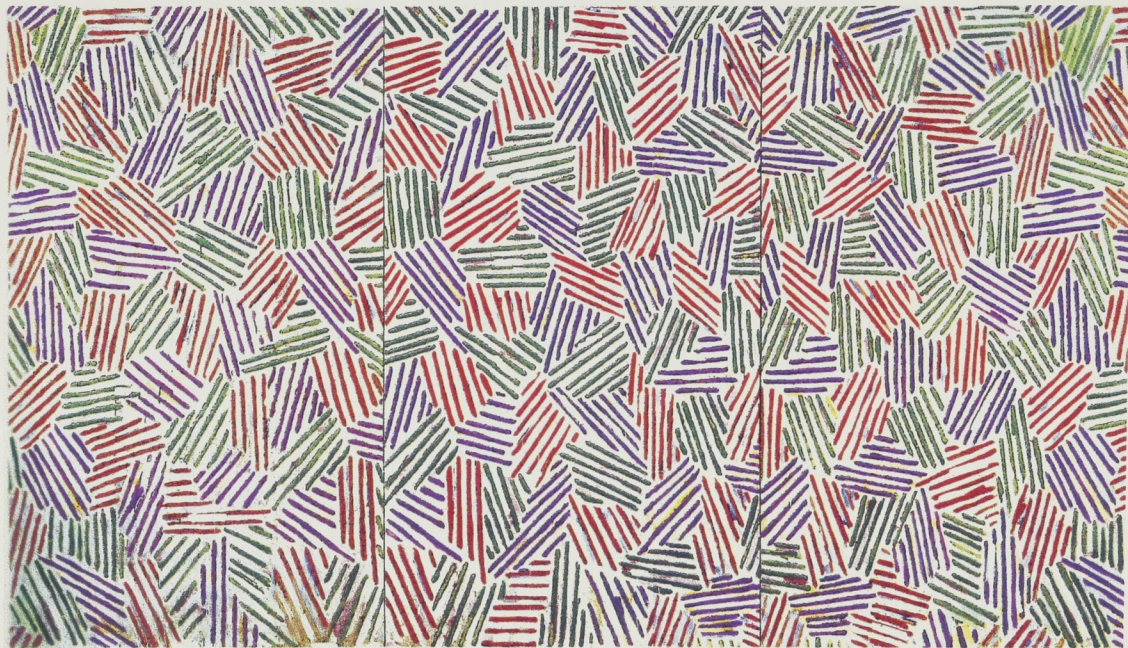
<sup>1</sup>Peart, John, (1996), Melbourne, Charles Nodrum Gallery, (catalogue).



Pale Moon 1994

*Oil and Acrylic on canvas* 171 x 290cm

JOHN PEART



Scent 1973-74

Oil and Encaustic on canvas  
183 x 321 cm

JASPER JOHNS

## CONCEPTS

### The Plantation:

I am interested in the rejuvenating energies I experience when in close contact with the earth in a growing process. For example growing vegetables, preparing the earth with compost, mulch etc and then planting the seed. Similarly the planting of pine trees in plantations, harvesting , the consequent remulching of the soil and replanting. It is a meditative and methodical process. The close contact with the earth and subsequent benefits of harvest are nurturing and reassuring. It is a relationship which sustains itself year after year, generation after generation. It forms a pattern that grows and changes over time.

### This landscape as a metaphor for memory:

Acknowledging the past is a vital part of understanding the present. The land bares the reminders of the past in the marks that are left on the surface. Traces of actions and events can be found everywhere. The furrow plough reveals layers that have been hidden by the accumulating events of time. Standing on the freshly logged and ploughed hills with the earth at my feet bearing memories and the horizon sweeping off to the future, somehow makes me feel caught in the moment. My feet make marks now, over earth then, as I move into space there. In remembering these moments, tracing through my mind those events, my recollections become blurred and obscured by other events, competing thoughts. My memory becomes frustratingly fragmented and contorted. The metaphor is the actions of time on the earth through repeated logging and topographical disturbance, blurring and confusing history.

### Relating the plantation as a metaphor for memory to my paintings:

Through the process of applying paint to the surface of the paintings the paint builds up and partly obscures what was underneath. I then scrape back the layers to reveal early markings, however these early markings become mixed up with what is on the surface. It all starts to exist together as a fabric of surface, and suggests new structures and forms. The push and pull of light and heavy paint, on the surface gives a sense of instability and shifting ground. A strong structural edge imposes order and clarity which could be the remanence of a vision or a vision that is the outcome of experience.

