Buried Giant

This is an edited version of a Seminar delivered to the Dunedin School of Art as Artist in Residence, February 2025

My name is Stephen Ellis. I draw.

Drawing is my addiction. Not drawing as preparation or placeholder, but drawing as the finished art object. Drawing is how I think, see and speak. It is how I explain the world to myself, and myself to myself. It is my outlet and my inlet, it creates and soothes my anxieties. It is my OCD.

I will define drawing as the use of linear media and mark-making to accumulate image. The dictionary definition insists on a two dimensional outcome, but the current quest for art-making opportunities outside and between the old disciplines has let drawing expand into three dimensions, into textiles, even glass.

Drawing is not secondary or temporary, and need not be preparatory. Drawing has mana. It is probably older than painting and sculpture, our species has always made marks. My painting tutor here at the DSA called me an "effing useless painter". It was a judgement I shared. There was no place then for drawing as art object, drawing was considered an exercise, or a step to a senior discipline. For years I used drawing in the service of other media, as an animator, a storyboard artist and a concept artist in film and television. It wasn't until 2011 that life allowed me to return to a full-time art practice when I embarked on a Masters degree at Unitec in Auckland.

The earlier suites of drawings are in ballpoint pen; this is the drawingest process I could have conceived, and I wish I had found a less arduous and long-winded way to get what I see in my head onto the paper:

I make rough studies to hone a composition

When I am satisfied, I will start researching art historical precedents

At the same time, I start making and finding objects and models appropriate to the content of the work

I then pose the models in dioramas

I photograph the dioramas

I Photoshop the photographs, resolving the composition and adding atmospherics

Then, at last, I draw.

In these earlier suites the art historical quotations are from the Romantic Sublime. This is the acknowledgement of a debt to another time when the arts spoke of Awe at the indomitable power of Nature, and human insignificance in the face of forces like storms, earthquakes and eruptions. The other role of these quoted images is to suggest that cultural history is in as much jeopardy as natural history in the Coming Storm.

The Sublime impulse is to overwhelm the viewer or the listener or reader. To overwhelm with scale, with content and with what I will call "overwork". The drawings are large and densely drawn in tiny marks. The largest took ten weeks to make. The densest passages have nine "coats" of ink, accumulated in a compass-point crosshatch. The modelling of volume uses curved marks inherited from printmaking.

It would be ironic at best, hypocritical at worst for a climate-conscious practice to use high end materials. Choices had to be made early to use humble materials like ballpoint pens and paper – essentially the contents of the stationery cupboard. I auditioned many pens before settling on a colourfast limpid blue. Blue is the least fugitive pigment and this ultramarine with its oily purple sheen brought a legacy of lapis lazuli and documentary associations with blueprints and carbon paper. Choosing paper is always tricky; humble papers have short lives; high end papers have accumulated considerable carbon footprints by the time they reach New Zealand. My compromise is to use Italian and German rag papers which are largely comprised of reclaimed textile fibres.

I have always worked in series, or suites. The drawings in each suite are linked by theme, medium, content and scale. And by metaphor. These early suites, from 2014 to 2016 used ballpoint pen, large scale and European Sublime progenitors to address climate change, sea level rise and the loss of permafrost and ice.

In 2016 tens of thousands of people were leaving their homes and looking for shelter elsewhere in what became known as the Migrant Crisis. Geopolitical forces, some of them climate driven, were compelling people to move in numbers not seen since the wars of the 20th century. This is not just our past – it will more and more be our future. The 'climate refugee' will be a subset of 'refugee', and refuge will be rarer, smaller and harder to find.

These are the themes of the *Opposite Shore* suite (2016-17). I have returned to the turbulent seas of earlier work; now they carry refugee transports and multiple inflatable dinghies. A rickety jetty offers the only landing, distress is signalled, the signal goes unseen. The quotations here are from migrations of another time and place; The North Sea coasts of the Netherlands and France in the early 19th century, and the jetty is a verbatim quote from the coastal genre paintings of the Achenbach brothers. Europe was then exporting its poor and dispossessed in a massive colonial project the effects of which we are still feeling today.

