The Constructed Forest: Weaving Landscape, Pattern and Ideas in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This research is relevant to the broader discussion of how culture and nature interact, by analysing and demonstrating how artworks can shed light on the ideas that contribute to longstanding and culturally deep-rooted attitudes to nature. The project questions if artworks can simultaneously trigger and blend ideas that are, in Western art, associated with either the natural or the cultural so as to erode categorical distinctions.

This exegesis examines the ways concepts of nature and culture have played out in artworks over time, focusing on the Western motif of the forest. It explores how contemporary Australian artists have offered platforms to explain aspects of the complex relationship between people and their environment. This research investigates how the visual language of artworks (in particular, motifs, aesthetic conventions, and scale) can clarify how cultural ideas and values have been overlaid on the natural environment of the forest. It examines how traditional ideas of culture and nature are organised into strands of meaning that act as connective threads, linking the past and present.

In contemporary artworks, these strands are woven together with new ideas to offer alternative ways of visualising the relationship between culture and nature. The resulting artworks give voice to ideas that transgress the traditional limits of culture and nature categories, thus shifting meanings and blurring boundaries.
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the exegesis contains no material previously published or written by another except where due reference is made.

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Introduction

...what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.
—Cronin cited in Tunnicliffe 2010, p. 13

Global warming has revitalised the discussion concerning human’s interaction with nature, with questions being asked about the notions that feed political ideas and societal attitudes. These attitudes affect culture’s interaction with nature, which may have contributed to the current environmental predicament and could influence future actions.

There is a wide gap between ecological reason and ecological morality. We know what we should do, but we do not do it. Why does this happen? Ecological reason seems to be only a subordinate aspect of our interaction with nature. . . . it continues to reproduce our longstanding and culturally deep-rooted attitudes and modes of action in interaction with nature (Eder, 1996, n.p.).

This research contributes to this discussion by analysing and demonstrating how artworks can shed light on the ideas that contribute to these ‘longstanding and culturally deep-rooted attitudes’ to nature to which Klaus Eder refers. Cognitive psychology and perception theories suggest that seeing is conditioned by knowing and that behaviour is influenced by a person’s attitude and expectations; not by
reality, but how they think or perceive reality (Gollwitzer & Bargh 1996). Importantly, these theories reinforce the relevance of concepts and the significance of distortions in forming attitudes, including those relating to nature, which may, in turn, influence behaviour.

This exegesis investigates how visual representations of landscape in Western art can, by picturing the evolution and interaction of ideas associated with culture (the man-made world of objects and ideas) and nature (the God-made world of plants and animals in environments), reveal the complexity of the history and interdependence of these concepts. In doing so, artworks can assist us to contemplate how ‘our minds structure myth and in a feedback loop, myth instructs our perceptions of the phenomenological universe’ (MacCormack & Strathern, 1980, p. 6). The many stories and patterns used by a society to interpret and explain the natural world constitute the myth that is used to instruct perceptions and influence mindsets. These stories rely on language. In his book *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape* (1998), George Seddon makes a clear link between the language that is used to describe environments and how a society both perceives and interacts with it:

> Language carries the riches and the burdens of the past, and the language of landscape like all landscape is loaded. The words we use both reveal and influence our perceptions of the environment, reflect our objectives and interests, and affect our actions . . . (1998, p. 27)

This enquiry focuses on how various artworks’ use of visual language (in particular, imagery, conventions, and scale) can reveal how ideas and cultural values have been structured as myth and overlaid onto the natural environment. It examines how sets of ideas act as connective threads, linking the past to the present. As I will show, longstanding ideas influence current perceptions and attitudes to nature, reappearing in contemporary artworks as well as commercial and popular imagery.

Western philosophical thought’s long history of privileging culture over nature arose from ‘an elemental juxtaposition of nature and culture [which is] deep-seated and pervasive’ (Coates 1998, p. 1) and has been frequently expressed in Western art. This research questions both the power relationship that is inherent in oppositional theories of culture and nature and the separation of ideas into a hierarchy. This exegesis proposes that certain contemporary artists (including myself) restructure these ideas by offering alternative ways of visualising the relationship between the natural world and culture—ways that erode category boundaries and unseat hierarchical power.
Together, the creative and written components of this research interrogate how the strands of Western cultural meanings have been used by Australian artists (past and present) to represent one form of landscape: the forest environment. My studio experiments have focused on the key question:

- How can artworks that depict a forest simultaneously stimulate and blend ideas associated in Western art with either the natural or the cultural, so as to erode categorical distinctions?

I developed and held four major exhibitions of work as part of this research. All held in Brisbane, *An Elaborate Ploy* (2007) was shown at College Gallery, Queensland College of Arts (QCA), *Veneer* (2008) at Metro Arts, *Sweet Subterfuge* (2008) at Jan Manton Gallery, and *The Constructed Forest* (2012) at the Project Gallery and White Studio, QCA. These exhibitions linked ideas that were traditionally regarded as oppositional, aligned with either nature or culture (such as the rational and emotional, order and instability, predictability and chaos, the known and unknown). Through my studio research, I tested two methods of visually combining ideas in order to blur the boundary between concepts of culture and nature: overlapping and layering motifs to conflate ideas, and combining pictorial conventions to closely interweave ideas. My artworks combined painting and digital manipulation, depicting forest scenes using selected modes of representation (the panorama, picturesque and sublime painting, decorative patterns, photography, and engraving lines). This exegesis explores how these modes have historically been employed to describe, analyse, and document nature, or idealise and invest nature with transcendental power and moral values; a practice critiqued by my studio works. A key focus of this enquiry is the extent to which the ideas or associations connected to these specific pictorial conventions transfer to contemporary images. This has been thoroughly tested by mimicking and combining sets of the selected pictorial conventions in four distinct but related series of works, *An Elaborate Ploy* (2007), *The Forest* (2007–08), *Sweet Subterfuge* (2007–09), and *Not What It Seems* (2007–12), and the major work *The Entangled Forest* (2012, plate 16).

During the course of my studio research, I identified scale as an aspect that required extensive interrogation. I examined whether ideas of nature could be communicated by the size used to depict a forest; in particular, I explored to what extent immersive scale could activate a recollection of being within a forest or stimulate a sensation of
The final work *The Entangled Forest* investigates how scale operates in conjunction with landscape and decorative conventions that emphasise artificial or cultural features. Recognising the extent and the process by which a painting can activate ideas of nature through its physical size was unexpected and has been highly influential in developing my artistic practice.

As part of my research, I investigated what happens to strands of meanings when sets of aesthetic conventions belonging to different traditions are used together. This process interrogates George Seddon’s claim that the rich body of ideas relating to culture and nature, and developed over time, now ‘cancel each other out’ and that they merely contribute to ‘that body of legend [that] embroiders the cloth of our Western tradition, but . . . now has no functional place in it, only a decorative one’ (1998, p. 113).

Rather than ‘cancelling each other out’ (that is, losing ability to evoke meaningful associations), this research has sought evidence to support the proposal that longstanding strands of meanings continue to resonate with the new, blending in the viewer’s mind to form fresh meanings. Such meanings have been found to belong in a ‘border zone’ between traditional ideas of nature and culture. Virginia Madsen eloquently describes this process as follows:

> This blurring of the boundaries on the turbulent border zone between nature and culture—already a fusion, an interplay—opens the possibility of a resonant critical space in which both the natural and cultural can be heard not as opposed ‘givens’ or ‘constructions’ but as material forces (voicings) which in complex mix, come to shape, transform and dissolve meanings in the world. (Madsen 1999, p. 36)

This exegesis is organised into four chapters and a conclusion, which outline my studio methodology, the processes of investigation, and the findings of my research. Chapter 1 identifies and discusses key concepts of nature that are a significant part of the history of theorising and representing nature within the Western tradition of visual art. It describes aesthetic conventions associated with the ‘urge to know’ and the landscape conventions of the sublime and the picturesque. This chapter argues that these conventions are associated with ideas of nature (such as the limitless, eternal, wild, and irregular) and ideas linked with culture (such as the controlled, rational, and ordered). Historically, these have been conceptualised as oppositional sets and, through their ongoing appearance in contemporary commercial and media images, continue to inform present ideas of nature and culture. How these concepts interact is...
considered in relation to the ideas of contemporary theorists, in particular those presented in Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (1995) and Peter Coates’s *Nature: Western Attitudes since Ancient Times* (1998). I propose that these established ideas act not as layers, but that each set of ideas operate alongside each other. Using contemporary Australian artists Simryn Gill, Fiona Hall, and Jazmina Cininas, and filmmaker Jane Campion as exemplars, I explore how current visual artists select and weave ideas together in a variety of combinations to form complex images that evoke ideas of both nature and culture.

Since nature has been represented in art for centuries, the discourse surrounding it is vast. In Chapter 2, my research focuses on one type of natural environment: the Australian coastal forest. It examines the strands of meaning that have been built up over time in relation to representing this environment. I analyse the associations that have been connected with key representations of the forest-as-landscape by artists, such as Joseph Lyckett, Eugene von Guerard, and Peter Dombrovski, and make links between the various ways the Western motif of the forest has been used by contemporary artists to reveal culture and nature’s complex interactions. I discuss Wayne Tunnicliffe’s ideas (2010) relating to the significance of wilderness in current visual arts discourse and examine the methodologies used by artists William Robinson, James Morrison, Rosemary Laing, Sam Leach, and myself.

Chapter 3 identifies the role that decorative conventions have played in forming and manipulating concepts of the natural and the cultural. It discusses how plants have been represented in Western visual art and analyses how decorative designs have operated as means of both making sense of and perceiving nature so that ‘the distance between the natural and the civilized’ is abolished (Harpham 1982, p. 51). The theories of E.H. Gombrich outlined in *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (1979) and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982) are also scrutinised in this chapter. My works *An Elaborate Ploy*, *The Forest*, *Sweet Subterfuge*, and *Not What It Seems* engage with and expand on these theories, presenting forest landscapes that trigger ideas of nature while being obviously artificial constructions. They are composed using stylised, decorative conventions (pattern and grotesque motif) in combination with conventions associated with landscape and scientific traditions (in particular, sublime imagery, the panorama format, and engraving line). These artworks investigate whether category meanings can shift and blur when nature is represented using both landscape and decorative
conventions. They offer speculative interpretations of the way concepts of nature and culture can be visually represented, shedding light on the interdependence of conceptual and visual traditions.

Chapter 4 presents the major findings of the studio research established by the final work, *The Entangled Forest*. It examines the interaction of aesthetic conventions used to represent the forest and interrogates the panorama format and the phenomenological impact of large-scale artworks in recalling an experience of a forest. The power of immersion in ‘calling up’ a sense of nature was found to be particularly significant to this research. Some key theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlined in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) are discussed and their relevance to studio experiments that adjust scale and format is explained. The final painting of this research investigates whether artworks can, by weaving together landscape and decorative conventions and by using immersive scale, simultaneously trigger multiple associations that challenge oppositional frameworks of how culture and nature interact. In this work, these concepts are shown not as distinctly separate but deeply entwined.
Chapter One: Conceptualising Nature and Culture—The Fabric of the Western Tradition

As Simon Schama remarks in his influential book *Landscape and Memory*, inherited ideas exhibit a ‘surprising endurance through the centuries and [a] power to shape institutions that we still live with’ (1995, p. 15). This chapter examines how the ideas connected with concepts of nature and culture that make up the fabric of the Western tradition have been passed on to Australian artists. It is organised into two parts: the first examines how longstanding Western ideas of nature have been theorised as being oppositional to ideas of culture and how this has influenced the way natural environments have been depicted by scientific and Romantic conventions; the second discusses how the concepts of culture and nature are seen to interact in recent discourse and examines how these current theories alter the way traditional ideas appear in the work of contemporary artists.
Over the last three thousand years a plethora of meanings have been assigned to nature within Western philosophy and the arts, and these are outlined in Peter Coates’s comprehensive survey *Nature: Western Attitudes since Ancient Times* (1998). His overview reveals how culture’s control and domination of nature has been a recurring theme in Western thinking for the last five hundred years, from Francis Bacon (1561–1626) through the Enlightenment to the present. The ideas of mind, culture, consciousness, and spirit were firmly divided from ideas relating to the body, matter, phenomena, and nature by the theories of philosophers and scientists, such as Bacon in the *Nova Organum Scientiarum* (1620), Rene Descartes (1596–1650) in *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) in *Discourse on Inequality* (1754). This thinking led to the concept of culture being aligned with reason, intellectual pursuits, science, and the ability to control one’s surroundings, while nature was associated with ideas including superstition, the spiritual, emotions, and uncertainty. These oppositions resulted in the clear separation of culture (the works of humans) from nature (the physical world created by God and gifted to man).

