

The Obscurity of Art in Exile

Painting the Atmospheric Scape of Longing

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‘Does not the function of art lie in *not* understanding?’ (Levinas 1949,131)

This thesis explores methods and philosophies deployed to experience the mystery of the unfamiliar, and in turn produce paintings that evoke a ‘poetic atmosphere of ambiguity’ for the viewer. What value then, does the art of painting which evokes the *obscure ‘scape*, offer in a contemporary Western society, obsessed with digital technology and the scientific pursuit of demystification?

Inspired by my Lithuanian father’s unpublished memoirs, and my own experiences of seclusion as, an ‘artist in exile,’ the painting process will be correlated metaphorically with the condition of exile, emphasizing the nature of confrontation with the unfamiliar landscape. This relationship, will be considered in the light of research by Dalia Kuiziniene, in her essay, *The experience of Lithuanian exile - between loss and discovery*. To highlight the *positive* aspects of exile, comparison will be made with the encouraging implications of recent scientific research in the field of neuroscience which investigate the contrast and benefits between creative and analytical ways of thinking when confronted with the unfamiliar.

Seen through the lens of the Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in his 1949 essay *Reality and its Shadow*, related ideas and artworks, such as those of Surrealism, with its aim to *disrupt logic*, will be considered in the context of the art history of landscape painting. The impact on the Australian painting scene through artists such as Sidney Nolan will be considered, along with the contemporary context with reference to the work of Australian painter Imants Tillers and the internationally renowned Mark Rothko.

Corresponding with the quality of dispersal associated with exile, the structure of this exegesis will take the form of a meandering personal story of a Sebaldian nature. W.G. Sebald rambled the countryside on foot, ruminating on diverse histories, often reflecting on the devastation of WW2, charging the landscape, and his illustrated writings, with a poetic significance. So too does my study commence its wandering here, with a reminiscence having it’s genesis in a war torn Europe, constructing a landscape of correspondences along the way which eventually bring me to befriend a birch and realize a future quest in the making.

‘We leave all our possessions on the wagon which slowly disappears in the darkness...Utter despair! This is a nightmare! In the middle of nowhere, not knowing where the next town is, dad and mum holding our hands, as we slowly crunch through the snow.’

(Richard Eugene Francas - memory as a 14.y.o.1944 from unpublished memoirs)

My Father's childhood memories recalling his journey as a Lithuanian exile fleeing the terror of WW2, brought me to consider some implications with respect to my own far less precarious experiences of self imposed exile, usual for many artists and typically taking the form of a withdrawal of the self from a familiar community. The newly encountered spaces, or *obscure 'scapes* for the exile, present initially as *strange atmospheres*. These atmospheres, can evoke mixed responses.

Melancholy longings felt by loss, and memories of the past inherent with separation, can mingle with the optimism of enticing new possibilities offered by the unfamiliar. According to Kuiziniene,(2006) referring to Lithuanian artists in exile, 'some choose isolation- while others open to the world around them.' It is this contrast between being fixed in a mindset of the past, versus being open to new possibilities that I want to draw attention to, as a key to the argument of this thesis.

Levinas (1949) insists, the artwork remains essentially disengaged. Whilst he is referring to the separation of an artwork from the intrinsic flow of life, disengagement is also a defining characteristic of exile in terms of a distancing and isolation from community. With this in mind, the year 2013, commenced for me with a withdrawal from my hometown Perth, to the wheatbelt town of Kellerberrin, two and a half hours east of Perth by '67 Valiant. Passing on the way, the controversial and thought provoking Northam Refugee Centre, was a stark and poignant reminder of my fathers experience which entailed 4 years spent in a refugee camp for Lithuanians located in Germany, prior to his re-settlement in Australia in 1949.

‘I start thinking seriously about art and start sketching cartoons and views around the camp’ (Richard Eugene Francas - from unpublished memoirs)



1. Northam Refugee Centre Western Australia.

photograph by Michael Gabriel Francas.

My aim in Kellerberrin was also to 'do some art', while based in the temporary seclusion of an old theatre, converted into an artspace. In fact, I did not produce much painting whilst there. What I did do however, was a lot of absorbing, contemplating, walking, looking, reading, photography and some writing.

