

Journey to the Centre of the Stony Rises: Liza McCosh's Volcanic Series

Descend, bold traveller, into the crater... and you will attain the centre of the earth.

Jules Verne

Liza McCosh travels from her home on the coast at Warrnambool to work at Deakin University's Koorie Institute on the coast at Geelong. In doing so she traverses the volcanic landscape. She skirts Framlingham Forest and Aboriginal Trust, the volcanic eruptions of the Sisters and Mt Noorat, the crusty salt rimmed crater lake of Gnotuk, and the town of Camperdown nestling into the maar of Mt Leura, and past Mt Wiridgil. McCosh then encounters the volcanic upheaval and barrier of the Stony Rises – a low rise of rocky outcrops, covering approx 150 square kms. The area is a complex coalescence of dormant volcanoes, lava flows, rocky ridges, collapsed blisters and caverns, brackish and fresh water lakes, peat bogs and lagoons.

Humans have lived in this landscape for approx 50,000 years (Joyce 2009) and witnessed the volcanic upheavals; evidence of their occupation – middens, structures and fish traps – are remnant features in the landscape. Mega-fauna once roamed the Stony Rises, and fossilised giant wombat claws and pearly opalised kangaroo teeth are found on the clay pans by shifting lakeside lunettes.

The Stony Rises presented an inhospitable barrier to the first Europeans but the pioneering Manifold brothers penetrated the rugged and dense bushland and in 1838 reached the fresh water source of Lake Purrumbete and called it 'the wished for land' (Manifold 1984). Then others followed: settlers, scientists and artists... including Eugène von Guérard in the 1850s, who recorded the newly explored wilderness and colonial settlement under the wide expanses of sky, and at times evoked the romantic sublime.

And now McCosh journeys to the centre of the Stony Rises.

McCosh has rigorously researched the philosophical concept of the sublime to situate her art practice. She has explored the romantic, material, feminine, geographic and ecological sublime but shies from an idealist transcendental Kantian sublime, which she perceives as problematic and privileging mind and spirit above body, matter and experience. McCosh purposely aims to collapse patriarchal dualisms by preferencing a 'material sublime' derived through the interaction of the senses with the material. She grounds herself in the materiality of her art making.

The sublime itself cannot be represented. The sublime is an experience where the mind overcomes the fear and awe of the material, often nature. But a sense of the sublime experience is often depicted in art, a joining of the material and the immaterial. The romantic art tradition depicted humans in mysterious dark woods or on the edges of precipices awed by nature, but in the same works a misty ethereal light evoked the sense that they had overcome the fear and awe and attained an enlightened sublime state.

However, humans rarely get a show in McCosh's work. It is the viewer who is overwhelmed by McCosh's elements - earth, water and sky - which McCosh admits has roots in a romantic Turner-esque tradition. She seeks the sublime experience through her art and describes instances of her encounters.

As a small child McCosh ran to the edge of a precipice at Tower Hill and was overcome by awe at the realisation of her close encounter with falling, death.

McCosh also refers to sublime moments in the making of her art. Struggles with new mediums where in desperation she haphazardly applied more materials resulting in sublime 'new and wondrous effects'. Accidents occurred, the unexpected rippling of paint or other effects, which she states 'caused the feeling of the sublime through which new insights into creativity were realised' (McCosh 2003, 9). McCosh maintains that a material sublime is of greater relevance to the contemporary artist as it 'is a sensory experience grounded in forms of material interaction... which interprets the experience as a holistic co-emergence of matter rather than the mastering of matter' (McCosh 2003, 37).

McCosh employs a chance automatism process to disrupt and defy boundaries. Describing one of her chance processes, McCosh squeezed the remains of the sponge onto the painting and found the paint 'volume and consistency changed. The paint retained air bubbles, taking on a whipped texture and the appearance of porous rock' (McCosh 2003, 25-26). The works are inherently informed by the atmospheric processes of the water cycle – fog, swirling mists, liquid, precipitation. McCosh lets the paint go where it will. The pigment curdles. Air, evaporation, defines the rest.

In *Fragment, Surge* and *Blow* McCosh's primeval, explosive phreatomagmatic eruptions of water and magma, steam and gases, and pyroclastic flows spiral out of control. Pulsatile iron pisolites (buckshot) spatter the canvas, cinder cones meld into the lava flows, scoria upheavals mould craters and the wind blown oils form lakeside lunettes, swamps and maars, tectonic depressions and monoclines. Interglacial shorelines recede and water seeps through gullies and chasms forming tunnels, lineations and sinkholes, cavities and fissures.

Automatism and marbling are synonymous with surreptitious concealment, camouflaging; it heightens and confuses the senses. Mottling is also associated with the blemishes of illness, weakness and adipocere flesh. In gendered patriarchal discourse mottled and pattern images relate to the feminine idiom. McCosh's painting *Fusion* evokes a bloody coagulation, visceral initiation, woman, birth, life, and death.

