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## Imaginative Geographies: Visualising the Poetics of History and Space

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## Imaginative Geographies: Visualising the Poetics of History and Space

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As a migrant of twenty-five years, I still have no connection or affection for the Australian landscape. It is difficult to erase one's past: memories of Yorkshire's rolling hills, moist peat grass enveloped by a low, wet mist that seemed to osmotically shape one's psyche to a point where memory becomes an unconscious architecture on which we view all others. By comparison, the Australian bush appears featureless and barren, belonging to someone else, a place of emptiness and a space yet to be defined by histories that have yet to be told.

To add to this feeling of alienation, I inherit a legacy of colonisation and privilege that is negative, through which my actions as an artist and commentator have been heavily influenced. Jacqueline Lo borrows from Tessa Morris Suzuki's theory of 'implication' as a means of understanding and accepting inherited responsibilities as individuals:

'Implication' means the existence of a conscious connection to the past, but also the reality of being (in a legal sense) 'an accessory after the fact'. We who live in the present did not create the violence and hatred of the past. But the violence and hatred of the past, to some degree, created *us*. It formed the material world and the ideas with which we live, and will continue to do so unless we take active steps to unmake their consequences. (2012, 22)

To Lo's idea, I would add Zygmunt Bauman's thesis on liquid individuals, which describes how "reality should be emancipated from the dead hand of its own history...dissolving whatever persists over time and is negligent of its passage or immune to its flow" (2000, 3). Comparisons, of course, are onerous, but what my personal diaspora offers is an opportunity to *unmake these consequences* and to re-examine my sense of reality and place through a visual study of our socio-political landscape.

Within this idea of a limited historical reality, the European Arcadian landscape as a transferable concept in our formation of a social order has played a major role in

the European colonisation of Australia, a cornerstone within postcolonial theory that is most evident in the construction of our parks and gardens. It is the idea of a simulated and nostalgic landscape that I expose through my visual artworks.

Central to these simulated spaces is the thread of emotive nostalgia, particularly 'restorative' nostalgia, which Deleuze and Guattari define as a nostalgia that focuses on *nostos*<sup>1</sup> and aims to reconstruct the lost home, often in association with religious or nationalist revivals (quoted in Legg 2004). Arcadia is an imaginary and socially constructed space in which pastoral harmony is played out in various creative guises. The classic Eurocentric interpretation of Arcadia is relatively static, and was formed on a mythological and monocultural vision that reflected a particular time and place, a golden age formed through nostalgia as a "longing for a home that no longer exists—or never existed" (Legg 2004, 100). *A home that never existed* suggests that our personal and national identity forming may well have its roots in an imaginary place, an ideal landscape that only has lasting currency within the socio-politics of colonisation.

In my case, nostalgia serves an important function in reflecting on the origins of European colonisation within the development of Australian art, particularly in relation to historic references to the noble savage.<sup>2</sup> The debates around globalisation (Said 1985; McLean 2004) and hybridisation (Bhabha 1994; Papastergiadis 2003a; Ang 1997) centre on the transition of culture through diaspora and its production of hegemonic systems. It is within these systems that the maintenance of the construct of the noble savage becomes crucial to upholding both the dominant political structures within the governing systems in Australia and the construct of spiritualism that feeds the international art market in respect to the *value* of Aboriginal art.

Since the publication of Homi K. Bhabha's influential text *The Location of Culture* (1994), much postcolonial theory has focused on a broadening transnational approach that interprets today's world as a place of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000, 1). Contemporary critical literature and theory (Papastergiadis 2003a; Ika 2009; Dervin 2014) may have succeeded in developing a unified position in its attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> The English word *nostalgia* derives from *nostos* and *algos* (pains) and is used in this instance as a longing for home, and one that is constructed often as an ideal or romantic image

<sup>2</sup> The concept of the noble savage is not a singular representation of Indigenous people nor is it particular to Australian postcolonial history. It does, however, carry the most currency in terms of the underlying perception of Australian Indigenous art within the international market. Refer to authors such as Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) or Sandy Greer on ethnic stereotypes/and social histories (quoted in Burayidi, 1997, 270–71).