Meandering around Kellerberrin and it's unfamiliar environs on foot, with a sense of searching for something uncertain, knowing only that I wanted to engage with these alien surrounds and be alert for possibilities, I gathered knowledge bodily from the environment through the senses and documented what I saw with a camera.



2. 'Aurora' Artspace - The Old Kellerberrin Theatre Western Australia.

photograph by Michael Gabriel Francas.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.

Views Around District of Kellerberrin.- photographs by Michael Gabriel Francas.

The usual experience wandering an unfamiliar 'scape is disorientation, belonging neither in the 'space of the home one has left or the space that one is still looking for,' (Kuiziniene 2006) This is apparent in the first vignette produced by me in Kellerberrin, a fairly traditional landscape painted in the plein-air tradition normally associated with Impressionism, i.e. a small, quick rendering outdoors, in situ. How better to re-orientate yourself than by climbing the highest peak, (Kellerberrin Hill) thus gaining the vantage point of an aerial perspective encompassing the surrounds as far as the eye can see in all directions, a 360 degree vision of the horizon. What particularly came to my attention, was the prominent greenish oval expanse of the local football field, a motif that was prevalent in my prior 2012 paintings, thus eliciting in me a link to my past paintings that I could resonate with. It is this concept of 'resonances' or 'correspondences,' which are established in an unfamiliar landscape in an attempt to orient oneself, that are meaningful to the assumptions made in this exegesis.



9. View Of Oval From Kellerberrin Hill- photograph by Michael Gabriel Francas.

My next foray into painting, included views of the previously climbed peak of Kellerberrin hill, only this time painted from *inside* the theatre, looking *outside* through a window. Painting images of the previously climbed hill, signifies for me a relationship to the distance past with respect to the hill, evoking memories and concepts of passing time, a contemplation of the *here that I am now inhabiting*, together with a *there that I had previously inhabited*, by a depiction of the *space in between*, the atmosphere that is the *neither here nor there*, the 'eternal tension between one's home and the world,' which Kuiziniene (2006) refers to.

The space between one place and another, that had in fact been traversed physically, perceived bodily and now depicted visually with the act of painting, is thus a re-enactment of the travelled space. Only this time, using paint as a medium rather than the human body, paper rather than the ground to recall an actual topographical location, all filtered through the imagination and charged with the enigmatic tension of a surreal and poetic atmosphere. In this way, does a painter create the 'scape as it is being experienced and depicted simultaneously.



10. Michael Gabriel Francas. *12 Views of Kellerberrin Hill #1*. 2013. ink & water based paints on paper. 20.0 x 20.0 cm.

This is poignant in terms of the history of Western landscape painting in which the emphasis shifted from the outdoor impressions of the late 19th century, toward the 'internal' landscapes associated with the psyche in the 20th century. These 'psychoscapes' or 'Inscapes', most notably evident in the paintings associated with the art movement labeled Surrealism. 'The surrealists resorted to painting because,.. it remained the best way of recording the inner life, of endowing subjective imaginings with the forms of reality....' (Short,1980,95-96)

This potential had a profound and continuing impact on Australian artists such as Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. The 'forms of reality' endowed with subjective imaginings appear in their case, to be recognizable elements from the Australian outback as is evident in their landscapes, although some ambiguity is sensed, and desired as acknowledged by Nolan referring to his *landscape* of 1947. '*I put a fire or a setting sun on the horizon... I wanted a clear ambiguity*' (N.G.A. 2010)



11. Sidney Nolan. *Landscape* 1947. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Enamel paint on composition board. 121.4 h x 90.7 w cm

According to Edmund Capon, in his documentary series *The Art of Australia*, art has always played a part in our trying to make sense of this vast strange country. Nolan and Boyd were both profoundly inspired by the confrontation with the unfamiliar during travels to the alien interior of the Australian continent and its

desert landscape, both 'captivating and unsettling in equal measure.' Nolan, painting what could be regarded as one of the first modernist interpretations of the Australian landscape thus produced the first uniquely modernist Australian art. In Nolan's now famous Ned Kelly series we see depictions of the outcast outlaw Kelly, in the Landscape symbolizing his alienation, an alienation, which had a deep resonance with the population of Australia. (Capon 2013)



12. Sidney Nolan *Ned Kelly*, 1946. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

enamel paint on composition board. 90.8 h x 121.5 w cm

'meandering adrift and aimless...what is it that keeps us striving onward?...like a search..for something....a recognizable feature in the landscape ? Even a vague allusion to anything barely familiar....like a resonance...often dissolving...like a false lead..like a mirage....the scent of a promise...the vapours merging into each other like a Sebaldian fog...in which we struggle to form a picture we recognise....Da Vinci's stained wall or Plato's flickering cave wall....we are alert for meanings...the most meagre of signs....as we tentatively eye the horizon in the absence of clear markers...'