## CONCLUSION

The changes that have taken place in my work have been at times thrilling and at other times disturbing. Thrilling, because the drawings and paintings are reflecting the subject in ways that I did not plan. For example, the strong vertical structures and calligraphic marks developed as a way of describing the physical features of the pine plantation. Disturbing, because these changes are quite different to the works I made last year and there is a certain unfamiliarity about them.

Over this twelve month period I have become familiar with my subject and at times I have found the raw earth and tree debris quite intoxicating. The mountainous atmosphere, incredible light and sense of endless space overwhelmed me, however I always returned to the simple action of placing a mark on the paper or the painting surface. This was a way of keeping a simple order in my mind.

I have learnt much about applying paint and manipulating it on the surface of the canvas. I feel as though I have traversed the surface of my paintings, just as I have traversed the hills of the pine plantation. I have inhabited them and mapped out my experiences in the subject.

By slowing down the painting process I have found more thinking time and space which has allowed me to consider the subject on a more meditative level. In this state I have found the ideas for the paintings to arrive almost of their own accord.

Focusing on the pine plantation has broadened my perspective of what I can use for my subjects. I feel released from the tradition of painting the Australian bush to depict sublime experiences. In fact it has really made me want to look for subjects in unexpected places. For example suburban streets. It is very exciting to think of those times and places when I feel spiritually transformed by a striking cast shadow of a building that cuts across a nature strip. Or soft afternoon light which shines into the entrance of a supermarket, a moment of profound beauty, while the oblivious public hurry to do their shopping. The relationship between nature and the man made structures like houses is an enduring source of tension in my paintings.

I feel a need to be committed as a painter to the ever changing aspects of nature I experience by daily investigating my subject. At times a mundane pursuit although when sublime moments do happen, the daily routine in contrast heightens my experience. I suspect that I

am thinking the thoughts of a romantic. If so I am applying these thoughts to a contemporary context.

In concluding this report the work of the nineteenth century artist Eugene von Guerard springs to mind. In particular the painting North West View from Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko, 1863 (illustrated overleaf).

In this painting von Guerard has positioned the figures in the foreground. Some are climbing over boulders to gain the view that one of their fellows is already enjoying. The hikers are like the dark boulders they are scrambling over, just small physical components of the whole. However the hiker that stands and views the extraordinary panorama at his feet is not only a physical component but also seems in command of this large and powerful environment.

I think this relationship of the body to the material substance of the earth in contrast with a vision of endless space at my feet is what I have tried most to express in my paintings. In this case I have found a curious influence and predecessor in Eugene von Guerard and am encouraged to think that I could attempt to describe similar ideas in 1998 with quite different visual means.



EUGEN VON GUERARD *North-East View from the Northern Top of Mt. Kosciusko*, 1863 Oil on canvas 66.5 × 116.8 cm



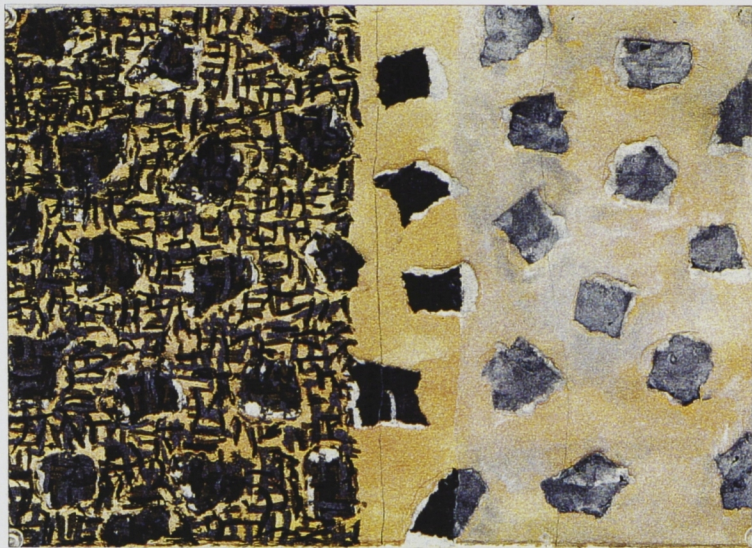
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1. Plantation Drawing 1997  
gouache, collage, oil pastel on paper, 25.0 x 35.0 cm
2. Plantation Drawing 1997  
gouache, collage, oil pastel on paper, 25.0 x 35.0 cm
3. Plantation Drawing 1997  
gouache, collage, oil pastel on paper, 25.0 x 35.0 cm
4. Plantation Drawing 1997  
gouache, collage, oil pastel on paper, 26.0 x 35.0 cm
5. Plantation Drawing 1997(detail)  
gouache, collage, oil pastel on paper, 10.0 x 6.0 cm
6. Plantation Drawings 1997  
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7. Passage 1997  
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8. Man Dog Wallaby 1997  
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9. Man Dog Wallaby in Plantation 1997  
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10. Man Dog Wallaby in Plantation 1997(detail)  
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11. Clouds and Gap 1997  
oil on canvas, 97.5 x 321.0 cm
12. Clouds and Gap 1997(detail)  
oil on canvas, 10.0 x 6.0 cm
13. Clouds and Gap 1997(detail)  
oil on canvas, 10.0 x 6.0 cm