decentralise modernity within a more fluid and globalised dialogue. For instance, while many Asian Australians have maintained their transplanted collective traditions (Grishin 2013), many Asian Australian visual artists have focused on more individualised responses to their location (for example, John Young, Ah Xian, William Yang), perhaps in an attempt to visualise their newfound personal and hybrid identities in reaction to their feelings of being dislocated from home. Often, these individual identities are firmly situated within the binary polarities of cultural exchange in which Bhabha's (1994) thirdspace theory operates.

In response to this, I propose a dialogic space based on my ongoing experiences of working with Aboriginal artists in Western Australia and, more recently, with Chinese artists in Mainland China. Besides that felt by migrant groups, the feeling of displacement brought about through cultural transformation is often manifested in the arts by contemporary urban Aboriginal people who do not fit Western ideals of Aboriginal art and who often find themselves alienated within their own country and culture (Bell 2003; Langton 2003). Within this Sino-Australian relationship, the issues surrounding displacement and cultural identity are examined through a more fluid interpretation of space, a triangular relationship that aligns with Henry Lefebvre's theories of cumulative trialectics, which Eduard Soja describes as:

Another way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality–historicality–sociality (1996, 57)

While this model presents a spatial shift from a focus on *place* to one of *space*, the British-Australian-Chinese model I adopt disrupts the dominant study of others through traditional ethnological writing by extending the binaries of third space theory into a more three dimensional model of cultural interaction that includes the artists as auto ethnographer. This allows the artist to involve creative practice as a critical part of the self-rewriting of history, rather than offering a mere illustration of its findings. It also answers Papastergiadis's (2003) key question about the writing of history and its assumptions. In his critique of Rasheed Araeen's summary of exile and the formation of identity, Papastergiadis asks, "How can we re-write history if the language of history,

with all its Hegelian hierarchies and Eurocentric biases, is itself not challenged?" (2003, 163).

To challenge our own writing of history, we must first question our construction of time. Time as a linear construct has served us well, but is limiting in our interpretation of the complexities of cultural histories. H. Porter Abbott's (2002) description of the narrative as "giving us this understanding [of what we see not just in space but in time], gives us what could be called the "*shape of time*" (2002, 11).<sup>3</sup> This open model of time contests the traditions of linear chronological histories by aligning more closely with Keith Moxey's argument in *Visual Time* (2013) for a "heterochronic"<sup>4</sup> model of art history. Heterochronic history returns us to the power of aesthetics over semiotics: as Moxey asserts, "The work of art is... something that has the power to break time by addressing us directly and by demanding an aesthetic response" (2013, 31).

Cumulative trialectics interpreted through a British-Sino-Australian experience offers a new reading of identity forming across time and cultural divides. Aboriginal and Chinese cultures, although very different, share important markers of identity and one could argue that their identity, to a greater or lesser extent, has been formed *in* and *by* the West (Kus 2008) and in response *to* the West (Roberts 1999). Within the Occidentalism-versus-Orientalism discourse, an oppositional geographical binary is constructed, or what Said terms "imaginative geography" (1985, 2), where the colonising force justifies its actions as beneficial to the "other" through the perceived (imagined) validation that elevates one national culture over another. In his refused designation of the terms "Occident" and "Orient", Said (1985) makes the point that once a simplified oppositional model is constructed in this way, the Orient naturally inherits aspects of the primitive, giving rise to the maintenance of the noble savage, particularly in indigenous cultures of the East. The labelling of "primitive" extends well beyond Eastern culture, but in terms of the East–West divide, the proliferation of primitivism still has potency within dominant political and cultural hegemonic construction.

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<sup>3</sup> Abbott's mention of "the shape of time" is a direct reference to George Kubler's (1962) classic text *The Shape of Time* in which the relationship between time and space is discussed.