Oppositional ways of thinking about nature and culture generated numerous strands of meanings, some of which reappear in contemporary images and continue to influence current attitudes towards nature. For instance, key ideas of predictability, control, rationality, and order continue to be connected to culture, and ideas of the feminine, wildness, emotionality, and sensuality still appear linked to nature. It is perhaps surprising that dualisms arising from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could persist in the twenty-first century—that, in an era noted for its multiple viewpoints and heady pace of change, these age-old ideas could still contribute to ideas concerning the relationship between people and the natural world. However, such ideas form a persuasive ideology that is translated through the myriad of images that drench our contemporary world. Images of natural environments that are romanticised, awe-inspiring, or beautifully ordered are used to support the economic arm of culture by endorsing corporations. For instance, advertising images for products, and commercial photographs, such as *The Green Guardians Calendar* (2011, fig. 1), created to mark the International Year of Forests (2011), link idealised, semi-naked women, tribal culture, and naïve eroticism with images of pristine natural environments. They picture an idealised, wild nature and support ‘the idea of culture as a distinctive way of life . . . closely bound up with a Romantic, anti-colonialist penchant for suppressed “exotic” societies’ (Eagleton 2000, p. 12).
Every day television, magazines, and online images present highly manipulated versions of nature in order to sell an array of goods and services. Typically, these media present slick and ideologically dense visions of natural environments, landscapes and plants in which the natural is ‘draped in notions of [the] eternal and unalterable’ (Eagleton 2000, p. 93) and the cultural is clothed in the new and ever-changing. The development of digital photography has enhanced the illusion of the eternal and resulted in the real being supplanted in images by the seductive power of the ideal. As Neil Smith writes, ‘The idolization and commodification of nature [is] combined with an aggressive exaltation and effacement of any distinction between real and made nature’ (Smith 1996, p. 37).

Increasingly, digitally perfected scenes of natural environments are used to promote a company or product’s alignment with environmental responsibility—linking ideas and imagery with corporate actions and attitudes. ‘Green’ advertising has become common across product categories and sectors. Such advertising combines a slogan with green-coloured graphics and typically features images of plants or natural landscapes, such as forests (Grillo 2008, p. 41). Often, advertising for products that
have detrimental impacts on the environment (such as soap, shampoo, and paper products) omit the environmental facts of the company’s production processes (Pomering 2009). Instead, they rely on the power of the constructed image to deliberately exploit eighteenth-century Romantic ideas attached to the concept of nature, which have been made familiar through its art.

In the West, ideas that mythologise and idealise the natural world are derived from its history of assigning meaning to environments, natural landscapes, and botanical forms. Art contributes to myth-making by visualising the abstract, invisible world of ideas and emotions. Artworks reflect what we see but more importantly can assist us to understand how we see. As Barbara Novak remarks, myths that seek to explain the natural world change ‘according to the religious or philosophical lenses through which they are examined’ (1980, p. 4). This research examines how aesthetic conventions used to construct an artwork act as focusing devices— that is, like cultural spectacles fitted with scientific, picturesque, or decorative lenses, which variously colour and shape the wearer’s vision of nature. The work arising from my studio research enables viewers to ‘see’ with a particular focus, and emphasises that aesthetic conventions and genres, such as landscape, are, as Imants Tillers states, ‘something you look through rather than look at’ (cited in Burn 1995, p. 23) in order to perceive nature. Ways of thinking about nature that were part of Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies and developed over the last five hundred years have found visual expression in various modes of artistic representation, such as scientific illustration, engravings, the panorama, sublime, and picturesque landscapes. These modes have led artists to use certain conventions that reflect ways of thinking and have shaped Western concepts of nature and culture. Through my research, I have explored how the historical meanings attached to these conventions were formed, so that I may understand the context in which ideas and associated conventions are generated. This informs my studio experiments, which deliberately manipulate context in order to alter the way ideas of culture and nature are stimulated.

**The Thirst for Knowledge and Nature**

The desire to know and classify natural environments has long been an influential way of thinking about nature in the Western world. Enlightenment thinking and science, which emphasised the rational and ordered (exemplified by the theories of continental rationalism and in particular, Rene Descartes (1596–1650), Brauch de
Spinoza (1632–77), and Gottfried Liebniz (1646–1716) led European explorers of the eighteenth century to seek to know the foreign through scientific scrutiny (Hewsen 1999, pp. 25–42). The vast array of unknown places and plants were explained through scientific taxonomies and frameworks. The botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) published his book *Systema Naturae* in 1735 and established a way of classifying nature into kingdoms, classes, orders, genera, and species (*The Linnean Correspondence*). Categorising natural phenomena involves discerning patterns, and identifying and codifying similarities and differences into recognisable structures. These cognitive patterns operate as a model against which deviations from a specific norm can be identified and then excluded. The systematic classification of nature and its visual documentation was part of a longstanding cultural agenda of Western civilisation to exercise control over nature through science, a project that the nineteenth-century anthropologist Lévi-Strauss suggests is a result of ‘a universal desire of all people, to know and classify their biological environment simply for the sake of knowledge and for satisfaction of imposing some pattern upon their surroundings’ (cited in Seddon, 1998, p. 26).

This way of thinking about and relating to the natural world was also expressed in the zeal of eighteenth and nineteenth-century natural scientists, such as Daniel Solander (1733–82) and Joseph Banks (1743–1820), and artist Sydney Parkinson (1745–1771) who sought explanations of the New World and Oceania through detailed observations of plants and recognition of structural patterns. Their intense scrutiny is evidenced in the notes made on the 30,000 plant specimens collected on the Endeavour voyage and now kept in herbaria in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand (Natural History Museum, London). The unshaken belief in the completeness of the Linnaean system’s ability to explain and understand the whole of nature was revealed in the tendencies to ‘force’ New World plants into existing taxonomies, making them fit into known categories rather than acknowledging their deviance. The act of classifying and naming was a strategy that provided ‘a coping mechanism; through naming, the unknown was tied to the known’ (Seddon 1998, p. 24).

Visual representation played a significant role in this process of knowing foreign environments and eco-systems. Over his lifetime of exploring the Southern Hemisphere, the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), analysed how written description, landscape painting, and botanical illustration could be used to give Europeans a better idea of the multiformity of nature (Mattos 2004, pp. 141–143). Focused on South America and the Pacific islands, Humboldt’s research
informed nineteenth-century attitudes and approaches to the study of Australian environments. Details of botanical illustrations communicated information about the observable characteristics of specific plants and recorded the characteristics of unfamiliar specimens. As drawings for field guides became an important way of collecting scientific data and of knowing and understanding a place and its vegetation, artists contributed to this process of acquiring knowledge.

Paintings and drawings documenting the colonial settlements of the New World and Oceania also assisted Europeans to become familiar with environments and settlements that were vastly different to their own. Used extensively to document place, panoramas, such as Louisa Anne Meredith’s Panorama of Sydney Harbour (1840) and Jane Currie’s Panorama of the Swan River Settlement (1830–32), provided a descriptive account of the coastlines, settlements, and the details of types of flora and fauna found in a specific site. The intense public interest in Britain for commercial panoramas resulted in the construction of purpose-built venues, such as the Barker & Burford’s Panorama Building in Leicester Square in London. Between 1823 and 1831 paying customers flocked to see 360-degree panoramas of places, including Hobart and Sydney. These were enlarged versions (some of which were 1500–2000 square metres in size) of the panoramic watercolours of James Taylor (1783–1829) and Augustus Earle (1793–1838) or engraved interpretations of them (Jones 2006, p. 358). In this way, engraved landscapes became familiar representations of foreign environments and geography as well as official documents of place. Scenic wallpapers, such as Joseph Dufour & Co’s Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique (1806) were also popular and distributed throughout Europe. Applied to boudoir walls in the nineteenth century, this set of twenty-one wallpapers was loosely based on the paintings (and the engravings made of them) that accompanied Cook’s official account of his South-Pacific voyage (Webb 2000). Although details were fancifully rearranged and their subjects idealised, these panoramic scenes offered the European viewer the chance to ‘know’ a different world and to psychologically escape, within the comfort of their homes, to exotic locations in the Pacific.

Botanical illustrations, engravings, scientific diagrams and line drawings were used extensively for documenting and recording. The line is therefore a familiar tool used to describe what is seen in an attempt to know. Thus, my research investigated whether the link between the linear convention of engravings and line drawings and the search for knowledge could render this mode of representation as a visual marker of the rational or of scientific enquiry within contemporary artworks. Because engravings are
closely connected with a scientific and colonial way of seeing the world, they could also be considered as part of a visual language associated with cultural domination. The mimicking of this linear technique within the artworks of this research was chosen in order to encourage the viewer to consider how Australian environments have been represented over time and how a system of power can be represented through a schematised codification. By adopting the etching line (though significantly up-scaled and painted), intensive detail, and the panorama format as primary conventions for depicting the forested landscape, my studio research brings attention to the persistence of attached ‘scientific’ or rational meanings within contemporary imagery.

In the artworks arising from this research, the linear construction of form is associated with the engraving convention. In the *Sweet Subterfuge* series, the lines represent the rational and create tension with the other conventions incorporated (such as grotesque imagery) that work against or aim to resist the urge to know. By combining the linear convention of engraving with other landscape and decorative conventions, these artworks rework and generate new meanings by using longstanding and familiar tropes in unfamiliar contexts.

**The Romantics and Nature: The Sublime**

In Western art ideas, values and artistic conventions are closely connected. During the centuries of great European exploration, colonial settlement, and development of scientific knowledge, Christianity had significant cultural power. Nature was primarily understood as God’s creation. This close alignment with God gave nature a sanctioned status and the genre of landscape the role of being a ‘... holy text, which revealed truth’ (Novak 1980, p. 7), offering it for spiritual interpretation. In the eighteenth century, a seductive set of ideas tied feelings of the spiritual or emotional sublime to nature (Chalmers 2001). In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke (1729–97) separated ideas of the beautiful and the sublime, emphasising the value of emotional pleasure created by uncertainty and terror. In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) distinguished between the limitless and bounded and human’s capacity for incomprehension of sublimity. Meanwhile, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) defined the feelings of the sublime in relation to the grand and overpowering. The various theories of the sublime attempted to explain the perception of beauty and categorise the psychological sensations of awe, fear, and wonder that were inspired by the dramatic
landscapes of Europe; the lofty peaks, expansive forests, and turbulent, rushing waters of the Alps. The sublime testified to God’s presence in nature. The pleasure caused by the perception of grandeur, incomprehensibility, and power could offer the viewer a transcendent experience.

Notions of unboundedness, immensity, and God’s power were visualised in the paintings of such artists as Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) and John Constable (1776–1837). The dwarfing of man, achieved by being pictured small in relation to an expansive scene of nature, was common (such as in Asher Durand, Kindred Spirits (1849, fig. 2). Through the convention of the extensive vista or distant view, dramatic, grand landscapes communicated both the omnipotence of God and the overwhelming power of nature. The Romantic idea of the sublime (as described by Edmund Burke) was created by the distance, between the viewer and awe-inspiring, natural phenomena:

The romantic sublime, as shaped by Edmund Burke in his treatise of 1757, is constituted by two principal attributes—imitation and distance—both of which find their logic through the ‘ruling principle’ of Burkean terror. Simply put, terror consists in the effect of ‘an apprehension of pain or death [that] operates in a manner that resembles actual pain’. This imitation of danger precisely depends upon the individual who is faced with the apprehension always maintaining a safe distance from it. The effect of imitation via proper distance is a negative pleasure that Burke refers to as delight: ‘When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight . . . but at certain distances . . . they are delightful’. (Jones 2006, n.p.)