(Michael Gabriel Francas. *Journal Extract* 2013)

'The suggestion of a great unknown that draws the mind onward and gives it hope. As Aragon described it in Une Vague de rêves: " At best it is a notion that slips away like the horizon before the walker, for like the horizon, it is a relation between the spirit and that which it will never attain." ' (Short1980, 145)

Thus the essential atmosphere I seek to instill within my painted works, are ambiguity and obscurity.



13. Michael Gabriel Francas. *Untitled*.
Ink, charcoal & water based
pigments on paper. 15.0 x 15.0 cm.

Subsequent to the Kellerberrin paintings, upon return to Perth and the community of University, the direction 'inwards' for my painting would continue, now in tandem with the reflection and critiquing process. No longer would an actual external geographical location be depicted. Ambiguous references to a 'scape of sorts will maintain a presence in my work, which keeps it still loosely settled in the camp of landscape painting, however the 'forms of reality' would continue to become more ambiguous and abstracted to the point where the painted 'scapes could just as convincingly be hung either way around.



14.



15.

Michael Gabriel Francas. *Untitled Surreal Scape*. 2013. Inverted.
pigments & shellac on marine grade plywood. 60.0 x 60.0 x 0.6 cm.

This quality makes them more akin to the minimal abstraction developments which took place in the 1940s, in New York with the likes of Rothko and Barnett Newman. When I perceive my images as inverted landscapes it is interesting in some cases to note that the mood can shift, if for instance, a light sky over a darker ground is inverted, to a light ground with a darker ominous sky looming over. Note also in the above example the appearance at the edge of a dark strip. This is often rendered top and bottom and gives me the sense of peering through an eyelid like aperture to the distance. This notion suggests the idea of Nolan's famous Kelly helmet, except that while with the work of Nolan, we see the helmet *in* the landscape, with my work we consider the landscape *from inside* the helmet. This move tends to also evoke for me the rectangles of the Baltic born painter Mark Rothko.



16. Michael Gabriel Francas. *Untitled*.

Water based pigments on paper. 57.5 X 57.5 cm

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT.

Currently in science there is an endeavor to study the brain so as to understand 'artistic' ways of gaining knowledge, often termed intuitive or insightful, 'creative thinking' as an alternative to the analytical mode of thinking normally associated with scientific pursuits. In the BBC documentary, *The Creative Brain: How Insight Works*, the links between disorientation and surprise in relation to opening the mind to more creative forms of thinking, by placing subjects in a virtual environment and monitoring their responses, is explored (Dart, 2013). Another test in this field measures the ability of the subject with regards to their capacity to conceive myriad associations in relation to an arbitrary object. Within a given time, the number of uses suggested for the object, and also the degree of innovation of the suggestions are evaluated. This type of thinking is labeled 'divergent thinking' and is regarded by researcher James Kaufman to be the 'single most important element of creative thinking.' (Sampson 2013) This is linked to the capacity of the mind to improvise, such as a jazz musician or a painter might. By scanning the artist's brain while under different modes of thinking, (e.g. analytical versus intuitive) researches can verify which parts of the brain are active. This has outcomes such as the technologies being developed by Professor Alan Snyder, which can temporarily inhibit that part of the brain which filters intuitive thinking, thus allowing more creative thought processes to occur. When trialed on Todd Sampson, the host of the 2013 documentary *Redesign My Brain*, Sampson reported experiencing 'brighter, better colour sensation.'

The results of the research therefore, are significant, as it appears that the brain functions completely differently when operating analytically as compared to creatively, with both forms of thinking using different pathways in the brain. In fact as suggested by Sampson, (2013) it appears that 'logic can get in the way'. It is this divergent thinking as analyzed by science which is asserted by me to find resonance with the surrealist image which, 'was a revelation of the subtle net of correspondences which linked the individual psyche to forces operating in the external world' (Short 1980, 91), and the equivalent also to the positive response of

the creatively engaged exile Algirdas Landsbergis, when confronted by traumatic situations, 'finding all this rather a gift rather than a loss' (Kuiziniene,2006).