*Fig 7. Plantation Drawing 1997*



*Fig 2. Plantation Drawing 1997*



Fig 3. Plantation Drawing 1997

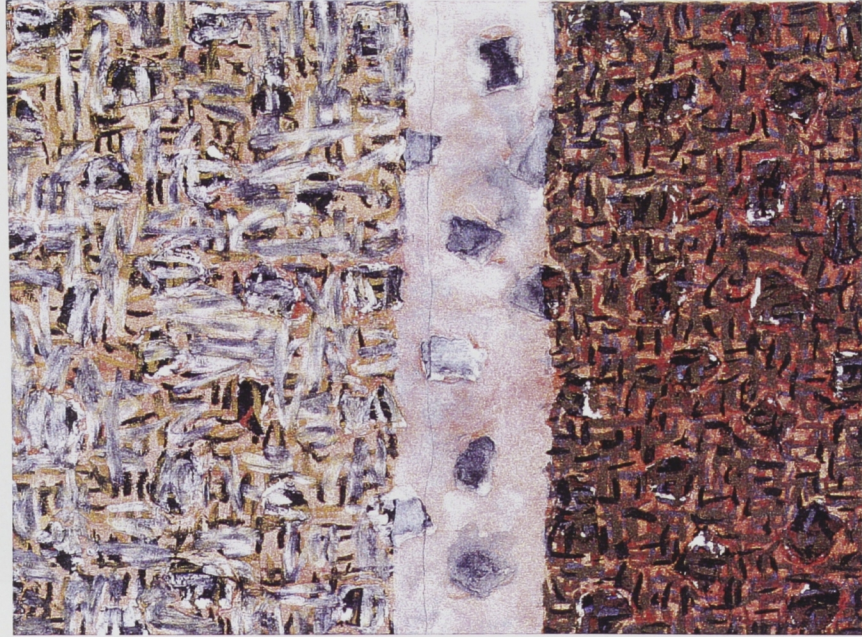


Fig 4. *Plantation Drawing* 1997

Fig 5. detail Fig 4.