This convention established mythic relationships between nature, God, and man. A vast world was suggested by paintings that acted as windows to an illusionary view that stretched way back, out and beyond the frame, as in Friedrich’s Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818) and Reisengeberger (1835). These paintings are relatively modest in size, the greatest dimension of the canvases being less than one metre. However, through their bird’s-eye viewpoint and vanishing-point perspective, such compositions were able to allude to the enormity of nature and possibly emotionally affect the viewer. The positioning of figures as aloof and apart from the landscape or totally absent from it emphasised nature’s separation from and opposition to the world of culture.
Understanding how these pictorial conventions operated within eighteenth-century and colonial Australian paintings has contributed to developing my works’ own imagery and compositional structure. The *Sweet Subterfuge* and *The Forest* series deliberately distort these conventions by creating a web of lines across each work, which flattens the field of depth and prevents the viewer from entering the scene, although they are positioned close to it. *The Entangled Forest* (2012, plate 16) manipulates and distorts the perspective created by a distant view, so as to unsettle the viewer’s relationship with space. Instead of being led back into a peaceful distance, the viewer is encouraged to feel as if they are falling into an imagined space. They are simultaneously drawn into and blocked (by the grid of lines) from entering the landscape, producing a feeling of being ‘pulled towards’ and ‘pushed away’ from the scene.
The Romantics and Nature: The Picturesque

For the Romantics, nature in its original state was also considered to exert a moral power as God’s creation, and various ‘myths of nature assisted the powerful hold nature had on nineteenth-century imagination’ (Novak 1980, p. 4). Nineteenth-century artists, writers, and philosophers summoned the idea of a pure nature through a range of aesthetics, symbolism and coded uses of motifs. This natural state of purity was contrasted with the state of corruption and moral ills attributed to the industrialised world of culture. John Ruskin (1819–1900), William Morris, and the Romantic poets, John Keats (1795–1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and William Wordsworth (1770–1850), all celebrated nature as being pure, beautiful, and morally sound. In The Prelude (1805), Wordsworth gives praise to nature illustrating pantheist views:

To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,
Or linked them to some feeling; the great mass
Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respired with inward meaning.

(Third Book, Residence at Cambridge, lines 130–136)

Nature promised to act as ‘a soothing balm’, offering spiritual assurance and renewal by ‘assist[ing] the human spirit in its quest for perfection’ as well as the ability to escape the trials of modern life’ (Coates 1998, pp. 135–6). The Romantics believed in the transcendental qualities of nature and that nature was a direct revelation of God; the ‘visible landscape of the earth was an emanation of God complete unto itself’ (Appleton 1996, p. 36). Although nature may no longer be linked to a profound Christian experience of God’s presence on earth today, in popular culture, pristine nature remains linked to notions of ‘the spiritual’, a link that is attested by the labels on a multitude of products in health-food shops and ‘spiritual living’ outlets that promise spiritual benefits through natural plant products.

The moral value of plants and natural environments was also expressed in the Romantic and idealised approach to landscape design and the painting of landscapes. Eighteenth-century landscape design established an aesthetic preference for a God-made nature that paradoxically was predictably ordered by the hands of man. A serene and peaceful nature could be experienced safely and conveniently in idealised landscapes that were created by carefully controlled plant
forms within tightly designed parks. The countryside surrounding important manors was managed to create theatrical views or scenes and these entrenched the criteria for the ideal landscape in the British and European mind. Although highly controlled, the aim was to make the manipulation by humans unnoticeable, through placing trees in balanced but asymmetrical compositions. Landscape designers such as Lancelot Capability Brown (1715–83) were responsible for building a series of ‘pictures’ of ideal countryside. The scenes within the gardens of Blenheim Palace, Chatsworth, and Hampton Court created pleasing vistas that offered a variety of focal points on which to rest the eyes as the viewer imaginatively moved through the landscape. In Australia, William Robert Guilfoyle (1840–1912) created similar picturesque scenes during his time as Director (1873–1909) of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne. I was able to appreciate the ideal beauty of the ‘perfect’ Guilfoyle landscapes preserved in the Princes and Tennyson Lawns, the Fern Gully, and Ornamental Lake while working for the Gardens in the 1990s. Walking to daily meetings in the offices located in various historical buildings within the grounds, I experienced the pleasure of the panoramic vistas, the seductive power of the ideal landscape, and the surprise, afforded by each turn of the path, of being privy to carefully managed scenes that changed with the seasons.

In Europe these principles of design were mixed with classical ideas that were also translated into aesthetic rules for painting ideal landscapes, reflected in the work of painters such as Claude Lorraine (1600–1682) (see, for example, his The Enchanted Castle, 1664, and Imaginary View of Tivoli, 1642). The picturesque became an accepted European landscape tradition that was exported to colonial countries as a way of seeing the land (one that I too had been inadvertently trained in through my experience at the Royal Botanic Gardens and my enthusiastic touring of heritage gardens throughout a five-year residence in London). Characterised by qualities of irregularity, asymmetry, partial concealment, the unexpected, and ‘the impression of natural occurrence rather than artificial contrivance’ (Appleton 1996, pp.30–31), the picturesque was a rhetorical framework applied physically to the land, both in Europe and its colonies. Picturesque conventions influenced the land’s clearing, as well as being applied visually within artworks.

By the end of the nineteenth century, domination, celebration, adoration, and romanticisation had all become embedded within representations of nature and the Western landscape. These pictorial traditions and conventions established ideas that were collectively thought of in pairs (such as wild/controlled, pure/decadent,
Ordered/chaotic); these binaries could as easily explain what something was not, as what it was. Lévi-Strauss maintained that the foundation of perceptions was built from the process of making binary distinctions:

By perceiving opposites or contrasts the mind builds up its perceptions of the world. One does not know light without knowing darkness . . . But isolated contrasts are not an end in themselves, for the human mind seeks analogies with other contrastive phenomena and upon finding them encompasses the analogies into its system of classification . . . the unconscious tendency to perceive relations is fundamental to the mind (cited in MacCormack & Strathern, 1980, p. 2).

Ideas of nature that arose out of Romantic or scientific traditions were often contradictory. In different contexts nature could be seen as being either one or the other of a range of oppositional pairs, such as 'robust and fragile, benign and malign, capricious and ordered, perverse and tolerant, eternal and ephemeral' (Dwyer 1996, p. 9). Nature was subordinate to culture at the same time it was privileged as ‘the superior other’ (Coates 1998, p. 5). Moral judgements made on the value of certain types of environments allocated different qualities to different types of nature. For instance, woodland could be wild and mysterious, forests could be pure and pristine, and meadows serene and peaceful. Ambiguity could appear to be unambiguous due to the organising power of dualist thought that privileged man and society over nature. For instance, a pure, spiritual nature, in its untouched state was wild and therefore ‘needed’ to be ruled, controlled, reorganised, and simplified by a rational culture; paradoxically, it was also revered as being perfect for its untouched state. These contradictions were ‘ironed out’ by the dominance of culture over nature, which allowed landscapes (though awe-inspiring) to be ultimately read as safe. My studio works respond to this hierarchical ordering by resisting familiarity—they simultaneously destabilise and trigger ideas of beauty, order, and predictability.

**Contemporary Ideas of Nature and Culture**

The plethora of images in contemporary commercial and media that recall of historical ideas of nature illustrates its persistence in contemporary culture. The recent advertising campaign for Land Rover’s Freelander 2 (2011) relies on the separation of nature and culture as discrete concepts. Though reversing the traditional position of culture dominating nature, this clichéd image nevertheless hinges on the assumption that nature and culture interact within the confines of an oppositional system of power; a hierarchy in which one concept is in control of the other.
To the contemporary artist and researcher, such oppositional dichotomies suppose a too definite and fixed hierarchy. The persistence of dualisms does not justify their existence or determine their acceptance as a preferred way of thinking about nature and culture. Marilyn Strathern’s assertion that ‘[n]o simple meaning can in fact be given to nature or culture in Western thought; there is no consistent dichotomy, only a matrix of contrasts (MacCormack & Strathern 1980, p. 177) suggests that nature and culture are so connected that each concept obtains meaning from attempts to define the other and from the relationship between them. Current theorising supports this but also suggests that a more ambiguous relationship exists between the two. Moreover, it has been asserted that art can play a significant role in understanding and picturing a different type of interaction, as Eagleton states:

When Frederick Nietzsche looked for a practise which might dismantle the opposition between freedom and determinism, it was the experience of making art that he turned, which for the artist feels not only free and necessary, creative and constrained, but each of these in terms of the other, and so appears to press these rather tattered old polarities to the point of undecidability. (Eagleton, 2000 p. 5)

interesting ideas regarding the interaction of concepts of nature and culture, and the consequential reconceptualising of these ideas. These theorists suggest that, rather than being hierarchical and oppositional, the relationship between nature and culture is complicated and interconnected. William J.T. Mitchell proposed that natural landscapes are in fact cultural landscapes ‘constructed through the medium of cultural expression’ (cited in Coates, 1998, p.110). Rather than separate, opposing concepts, as products of discourse, they exist interdependently. Wilson is definite about their interdependence, when he argues that:

Nature is part of culture . . . [N]ature too has a history. It is not a timeless essence, as Disney taught us. In fact, the whole idea of nature as something separate from human experience is a lie. Humans and nature construct one another. (cited in Smith, 1996, p. 44)

The cyclic nature of this relationship is important for it highlights that the way nature is represented and experienced visually is not just a handy system of coding used to illustrate scientific, cultural, or religious ideologies concerning God or man’s relationship to God’s creation, but forms part of the history of the way nature is dynamically experienced in conjunction with human culture. The non-human world is linked to the human through the connective tissue of history and its interpretation in art. Conceptions of the natural world change in response to how society transforms both the environment and its attitude towards it.

Human beings are not mere products of their environs, but neither are those environs sheer clay for their arbitrary self-fashioning. If culture transfigures nature, it is a project to which nature sets rigorous limits. The very world ‘culture’ contains a tension between making and being made, rationality and spontaneity, which upbraids the disembodied intellect of the Enlightenment as much as it defies the cultural reductionism of so much contemporary thought. (Eagleton 2000, p. 5)

In Landscape and Memory, Schama builds a cogent case for how the concepts of nature and culture should be seen to interact. Like Wilson (1992), Mitchell (1998), and Madsen (1999), Schama maintains that nature and culture should not be seen as unrelated, in opposition or distinct, but rather that they are deeply entwined:

For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock. (1995, pp. 6–7)

Schama emphasises the role history, cultural memory, and thinking play in the way humans perceive natural environments and highlights that this is expressed in the
conceptualisation and visual representation of those environments as landscapes. He argues that certain landscapes, including woods, are in fact perceptual terrains, constructed from the histories, myths, and obsessions that are invested in a particular place over hundreds of years:

... once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming in fact part of the scenery. (Schama 1995, p. 61)

This suggests that memories and associations stemming from specific events become mixed with broader mythical stories and metaphoric descriptions, to make a complex layering of meanings, which may cumulatively disturb categorical boundaries. Peter D. Dwyer also remarks on the power of metaphor to blend and make new meanings, stating that ‘through metaphor the contrastive pairs “self” and “other”, “culture” and “nature” are linked and meaning arises’ (1996, p. 161). The making of metaphors and interleaving of stories as layers has a powerful impact on an understanding of place and natural environments. In his chapter entitled “Woods” Schama (1995) provides numerous examples of historical events and representations in art, and describes how visual and literary media reflect, consolidate, and reinforce these ideas, investing them with resonant meanings that are then applied in wider contexts. In this way, stories and rhetorical ideas become deeply embedded in the understanding of a particular type of landscape as well as a specific site. For example, visual representations of the wooded environment are laden with memories that are connected not only to the forests of Lithuania, Germany, Russia, or Poland, but also to the broader Western concept of woods or forests.