This situation is a widespread phenomenon nowadays as Professor Didier Maleuvre asserts. 'Human society is a patchwork of mental horizons-a jumble of exiles'....'Home is not permanence'....'The real human home is the precarious exile, the race to nowhere, the place never-to- be- reached' (Maleuvre 2011,47) This causes a rethink of the term exile, as Kuiziniene argues 'In today's world the concept ' exile', emigration are beginning to lose their relevance.' In fact Jonas Merkas, one of the Lithuanian artists under investigation simply now considers 'the entire world of culture as his home' (Kuziniene 2006)

Perhaps then, the natural human state is *adrift*, meandering, as suggested by one contemporary artist featured on the documentary *patience (after Sebald)*,-

‘Children have homes adults do not.’ (Gee 2012)

This diverse milieu is reflected in contemporary trends further linking art to science as discussed at the *Transdisciplinary Imaging Conference in Melbourne, 2012*. An academic forum proclaiming to have concerns at the intersections between Art, Science and Culture. Citing the main current concern for art, including painting, amidst the plethora of digital imagery or ‘media pollution’, as being some form of ‘interference’ to this digital deluge. Within this context I consider my act of simply painting, in itself, and the images it produces, a form of dissent by disengagement, and thus a possible ‘interference’ to the onslaught of digitality, by its background presence as a, non- conforming otherness.

My strategies in painting tend to involve a complex mingling of processes, from the intuitive, vague and chancy, to the pre-empted, so that not only the outcome is ambiguous but congruently, so is the process. While no longer referencing a particular location in the landscape, my starting point may still involve being outdoors. Spending time with nature contemplating, sitting, walking, absorbing the sights and sounds of trees, birds, clouds, water, shadows etc. Acknowledging the atmospheric conditions of nature, composes me with a sense of harmony and increases my sense of awareness and familiarity with my surrounds, an intuitive way to gather knowledge and reduce the anxiety accrued from alienation and thus fostering the calm internal state desired by me to paint. As suggested by the artist

Janet Echelman when referring to these intuitive processes, 'we are always getting this type of information through the body...I have trained myself to listen to that.'

Sampson suggests 'her works combine intuitive thinking and scientific thinking' and Echelman confirms this 'for me there is no separation ' (Sampson2013)

This intuitive approach, can reveal seemingly strange occurrences in the art making process. 'Events which looked at first sight like simple coincidences revealed, on further examination, signs of a mysterious complicity between the unconscious and external phenomena.' (Short 1980,125) Recently after making a sketch design of a meandering trail, I immediately recognized its striking resemblance the following morning on my driveway in the form of a snail trail. Coincidentally the colour of the driveway cement also matched the tones I had been recently exploring in water colours. I suspect this state of awareness may have positive benefits such as the heightened perception of colour for instance, as remarked previously by Sampson.



17. *Snail Trail*. photograph by Michael Gabriel Francas.

Colour perception is invaluable to a painter, being as far as I am concerned, the quintessential currency of the artform. The great colourist Matisse, states that 'Colour.... even more than drawing, is a means of liberation' (Batchelor 2008,99) In this sense I personally equate colour with the notions of freedom inextricably bound to the concerns of the exile. Enjoying certain colour harmonies brings me great satisfaction, and according to Jacqueline Lichtenstein '(Colour is) a pleasure that exceeds discursiveness' (Batchelor 2008,14). In this way we can explore, through painting, the freedoms that the irrationality of colour offers as a transcendence of the rational.

