

Over the past few years I've been interested in painting environmental scenarios that focus on unusual or alternative dwellings such as mobile homes, caravans, tents, cabins and tree houses. These kinds of informal, mobile or temporary dwellings are for me potent metaphors for many of the existential issues facing humanity in our time. They raise questions about where we live, how we live and why we chose to live in the way we do. The recreational/escape vehicles in my work symbolize a vital connection with a longed for natural paradise beyond the confines of the cities most Australians live in...by *David Ralph*

The recipient of a 2000 Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships, David Ralph traveled to England at the end of 2000 to study in the Masters program at the Chelsea College of Art & Design in London. Ralph spent four years in London and has held numerous exhibitions nationally and internationally. He is represented in several public collections in Europe and Australia and has been the recipient of many awards. In the last three years he has been a finalist in the Celeste Contemporary Painting Prize, London, the Archibald Prize and the past three consecutive Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prizes amongst others.

David Ralph at Boutwell Draper Gallery, 22 April – 15 May 2010



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Unnatural voyeurs of the natural
By Ashley Crawford

Mankind once lived amidst nature. Today interaction with nature for most of us is, at best, a potted plant. As we have moved away from natural environs our indifference to flora and fauna has grown apace, to a point where it is only recently that we have become aware that this indifference could well be truly catastrophic.

That is where a somewhat chilling aspect comes into David Ralph's most recent body of work. In his past work Ralph has utilised such images as the caravan as a metaphor for escape, for a return to nature or, at the very least, a brief stint of living away from urban madness. In his most recent works even the caravan has been enclosed; an odd, alien thing that once resided in the bush has been transported into the museum, an artefact of the days that one could venture into the hills and enjoy some fresh air.

It is tempting to view these paintings as museum dioramas from 3008 where those still surviving could be told about the archaic notion of escaping the grid. The caravan has been dredged from a swamp and reconfigured in the museum a thousand years later to replicate the notion of sitting under party lights in deck chairs as a now extinct insect called a cicada chirped away. In much the same way that museums today replicate the environs of our primordial ancestors these dioramas would seem fantastical. Those in the future will titter nervously about how their ancestors of 2008 could live in such conditions, with so much green stuff around, so much moisture!

Ralph's curators have also reconfigured a camping scene which is thoroughly surreal in that the mountains are coated in white, a thing humans once called "snow", something which has long since faded into the stuff of legend. They illustrate how early man, back in the early 2000s and even before, would set up a thing called a "tent", presumably to keep off rain, although the acids of today (3008) would eat straight through it. Of course these campers sit on astro-turf, grass having become another victim of degradation.

Ralph's tent hurtles through the air, starting as an abstraction before finally grounding itself as a shelter. His tent acts as a metaphor for the abstract idea of a journey or a camping trip before it becomes a reality, but in its illustrative depiction it also becomes a thing of nostalgia, or of the trip not taken, the opportunity lost. And by 3008 the opportunity has been lost forever. Even Ralph's boat, like his tent and caravan, is a thing of quirky fascination, placed like a prized relic in a corporate foyer, again a thing of the past, never to float again.

In one of the most surreal and quirky images in this museum we witness the domicile of a wealthy woman from 2060 (these are my dates, David Ralph will no doubt be totally bemused by this entire fabrication). Titled *At A Safe Distance* she stands in a gutted or incomplete apartment building, her attire, pure haute de'couture, her actual home. She scans the horizon, searching for threat, either towards her fashion status or her overall environment. Behind her, framed by pitted and scarred concrete, a toxic fog veils the landscape. It is an image worthy of a post-apocalyptic J.G. Ballard novel.

For Ralph his caravans, tents and even attire are vehicles of escape and the fantasy of freedom. His *mis en scenes* are reminiscent of the strange portal in the 1999 film *Being John Malkovich* (one of the artists' favourite films) in which, for a small fee, one can be inserted into the film-star's life. Of course, as with the fantasy of a weekend in the bush, things are rarely what we hope for. Malkovich's life is banal, as is the reality of rain and mosquitoes on a camping trip. Yet despite that we still yearn for a different environment and these are indeed images of yearning for tranquil settings, bordering on melancholia but not without a degree of gallows humour. There is the very real sense that these other environments are disappearing.