It follows from Schama’s ideas that particular European myths, visions, and ideas of landscape do not just reside in the specific site in which they were originally generated, but can become, in the Western cultural imagination, attached to the broader concept of the forest that defies a country’s, continent’s, or hemisphere’s borders. For Australian settlers and their subsequent generations, the ideas and the metaphorical associations imported from Europe and North America with Australia’s early settlers, remain relevant and continue to inform contemporary concepts of nature. Ideas of a natural environment such as a forest, which have found a place in the public imagination at any point in a culture’s history, are difficult to shake off. These may have been created through childhood tales, classical stories, ethnic memory, and/or historical events. Once laid down they become part of the core materials used by a culture and are woven into the conceptual understanding of place.

Jennie Jackson, Exegesis
and natural environments through the conventions of landscape. My artistic works arising from this research highlight the historical basis for the formation of ideas of nature and culture by combining different aesthetic conventions in unexpected ways to depict a forest landscape.

One of the most compelling aspects of the visual language of art Schama identifies is its capacity to excavate the layers or strata that lie beneath the surface:

> Instead of assuming the mutually exclusive character of Western culture and nature, I want to suggest the strength of the links that have bound them together. That strength is often hidden beneath layers of the commonplace . . . an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface. (1995, p. 14)

In keeping with this metaphor, artworks could be understood as being like a geological core sample, revealing both the depth and different types of ideas layered over time within a landscape. However, this exegesis documents how this process, unlike strata sampling, is not carried out with the aim to preserve these ideas in strict historical order, maintaining the thickness of each layer built one upon another. Instead, the work of selected contemporary artists (and my own) discussed here will reveal that contemporary artworks reorganise, mix, and weight ideas differently. I assert that the layers of meaning to which Schama (1995) refers lose their distinct attributes associated with their historical position and become less connected to a specific history. They act more like the different-coloured strands used to create an embroidery; strands that are carried, running along on the rear side of the cloth to be intermittently pulled through to the surface and twisted with other strands to create an intricate tapestry made up of an endless array of colours, patterns, and images. The works of my studio research show that in this process some strands lay dormant while others are used to colour a section of a new image and some, in the process of twisting together, become distorted.

The four series of works and *The Entangled Forest* can be described as creatively weaving together various strands of ideas associated with the concepts of nature and culture (including those that may be competing or oppositional). These strands were selected for their ability to add specific meanings (such as predictability, ambiguity, and uncertainty) to the contemporary image and to shed light on the complexity of current ideas of the natural and cultural. The works of *The Forest* and *Sweet Subterfuge* series and the final work *The Entangled Forest* do this by pulling together the aesthetic conventions used by previous traditions to convey specific ideas of
nature, including the predictable and mysterious as well as the idealised and the aberrant. These are then ‘woven’ together to form contemporary images of nature and culture, which belong to a transitional zone between oppositional concepts, and engage with aspects of the broader, postmodern concerns of ambiguity, hybridity, and psychological motivation.

**Nature and the Artificial**

Postmodern society is frequently asserted as being tolerant of and embracing ideological contradiction and ambiguity (Paoletti 1985, pp. 53–54). One of the practical challenges of this research has been to identify different ways of picturing natural environments that mix ideas in ways that engage with contemporary discourse on the interaction of nature and culture and reflect related issues, such as technology, identity, and land ownership. A significant argument that contributes to postmodern discourse is one that challenges the continuing relevance of the concept of nature in a contemporary, technological world. The editors and writers of *Future Natural: Nature, Science, Culture* (1996) present a variety of opinions about the interaction of humans and environments and its future implications. The book’s introduction proposes that recent technological advances have fostered attitudes of human omnipotence, which have eroded the very existence of the concept of nature, preventing it from acting as a ‘ground of being, a stable otherness to the human condition’ (Robertson et al, 1996, p. 1). For instance, genetic reproductive technologies (such as cloning and genetic modification of both plant and animals) permanently undermine the foundational quality of the idea of nature as a constant and as a God-made thing. This argument leads to the conclusion that instead of two concepts closely interrelated or oppositional, there is one; the concept of nature dissolves because it becomes both a culturally constructed *thing* as well as a culturally constructed *idea*. Taken to its extreme, this theory proposes a profoundly unstable concept of nature and posits an all-powerful culture that gobbles natural ideas. However, rather than unseating the concept of nature, I suggest technological advances confirm the relevance and importance of the artificial to notions of both culture and nature. The artificial (that is, a man-made nature) blurs the categorical division between the two concepts causing the distance between them to close; rather than a dividing line between the two, the boundary opens up to make room for a transitional zone that embraces the artificial that incorporates elements of the cultural and the natural.
Cultural perceptions of nature and their portrayal in art are closely linked and mutually determining; Seddon writes ‘we see what we have learned to see . . . it is also true that we modify and extend what we have learned by seeing’ (1998, p. 62). In order to visualise a contemporary understanding of the relationship between nature and culture, my studio research has attempted to picture the qualities of the proposed transitional zone by highlighting and emphasising the constructed and the artificial. The artworks of the Sweet Subterfuge and Not What It Seems series, as well as The Entangled Forest, reveal my experiments with ways of dynamically mixing strands of ideas together. In order to achieve a categorical blur or transition between concepts, landscape conventions have been mixed with decorative techniques that stimulate ideas of the artificial and the ambiguous.

**Weaving Threads of Meaning in Contemporary Art**

A number of contemporary artists have explored the complex interaction of ideas concerning the cultural and the natural in relation to postmodern concerns with Indigenous rights and the impact of cultural colonisation. By using established conventions in unconventional ways they shed light on the complexity and interdependence of the concepts of nature and culture. Australian artist Fiona Hall has investigated how mimicry of different scientific conventions (for example, botanical illustrations and nomenclature) can operate within artworks that investigate the interaction of nature and culture. Her work comments on colonial occupation and the impact of cultural systems on natural environments across both the Pacific and Asia. Both her sculptural and installation work is characterised by detailed, scientifically accurate representations of natural objects (such as birds' nests, fruits, leaves, and plants) using unnatural materials that are industrial products of culture (such as metal packaging, money, soap, coke cans). The resulting objects act as striking metaphors for the culture/nature interaction and ‘exquisitely contrived evocations of the tensions between nature and culture’ (Davidson 2005, p.15). They are achieved by combining quite disparate items, mediums, and logical systems of working that simultaneously activate in the viewer a series of longstanding associations related to both the cultural and the natural. Her reference to historical relationships between nature and culture in many of her series—such as Cash Crop (1998), Occupied Territory (1995), Cell Culture (2001–02), and Understorey (1999–
2004)—and her ability to elicit a depth of associations and meanings, which are often contradictory or ambiguous, has been highly significant to my research.

Important exemplars for this project are the four series of Fiona Hall’s works *Paradisus Terrestris* (1989–90 & 1999) and *Paradisus Terrestrus Entitled* (1996 & 1999). In these series different visual and textual conventions are skilfully combined. The reading or decoding of the works relies on both the physical joining of the elements within the composition, and the ironic play of words in the title and image. These works rely on the subtle similarities detected between aspects of the Australian and Sri Lankan plant forms and the titles and/or body parts they are combined with. For instance, in *Plumeris acutifolia; araliya* (Sinhala); *malliya poo* (tamil); *frangipani / temple tree* (1999, fig. 4) the blooms of the plant mirror the shape of nipples, and the form of the plant reflects the pattern of the underlying structure of the breasts (the papillomas and milk ducts). The significance of colonisation and commercial development within the countries is symbolised by the canned, basic food product (sardines), and the inclusion of indigenous and Latin names. In *Xanthorrhoea australis* (eora) / black boy (1989–90, fig. 5), an erection is paired with the assertively upright form of a plant flower spike and the common English name.

Fig. 4 (left) Fiona Hall *Paradisus Terrestris: Plumeris acutifolia; araliya (Sinhala); malliya poo (tamil); frangipani / temple tree* (1999) retrieved 1 August 2011 from http://gleb-zinger-architecture.blogspot.com/2009_03_01_archive.html

Fig. 5 (right) Fiona Hall *Paradisus Terrestris: Xanthorrhoea australis (eora) / black boy* (1989-90) retrieved 1 August 2011, from http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail-LRG.cfm?View=LRG&IRN=6104&View=LRG
In this way meanings associated with systems of knowledge, science, and colonial power (Linnaean classification) and Indigenous systems of knowledge and ownership are interleaved with playful or ironic references to body or sexual parts. Thus, the various conventions of representation act as ‘vocabularies’ (Ewington 2005, p. 155), which together communicate a Western cultural encoding of nature and its political ramifications within Australia and Sri Lanka. Julie Ewington’s (2005, p. 155) description of these different systems of representation as ‘vocabularies’ is significant as it suggests that each system holds meaning that can be mixed in a complex and an infinite variety of ways to communicate a changing set of messages. The challenge of my research has been to trial how combinations of different conventions interact in two-dimensional formats and mediums and to test how this interaction can be used metaphorically, as well as perceptually, to prompt the mixing and blurring within a viewer’s mind of concepts associated with culture and nature.

Simryn Gill also investigates how European ideas of nature have operated within Southeast Asia. Like Hall, she focuses on the narratives of colonial occupation while questioning the various systems of meaning used in the West to understand the world. She photographs installations that enable her to record her interventions into natural or urban landscapes. Her *Forest* series (1996–98) juxtaposes the lush natural plant forms of the forest (metonymic of nature) with the language and images of various colonial texts (metonymic of culture), including those by Charles Darwin (1809–82), Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), and Daniel Defoe (1659–1731). These texts are full of complicated imagery, evocative, and seductive ideas of nature (including the wild, the primeval and the exotic, dangerous forest) that have become part of Western literary traditions.

Gill inserts torn sections of books into banana flowers, places them around mangrove roots, or suspends them to become the aerial roots of fig trees (see *Untitled* from *The Forest* Series, fig. 6). They hang as conceptual threads and, though originally spun elsewhere, are interwoven into the meaning of the Southeast Asian forests. The combination of these metonyms for culture and nature is subtly achieved, with the blending of plants and text assisted by the black-and-white visual format used. Viewed up close, the paper shapes and roughly torn pages are obvious. Although the words are barely readable, the longstanding ideas associated with natural environments reverberate. From a distance, however, the individual plants seem normal—the intervention is almost invisible. It is the knowledge of the eventual decay of these torn pages that prompts the viewer to consider the complexity and
interdependence of concepts of the natural and the cultural in the present. These transient interruptions to the landscape are photographed before they have a chance to rot away, commenting on the cultural inscription of nature and the changing quality of the relationship between the two.

The subtlety of Gill’s blending of ideas significantly influenced my studio experiments. I was interested in the blending of traditional conventions and their transformation; distorting and reinterpreting aspects of these traditions, rather than relying on the juxtaposition of different sections, which mimic individual conventions precisely. Inspired by Gill’s method, a blending of conventional techniques was developed across many individual works and can be seen in the way the faux engraving line in …Her Beauty and Her Terror (2008), Panorama II (2008), and Sweet Subterfuge (2007) morphs into a decorative patterning, which also describes the structure of a grove of trees.

Image removed

Fig. 6 Simryn Gill Untitled from The Forest series (1996-1998), gelatin silver photographs (1 of 16), 120.0 x 95.0cm each, retrieved 1 August 2011, from http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/new-contemporary-galleries/featured-artists-and-works/simryn-gill/
Jazmina Cininas’s work explores how ideas of nature and the feminine have been conflated in diverse myths from around the world. Her intricate linocuts draw attention to the similarities of shared histories of women and wolves in various popular mythologies. They have been shown in the recent exhibition, *The Enchanted Forest: New Gothic Storytellers* (2008) along with other artists who share an interest in mythology and concepts of the forest (Milan Milojovic, James Morrison, and Louise Weaver). Drawing upon a variety of illustration and decorative techniques, Cininas combines a number of pictorial and narrative traditions and uses the forest as the common stage for her reinterpretations of myths (*Wolfbane works on Dingoes too* (2007, fig. 7). The strange hybrid creatures/figures that inhabit the forest and result from the blending of human and wolf form mix longstanding ideas about the natural and the cultural and link the wild with the restrained. Interestingly this contemporary work references Gothic sensibilities and narratives associated with perverse category disruptions (such as vampires and werewolves) without arousing fear of being devoured.