Like the majority of New Zealanders I am a product of migration, of ancestors who made similar perilous sea voyages at that time. One branch of the family moved to the Far North in 1849 to find that the land their church group had purchased was a swamp. Migrant uncertainties and reinventions followed, and it was twenty years before the family found a permanent home. Research led me to a similar but more dramatic story on Auckland's Manukau Harbour. Te Uru Gallery in Waitākere overlooks the site of the *Headforemost* story, the gallery was approached to show the work, and an early decision was made to show the models with the drawings.

In 1839 William Cornwallis Symonds, acting for the Manukau Land Company, bought Puponga Peninsula (now known as Cornwallis) on the Manukau harbour in Auckland from an earlier settler. Symonds thought he was acquiring a much larger block, and iwi disputed the sale. That didn't stop him from reporting favourably to the Land Company, nor the Company from dispatching the ship "Brilliant" with about 30 Scottish migrants on board.

William Cornwallis Symonds was a colonial archetype – ambitious and energetic. At 29 he was a captain in the British army, deputised for William Hobson gathering signatures for the Treaty in the Auckland area, was deputy Government Surveyor, Chief Magistrate, and freelanced as a land speculator. He was also hasty, knowing that his Manukau Land Company was competing for land and emigrants. These were capitalist ventures, selling land and prospects on inflated claims, boosterism and some almost magical thinking. The Scots on the "Brilliant" had paid for land for which Symonds had no title. The "Brilliant" took ten months to reach New Zealand, arriving in the Manukau to no title, no town, no dwellings. The migrants were invited ashore, provisioned, and helped to build whare by tangata whenua.

Then on November 23rd 1841 a message arrived from the other side of the Manukau asking the "Brilliant"'s doctor to attend a sick woman. The doctor was not available, so Symonds gathered three other colonists, a "Māori oarsman" and some medicines from the "Brilliant" and set off across the Manukau.

I will quote from the *New Zealand Herald* report:

Part way into the journey

"A violent and sudden squall struck the boat, which was observed to go down headforemost about a mile from the ship … Owing to the dangerous sea running it was found impractical to proceed to the unfortunate men and those on the shore were compelled to witness their unhappy fate."

Only the Māori oarsman survived.

Symonds' settlement failed. Families drifted away to the newly established capital at Auckland on the Waitemata. By 1850 Symonds' city was abandoned.

I have migrated briefly a couple of times and know the heady limitlessness of a new place, of reinvention; redemption even. But I also know the feeling of displacement or misplacement. Knowing that Home is not elsewhere does not allay the post-colonial unease of not being entirely at home here either. This, I suppose, is the migrant legacy that shades these images. The *Headforemost* suite is comprised of four large drawings, all themed and titled on aspects of the settlement of Cornwallis; *Unsettlement, Capitalise, Landed* and *Conveyed*. For the first time all the quotes are from the history of New Zealand painting,

because although migration is a global theme, this is a very local story. They are all from unmistakably Romantic models.

Drawing is hard work. At this scale anyway. I have a stiff neck and twisted shoulder. During the making of the *Headforemost* drawings, I also began to experience overuse pains in my hand. That, and the awareness that I was becoming The Ballpoint Pen Guy made me reassess my process. The *Pond* (2019) drawings are of a different medium and a very different scale.

Robert FitzRoy was New Zealand's second Governor. He had been the captain of Darwin's *Beagle* and went on to found the British Meteorological Office. His life's work was the prediction of storms and the protection of shipping and seafarers from their destructive force. To that end he invented the weather forecast and a system of storm warnings that could be telegraphed to coastal stations and displayed to ships as drums and cones hung from masts on shore, indicating wind strength and direction.

FitzRoy sits at a moment between climate ignorance and climate science. His *Weather Book; A Manual of Practical Meteorology* (1863) was the first popular guide to the causes and patterns of weather. The skies in the *Pond* suite of graphite drawings quote directly from the cloud illustrations in *the Weather Book*.