'Unlike the vivid and vibrant springlike colours of Monet's watery lily pad paintings, my watery colour pools are tainted, slightly murky, more obscure. The effervescent impression of light gives way to a diminishing luminescence. In correspondence to this analogy of watery colours, I explore the possibilities of painting with water based pigments and deploy various methods to achieve my desired muted washes. The abstract colourfield paintings of Helen Frankenthaler in the 1940's come to mind. Admired for their appearance of intuitive freshness, an aspect I wish to capture, as it alludes to the non-static nature of water and life. Pondering my own once clear backyard swimming pool, where I formerly took some Zen inspired photographs of 'lenticel' shaped leaves floating safely on the surface, I notice their texture and colours are in contrast with the infinity evoking liquid blueness beyond. This morning, contemplating this, I salvage the now dark and decaying organic leaf debris from the bottom of the greening murky pool, with a scoop net and chlorine attempting to clarify the darkening waters. This strikes me as a surreal metaphor for delving into the subconscious realm, to bring matters to the surface, only the scoop net is replaced with a paintbrush and the chlorine, the clarifying element, is replaced with writing and reflection.'

(Michael Gabriel Francas. *Journal Extract*- 2013)



18. *Pool*. photograph by Michael Gabriel Francas.

This sensitivity to colour and nature has played an important role in my life as typical for many budding landscape artist, and according to Capon (2013) it was Nolan's love of nature that drove his creations onward. Fondly I recall many rural outings with my father, learning by his side, the art of watercolour painting to interpret a landscape scene. This love of nature is evidently a shared Lithuanian sentiment. 'The Lithuanian artist is born with a sense of colour and form...His impulsiveness is the outcome of intuition....Rationalization and mechanization are not in his line.' (Valeska c1946)



19. Renowned Lithuanian artist. M.K. Ciurlionis.

Thoughts. 1907. Pastel on paper.

84.7 x 67.7 cm.

The word 'Obscurity,' refers to low lighting and the hidden, which raises enticing connotations of twilight and duskiness, smokiness or haziness, all visual allusions relevant to my image making in context of evoking mystery and ambiguity. 'Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow.' (Levinas 1949,131)

This 'twilight' aesthetic has permeated Australian landscape painting, as evidenced in many works such as the Whistlerian inspired 'tonal school' of Max Meldrum, his students such as Clarice Beckett, and the dusky paintings of David Davies, whose work according to Frederick McCubbin. 'seemed the result of long contemplative brooding over the subdued effects of quiet light' (Lynn1977,48)



20. David Davies, *Moonrise*. C1894. Oil on grey academy board 40.0 x 69.1 cm

It is this twilit tonality, which contributes to poeticizing space and imagery, as suggested by David Thomas referring to the paintings of Rupert Bunny describing 'an interest in twilight effects with their poetic and lyrical overtones.'

(Thomas1970,26)

The assertion by Levinas(1949) that, where common language abdicates, a poem or a painting speaks, is a reference to the profusion of possibilities imaginable by the use of ambiguity in image or word, which essentially offers multiple 'transparent' meanings and therefore interpretations. One way I try to achieve this, is by use of a frequently recurring elliptical form, prevalent in my painted images and here referred to as a 'lozenger'. The origin of the lozenge shape can be traced to my 2012 paintings, which dwelt upon the form the football oval.



21. Michael Gabriel Francas. *Untitled* 2012.

Ink, pastel and paint on paper. 15.0 x 10.0 cm.

The human figures formerly populating the ovals are now absent from the 'scape, removing any reference to human scale and thus adding ambiguity as well as highlighting a sense of isolation. Partially or fully depicted, vaguely implied or

definite, the lozenge now offers a myriad of possible evocations, such as allusions to water in the shape of a bay, a shore line, a lake or pond, Clouds, shadows, distant headlands or just a free floating patch of colour, referring only to itself. Much equivocation in apparent depth is also rendered possible by the variation of colour, tone, transparency, opaqueness or gloss. This desired confusion is alluded to with Nolans earlier collages, 'a constant slippage between surface and depth, the recognizable and suggestive, order and chaos, rationality (the grid) and derangement ...and a constant flux.' (Chapman,1993,14)

The allusions to the famous water lily paintings by the great impressionist colour master Monet cannot escape my attention. The thought of the floating leafy ovals offering a place to take refuge amidst the mysterious flowing currents of water that surround, and of course also support each isolated leaf, is among the myriad possible interpretations we can consider for the lozenge. The seeming opposite interpretations of, on the one hand, a nourishing waterhole to the thirsty desert dwelling exile or on the other, a floating island sanctuary amidst the watery abyss of the tired swimmer adds to its ambiguity.