Another Australian artist whose work has informed my research is filmmaker Jane Campion. Her film *The Piano* (1992) recalls nineteenth-century concepts of nature and culture to explicate ideas relevant to a contemporary audience. The images and
feelings of the forest that are evoked by Campion’s film have long resonated with me. *The Piano* is set deep within the temperate rainforest of New Zealand’s North Island. Set in the nineteenth century, it explores themes of control and domination, possession, love, and desire. Campion calls on the concepts attached to the Western concept of the primeval forest to act as the conceptual background and physical backdrop to the unfolding story of seduction. Both the Indigenous inhabitants (the Maoris) and the forest are seen through Victorian eyes and are positively contrasted with the ‘Anglo-Celts’ repressively neurotic ‘culture’ (Bell 2001, p. 200). The forest is wild and dark where passions and sexuality can be unleashed; it is dense, difficult to penetrate and steeped in mud and rain. The forest scenes are filmed in ultramarine to give ‘it an underwater look that activates the central metaphor: drowning’ (Johnson 1993, p. 72).

These familiar associations of the forest are however complicated by the character of George Baines who lives deep within its bounds and in-between the colonial and Maori cultures. For in this complicated postmodern narrative, the forest is intimately connected to the masculine (rather than the feminine) and is simultaneously repressive and liberating for Ada, the heroine. Hegemonic masculinity, imperial culture, and power dissolve its hold over Ada with each journey she makes through the forest, initially embarked on to reach the piano but eventually to join with Baines. Nineteenth-century oppositional pairings of ideas are replaced by unexpected sets of
associations; the primitive, unsophisticated, sensitive, and sensual/erotic are attributes of the tattooed hero; the settlers who separate themselves from the forest and vainly uphold the trappings of civilisation are the ones who act barbarically and irrationally—behaviour that is exposed symbolically by the settler's re-enactment of the Bluebeard story and by Ada's husband's violent attack on her in an attempt to control her. The characters who are aligned with the values of European imperialism become ‘pathetically monstrous’ (Hendershot 1998, p. 99) while those associated with the forest become psychologically freed from culture’s restrictive rules.

Like the forest, the piano is a complicated symbol. It is a foreign object that signifies Europe’s culture of high art and civilisation. During the course of the film, it is abandoned, rescued, hauled into the forest on the back of the Maories, fetishised as an object of desire, bartered for at great personal cost (by both Baines and Ada), pulled apart, and ultimately drowned. The notes of the piano echo through the forest making the inner voice of Ada audible, expressing her desperation, defiance, and longing. The forest acts as witness to the passionate transformation of lust into love. However for Ada and Baines to be psychologically remade they are required to escape both imperial culture as well as the claustrophobic ‘other’ world of the forest.

Fig. 9 Jane Campion, Film still from The Piano (1992) retrieved 10 July from http://thebestpictureproject.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/thepiano2.png
Thus, diverse cultural meanings associated with nature are skilfully interlaced in the works of Simryn Gill, Fiona Hall, Jazmina Cininas and Jane Campion, revealing how the ideas of the Northern Hemisphere have been projected onto Southern hemisphere and Asian natural environments. These contemporary artists’ works make clear how the strands of meaning connected to various Western art traditions and motif of the forest have contributed to ways of thinking about and relating to environments outside the boundaries of Europe. These works also illustrate how these ‘old’ ideas, though distorted or transformed, are passed onto recent generations. They show how these concepts are elaborated on and given new metaphorical life within contemporary artworks. This re-processing and weaving together of ideas leads to a far more complicated picture of how concepts of culture and nature are considered to interact. This also enables them to remain in the fabric of an artwork, like threads pulled through to the surface, actively constructing an evolving, contemporary picture of nature. In this way, longstanding ideas of Western literature, philosophy, science, landscape design, and fine art are used in different combinations to create a richly embroidered concept of nature that is deeply entwined with culture. Having mapped out these fundamental concerns, Chapter 2 considers the way the Australian forest has been represented by selected colonial and contemporary artists, including myself, and how this motif has been associated in Australia with concepts of the wild, foreign and dangerous.
Chapter Two: The Australian Forest as Landscape

Landscapes are culture before they are nature: constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock
—(Schama 1996, p. 61)

Over the last 240 years, depictions of the Australian environment (including its forests) have been imbued with seductive, visual traditions imported from elsewhere. The conventions belonging to Europe, described in Chapter 1, were adopted to stimulate an emotional connection between Australia’s newly arrived peoples and the natural environment. Acting like embroidery threads of different hues, these various modes of representation have been used to create a unique Australian picture. This chapter examines how these conventions and the ideas associated with them have been woven into the Australian context through visual representations of forests. I explore art’s power to capture the complex, and often entangled, historical and contemporary concepts of nature through examining works that reflect, modify, and/or twist together long-held ideas. In particular, I examine the intricate way in which nature and culture interact as interdependent concepts through considering works by Sam Leach, James Morrison, Rosemary Laing, and me.
For at least for five generations, the Australian bush has been romanticised and idealised by Western eyes. The practice of representing nature according to the rules of an established aesthetic convention, rather than observing and recording exactly what is there, is clearly illustrated in the work of early colonial artists. Artists such as John Eyre (1771–1812), Joseph Lycett (ca. 1774–1828), Conrad Martens (1801–78), and John Glover (1767–1849) represented early settlements and the surrounding land as either a de-forested pastoral idyll or part of ‘an antipodean Arcadia untouched by European settlement and occupied only by Aborigines enjoying a bountiful existence’ (Bonyhady 1985, p. xii). In contrast to European agricultural practice, the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia had not managed the land’s productivity via a process of clearing forests. Picturesque aesthetics were therefore used to domesticate or ‘clean up’ what the settlers regarded as an unruly bush, thick with strange-looking trees and messy undergrowth. This aesthetic set of rules informed the clearing of the land as much as it guided artists’ compositional choices. The appeal of the picturesque even prompted artists to make physical interventions in the landscape. Tim Bonyhady describes the practices of ‘artists with axes . . . moving bushes or branches in order to enliven their foregrounds . . . [and] felling trees in order to expand the horizon’ (2000, pp. 192–3) so they could restructure nature for a pleasing composition. Works such as Eyre’s View of Sydney from the West Side of the Cove (1806) and Lycett’s The Sugarloaf Mountain, near Newcastle, New South Wales (1824, fig. 10) show classically beautiful scenes that follow picturesque principles. They feature expanses of gently flowing water, distant mountain views, and patches of cleared forest ready for agricultural development.

The practice of bending nature to culture’s aesthetic preferences reflects the Western attitude of culture’s dominance over nature, and reveals the intellectual lenses and emotional filters used by a culture to understand and appreciate new environments. This can be seen in the methods used by colonial artists to portray the details of their environment. For instance, the strange and unfamiliar plant forms of coastal forests (featuring eucalypts, melaleucas, and banksias) were dressed in the familiar garb of the English countryside. Lycett created scenes that included ‘[n]oble park-like trees of the Eucalyptus family grouped about by the hand of nature’ so as to produce scenery of ‘extreme beauty and loveliness’ (Angus cited in Bonyhady 1985, p. 47). His trees were barely recognisable as Australian and often appeared individually or in carefully positioned groups at the edge of a composition as if to reproduce the planned, ‘natural’ landscapes of English landscape design (Bonyhady 1985, p. 45). Works such as these were heavily indebted to Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin’s compositions of
imaginary, classical landscapes (Bonyhady 1985, p. 47) and made no reference to the reality of living in what the British colonists initially found to be a harsh and unforgiving land.

Successive generations of Australians had their visions of the Australian environment translated into the visual form of an artwork—transforming thoughts of nature into landscapes. Australian landscapes are expressions of ideas as much as they are aesthetic compositions; issues such as land ownership, belonging and not belonging, prosperity, and achievement were all communicated through the visual methodologies used by colonial artists. For instance, Glover’s Australian Landscape with Cattle: The Artist's Property Patterdale (1835, fig. 11) uses established European Romantic aesthetics and features majestically posed eucalypts surrounded by contented cows to illustrate colonial achievement and prosperity. Paintings became documents of ‘the importance of origins, of noting the imposition of the values of a “superior” culture on a landscape considered virgin until viewed through British eyes’ (Kerr 1995, p.188).
As well as ideal landscapes that promised the fulfilment of economic dreams, colonial scenes (extended horizontally as expansive panoramas) acted as official records of the layout of the new colony (such as Louisa Anne Meredith’s *Panorama of Sydney Harbour*, 1840). They were also mechanisms of laying claim to ownership of the land, which had wrongly been perceived as being without owners. Little recognition was given to the densely forested character of the coastline that existed before settlement. In images that are clearly focused on white settlement and domesticating the land—such as Lycett’s *The Homestead at Raby* (c.1824, fig. 12) and Glover’s *A View of the Artist’s House and Garden, in Mills Plains, Van Diemen’s Land* (1834–35)—the forest is ignored, placed far in the distance or banished to the edge of the composition. Either way, it forms a boundary that marks the end of cultural order and peacefulness and the beginning of the wild, unknown world of the Aborigines and Australia’s exotic, native creatures.

The myopic European vision of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led settlers and colonial artists to try to control the land that they struggled to know. This was attempted by a process of finding similarities and fitting new data into known schemas or ways of doing things; a process that perhaps also subconsciously suppressed fearful or perplexing differences. In von Guérard’s *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong*
Ranges (1811, fig. 13) the exotic beauty of the fern tree gullies is celebrated. Executed with meticulous detail, this painting of the temperate rainforest is part of the natural-history approach to define and categorise exotic vegetation that had been inspired by Humboldt’s writings and expeditions (Bonyhady 1985, pp. 64–65) and is exemplified in the extensive collections of botanical illustrations. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, etchings and line drawings were extensively used to communicate information about both scientific discoveries and life in Australia. These images helped make sense of the exotic and strange New World where the rules of nature seemed to be turned on its head. Paradoxically, the need to identify recognisable patterns in the way things worked—to force an unknown nature into a known taxonomy—seemed to coincide with a fascination for a sensual and almost unfathomable exotic. Early images of an exotic ‘other’ world were often mistranslations. The unfamiliar was elaborated upon, allowing mistakes or distortions in representation to be compounded with each form of reproduction. Thus, the Australian natural environment was simultaneously recognisable and incomprehensible.
The Foreign Forest

In the nineteenth century, forests were represented as the primary subject of many compositions. They were mostly pictured as sites for mysterious Aboriginal rituals, corroborees, or hunting routines, such as in Glover’s *A Corroboree of Natives in Van Dieman’s Land* (1840, fig. 14) and von Guérard’s *Warrenship Hills near Ballarat* (1854). Romanticised and reduced to ‘noble savages’, the Aboriginal peoples were as misrepresented as the plants and animals. Literature of the time linked the forest and the ‘natives’ with ideas of the mysterious, melancholy, and frightening:

The natives aver [sic] that when the night comes, from out of the bottomless depth of one of the huge lagoons the Bunyip rises, and in form like a monstrous sea-calf, drags his loathsome length from out the ooze. From some corner of the silent forest arises a dismal chant, and around a fire, dance natives painted like skeletons. All is fear inspiring and gloomy. (Marcus Clarke cited in Bonyhady 1985, p.127)

This foreign character of the Australian environment was envisaged from a Eurocentric perspective as a ‘melancholy landscape’ in which ‘all things are queer and opposite’ (Hoare 1969, p. 198), and nature was regarded as weird:
In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write. Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly and our beasts who have not yet learned to walk on all fours. But the dweller in the wilderness acknowledges the subtle charm of this fantastic land of monstrosities. (Marcus Clarke cited in *The Australian Landscape* 1986, p. 3)

Fig. 14 John Glover, *A Corroboree of Natives in Van Dieman’s Land* (1840) retrieved 7 July 2011 from http://www.hangingpalette.com/v/vspfiles/photos/Glover-1767-0001-2T.jpg