In these works the indoors become outdoors, the exteriors become interiors – we are both out in the wild and safely secured inside; unnatural voyeurs of the natural.

Ralph's paintings are somewhat reminiscent of the final scenes of the 1972 film *Silent Running* in which Earth's last remaining forests are secured in greenhouse-like geodesic domes outside the orbit of Saturn. It is hoped to return them to an apparently barren Earth in order to reforest the planet, but such a plan becomes economically unfeasible and the resident botanist, played by Bruce Dern, is ordered to destroy the forests. He refuses and manages to jettison one dome to safety, dying in the process. In the sequel, released in 3008, the botanist is played by David Ralph who is trying to secure the dying traces of a fore-gone world.

Return to paint

Dale Hickey: *Life in a Box* Ian Potter Museum, Melbourne, until April 27. David Ralph Arc One Gallery, Melbourne, until March 8. Del Kathryn Barton Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne, March 5-April 5. Benjamin Armstrong Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, until March 15.

"David Ralph looks like a healthy teenager limbering up on a basketball court. He is having fun with paint, combining different visual registers on the same canvas, abstracting here, shading to create volume there, throwing in hints of *trompe l'oeil* and generally having a ball. He uses squeegees and palette knives, poured turps, rags, brushes and computer-aided collage. Ralph's paintings are at once stunningly beautiful and dazzlingly clever."

Sebastian Smee - *The Australian* — Art Review 2008

An extract re "In Captivity" exhibition 2008, exhibition at Arc One Galley Melbourne.

Out of the abstract

Non-figurative art has been with us for almost a century, but a new generation of artists seems no longer to believe in it. Sebastian Smee visits some Melbourne galleries. Aida Tomesco at Niagara, David Ralph at Arc One, David Wadelton at Tolarno and Stephen Bush at Sutton,

May 06, 2006

"Richter is winked at in a painting called *Gerhard's Retreat* by David Ralph at ARC One Gallery on Flinders Lane in central Melbourne. Ralph's show, easily the most compelling of a crop of painting exhibitions in Melbourne right now, is called *Mobile Home*, and it consists of a series of small figurative paintings that riff on the theme of caravans and other types of mobile home. It's an extremely sly, self-conscious show, and its real subject may simply be the strange business of representing things in paint.

Before now, Ralph, who was brought up in Melbourne and returned from studying in London 18 months ago, painted urban images in a beguiling but rather slick photo-realist mode, using a lot of blurred imagery suggestive of alienation in the manner of Richter. He has since switched to a more "painterly" approach; he's more interested, in other words, in manipulating paint to achieve effects that are unique to the medium, than in imitating photographic effects.

And yet his approach is full of wit and verve, dazzlingly alive to the tension between abstraction and figuration and packed with tautologies, art historical in-jokes and assumptions turned on their heads. In their combination of painterly wit and conceptual mischief-making, if not in their look, they are reminiscent of the work of brilliant young painter Matthias Weischer.

Why mobile homes? Ralph says in an artist's statement that he "needed a break from the smog and concrete" of the city. But he has chosen mobile homes, in truth, as a flexible metaphor - not only for displacement, but for a sense of being unanchored within art history. He paints, you feel, in the same way that someone might choose to live in a mobile home: hoping for adventure and an imaginative escape, unsure of where he belongs, lacking belief. Rather brilliantly, he turns all these symptoms into strengths. His small, modest paintings make us doubt our eyes. The objects in them are rendered in different degrees of illusionism, from *trompe l'oeil* to abstract blur. There are witty references throughout to artists such as Jeanne-Claude and Christo, Mike Nelson, Mario Merz and Richard Hamilton, but you do not need to get them to be drawn in. Ralph could push himself a lot further, but already he is one of the more interesting of a new generation of painters who make you optimistic about the medium's possibilities."

2006

Sebastian Smee - The Australian — Art Review 2006