

# landscape / inscape

Review by Tony Green

landscape/inscape exhibition at  
St Paul St Gallery  
April 27 – May 28, 2006

Leonhard Emmerling, the new director of AUT's St Paul St Gallery, put together this show, his first here, in just three months. As will happen with immigrant curators, it juxtaposes the culture he comes from with the culture he is beginning to find here. In this show, he works with German artists and Bill Viola side-by-side with paintings and drawings by Colin McCahon and Stephen Bambury. The main Gallery space is about as not-white-cube as you can get: irregular walls and angles, exposed services in a ceiling that feels oppressively low for the width of the space, one long wall and two short, interrupted by a window, more like a loading-bay than a gallery. This set-up fully tests curators' ability to make anything coherent. Leonhard Emmerling does well: he has undoubtedly got a good eye for hanging a show, giving work that needs slow thoughtful looking plenty of wall-space; making major juxtapositions out of the different framing effects of the walls; not afraid of irregularities in the lines and groupings on the longest wall; and happy to mix – not easy to do – drawing, painting, photography and, in the two more regular shaped rooms, video.

The terms for coherence for this show are laid out in his interesting introductory essay. It covers the ground: landscape as a questioning of mediation of perception; seeing revealed as visionary and seeking the sublime. That works well with most of the imported work, putting in high-relief questions of light, the eye, the perception of something seen as out there, but necessarily elusive and illusionary. In most of them, the instrumentation of lens/camera attempts to make it permanent, fixed, and Pieter Rösels' paintings attempt to do likewise. With Bill Viola's *Chott el Djerid* video, it is mirages – unnameable constantly shifting images from which slowly figures appear, a truck maybe, a camel, motor-bikes; with Rösels' it is again mirages, but unreachable by plein-air painting, because the images are always in flux and such painting implies only one sighting of something, more or less constant, *pace* Monet. In a digital video by Gerhardt Mantz, the views of changing landscape are all fabricated, manipulations evidently schematised by some apparently inner vision. Even photography here is, quite properly, problematic as two pairs of two variant views by Sylvia Henrich dispose of the seemingly evident singularity of what it can say of a place. High up on the gallery's one pillar, that everyone tries to ignore, is the work that Emmerling regards as a paradigm for the whole: Bernhard Härtter's *Egg*, a shining stainless steel ovoid, reflecting in its own re-stating rather than dis-torting mirror-surface whatever for whoever as they pass. These works sweetly cover the ground. The curator's intelligence shines in the conceptual tightness of the show and the recognition of variations on a central issue among the overseas works.

But whether this conception works for the local content is not so clear. It runs into difficulties with Colin McCahon's 'Necessary Protection' painting and drawing straight away. Even the roughest drawings of the series are not the recordings of an eye for a scene. Characteristically, as with the *Northland Panels*, a decade



Bernhard Hürtter, Egg, 1998,  
metal, private collection,  
Auckland

earlier, they were done from memory, in the studio. McCahon, in his art, resists every kind of pictorial blandishments, impurities of sense – colour, fine finish, and charm. It cannot accept pure formal abstraction, because that eliminates exactly the justification for painting, the overriding moral purpose that McCahon clings to. It is difficult to see this as other than founded on fear of the biblical taboo on images. His landscapes are, instead, the gradual and difficult transformations of characteristic blocks of light and dark – generalities of a scene, never particulars, into a field filled with symbols. In their furthest extension, the large *Necessary Protection* canvases, the once-seen scene is a lingering specific local reference, alongside moral readings that result from a meditation on the Crucifixion. This puritanical art does not elude, however, the beauty of surface effect, the look, of his paintings and drawings, which does not hide their simple feeling for materials, nor spoil moral utterance with virtuoso displays of decoration. Instead, with the craft pared down to the most direct means, they are testaments to integrity.

Stephen Bambury, as Emmerling recognises, reverses that which in McCahon's procedure pushes away from pictorial landscape scene to moral utterance. The little *Southland Panels* and the *Sight Line (IX) Oaia Island* are both variants of McCahon images. Bambury begins with some simplicity of formal arrangement, but in the working of the materials, allows for the resonance of the formal with those who have used it before, and that the formal carries a symbolic weight. Further, his working of medium, resin or patinated metal, is always open to the aleatoric. He allows the medium to throw out suggestions of how paint surface or metal patination can be looked at as fleeting unstable landscape-like images. In his continuing meditation on McCahon's painting, Bambury, though capable of a range of feeling from the gentlest, as in the small pieces, to terrible intensity in the large trowelled orange resin [priests' robes] and streaked graphite of *Angkor II*. In all respects, even in its plain reference to Buddhist culture within the format of McCahon's Crucifixion/*Necessary Protection*, Bambury is performing his necessary corrections to McCahon. In his opening up of abstraction' to image, to symbol, to states of feeling, to landscape, Bambury fits better with the reflections on landscape in the rest of the show. This show, with its high quality work by artists' rarely, if ever, seen here before, has usefully opened up some critical issues.