In Europe, forests were associated with Gods and spirits, elves and fairies, magicians and witches; they concealed secrets that were deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of Europeans (Taussig 1999, p. 126). In eighteenth and nineteenth-century European landscape paintings, the-edge-of-the-wood was a common motif and ‘zone of special significance’ (Appleton 1996, p. 191). By adopting this motif and representing a definite boundary between cleared land and wild forest, Australian artists expressed familiar oppositional concepts that offered obvious choices between ‘prospect and refuge’, ‘good visibility and effective concealment’ (Appleton 1996, pp. 191–2). Here this motif functioned as a marker of the division between the provinces of man (culture) and the dangerous unknown (the forest wilderness). Unlike the European woods described by Schama in *Landscape and Memory*, Australian forests were not inhabited by bears; there were no mighty antlered elks or ‘hairy aurochs with red-black eyes and fearsome curving horns . . . [or] strange birds whose plumage shone like fire in the depths of the night’ (1995, p. 83). For the European settler, physical danger and emotional risk was associated with penetrating the forest.
because this meant entering an utterly alien world. The fear of becoming lost in a vast landscape whose exact dangers were not known was created as much from the absence of things (such as, water and food) as in the presence of threats (such as snakes and hostile Aborigines). These fears imbued the depiction of this transitional zone with mystery and metaphoric significance and the forest itself with an aura of unpredictability and anxiety. This early form of fear of ‘the bush’ resulted in one of the most persistent ‘set of threads’ used over time to conceptualise the Australian forest as exotic, foreign, and potentially terrible:

At the heart of white settlement lies a deep ambivalence about place. White Australia’s origin as a penal colony implanted ambivalence at the moment of inception. Was this new land to be a prison of and attractive pastoral prospect for settlers? Is this country hell or paradise? The tension between utopian aspirations and dystopian experience that that pervades Australian art and experience is revealed most potently in the configuration of the landscape . . . (Taussig 1999, p. 128)

In my paintings and prints arising from this research, this strong association between the forest and the unknown in Australian art has been incorporated like a set of weft threads in a fabric: essential to create the background upon which other ideas can be embroidered. Within the works of the Sweet Subterfuge series, the ambiguously shaped bushes and the cavernous forms of groves of trees that threaten to close over unexpectedly evidence the existence of this unsettling weft.

Perhaps because of the vague cultural fear of the Australian forest, relatively few landscapes have been painted from the viewpoint of being within it. As this perspective is of particular significance to this research, each of the four series of artworks created as part of this inquiry are set within this position—immersed within the forest. Paradoxically, however, these works both engage with and resist the ideas traditionally associated with being within the forest. In the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century, the centre, or interior of the forest, was presented as an uncanny place where children could be lost and monstrous or mysterious things might happen. Artworks that have emphasised these ideas include Conrad Martens’s Brisbane: Cunningham’s Gap (1856, fig. 15); Frederick McCubbin’s Lost (1886 & 1907, fig. 16); Blamire Young’s The Mansions of the Grey Thrush (1925–26); Sydney Long’s Pan (1919); Albert Tucker’s Faun & Bush series (1968); Clifton Pugh’s Day of Winter (1959); and Charles Blackman’s Rainforest series (1984–86). The forest undergrowth also provided a fitting stage for Arthur Boyd’s depiction of the traumatic tale of the Love Marriage and Death of a Half Caste series (1958–60). The darker or entangled character of the undergrowth in these images relies on mournful associations of the
forest or the sublime awe or fear associated with being dwarfed by the power of nature.

![Image removed](image-url)

Fig. 15 Conrad Martens, *Forest, Cunningham's Gap* (1856) retrieved 2 June 2011 from http://qag.qld.gov.au/collection/queensland_heritage/conrad_martens2

![Image removed](image-url)

Fig. 16 Frederick McCubbin, *Lost* (1907) retrieved 7 July 2011 from http://www.mccubbinfamily.com/_images/Lost%201907.JPG
Contemporary Queensland artist William Robinson paints and draws significant artworks of forests, positioning the viewer deep within them. These paintings of the southeastern temperate rainforests of the Springbrook district (e.g., *Creation Landscape, Darkness and Light*, 1988, and *Creation Landscape: The Ancient Trees*, 1997) present a spiritual forest—one that is ‘unquestionably a God-revealed world’ (Fink 2001, n.p.). These primordial landscapes are, in true romantic tradition, metaphors for the mystery of life and the grandeur of nature. They are deeply religious explanations of man’s relationship with God with nature at its centre (Seear 2001, p. 22). Robinson’s paintings and pastels create a powerful sensation of being within the forest, communicating a sense of being surrounded by plants, trees, and sky. The change of perspective and rotating horizon line prompts memories of the experience of looking up through forest trees to the sky as well as the swirling sensation of turning to see the surrounding forest (see *Gum Forest with Pale-headed Rosellas*, 2001, fig. 17). This distorted and multiple-viewpoint perspective enables these paintings to visually communicate the sensation of being within the forest. Robinson confirms that these images are based on his daily observation and experience of his surroundings. They are ‘looked at from outside but [also] contain the observer’ (cited in Klepac 2001, p. 40).

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Both the colonial and contemporary artworks discussed in this chapter demonstrate that ideas of the wild wood and the spiritual forest, initially associated with European forests, have become significant conceptual threads used in Australian art. These ideas have been gradually interwoven into Australian scenes and progressively stitched into an Australian psyche. The melancholy landscape, the weird and the wild primeval forest are concepts that still resonate in Australian popular consciousness and figure in the representation of forests as psychologically dark and dangerous places. Such images of nature owe much to the ideas and conventions of the sublime in visual art and raise questions as to why wilderness has become a motif that ‘speaks’ to contemporary audiences. Andrew Ross offers this explanation as to the metaphoric and psychological potency of wilderness as a concept and a representation:

Untamed nature begins to figure as a positive and redemptive power only at the point where human mastery over its forces is extensive enough to be experienced as itself a source of danger and alienation and when a culture has begun to register the negative consequences of its industrial achievements that will return to wilderness or aestheticize its terrors as a form of foreboding against further advances. (Ross 1996, p. 25)

Ideas of an untamed nature that requires caution and is conceptualised as being ‘other’ to ‘us’ appeared in the recent exhibition Wilderness; Balnaves Contemporary Painting (2010) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This show featured work portraying wild environments from contemporary Australian artists Julie Fragar, Stephen Bush, Andrew Browne, Fiona Lowry, Del Kathryn Barton, Louise Herman, and James Morrison. In the introductory essay to the catalogue, Wayne Tunnicliffe describes the significance of the concept of wilderness to the psychology of a place:

Wilderness inhabits the edges of our consciousness as much as it is a physical and tangible place. In the course of Western history the wilderness has often been conceived of as the opposite to civilisation, a wild and potentially dangerous place from which settlements and villages were carved into existence. The wilderness was . . . a place in which the known world gave way to unmapped and uncultivated land, terrain that offered both the benefits of discovery and transformation and the risks and fears of the hazardous and unknown. However the wilderness was as much an idea as a material reality—a world where disorder rather than religious, royal or secular law might reign. (Tunnicliffe 2010, p. 8)

Tunnicliffe’s concern with wilderness as both an imaginary and a real place is also investigated in this project’s interest in how ideas are overlaid onto environments and how cultural mythology surrounding the concept of a forest is built up. In contemporary Australia, the imaginative construction of wilderness and wild forest is
embellished by local folklore, documentaries (such as the ABC’s *Into the Forest* series), media stories, and guided tours for tourists (such as O’Reilly’s tours). Mostly based on real events, these stories become mythical, affirming ideas concerned with the psychological associations of wilderness and the notion that the Australian forest is a dangerous place to be. They describe and replay events, such as the Stinson plane crash in the McPherson Ranges of South East Queensland, with dramatic effect, and mythologise the string of murders or massacres associated with forests throughout Australia (for instance, the Myall Creek Massacre (1838); Stringybark Creek Massacre (1878); Forrest River Massacre (1921); Hope Forest Massacre (1971); McKay Sisters murders at Antill Creek (1970); Truro Bushland murders (1978–9); Bengalo State Forest murders (1990s); the Millewa State Forest murders (2000); and the murder of Daniel Morcombe (2003)). Eerie images of the uncanny forest are sold as computer screensavers; for example, *The Mysterious Forest, 2011* (fig. 18), has become part of everyday life—at each reboot, screensavers such as this replay the notion that the forest is still an unfathomable element of an alien Australia.

![Image removed](http://www.softpicks.net/software/Desktop/Screen-Savers-Nature/The-Mysterious-Forest-Screensaver-77299.htm)

Over the last 240 years, what has been regarded in Australia as dangerous and safe, familiar and unfamiliar, Indigenous and foreign, or beautiful and weird has changed, affected, in part, by how environments have been represented. The need to tame the
landscape has been repeatedly acted out on canvas and paper. In the comforting, pastoral views of early colonial artists, such as Joseph Lycett and Louis Buvelot (1814–88), and in the later, idealised scenes of a ‘golden country’ produced by the Heidelberg school painters (Tom Roberts (1856–1931) and Arthur Streeton (1867–1943), the dense forest as a motif was almost completely replaced with open countryside. This was perhaps as much a retreat from the claustrophobic or disturbing power of the ‘foreign’ forest and an advance towards the safe and picturesque qualities of the familiar paddock or field as it was a representation of the physical clearing of the land. The increased interest in picturing agricultural and grazing land and the harshness of the Australian environment (as shown in Man Feeding his Dogs (1941) and The Drover’s Wife (1945) by Russel Drysdale) reflected the developing association of Australian identity with the rural, the masculine, and the heroic myths of the outback. These heroic conventions linked outback landscape and masculinity with national identity and left the forest as the province of the ‘other’.

The Australian forest, however, has continued to play a significant role in the understanding of identity and Western culture’s interaction with the Australian environment, with the tension between the Indigenous and the foreign being a persistent theme. This tension is a peculiarly colonial idea and has been significant in many of the colonial territories of Britain, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, and France. Unlike the territories, these colonisers have for centuries framed their culture around stable notions of identity. Only recently have they too experienced the cultural and social dilemmas raised by a multiple ‘we’ or ‘us’. The importance of a constant engagement with all types of ‘us’ is emphasised by John Barrett-Lennard when he argues that relating to the natural world and seeing the land and its various scapes is an active cultural process: ‘Landscape exists in and through discourse, so to re-imagine our stories, or write new ones, allows Australia to be seen or understood differently’ (Barrett-Lennard 2010, p. 102).

The significance of the dynamic role that artworks play in understanding the way nature is ‘seen’ and constructed by culture was recently highlighted by Sam Leach’s Proposal for Landscaped Cosmos (2010, fig. 19), which was the winning entry of the Wynne Prize 2010 for Australian landscape. Rather than being based on an actual Australian forest scene, Leach’s work closely appropriated an imagined Italian scene painted by Dutch painter Adam Pynacker in 1660. This appropriation is significant to the contemporary theorising of nature in that it ‘confirm[ed] that landscape is a construct and not innate. In fact, even the most naïve realism relies on a foundation of
myth’ (Barrett-Lennard 2010, p. 102). Interestingly, one of the judges, John Beard, defended the controversial allocation of the prize to Leach with his statement, ‘[w]hat matters is when I looked at it I felt the myth, the wonder, the beauty’ (Boland 2010), emphasising that it is the poetical and mythological, rather than the literal interpretation of physical elements of nature, that, in his mind at least, ultimately constituted what can be considered representative of an Australian landscape.

Leach’s win testifies not only to the persistence in contemporary art of the Romantic Western art traditions of the picturesque but also suggests that the significance of truth-to-appearance or of patriotic ‘Australianism’ (popular since the 1860s) is now just one of the many threads that makes up the history of Australian representations.
of landscape, rather than being an ultimate truthful form of depiction. Contemporary Australian painting ‘considers how the natural world exists as much in our minds, memories and imaginations as it does in any empirical fact’ (Tunnicliffe 2010, p. 13) and offers an imaginative rethinking of ideas about landscape that is based on a cultural relationship rather than a desire to represent the varieties of Australian plants accurately within an environment.