22. Michael Gabriel Francas *Untitled* 2013.
acrylic on paper 14.8 X 14.8 cm

More recently, adding to the possible correspondences was the discovery of the lozenge shape prolific upon the bark of the birch tree. The birch is highly significant to the Lithuanian people, and I recall my father fondly recounting boyhood tales among the birch forests of his homeland. The discovery of a lone, dying birch in my own backyard came to my attention when I first leaned a painting against it. The

fascinating thin horizontal lozenge shaped scars, which render the birch bark so distinctly are named 'lenticels'.



23. *Painting on Birch tree.*
photographs by Michael Gabriel Francas.



24. *Birch Bark.*

The essence of creative thought, 'divergent thinking,' alludes to this capacity to make multitude correspondences. Some correspondences seem obvious, based on simple resemblances (Levinas1949) such as colour, texture or shape. It is not difficult for instance to make the correlation between the syrupy golden shellac varnishes I have been applying to my painting with the golden yellow colour of amber, formed from a sticky sap, to that of golden sticky honey. In a poetic sense, this implies not only relatedness, but possible substitutions of ideas which implies a symbolic function.(Levinas1949) e.g. substituting shellac for amber to connote (with a more available and inexpensive ersatz product) any cultural meanings vested in the amber itself.

The significance of intuition in unearthing these connections comes to light here. Shellac was a substance I was simply attracted to using. There was no logical driver for this attraction apparent to me, other than a magnetic desire to play with it, perhaps being drawn aesthetically by the translucent golden tonal qualities. It was not until more recently, after a series of 'coincidences,' that, I realized its potential symbolic value in my art. Discovering the birch tree in the backyard,

recalling it's Baltic significance, relating that to the substance derived from the sap of a tree in the form of amber, a substance also of great significance in the Baltic. Another intuitive attraction, for no particular reason at the time was to be painting on wood, which I started painting with pigmented shellac allowing the woodgrain to be perceived, even highlighted (adjusting the variation between gloss and matt finishes which alter the reflectivity or 'absorption' of the surface, again an allusion to visual qualities noted from nature, e.g. the mirror like surface of a still pond). Again, it is only later, upon uncovering the Birch associations with my heritage, that the use of wood gained deeper significance for me.



25. Michael Gabriel Francas, *untitled*, 2013. Pigments and Shellac on Marine grade plywood. 60.0 x 60.0 x 0.6 cm

By contrast, the confining parameters such as the square format, refer not to nature, but to logical systems. These pre-empted strategies, which for me signify analytical processes such as the language of discursive logic, are most notably represented in my allusions to line, perspective and the grid. My initial foray into the production of a 'whitened perspective line' proceeded from the context of my 2011 touchstone painting 'purity field'.



26. Michael Gabriel Francas, *Purity Field*
acrylics on canvas. 2012. 76.5 x 48.0 cm

The lines were simply painted freehand. Masking fluid was first painted and then erased in a latter process, which exposed the white canvas support beneath the subsequent thin paint layers. These early examples were rustic and a little crude in the nature of their execution. Since the allusion is now to a rigid system of thought as represented by the line, subsequent attempts using a ruler as an aid to scribe a straighter line has been useful and preferred regarding the effectiveness of visual outcomes, but just as importantly, because it *feels* different to use a ruler rather than the freehand method. It feels more precise, more linear, more controlled, and these associations comport more closely to the desired concepts, which have been alluded to. A ruler, surely must be the perfect symbol in itself to represent the rigid measuring systems devised by man to gauge and articulate and thus assert control over the natural world. Marcel Duchamp commenting on Kandinsky tracing his line

with a ruler states, 'It was no more the lines of the subconscious, but a deliberate condemnation of the emotional; a clear transfer of thought on canvas.' (Sanouillet and Peterson 1973,151) The choice of 'whiteness' in the line, contrasts with the use of colour, which denotes within my work, the irrational. Countering the impression of 'solidity' that a blacker line might imply is also helpful to increase a sense of uncertainty undermining the 'definiteness' of logic.



27 Michael Gabriel Francas. *Untitled*.

Water based pigments and Shellac on paper.