Now the oceans have become commercialised, militarised and irremediably polluted. The idea that the sea is limitless goes back long before FitzRoy and has always been taken as licence to dump our waste offshore, and plastic is now in the deepest parts of the oceans. All the models for the *Pond* suite were made from found plastic: there are chopsticks, milk bottles, Lego, bits of packaging. The surface of the sea is a hardware store tarpaulin.

These images are drawn in graphite, a softer and kinder medium than ballpoint pen. Because it is softer, the marks are fainter so more marks are needed to amass a dense tone. What I've gained in comfort, I've lost in time. But these drawings are small, about A4 size and smaller.

In 2015 I attended the Gallipoli Centennial commemorations. At Gallipoli. My father's father fought there, surviving the battle of Chunuk Bair and another two years on the Western Front in France. Of course he was permanently psychologically damaged by the experience. He died when I was 8, all I remember is a dour humourless man who would sit out Anzac Day in a darkened room, alone with his memories. It took four years for my tiny Gallipoli experience to filter through into drawings. Although the commemorations were thick with references to service and sacrifice and heroism, I was more interested in that unmentioned legacy; the alcoholism, mental illness, and domestic violence that echo down the generations.

The *(Still Life)* (2019-20) drawings are in red coloured pencil; martial, military and I guess bloody reds. The post battle imagery of smashed buildings, downed communications and the dead are far from Romantic sea imagery. The torn and bashed cardboard box buildings refer to Groznyy in Chechnya, but they have a tragic resonance today. The background structures are domestic objects like cake tins, a cheese grater, Berocca tubes.

I have always been insistent that I don't make still lifes, that the dioramas are just a step to achieving the distortions of scale I'm looking for. I know where these distortions come from – as a child I experienced incidents of hypnagogia. It is a "threshold consciousness" between sleep and waking in which lucid dreaming, sleep paralysis and hallucinatory displacements of familiar surroundings occur. My memory of these hallucinations is I think foundational to how I see. The distortions are sometimes mistaken for Surrealism, a categorisation I reject for my own work. On the other hand, the *(Still Life)* of the titles is a rather belated admission that the dioramas and the domestic scale are, at least in part, in the still life tradition.

Then came Covid, and we were all compelled into a still life world of domestic interiors. With just me and my daughter at home, I saw an opportunity to reevaluate the domestic, and the mute army of things that supports our lives.

The resulting suite is called *each to each* (2020-21), a kind of relay of vessels. These objects have never existed, they are visitants from a different order of being. The Covid pause let me teach myself Blender, an open-source 3D modelling and animation programme. It is a different-but-same kind of modelling, and the virtual camera makes the photography stage of my process redundant. The outcome though was always going to be drawn.

The drawings have a weird cosiness for me. Despite the unreality these interiors do not feel unsafe. There are no landscapes out the windows, only clouds; we are, truly, in a bubble. If these images seem like an inappropriate reaction to the nearest thing to global catastrophe in my lifetime, I can only say that the lockdowns let the clamour of modern living die away and small essentials become visible. Blender offered a new way of seeing, or at least of manifesting. When the "normal" returned, and in response to a slower-moving panic, I began experimenting with AI.

AI image generation has advanced exponentially since then, to the point where it threatens to replace graphic artists and concept artists. This grown-up AI is of much less interest to me than its naïve, rather stupid, predecessor. The image generator I used is called "Night Café", I think a reference to Vincent van Gogh. In 2021 it was in its infancy. One of the first prompts I tried included the words "climate catastrophe" and in the chaos of colour and tone that the AI delivered it also offered a cat. Although relatively primitive this early iteration offered an intriguing type of image, totally agnostic about figure-and-ground and composition and colour theory. As I learnt to control the prompts, I began to see fragments of image that I could use. I always asked for monochrome images and the prompts always included the word "unfolding", the title of the resulting suite (2022).