**The Sublime and the Australian Forest**

The Romantic philosophers (for example, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer) and writers (for example, Victor Hugo, Edgar Allen Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron) who were interested in the sublime closely aligned a fear of the unknown to an unsettling or exhilarating beauty. This linking of nature with intense emotion was imported from Europe and applied to dramatic images of Australian forests. As early as the late 1800s, the European rhetoric of the sublime was superimposed on the Australian landscape and portrayed through grand views, vast panoramas and wild, densely forested landscapes of the Blue Mountains, the Great Dividing Range, and beyond. These were most commonly seen from a high vantage point. Each landscape was designed to foster awe; an awe of the grandeur of God’s design as well as of the heroic might of the explorers who crossed these wild terrains. Painters such as W.C. Piguenit (see his Kosciusko, 1903) and von Guérard ‘depicted heavy skies and towering mountains with a dramatic grandeur atypical of the Australian landscape’ (Great Australian Landscape Paintings 1973, n,p). Inspired by the works of the nineteenth-century Romanticists, such as Caspar David Friedrich, depictions of Australian mountains and its wild forests became a symbol of the sublime, transcendence, and spirituality; an attempt to ‘explain universal truths about man’s place in nature’ (The Australian Landscape 1986, p. 7). Von Guérard’s paintings often showed swathes of forested land from a distance, with the viewer often strategically perched on a cliff so as to survey the immenseness of God’s creation (see Govett’s Leap and Grose River Valley, Blue Mountains, 1873, fig. 20). In other paintings, which show scenes deep within the forest, the viewer is positioned near a tumultuous river, watching the awe-inspiring power of a waterfall (such as Bonyarambite Falls, 1863).

In the final painting arising from this research, *The Entangled Forest* (2012, plate 16), this deliberate positioning of the viewer is interrogated. The effect of scale, the
opening up of a distant view, and the impact of the changing position of the viewer as they walk along the length of a painting are significant aspects scrutinised by this research. These elements are manipulated so as to elicit an emotional or perceptual response in the viewer and are discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Fig. 20 Eugene von Guérard, Govett's Leap and Grose River Valley, Blue Mountains, (1873) retrieved 9th March 2010 from http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/IMAGES/MED/22939.JPG

In keeping with this tradition of sublime landscape painting, the more recent photographs of Olegas Truchanas (1923–72), and Peter Dombrovski (1945–96), of Tasmanian forests and rivers have become powerful symbols of an immaculate nature. Dombrovski’s photograph Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, South-west Tasmania (1979, fig. 21), published in his best-selling wilderness calendar Wild Rivers (1983), was elevated to an iconic image of wild forests and rivers. Used by the environmental movement of the 1980s in its political campaign to stop the Franklin River Dam going ahead demonstrated its value as a signifier of purity and wild beauty. As a photograph it captured a moment in time, emphasising the danger of that moment’s passing. It appeared just prior to the 1983 federal election as a full-page advertisement in the Herald newspaper with the caption, ‘Would you vote for a party that would destroy this?’ (cited in Batchen 2002, p. 54).
It could be argued that such landscapes, promoted as ‘untouched’ by human culture, have become politically untouchable, and have contributed to a concept of sacred wilderness within Australia. The absence of humans and their artefacts is marked and a natural world, frozen in an aesthetically beautiful composition, presents a contemporary version of the sublime and perfect world of the nineteenth-century English Romantic literary and artistic movements. Being more in line with that century’s aesthetics and philosophy of celebration and adoration of nature means that these images were also attuned to ‘seeing’ Australia’s moisture, river, and forest environments, rather than focusing on the twentieth-century view of the landscape as an arid inland (New Worlds from Old nineteenth Century Australian & American Landscapes 1998).

This deeply Romantic approach also separates and distances nature from culture, positioning it as a pure place, a spiritual sanctuary, and a place of recuperation or retreat that is unsullied by the influence of culture and its industries. Paradoxically, this supports the polarisation of the two concepts, setting up a direct competition between the needs of one versus the other. Environmental campaigns become
battles between two opponents; battles, that Tim Bonyhady argues (with regard to the ongoing struggle to preserve Tasmanian forests), has become an aesthetic campaign:

Yet the core of the campaign—especially the campaign to protect the giant trees of the Styx Valley—is aesthetic. On the one hand, there is the grandeur of immense old trees and the awe and wonder they excite. On the other hand, there is the ugliness of clear-felling, the use of aerial incendiaries to set fire to the remaining stumps and branches and the lifeless, blackened landscape which results. (Bonyhady 2004, n.p.)

The heated debates and controversy that continue to surround the preservation of forests in Australia illustrate both the polarised views and range of emotions and cultural values superimposed on this environment. Ecologically, forest ecosystems are complete ‘worlds’ that harbour a vast interconnected community of life—both plant and animal. Thankfully, the Franklin River gained protection from the dam, escaping complete annihilation. Instead, it has become the site of a tourist industry that thrives on selling the ‘healing power’ of pure wilderness, no matter how brief the exposure. Thus, even isolated forests have become, as Schama remarks (about wild European woods), ‘as much the product of culture’s craving and culture’s framing as any other imagined garden’ (1995, p. 7). It is worth considering whether this comes at the cost of a broader appreciation of the interdependence of nature and culture, the recognition of long-standing Indigenous land-management practices, and the development of a pervasive attitude that could result in more natural environments being managed responsibly as sites integral to culture. As long as Australian forests are conceptualised as opposite to culture they will be protected, but perhaps it also follows that they will continue to be controlled, limited, and exploited.

The various interpretative frameworks and the conventions that construct them give landscapes their meaning. Through my studio research, I have discovered that the way that the picturesque tradition relegates the forest to the edge of the scene is a means of ‘seeing’ the forest as a foreign “other”. Similarly, other ways of thinking about nature in Australia are revealed by the practices of misrepresenting and distorting tree forms and typing the forest as a wild, unfathomable and dangerous place or as an ‘untouchable’, beautiful environment. These ideas are European ‘threads’ that have wound themselves tenaciously around eucalypts, melaleucas, and fern trees. How this has occurred and what its impact is is investigated in artworks by contemporary artists James Morrison and Rosemary Laing, as well as myself. Each of us is concerned with the problematical interface between nature and culture and the political ramifications of place, identity, and environment in Australia.
The Forest in Contemporary Art

In his work, *The Great Tasmanian Wars* (2004, fig. 22), Morrison creates an epic story that reveals the interdependence of natural environments and humans and depicts the intricate interweaving of ideas of nature and culture that have featured in Western and Australian history of art. Made up of fifty-five panels, this extensive image is almost seventeen metres long and incorporates various complex narratives and uses a diverse range of pictorial conventions. Different sections of the work use the methodologies of naturalism, botanical and zoological illustration, abstracted decorative styles, picturesque landscapes, and the sublime. Layered with appropriated images, sourced from across continents and across time, this work evidences the cultural obsession of collecting artefacts of nature, and highlights the multifarious ways that nature has been represented by Western art:

The plants and animals within this work ‘present themselves as portraits of their biological specificity, as products of nature’s ever evolving figuration. . . . The division between nature’s creation and artistic representation becomes increasingly difficult to define. . . . Life imitates art imitating life in a chicken and egg-like way; different orders of representation fold into each other so that it is impossible to discover where this story of cosmic creation begins. (Rowell 2005, p. 86)

In his smaller, five-panel painting, *Freeman Dyson* (2008, fig. 23), Morrison paints in equally compelling detail a strange forest in which the scenes of a tragic act between nature and culture unfold. This painting is named after the theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson, who is known for his controversial or unconventional positions on global warming and biotechnology. The forest floor is littered with both the remnants of material civilisation and the giant body of a man who stares out to the viewer, either
transfixed in his thoughts or in death. The world of the painting is deliberately contradictory, appearing both celebratory and apocalyptic. It portrays nature with wonder but also seems to warn of potential destruction and the overtaking of society by nature. There is an obvious disjunct between the scale of the forest compared to the scale of the man, crows, and industrial objects, which appear as if they are being absorbed by the bush. Morrison’s careful observation of the crows, trees, and pebbles and the various bits of man-made things (bicycle helmets, watches, bits of robots, and televisions) is obsessive in its hyper-real detail and strangely artificial in its use of high-pitched colours. Through this painting, Morrison articulates his ideas about the interplay of Australian environments and their human and animal inhabitants—the complicated interaction between the diverse worlds of nature and culture. Artworks such as this offer a society a way of understanding itself and its history, its process of thinking, and its often strange relationship with the natural world; a relationship that allows humans to plunder and venerate at the same time.

Image removed


Artist Rosemary Laing also offers a contemporary reimagining of the way in which nature and culture relate. She investigates the longstanding tension in Australia between the Indigenous and foreign by exploring the natural, cultural, and historical contexts of Australian locations. Interested in place and its relationship to people, her artistic practice is informed by postcolonial perspectives that interrogate issues of occupation and land ownership. Of particular interest to this research is her series of works, Groundspeed (see Untitled 2001, fig. 24), which also comment on the struggle for dominance between nature and culture as well as the Indigenous and exotic. In this series, three Australian forest locations, staged and photographed by Laing, are
constructed scenes in which a dramatic narrative is played out. The forests appear in their natural states. These metonymically refer to sites of colonial settlement and, through close association, to the Indigenous Aboriginal population. In each site, highly patterned Feltex carpets, sourced from England, are physically inserted ‘on location’ to replace the forest floor and then photographed, making the cultural overlay upon nature literal. In these images the carpet and the forest represent culture and nature, stimulating the threads of ideas traditionally associated with each category. The forest is associated with concepts of the wild, the Indigenous, and the chaotic, and the carpet becomes a metaphor for the artificial, foreign, and ordered.

The floral and foliage designs of each carpet evoke images of domestic spaces, memories of living rooms where the flotsam of a family are strewn. The viewer is reminded that nature is the source for these decorative patterns—patterns that are European in both their history and their botanical detail. Together, the carpets and the leaves remind the viewer of an occupant’s presence in a home, and by association, also of a settler in the bush. The carpets, however, like all non-Indigenous Australians, are implanted, out of place in this environment. Webb comments that ‘in bringing the two together in one image neither nature nor culture loses its power to attract and the lines between the two begin to blur’ (cited in The Unquiet Landscapes of Rosemary Laing 2005, p. 11). By photographing them together, Laing comments on the strange co-existence of two cultures (the European and the Indigenous) sharing one location.

It is significant that the ‘blur’ of categorical meanings in these artworks occurs primarily at the conceptual level. The staging of the locations is obvious—two disparate things are brought together. There is no attempt to suggest that the carpet has changed any of its materiality; there is no pretence that it is made of grass, nor does it dissolve to become fused with the forest. It functions as it would in a house: it covers a floor. However, the usual power hierarchy between the culture/nature categories is disturbed and the result is ambiguous. The carpet is a solid, impregnable covering of the forest floor; yet, it is also littered with leaves and contained by the undergrowth. What the future of these shared locations will be is left up to the viewer to consider. If they remain, will the carpets gradually decompose and become part of the forest or will they prevent the natural cycle of new growth? An ambiguous space resonates and the struggle that is part of the discourse on occupation and land ownership is quietly played out.

Jennie Jackson, Exegesis
How this work evokes the tension between two opposing sets of concepts—by juxtaposing the forest and carpet—inspired me to consider a set of questions that I then interrogated in the first series of the studio research, and presented in the exhibition *An Elaborate Ploy* (2007). To examine methods of visually conflating ideas in order to trigger and blend contradictory associations, a series of digital collages printed on rag paper, which used fragments of a previously painted work (*Present II*, 2006, plate 1), were made. In the artworks *An Elaborate Ploy* (2007, plate 2), *Clouded* (2007, plate 3), *Entwined* (2007, plate 4), and *Breathe* (2007), sections of a forest canopy were overlaid onto a female torso that was tightly wrapped in a nineteenth-century costume. These two motifs (an embroidered torso and a tree) share the characteristic that Ross maintains is common to nature, fashion, and the body; all three are ‘culturally formed, in the sense that they are materially moulded and transformed by specific cultural practices and at the same time experienced through the mediation of cultural discourse and representation’ (Ross 1996, p. 31).