<sup>4</sup> Heterochrony means 'different timing' and derives from allometry and the relationships between organs and organisms.

## Imaginary communities in flux

Unlike nineteenth-century art and literature, the imaginary community I am proposing is not the result of a romantic attempt to contribute to the formation of a collective national identity, or particularly one based on Arcadian principles. What I propose is the opposite: an imaginary community where the yet-to-be connected component parts are exposed and recognised as a true representation of complexity, incommensurability and non-fixity. This presents an unresolved space, as Moxey suggests in his thesis on heterochronic storytelling where he states “these essays ally themselves with persistent questions, never pretending that they can be settled for good” (2013, 8).

Within this spatial framework, both Aboriginal and Chinese cultures are constantly referred to in generalised terms as synchronic cultures that are static rather than in flux. While the classification of synchronic culture is useful as a representation of a deeper and embedded spiritualism generally associated with Orientalism, this classification only has meaning as a comparative binary opposite to the dynamic characteristics of diachronic cultures, and, in this case, a classification constructed, again, in the West. In actuality, both Aboriginal and Chinese cultures are in constant flux (Kus 2008; Frink and Perkins 2005), regularly responding to shifting dimensions of migration and urbanisation while simultaneously retaining visual traditions that are timeless and unique. The dynamic Aboriginal–Chinese nexus presents a complex and deeply spiritual<sup>5</sup> space that goes well beyond a visual critique of multicultural societies and the hybridisation of culture.

As a visual artist, I have developed a working method that shares themes and ideas with multiple crossovers between the mediums and techniques at play, and that is driven by an underpinning theoretical discourse that questions time and place. For example, my use of found jigsaws involves the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of images that contain many uncontrolled elements, parts that both add and subtract from the key themes and narratives. This use and manipulation of found objects and the new meanings brought about through their reconstruction acknowledges such artists as Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel

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<sup>5</sup> I use the word ‘spiritual’ as a common term of reference for both Aboriginal and Chinese visual culture, which highlight the human spirit and a profound sense of belonging to place.

Duchamp, who were pioneers of assemblage. Robert Hughes describes Cornell's approach to referencing the past through found objects as follows: "To others, these deposits might be refuse, but to Cornell they were the strata of repressed memory, a jumble of elements waiting to be grafted and mated to one another" (1997, 499). I take a similar approach in making objects that refer to past memories while at the same time suggest new narratives.

To achieve this, I have returned to a narrative approach in my jigsaw artworks in order to articulate the complex issues surrounding the hybridisation of culture. Habermas, in discussing narration in his definition of the everyday concept of the lifeworld<sup>6</sup>, asserts:

Narration is a specialized form of constative speech that serves to describe socio-cultural events and object...This everyday concept carves out of the objective world the region of narratable events or historical facts. Narrative practice not only serves trivial needs for mutual understanding among members trying to co-ordinate their common tasks: it also has a function in the self-understanding of persons. (1989, 136)

While this statement refers directly to narrative speech, it can be applied to narrative images. Indeed, because of the contestation that arises through the formation of hybrid cultures and its association with miscommunication and misrepresentation between spoken languages (Ang 1997, 59), the narrative image has the potential to carry more agency than textual language as a legitimate carrier of meaning, and perhaps more importantly as a stimulator for the imagination.

### **The artworks**

While James Clifford (1986) suggests that culture exists "between subjects" (15), Julia Lossau (2009) describes thirdspace as being beyond its singular spatial meaning by asserting that "thirdspace tends to be transformed into a bounded space which is located next to or, more precisely, in between other bounded spaces, *like a piece of a jigsaw*" (Ikas and Wagner 2009, 70). Utilising the jigsaw as a metaphor for social reconstruction offers a play between form and function that is open to new meaning,

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<sup>6</sup> Lifeworld is a collective term for all the immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of an individual or corporate life.

particularly where the intersections between reconstructed jigsaws are awkward and ill fitting.