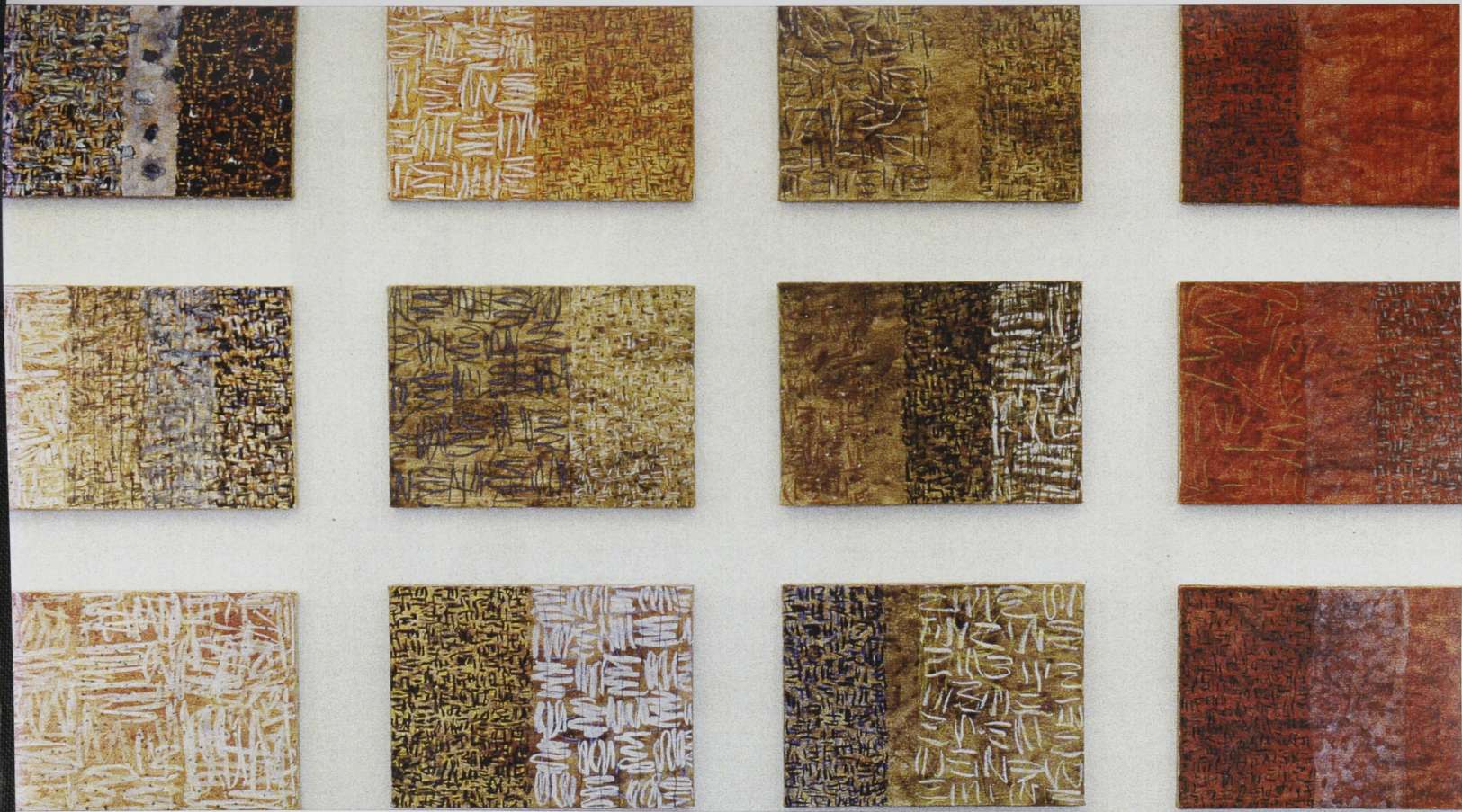


Fig 6. Plantation Drawings 1997

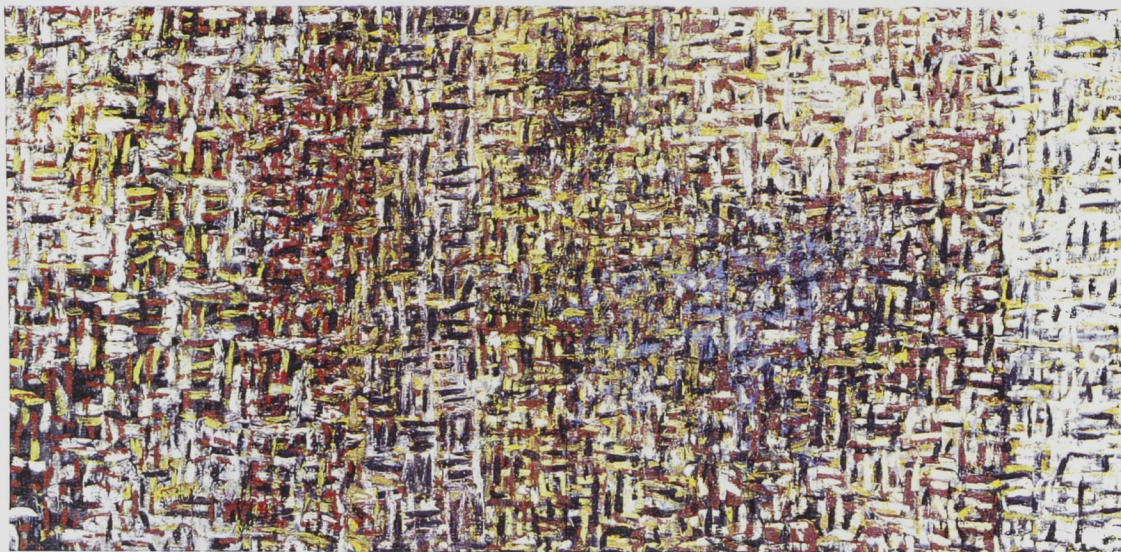


*Fig 7. Passage 1997*

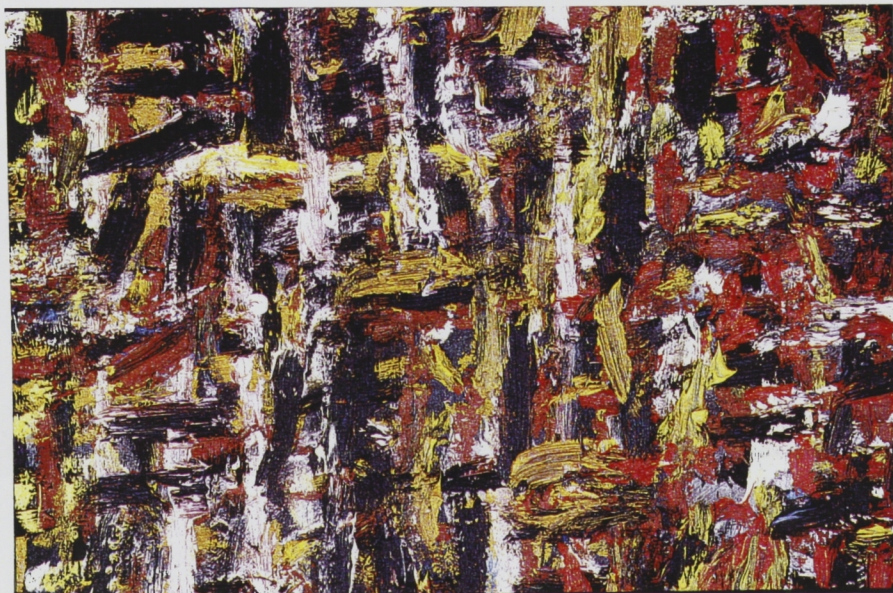




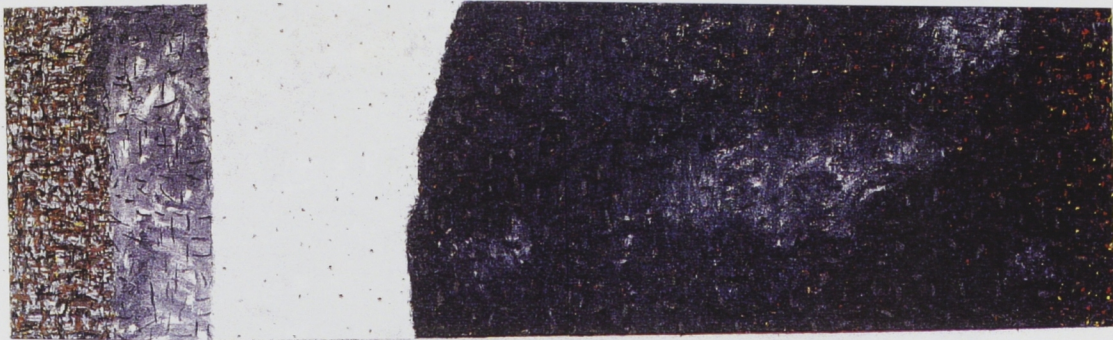
*Fig 8. Man Dog Wallaby 1997*



*Fig 9. Man Dog Wallaby in Plantation 1999*



*Fig 10. detail Fig 9.*



*Fig 11. Clouds and Gap 1997*



Fig 12. detail Fig 11.



*Fig 13. detail Fig 11.*

## Graduate Diploma Study Program 1st Semester 1997

### Aims

I aim to produce a body of landscape paintings, which metaphorically explore the relationship between memory and loss of innocence, conflict and transition to the present.

My subject is the Buccleugh State Forest located between the Brindabella Mountains and Tunit. The Buccleugh State Forest contains large expanses of eucalyptus forest, pine plantations and within the plantations small remnant patches of eucalyptus forest. A group of ecologists from CRES at the ANU, are conducting research into this area. They are determining what, if any, difference in species populations and characteristics occur in the remnant patches of eucalyptus forests compared to the surrounding areas of pine and eucalyptus forests.