"Unfolding" is one of those journalistic cliches. It's used to describe ongoing events and unresolved situations: "unfolding hostage drama", "unfolding wage dispute". It is also used to describe the climate crisis. Including the word in the prompts to the AI provoked some tempting results. I used these in the same way I use other found imagery, edited, composed, some elements exaggerated, some removed. In the foregrounds I again staged dioramas: floating garbage to suggest plastic contamination, a model whare to suggest

coastal erosion, and so on. These drawings are all the same size, use the same media and are presented in identical deep box frames like museum specimens.

Lamp Black is a pigment with a deep history. As the name implies it is made from soot and is one of the darkest densest blacks. It is pure carbon, and as such brings some controversial freight with it into the 21st century. As does New Zealand's relationship with coal.

There are three types of coal; lignite, bituminous and anthracite. The cleanest is anthracite, a dense hard coal. One of New Zealand's few anthracite deposits is under the Fox Glacier and the Fox River on the West Coast. This seems to me to be emblematic of the choices this country has made and must make – fossil fuel or ecotourism, coal or ice, black or white?

I bought a 10kg bag of bituminous coal from Mitre 10 (a small climate crime in itself) and was surprised at its gem-like beauty. The three small *Glacier Country* drawings in the *Lamp Black* (2023) suite suspend coal gems impossibly large over AI-generated alpine landscapes. I think you can see my ambivalence. As a South Islander I grew up with coal, it heated the houses I lived in and cooked my food. It gave winter Dunedin a distinctive smell and left a haze of carbon on every horizontal surface in South Dunedin. It employed a large number of (mostly) men – union men. Coal gave us the Labour Party. Coal, then, was good.

I tried to make my own lamp black from the Mitre 10 coal, crushing it as finely as I could, binding the dust with gum Arabic and thinning it with water. The results were not encouraging, a thin smear of grey speckled with black dots. So the *Lamp Black* drawings are made with an industrially produced soot, baked in a kiln to the densest light-absorbing black. I'm aware that this is when climate irony tips towards climate hypocrisy.

I think of the three *Glacier Country* drawings as coal portraits, tributes to the trees that fell 30 to 70 million years ago and the people who mined them, but also the shockingly irresponsible diggers of holes, polluters of waterways and heaters of the planet.

Coal mined on the West Coast travelled to Christchurch by rail, via the Ōtira Gorge and the village of Cass. These are evocative, pregnant names in the

history of New Zealand art. Petrus van der Velden made many colossal oils of the Otira Gorge, *Cass* by Rita Angus is New Zealand's most-loved painting. One can stand for the New Zealand Romantic relationship to the land, the other for a later, changing relationship. Incidentally, the rail wagons to the right in *Cass* are coal wagons. I made cardboard models of the entrance to the Ōtira Tunnel, and the train station at Cass, posing them with a toy train set in an impossible alpine landscape.

Ō tira is usually translated as "of travellers", a reference to pounamu gatherers crossing the Southern Alps. Whetū Moataane, a Kai Tahu language expert, has another interpretation: Oti rā, the closing of the day. Darkness gathers early in the Gorge, and the title *Close of Day* suggests the end of the age of coal.

The final drawing in the suite is called *Lamp Black* and quotes from both van der Velden and Angus. The process has changed again: The *Lamp Black* pieces are drawn with a brush.

That brings us up to date, and to the *Buried Giant* project that brought me to the DSA. I will quote my application for the residency:

The residency would be used to research and produce a suite of drawings on the theme of solastalgia. Solastalgia is the distress caused by environmental degradation – more than "climate grief", the word resonates with nostalgia and implies a tarnishing of memories. The working title of the project is* Buried Giant *in reference to unacknowledged grief for lost landscape and memory, both current and ancestral. The project will address landscapes we already mourn.

The project will research elegiac imagery from twentieth century regionalist New Zealand painting, privileging South Island and Otago exemplars. Such imagery can be found in the oeuvres of Rita Angus, Bill Sutton, Doris Lusk and others. Models would then be made of suitable structures from those works, other models of my own devising would be added. Simultaneously, models of "mourners" would be sought, principally in antique and opportunity shops. It is anticipated that these would be domestic-scaled wood and ceramic figures.