The underlying comic mimicry in my narrative work therefore acts to emphasise hybrid and misinterpreted language rather than to explain it; therefore, I assume the role of the trickster. As an example of this hybrid mimicry being used to examine and articulate the British-Australian-Chinese trialectic model, my work entitled *Uncool Britannia* (Figure 3) attempts a triangulation through its overt references to colonisation and culturally specific folklore, with its reference to Vivien Westwood's *God Save the Queen* series of graphic posters in the 1980s (figures 1 & 2).



**Figures 1&2** Vivien Westwood *God Save the Queen* (left & middle)

**Figure 3** Clive Barstow *Uncool Britannia* (right)

UK art critic and writer Jean Fisher used the traditional figure of the trickster as a way to contest globalisation, which Papastergiadis highlights in his book *Cultural Identity and Its Boredom: Transculturalism and Its Ecstasy* (2003).<sup>7</sup> McLean cites Fisher who derives her idea of the trickster, in part, from Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. However, as Bakhtin made clear, “the carnival’s inversions affirm rather than threaten the dominant power. The trickster is a survivor not a revolutionary” (quoted in McLean 2004, 301).

<sup>7</sup> The other trickster that Papastergiadis invokes is the early-nineteenth-century Aborigine, Bungaree. Today we may see his jokes as ironic parodies of colonial power, but in his day, he was merely laughed at by the colonists: he was considered a sign of the desperate impotence of Aborigines in early colonial Sydney (McLean 2004, 301). Bungaree was Mathew Flinders's Aboriginal guide and advisor. He often dressed as a British naval officer with astute comic mimicry, and welcomed new arrivals to the land. In this respect, Bungaree too was a survivor, not a revolutionary.



The visualising of power has generated a bi-product culture<sup>8</sup> in Australia and, perhaps more importantly, attitudes toward appropriation that have had damaging consequences for Aboriginal artists in particular. This was highlighted in the heated debate surrounding *The Nine Shots* (1985) by Imants Tillers<sup>9</sup> in which Gordon Bennett took particular exception to the notion of pre- and post-Aboriginal art in which appropriation and hegemony sat at its core (Morphy 2005). While Grishin (1997) mentions only briefly Tillers' "collaboration largely within a theoretical framework of post-modernist appropriation" (1997, 497), the lengthy debate that surrounded this work served as a catalyst for how Aboriginal art has been used "as a reference point" (North 2001, 36). In Bennett's case, as with a number of contemporary Aboriginal artists, this conflicted debate resulted in a "bounce" (McLean 2001, 38), where a two-way interplay occurs between cultural groups, exemplified in Bennett's postmodern response *Nine Ricochets* in 1990.

In my artworks *War* and *Piece* (Figures 4 and 5), a wordplay on Tolstoy's classic novel *War and Peace* (1869), I pitch the conflicts of war and hegemony against those of the idealised and illusionary aspects of our developing hybrid communities, particularly those of a colonised Australia. These artworks attempt a critique by utilising ironic humour and political satire while avoiding appropriation or any direct reference to individual situations in the form of protest. In this respect, they contain multiple readings that refer to European classicism, while revealing sub-themes as lost or selective histories within the construction of the colony.

*War* (Figure 4) presents a number of meta-narratives connected to civil war, such as the contribution of early Disney characterisation in which racism and propaganda played its part in a nation's systematic erasure of its Native American culture. The appearance of Minnie Mouse offers an element of seduction and manipulation to this deconstruction of black Indigenous culture in which reality and illusion converge as oppositional forces. Ironically, in the jigsaw fragment I have used, a white dove of peace lands on Minnie's hat, a moment made more poignant by recent sentiment following the tragic events in Charleston in 2015. Similar parallels between Indigenous histories have been highlighted by Gordon Bennett in his 2002 post-9/11 series of works *Notes to*

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<sup>8</sup> By 'bi-product culture', I mean a culture based on the translation of another culture but in a limited and diluted form.

<sup>9</sup>For further reading on this, see Bourne (2013).