This strikes me as a perfect metaphor for memory and the transition of time to the present through the abrupt difference of ecologies. And a loss of innocence as these patches of eucalyptus are confined by larger patches of pine. It is the feeling of loss of innocence and threat which I feel acutely both personally and historically. For example, the colonization and degradation of the aboriginal people and their culture. The destruction and loss of so much natural environment.

I see this harshness in the dark depths of the pine plantations against the relatively warm light of the Australian bush. And feel this loss with the knowledge that the pine plantations cover areas of land which once sustained complex Eco systems and the Aboriginal inhabitants.

### Methods/Materials

It is the edge, the place of transition, which holds the tension between one form and another.

This will be the key focus in my paintings:

- The relationship of a dark gloomy void and lively animated marks.

- When should the edge be crisp, painfully sharp and when should it be blurred, difficult to distinguish.

This is the kind of questioning I use to add tension and create illusion in the paintings. I will go on field trips to the Buccleugh State Forest with the ecologists from CRES and take notes on their research findings. On these trips I will make drawings and paintings focusing on the physical environment, the actual edge between pine and eucalyptus forests and their wider contexts, horizon colours etc. In the studio I hope to make large paintings where I will explore these ideas of memory and conflict on a larger scale.

Approx. 12 small paintings 30x40cm  
3 large paintings 100x300cm

### Context

Part of my process derives from abstract expressionism. Ashile Gorky, Phillip Guston. The process of making abstract marks which build on relative terms to one another. I use this process to express a kind of joy at the light and energy of a particular place In this case the eucalyptus forest.

I have not yet developed the language to express the tensions I have mentioned above. But Colin McCahon is an artist I am looking at. The way his paintings work on the contrast of light and dark, the sharp edges and his relationship to the landscape.

### Time Frame

I will make at least one visit per month to the Buccleuch State Forest. This should produce three small paintings per trip. Concurrently I will be working on the three large paintings in my studio. This way my studio practice can be continually refreshed by the field trips.

### UPDATE Graduate Diploma Study Program 2nd Semester 1997

This update concerns the idea I proposed originally to go on field trips to the Buccleuch State Forest with ecologists from CRES. Unfortunately this did not happen, not from lack of effort on my behalf. However I continued on my path of interest as outlined in my original proposal and concentrated on the Uriarra Pine Plantation because it is closer to Canberra and located in the Brindabella Mountains. Because the new subject had physical differences to the original I have tended to concentrate on the freshly logged areas.



## Lachlan Dibden

Born Australia, 1968

### Studies

- 1997-98 Candidate, for Graduate Diploma of Art, The Australian National University, Canberra School Of Art  
1992-95 Bachelor Of Arts (Visual) Hons, The Australian National University, Canberra School Of Art

### Professional Experience

- 1996 Technical Assistant for the Foundation Department, The Australian National University, Canberra School Of Art  
1996 Lecturer, The Australian National University, Canberra School Of Art, Winter School, Open Art  
1997 Assistant Lecturer, The Australian National University, Canberra School Of Art, Painting Department

### Related Professional Experience

- 1986-87 Travelled to Nepal for two months of trekking and cultural experience  
1989-90 Travelled to England, France, Switzerland, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Jordan and Israel for eight months visiting most major art galleries and museums.

### Solo Exhibitions

- 1996 *Growing Season* The Street Theatre Gallery, Canberra  
*Paintings* Legge Gallery, Sydney

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1995 *40 Days and 40 nights*, The Street Theatre Gallery, Canberra  
*Approches to drawing*, La Salle Institute of The Arts, Singapore  
*Finish*, The Australian National University, Canberra School of Art  
*Wet Paint*, Spiral Arm Gallery, Canberra  
1996 TAT2, Foyer Gallery, The Australian National University, Canberra School of Art  
*Fifth Australian Contemporary Art Fair*, Melbourne  
*Mellow Down Easy*, Legge Gallery  
1997 *Being There*, Legge Gallery  
*Sanguine Valediction*, Legge Gallery

### Awards

- 1995 ANU Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies Patron's Award  
University Of Canberra Union Art Prize, 2nd Prize  
1996 Berrima District Youth Art Award, 2nd Prize

### Collections

The Australian National University  
KPMG Canberra  
Private Collections

### Publications

1995-96 CRES Annual Report  
Art And Australia, Summer 1996-97

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