Spotted or blotched things cannot be sublime, according to Edmund Burke's *Enquiry* (Burke 1990, 75). Considering this, McCosh's blotching and mottling should deny the elevated sublime realm, but its dizzying freneticism evokes the awe preceding the sublime experience.

McCosh's marbling destroys the contrived European painting traditions, such as 'coulisses', that Von Guérard used to enclose the vista (Heathcote 2001). There is no frame of trees, rocks or mountains; it is unrestrained nature and forces. As in Gaian theory, the earth, the canvas, becomes a living, self-regulating organism. The work evokes a fear of falling, dissolution of identity, vertigo. The viewer is sucked into the vortex toward nadir. We traverse the caves and grottoes with McCosh to the molten amorphous realm bubbling beneath the surface.

McCosh allows the materials and natural processes to achieve effects. In *Vapour*, the natural vapourisation of heavily liquefied pigments and multiple overlays leave paint particles stranded in a swirling amorphous slurry. To further confuse the senses, McCosh turns the canvas sideways so that the paint runs across the canvas, seemingly defying gravity.

Automatism processes and marbling undermines the centrality of an image and creates a purported feminine, chaotic space which subverts rationalistic order and centrality. Stafford wrote about the marbling process: 'This protean and womanly attempt to adjust to the manifold meanders and openwork of matter seemed "mad" from the rationalist perspective' (Stafford 1991, 206). Yet, as Harpham noted in his treatise on the grotesque: 'Montaigne's sympathy to pined beauty does not compromise the center, but it strengthens it, for it admits everything as a possible center, and admits that the true center is beyond our grasp' (Harpham 1982, 76).

In *Spray* McCosh demonstrates order is beyond our grasp and determinedly missiles the canvas with pigment. The eruption's Medusian tendrils whip into space – the both fascinating and feared Earth Mother. While *Cataclysm* evokes the insanely intense heat and furnace of the center of the Earth, an illusionary gaseous cosmos and ether, and medium dissolve in an alchemical flux.

Latent 2, is an eerily suspended *sol noir*, or is it a black wormhole tunnelling through the molten cosmos. We are hurled into a nebulous Malin-like stellar storm (Malin, 1997). Supernovas self-destruct, cinders explode. And *Fusion 2* evokes McCosh's travels through the firestorms of Black Saturday; a lacey shroud hurls through the conflagration.

McCosh views the activity of painting as holistic – all parts of the medium and process are interconnected and have a sensory tactile significance, from the canvas ground, more than just a support for the paint, to the pigments and washes (McCosh 2003, 41). The tools and implements – sponges, brushes and brooms – become extensions of her body. It is an intrinsically intuitive material process, yet there is an order amongst the chaos, for McCosh has intellectually mastered amorphous surfaces.

There is also a spiritual dimension to McCosh's work, embodied in the ritual manipulation of the mediums. McCosh denies order, yet a natural meditative harmony exists deep in the nebulous minimalism of *Glow* where ethereal burning phosphenes blind the eyes. Influenced by Merleau Ponty's belief that if the body and world engage they become interchangeable (McCosh 2003, 47), the atmosphere of *Glow* is all encompassing, merging until there is no beginning and no end. Linear logic and identity is collapsed.

Although McCosh's work is grounded in the material, there appears to be an intellectual exploration of the ego's dissolution into the unconscious, a physical and psychic dissolution – like the mythical and paradoxical hero's descent into the abyss.

The earth, air and elements, and McCosh, are in transition.

Other works temper the fiery holocaust and connote the cooler wintry months when McCosh travels the Rises. In the *Conflux* series McCosh uses repetitive lace stencils to overlay sky and landscape to reference colonial intervention. The wavy lace stencils evoke the fragility of exploration and settlement in this strange land, and the passing undulating stone walls. Or perhaps the lace has deeper connotations. According to Thompson, males required an illusion of lace to screen woman's sex as it pertained to the terror of the sublime (Thompson 1981, 23).

Subtle lace stencils arise from *Conflux Smoulder's* Turner-esque whiteout. *Fusion Scape* evokes swirling mists, an interplay of forces envelopes the viewer in a foggy blur rising

above the lambertianaed colonial landscape. In *Travel*, the horizontal lace stencils are reminiscent of the repetition of McCosh's travel. While *Conflux 1* and *Conflux 3A* suggest the muddy spatters and dribbled sludge on the windscreen from trailing a semi (trailer) in the sleet, and *Verdant*, the safety and dreamy waft of blue sky against lace curtains in a cosy home.

And as I sit on the Mt Wiridgil I dream of what lies beneath and visualise McCosh's art. I am reminded of André Breton's evocation of the sublime: 'It is in fact impossible for the mind not to experience in it both a remarkable happiness and disturbance, a mixture of *panic-provoking* terror and joy' (Breton 1987, 40).

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