Basquiat (*Death of Irony*), “which explicitly draws Australian and American colonial history and contemporary New York into the same narrative” (McLean 2003, 38).



**Figure 4** Clive Barstow *War*

The construction of Australia’s narratives surrounding national identity are paralleled in *Piece* (Figure 5), in which the construction of an Arcadian landscape with its nostalgic references to European classicism plays a similar role in de-identifying Aboriginal existence through the phrase *terra nullius*<sup>10</sup>. Adopting another early European-style settler painting as a backdrop, that of *The Buffalo Ranges* by Nicholas Chevalier of 1864, *Piece* attempts to piece together the whitewash of black culture in which artists appear to paint an Arcadian mythological scene ignorant to the realities of place and time. *The Buffalo Ranges* was the first painting of an ‘Australian’ subject added to the National Gallery of Victoria’s art collection and illustrates a transplanted

<sup>10</sup> *Terra nullius* (/ˈtɛrə.nʌˈlɪəs/, plural *terrae nullius*) is a Latin expression meaning “nobody’s land”, and is a principle sometimes used in international law to describe territory that may be acquired by a state’s occupation of it.

European Arcadia, borrowing the horse and cart of Constable's *Hay Wain*, along with the chocolate-box rendering of the landscape in the English watercolour tradition. The romanticising of whiteness enters in the form of nymphs from Greek mythology, in this case from the 1890 romantic painting *L'Amour et Psyche Enfants* by William Adolphe Bouguereau, emphasising the basis of mythological constructs and the resulting realisation of shared belief systems through colonisation and indoctrination.

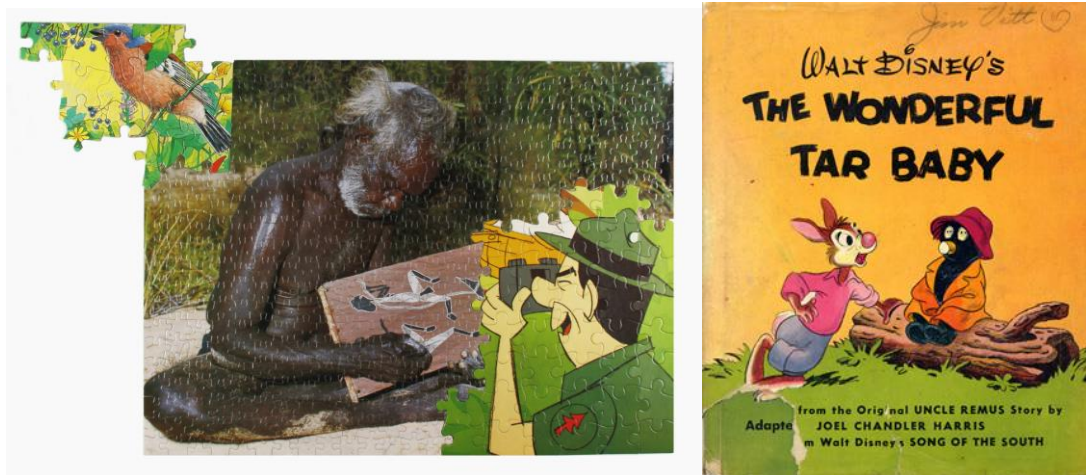


**Figure 5** Clive Barstow *Piece*

*War* and *Piece* draw parallels between the political and cultural constructs that have contributed to white dominance in America and Australia, and exposes the role played by visual culture in maintaining and promoting mythological narratives, reflecting Bhabha's theoretical position of incommensurability within thirdspace. The dual work also suggests that while the misrepresentation of indigenous culture is highlighted in times of conflict, it is equally virulent and enduring in times of peace.