I liked the idea so much that I started work on the *Buried Giant* suite last year, and several drawings are already realised. They vary in medium; some are raw pigment drawn with a brush, others are coloured pencil, and they vary greatly in size.

Like *Lamp Black* they quote from 20th century South Island landscape painting, and as predicted, the human figure has turned up; found wooden figures of about the same mid-century vintage. These are folk art renderings of the human form and here they stand in for us all – clumsy people in an altered land.

I was in Dunedin briefly in August, and visited the Hocken Collection to see Colin McCahon's *Dear Wee June*, a pencil study for it, and a Cilla McQueen drawing of the same subject. And I visited Wee June's grave at Port Chalmers.

Here is McCahon's version of June's epitaph:

In Loving Memory of

Dear Wee June

Who fell asleep 12th of March 1935

Aged 4 years and 9 months

"of such is the Kingdom of Heaven"

McCahon of course was a graduate of the School, and his South Island-ness pervades all his work. *Dear Wee June* isn't his best, and there might be a smirk of condescension at the sentimentality of June's epitaph. In McCahon's pencil study the Harbour and Aramoana are in the background. In the painting he has replaced the Harbour with the Tākaka Hills.

My response is also titled *Dear Wee June*. I am conscious of issues of tapu here, I am trying to tread very carefully around images of death and burial. My Southern Catholic upbringing embraces the concept of tapu – we don't stand on graves, we wash our hands when we leave urupa and cemeteries. I would

like to take a rubbing of Wee June's gravestone, but the weight of that upbringing prevents me. There are senior traditions here, and older ways of seeing the land, landscape and belonging. Since McCahon at least three generations of Māori artmakers have been using old and new media to tell other stories of the land and land loss… they are not my stories to tell, I can only record my own responses.

The Buried Giant of the title is Papatūānuku, the Green Man, or Mother Nature, a personification of the mauri or life force beneath our feet.

In keeping with the theme of Solastalgia my quotations are from Bill Sutton's *Nor'wester in the Cemetery* and Rita Angus's *Flight*. *Nor'wester* is a montage of the Barbadoes Street Cemetery in Christchurch with a rural Canterbury landscape, *Flight* reacts to the destruction of the Bolton Street Cemetery in Wellington and montages a fragment of a gravestone with others relocated to Makara. On the distant hill scrub is being burnt off. Both these images pivot from Romantic landscape to something more honest about land use and its price, and use elegiac imagery to critique the death industries that still dominate our economy. Angus's *Flight* title is deeply ironic.

The DSA residency has been a gift in so many ways. It brought me back South to familiar, if changing, places, it has given me access to the Hocken and City collections, it has given me time and space to make new work on this very personal theme.

Saint Clair Beach is deeply imprinted in my mental landscape. Even after my family moved to Christchurch my sister and I would spend all our school holidays there with grandparents. The beach has changed since then, the sand has gone. Climate change is an aggravating factor, but not the only one. The groynes have gone too - they were a surprisingly effective way of lessening the wave impact on the soft tissue of the beach and dunes, arguably more effective than the huge sand sausages that are the remaining defence against encroachment. There is another residue of the Sublime here – the power of the sea and our puny efforts at defence.

So my current relationship to the beach is solastalgic, and in the work I have made here I interrogate that relationship – the physical changes to the beach

and the emotional changes to me. In the first drawing of the suite the groynes make a room, a remembered bedroom, exposed to the coming storm.

I must have been two or three years old. It was summer, Saint Clair Beach was crowded. I was with my sister, mother and grandmother. They took me to the water's edge to paddle, the women holding my hands, but the feeling of the sand sucking out from under my feet as the waves retreated caused a panic so intense I still remember it.

That feeling of vertiginous insecurity, I think, informs all this work.

Stephen Ellis