41.5 x 41.5 cm

The straight white line then becomes a perfect metaphor to describe the 'fixity' established by the analytic mindset. The fixed white lines in my work, reminds me of a cage, or the constraints of a fence such as those of a detention centre. An appropriate 2 dimensional representation of a cage would be the grid, represented by the format chosen for the images, that of *the square*. As I am interested in symbolically 'dissolving' the architecture,(setting the captive colour free) this would suggest a process that involves first, constructing architectural linework with varying degrees of 'presence' and then the application of alternative methods to 'dilute' or erase its presence. Variable factors include the length, width and the depth of line, with none of these factors necessarily being uniform throughout the length or life of the line. Depending on the *precision* of line desired, various methods and mediums have been trialed and compared. Painted, drawn, scratched, cut, embossed, folded, rubbed, masked, burnt, bleached are just a few possible ways to describe

the establishment of a line, whether continuous or intermittent. The suitability and effectiveness of the mediums or methods chosen can also be influenced by the constituent nature of the support chosen. e.g. an embossed line may be effective for certain types of paper but ineffective on a thick plywood support, conversely the plywood surface accepts a line made by a deep cut incision whereas paper given a similar treatment is dissected. Further to this is the element of 'speed in execution'. The line element is the aspect in my work which can allude to the rapidity of logical thinking in contradistinction to the slower meandering movements enacted in other aspects of the painted work.

Paradoxically, the preferential method I have developed regarding line work, came about by chance. While attempting to print a line by pressing an image onto some painted newspaper, some random news text was imparted onto the line image. This immediately struck me as interesting both visually and symbolically, considering the links of discursive logic to language and the well known associations between Surrealism and writing, in which 'Poetic text and the visual image were fused so that a hierarchy between the two was abolished.'(Chapman1993,2) The connection to the collage work of artists such as Kurt Schwitters came to mind, but also the more obviously text laden contemporary landscape paintings of Australian artist Imants Tillers, winner of the 2012 and 2013 Wynne Art Prize for Landscape.



28. Michael Gabriel Francas. *Untitled*.
Water based pigments and Shellac
on paper. 19.5 x 19.5 cm

Upon investigation of Tillers work, it would appear that while the aesthetic differs dramatically between our images, it would seem our motivations and intentions are congruent. Referring to his Diaspora series from the 1990s, I note several similarities. To start with Tillers work is in reference to his Baltic heritage, and he was 'interested in poetic, evocative ways to convey'...in works 'relating to the dislocation of people from their original homelands,'(NGA2013) The correlation also extend to the fragmented grid like format which includes a vast array of small components of images and text references. These components can be shown independently or inter-connected in large works. Perhaps the motivation is different (It was suggested that he chose the format based on confined studio space), but the coincidence remains. Tillers composites often fit together to form a 'bigger picture' as though perhaps once homogeneous, prior to dessication. My images on the other hand are disparate and do not seek to present a unified landscape, but rather, when combined, an *atmosphere* of 'scapes. Likewise the text and figurative elements in Tillers work appear to be more obvious, more legible, than my own renditions seek to be.



29. Imants Tillers *Thou Majestic* : A 2009 Acrylic & goauche on 25 canvas boards. 127 x 177.8 cm(overall assembled size)



30. Michael Gabriel Francas- *Multiple Untitled works on paper.*

Water based pigments on paper. 41.6 x 41.6 cm. EA.



31. Michael Gabriel Francas- *Multiple Untitled works on wood. (Detail)* Various pigments and shellac on marine grade plywood. (small panels –60 x 60cm, large panels 120 x 120cmSQ)

The work of Tillers calls into question the issue of scale. Earlier painters such as Mark Rothko have explored large scale paintings. According to a Manifesto Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb sent to the New York Times They advocated the large shape because it has the 'impact of the unequivocal'. They also regarded art as an 'adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.' into a world of the imagination that is 'fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.' (Rothko and Gottlieb, 1947) This 'unknown' is the mystery Waldemar Januszczak (2009) refers to in his documentary *Ugly Beauty*, when he suggests, that in this information age, proliferated by technologies advanced by science, that perhaps we 'know too much' and are therefore yearning for mystery, and that it is Art, that can connect us to this mystery we seek.