A work that more overtly deals with racial classification, *Flora, Fauna and the*

*Ranger* (Figure 6), depicts a park ranger recording what he sees in nature, a reference to the early British and Dutch anthropologists in Australia. Racism through scientific documentation and classification can be traced back to Carolus Linnaeus (Swedish) and Johann Blumenbach (German) in the early eighteenth century, and is evidenced as recently as 1958 with a study of the Fijians by Norman Gabel (an American). Here the connection is formed between racism and the gaze of the ethnographer through literature and illustrated scientific texts, forming the basis for our lasting attitudes to the ‘other’. This jigsaw also makes direct reference to the cover of Disney’s children’s storybook *The Wonderful Tar Baby* (Harris 1946) (Figure 7), where the animalised gaze toward the black other is set in the “jungle of a far-flung British colony, [where] *Little Black Sambo* was immediately recognizable to Americans as an allegory of race and consumption” (Dingwall 2014, para 4).



**Figure 6** Clive Barstow *Flora Fauna and the Ranger* (left)

**Figure 7** Joel Harris *The Wonderful Tar Baby* (right)

*Flora, Fauna and the Ranger* acknowledges in part what Hal Foster terms “ideological patronage”, where the artist unsuspectingly assumes the role of “native informant” (1996, 303). The placing of the park ranger as photographer replaces the artist with an authoritative figure who records the gaze, a tactical substitution of sorts that diminishes the presence of the artist.

As an extension of the theme of native transformant across visual and written languages, *Every Road Has Two Paths* (Figure 8) translates a poem by contemporary poet Glen Philips. The image reflects a text that suggests the literal translation of Daoism as “The Way” or “The Road” as an explanation of change and transition as a process of reality itself. The image combines two interpretations of nature: one is a photographic construct of a British rural landscape; the other is a classic Chinese brush painting of birds, a symbol that reoccurs throughout my work as a meta-symbol of peace, life, death and deception. The tree transitions between East and West and between reality and illusion as a signifier of transference, while the path refers to Gillian Darley’s “narrative thread” (1997, 73), a connection between spaces and events that connects the road of Daoist philosophy to that of Arcadian idealism.



Figure 8 Clive Barstow & Glen Philips *Every Road Has Two Paths*

Certain elements of psychoanalysis can offer a useful perspective in the area of narrative meaning and particularly in the understanding of the transference and interpretation of symbolic meaning between artist and audience. In his book *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, Peter Brooks approaches the criticism and analysis of poetry and creative literature as a conduit to unravelling Freud's dream theories through the connections between the conscious and unconscious state. He proposes that:

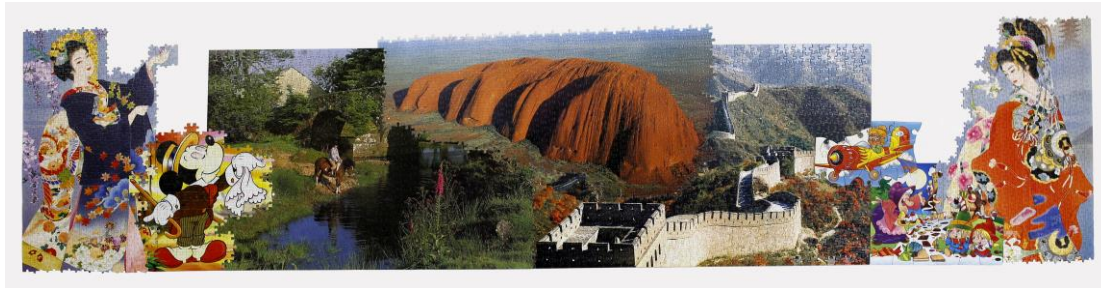
Psychoanalysis matters to us as literary critics because it stands as a constant reminder that the attention to form, properly conceived, is not a sterile formalism, but rather one more attempt to draw the symbolic and fictional map of our place in existence. (1994, 44)

There are two elements within psychoanalytical theory that I find most productive in contextualising my perception of space, place, and time in my current jigsaw works, moving into Lefebvre's trialectics of spatiality: (1) those of the chronological transference of meaning; and (2) and the culturally specific interpretation of missing information (or erasure). While assembling these jigsaws, I was acutely aware of the cultural implications of the missing pieces, particularly within the context of the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal people in Australia and the erasure of Aboriginal culture in the early settler paintings I regularly use in my jigsaw assemblages. As Langton (2003) points out:

The very idea of an 'Australian' landscape is based on erasure. This erasure is not simply that of nature subsumed and recast by culture, but that of the distinctly Aboriginal, autochthonous spiritual landscapes obliterated by the recreant settler visions which literally followed the frontier in the canvas bags of artists who came to paint the new land. (52)

Assuming there are cultural differences at play within the transference models of meaning within psychoanalytical theory, I make assumptions about storytelling that might be pertinent for the British, Australian, and Chinese triangular relationship with which I am currently working. Involving the British-Chinese-Australian nexus (such as *Entering An-arcadia*, Figure 9 and *Otherview* Figure 10), the notion of transference through absence (represented through missing jigsaw pieces) is conveyed within Daoist (and Buddhist) philosophy as emptiness, having "existed from the beginning of Chinese

thought” (Cheng 1994, 94). Daoism explains this emptiness as being the connecting space between the physical and the spiritual world, a common element that has consistency of meaning across all aspects of this trialectic cultural model.



**Figure 9** Clive Barstow *Entering Anarcadia*



**Figure 10** Clive Barstow *Otherview*

The Psychological observations of what is missing in Freud’s silent absence, as a metaphysical and ultimately disorienting construct of space, has connections to what Frank White (1987) termed the ‘overview effect’, where astronauts experience a cognitive shift in their sense of space while viewing earth from a distance. From this removed position, according to his interviews with returned astronauts, national boundaries disappear and the conflicts that divide people and nations become less significant. As White observes, “Although feelings of awe and self-transcendence associated with the overview effect are episodic... these changes seem primarily to entail greater affiliation with humanity as a whole, as well as an abiding concern and passion for the wellbeing of earth” (1987, 39).

White's observations from space make connections with Bakhtin's (1992) dialogic theories on infinite time and space where meanings are never closed; rather, they interact and inform each other. In his description of the chronotope, neither time nor space are privileged over each other but are interdependent elements that work with and for each other. In a discussion about Bakhtin's notions regarding "the time/space continuum that gives shape to a novel", Shumway observes "As the novel shifts from one chronotope to another, the gaps and silences that are a necessary part of the representation of an ideology will become increasingly noticeable to the perceptive reader" (1994, 182). The connections between the complex narrative chronotopes in Bakhtin's dialogics and Freud's observations on silence and erasure in psychoanalysis are brought together to form a disorienting narrative through an emphasis on what is *missing* in these works (Figures 9 & 10).

Structurally, and within the confines of using the jigsaw as a found object, *Entering An-Arcadia* and *Otherview* also attempt to emulate Shan-Shui-Hua<sup>11</sup> landscape brush painting and its underpinning characteristics of multi-point and multidirectional perspective as a culturally specific reference to Daoist truth. The link to Daoism materialises in the three main elements of Shan-Shui-Hua art: the path, the threshold, and the heart. Painters who work in the style of Shan-Shui-Hua do not present an image from what they see; rather, they attempt to paint what they *think* about nature, reflecting not the viewer's eye but the mind. In this respect the connections between social and cumulative trialectics and Shan-Shui-Hua painting offer opportunities to incorporate the future into a past and present dialogue as a past, present and future trialectic.

Visual images in the form of reconstructed jigsaws therefore present a mindset, or what Lefebvre refers to as mind space, or "the quasi-logical presupposition of an identity between mental space (the space of the philosophers and epistemologists) and real space... [which is an] abyss between the mental sphere on one side and the physical and social spheres on the other" (1991, 6). It is within and between the mental sphere and the physical and social spheres that these artworks operate.

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<sup>11</sup> Shan-Shui-Hua Chinese brush painting is a form of visualisation based on Daoist philosophy in which elements of history and place come together to form a unified vision of reality. Like European Arcadia, Shan-Shui-Hua is an illusionary and imagined place constructed to maintain cultural histories based on nostalgia (*nostos*).



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