My experiments have trialed various sized and toned images, using multiple techniques and mediums in an attempt to allude to mystery, and achieve a poetic intimacy. Multi-layered obfuscating processes which may include dipping in pigments, brush work, screeding, printing, embossing, smoking etc combine to evoke ambiguity. Preference in my work leans to images that do not seek to overwhelm in terms of the immersion into a monumental scale or 'over loud' colour range. Gauging the relationship between artwork and viewer, a more subtle space is proposed whilst traversing the *neither here nor there*, a more seductive, pondering presence, disrupted by fractures of the past and glimpses to the future. The 'scape, that becomes familiarized by an ethically balanced engagement, coaxed from meandering while paying attention. At once vast, though replete with minutiae if you take the time to peruse. Neither overwhelming nor underwhelming, simply whelming.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has drawn a correspondence between the exploration of painting as a venture into the unfamiliar, with the condition of exile, – also a venture into the unknown. The research of Kuiziniene into the diaspora of Lithuanian artists in exile, established alternate responses to exile ranging between, a despondent longing to the past, in contrast to a more optimistic and proactive engagement with an unfamiliar environment. These ‘fixed,’ or ‘flexible’ responses, have in turn been correlated by me with the ‘fixed analytical mind set’ and the ‘flexible divergent creative mind’ established by recent neuroscientific investigations, into various modes of thinking, with encouraging implications for the innovative exile and artist alike.

The relevance of painting in a contemporary society dominated by scientific reasoning was queried in my thesis question. Painting is relevant generally, as being considered one of the myriad artistic pursuits that embody the creative modes being explored by neuroscience and therefore, possibly beneficial for brain development, *providing* there is a significant element of surprise and discovery for the painter / viewer, rather than a resort back to well worn techniques or styling in a form of mannerism. The elements of chance and divergent thinking, basically Surrealist principles, have been explored in my painting practices and combined with pre-empted ‘logical’ techniques to create a tension in the image outcomes, with the intention to produce ambiguous atmospheric paintings. In actual practice, I found that the distinctions between the two modes was not so clear, with the emergence of grey areas, such as the accidental appearance of text while trying to print a straight ruled line. The chance aspects have been generally more beneficial in terms of surprise discoveries while the more pre-empted analytic strategies served better to set some parameters, aiding to resolve the work via reflection and the critique of outcomes, with respect to producing final images and this exegesis.

In Levinas’ estimation, it is this component of critique, which brings Art and in this case also this artist, out of obscurity and into the community of discursive ideas. The ‘community’ in this case has been shown to be an interdisciplinary contemporary milieu of art, science and the ‘culture,’ Merkas calls home.

It can also be demonstrated that painting maintains an important relevance in Australia, both anecdotally from my observations at Curtin University Art department with its hive of activity evident in the painting studios, together with the interest in painting shown by contemporary art galleries. For instance the current Surrealist exhibit on loan from MOMA showing at the Western Australian Art Gallery attests to the interest of painting also to wider audiences and is reinforced by major painting prizes such as the Wynns Landscape prize, and the production of recent documentaries such as *The art of Australia*, which features contemporary painters and the historic context. Painting will remain relevant as long as it retains its mystery, and therefore its correspondence to 'the unknown' via allusion, that has always fascinated humankind and therefore the Artworld.

It is hoped therefore, by these findings and implications, that a positive light is cast on those experiences in life, which confront the unknown, so often regarded as a negative predicament. In my practice, I do not lean to obvious, loud or chaotic methods to evoke obscurity. Ambiguity for me is a subtle affair. Ambiguity in my work is derived from worlds obscured, more akin to poetry. I propose an atmosphere of quiet yet disquieting ambience, a blurry mingling of quasi-references and quasi-tones. These are not 'scapes that seek to do away entirely with logic, but simply and subtly vouch for the ever present mystery that is a fact of our existence. For there to be a *known* world articulated by logic, there must then also be an *unknown* present, for there to be a knowable we require an unknowable. Poetry and hopefully my paintings can allude to the obscure ineffable that we sometimes long for, and all inescapably encounter.

POSTSCRIPT.

The discovery of the backyard birch seemed the perfect metaphor for the artist in exile, very alone on foreign soil. So it was with dismay that I recently watched it fall, making its peace with the ground. Comforted only by the thought of this bringing new beginnings, (symbolism of the birch), I look forward to gaining deeper understanding of my Lithuanian heritage which I am only just awakening to. Currently I am investigating the possibility of travelling with my son to the Baltic to trace my father's footsteps.

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