The heavy brocade of the garment is weighted down with botanical embroidery, which is suggestive of the body beneath and hints at the fecundity of the female body and of plants. In each image, the costumed woman’s body, assisted by the connections drawn between bark, embroidery, and skin, is subsumed into the forest. This series investigates the extent overlapping motifs can blend or blur boundaries between concepts and interlace ideas, and the way that clothing is part of ‘a continuous dialogue between the natural and the artificial’ (Wilson 2003, p. 95). It visually
represents the curious way in which nature has been represented since colonisation and the means by which concepts of nature and the feminine have become fused. These conflations of exotic flora and femininity comment on nineteenth-century ideas of nature and womanhood, which were both conceptualised as wild, fertile, and psychologically impenetrable. Familiar myths of the feminine associated with nature can too easily seduce the viewer. Strangely, they can become entrenched ideas upon which contemporary notions of nature can be built. As catalysts, these works seek to make the viewer aware of such attitudes—in particular, those attitudes that equate emotional excesses with women and wild nature. In this series of artworks, such excessive emotional qualities, are 'kept in check' by the preciseness and order of the lines of the steel-point engraving technique (here mimicked by lines of paint), and the monochromatic treatment of the lines throughout the image.

Overall the blend of nature and the feminine appears largely seamless—one concept slides into the other as if the borders are impervious. The smoothness of this blend prompted me to further question how viewers perceive conceptual simplifications and how such closely associated concepts build cultural myths. Ross (1996) explains the need to be cautious about re-presenting the classic genderisation of nature as feminine within contemporary imagery and dialogue:

The iconic associations of 'woman' with the land and earthbound values have served as a prop for national cultures whose actual policies towards women, land ownership and the division of labour are deeply conservative . . . the process of symbolic identification [with nature] tends to repeat the exclusion of women from 'humanity' and 'culture' (p. 29).

The artworks in the An Elaborate Play series aim to direct the viewer's attention to the way simplifications can become disguised as familiar 'truths', and how they are used within patriarchal ideology. This research found that the visual seductiveness of detailed overlaid images can easily collapse the boundaries between gender and nature, so that the two concepts become as one in the viewer’s mind—resulting in both the forest and the woman being read as metonymic representations of nature. The woman too easily becomes subsumed into the category of nature, drawing attention to the myths of a feminine ‘Mother earth’ with the result that the tension between concepts of culture and nature are eliminated rather than illuminated. It seems that the aesthetic beauty of an image can act to obscure; cloaking ideas in decorative complexities and evoking a sense of nostalgia that erases the categorical difference between women and nature. Perhaps the warning that Gombrich gives about the psychological attraction and numbing power of decorative beauty should be
heeded. He writes: ‘Ornament is dangerous because it dazzles and tempts the mind to submit without proper reflection’ (1979, p. 17). As a means of counteracting this numbing power, I chose titles such as *An Elaborate Ploy*, *Sweet Subterfuge*, and *Entwined*. Titles can prompt the viewer to consider the subtle subterfuge of such conflations and the seductive power of deeply embedded cultural myths. These ‘tags’ encourage the viewer to focus on the problem of perception and cognition rather than on skill and beauty—a shift in focus that is a strategy often used in postmodern works (Nelson & Shiff 2003, p. 273).

In contemporary Australian art, the interweaving of ideas from other places and other cultures is an ongoing process, and not limited to imported European ideas. Australian ideas of nature and its interaction with culture are currently being expanded with the increasing exposure to and understanding of Indigenous paintings of ‘country’ by Indigenous artists, such as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Queenie McKenzie, as well as with the stories of each new immigrant group, which are overlaid onto the Australian environment. The paintings of artists such as Guan Wei, who incorporate various conventions of Asian landscapes (Asian tree forms, patterns, and vertical layering of the composition) in works that comment on Australian place, identity, and/or environment, such as *Echo* (2005) and *A Mysterious Land No. 6* (2007), may progressively widen the range of conventions used by other contemporary Australian artists. The impact of these sets of non-Western ideas on an appreciation and a vision of the Australian landscape is, however, outside the scope of this exegesis. Nevertheless it is important to register that the cultural construction and representation of nature is not a process that is fixed or immutable, but is ongoing, enhanced and expanded with each new convention or ‘thread’ that is woven into the depiction of Australian environments.

As other aesthetic conventions are increasingly applied to the Australian landscape and become an established part of the way that landscape is understood, the findings of this research suggest that they too will become part of the materials that Australian artists, of varying cultural backgrounds, will use to create dense and diverse images of nature. The embroidered images of nature will be enriched by the different hues of an evolving array of threads. In Chapter 3, I investigate how western ideas of nature have also been linked to organic patterns and decorative motifs that are based on botanical forms. I explain how these ideas operate differently when evoked by forest landscapes that combine landscape conventions with decorative techniques.
Plate 1 Jennie Jackson *Present II* (2006) acrylic on canvas 230cm x 115cm
Plate 2 Jennie Jackson *An Elaborate Ploy* (2007)
digital collage printed on rag paper
80cm x 80cm
Chapter 3: The Decorative and the Forest

I wake up every morning to the sights and sounds of nature; a cacophony of bird song, the scratching of turkeys in the mulch, the palm trees brushing the porch with each gust of wind, the spiders spinning their webs between the overhanging branches of melaleucas wet with the dew. My daughters, 21 and 23 years old, declare that for them ‘This is too much nature!!’

For most contemporary city dwellers, an experience of wild, natural environments is unusual. Daily exposure to nature is limited to residential and botanical gardens, street plantings, and community parks—places where humans control plants. Experience with wild nature is restricted to the occasional holiday excursion or to the virtual-media experiences offered by television, film, and the Internet. These media provide idealised, glossy, and supersaturated images of nature coated in either the seductive advertising techniques or in the meta-narratives of nature documentaries (such as The Private Life of Plants, 1994). However, plants in the form of decorative designs saturate a myriad of surfaces in most urban environments: a seemingly never-ending array of organic patterns featuring winding vines, leaves, pods, and flowers are part of everyday encounters in Western city streets. Simplified and stylised plant forms feature in architectural details, textile designs, and wallpapers. Organic patterns embellish contemporary building facades and interiors (such as the Brisbane State Library in the
CBD, Ice works in Paddington, and the La Ruche Club in Fortitude Valley). Though decorative designs do not engage in the tropes of landscape (the sublime or the picturesque), they are culturally mediated images of nature that are manipulated by cultural aesthetics and values and, as such, contribute to the shaping of Western ideas of nature.

Decorative patterns and ornamental motifs featuring simplified plant forms have been a longstanding means of representing the natural world, embellishing textiles, furniture, ceramics, and buildings for thousands of years. Simplified plant forms, layered to create dense repeating patterns, decorate the pages of the *Lindisfarne Gospel* (700 AD). Floral and plant motifs embellish the ornate interiors of Baroque churches as reliefs and painted panels (for example, *Einsiedeln Abbey*, begun in 1717), and the whiplash curves of vines form the staircase of Art Nouveau buildings, such as Victor Horta’s *12 Rue de Turin* (1893). Throughout Western art, organic decorative designs have visually enriched different surfaces. They share similar forms and conventions that have been passed from generation to generation.

This chapter investigates how the various conventions used to construct designs as well as the cultural values assigned to the Decorative in Western art have been linked to Western concepts of nature and culture. Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes one style of decorative motifs, grotesque ornaments, as both ‘supreme artifice and an invocation of the “natural”’ (1982, p. 48). This chapter argues that the capacity of grotesque motifs to bring to mind values aligned with both the man-made (the cultural) and the God-made (the natural) can also be used to describe the qualities of other aspects of the Decorative, such as organic repeat patterns and motifs. The notion that decorative designs can simultaneously evoke and mix ideas, such as predictability and regularity (associated with culture), and ideas of the irrational and emotional (associated with nature), is highly significant to this research. As such, decorative techniques allow details of nature to be transformed into stylised forms that belong in the transition zone between categories. This assertion is theoretically interrogated through an analysis of how key ideas of concepts of nature and culture have been historically linked to the specific decorative forms of repeat patterns and grotesque motifs. I visually explore this in each of the four series of artworks, *An Elaborate Ploy*, *The Forest*, *Sweet Subterfuge*, and *Not What It Seems*, as well as in the work *The Entangled Forest*. 
This chapter is divided into two main sections: the first examines the relationship between repeat patterns, the rational, and artificial; the second explains how the grotesque breaks categorical boundaries and is associated with the irrational and deviant. Both sections discuss key findings of the studio research, detailing how the conventions of pattern-building and grotesque motifs blur ideas of the natural and cultural when used in landscapes. My artworks demonstrate how decorative conventions can be applied in landscape compositions to simultaneously allude to qualities that seem to contradict each other or upset oppositional ideas of how nature and culture interact. In particular, these landscapes flip ideas of order, stability, and the familiar into something more sinister, unpredictable, and unstable.

**Conventions of the Decorative**

Pattern and ornamental motifs’ ability to elicit associations of both culture and nature arise from how attitudes towards the Decorative have evolved over the history of Western visual art. Theorists such as Owen Jones in *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), James Trilling in his two books *The Language of Ornament* (2001) and *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (2003), David Batterham in *The World of Ornament* (2006), and Michael Snodin in *The V&A book of Western Ornament* (2006) provide comprehensive histories of the evolution of decorative styles. They outline in detail the development of decorative motifs and patterns and explain the conventions and rules by which decorative pattern and ornament have been constructed. These writers primarily focus on the way pattern has functioned as a decorative finish, describing the development of patterns as being dependent on the passing on of traditional knowledge within various crafts. This exegesis does not attempt to retell the narrative of this long and complicated history; however these texts discuss processes and techniques that have been important to my research’s development. For instance, Owen Jones gives clear explanations of the main techniques of symmetry, repetition, infilling, and elaboration (processes that I have used experimentally within my studio research), Snodin provides a clear analysis and examples of how different designs were interconnected and developed over time, and Batterham gives evidence of this in a comprehensive compendium of wallpaper and other decorative designs used over 2000 years. Trilling’s books are insightful in their discussion of how cultural values were assigned to ornaments and decorative styles. Throughout this chapter, I will relate these authors’ specific ideas to my own studio experimentation.
Pattern and the Rational

One of the most useful books I discovered is E.H. Gombrich’s *The Sense of Order: A Study of the Psychology of Decorative Art* (1979), which outlines theories on how the Decorative is linked to ideas of Western culture. It also provides a comprehensive analysis of the techniques and history of the Decorative. The central tenet of Gombrich’s argument rests on what he refers to as the ‘psychology of decorative art’. Interestingly, he maintains that pattern is an expression of humanity’s ‘powerful need for regularity’ (1979, p. 1); a need that is also postulated by anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss as a need to ‘order and re-order the world’ (1966, p. 36). Gombrich argues that the need for regularity is observable in the earliest applications of pattern-making and is a characteristic that marks pattern as reassuring, rational, and a clear expression of culture:

> The regularity is a sign of intention; the fact that they are repeated shows that they are repeatable and that they belong to culture rather than to nature . . . They are formations echoing and stabilizing the activity of a constructive mind. (1979, p. 7)

Contained in the structure of pattern, this expectation of regularity is, according to Gombrich, driven by ‘the sense of order’ (1979, pp. 7–9). Guided by this sense, designers of organic motifs extract elements from the botanical world, analyse, and simplify them. This ordered set of processes determines the form of decorative designs and, as they reveal the ‘mark of an ordering mind’ (Gombrich 1979, p. 5), link culture with the Decorative. The notion that the Decorative is associated with cultural ideas (such as the rational and predictable) is highly relevant to this research and has provoked a key line of enquiry:

- Could decorative repeat patterns incorporated in contemporary artworks carry with them a sense of order? If they could, would they activate ideas associated with the controlling and rational aspects of culture when used in landscapes?

Traditional organic patterns are made initially through a reductive process; a process that is reversed as the patterns are built. Simplified forms are embellished and repeated to become intricate and detailed motifs. These are combined to create complex patterns that are used on any surface, deemed by the artisan to require complication and beautification. For example, the leaves and flowers of a twisting grape vine are initially simplified by a craftsman to create basic elements. These are then elaborated on and extended, so that a single vine shape, tendril, fruit, and leaf form are transformed to
become a vine-scroll (see figs 25 & 26). This scroll is then repeated, reversed or alternated to become an intricate and predictable pattern used to beautify surfaces. Vine scrolls have been popular for hundreds of years and within many countries (Trilling 2001, pp. 113–25) and have undergone only minor changes within this time.

Comprehensive pattern books have enabled past and present designs to be linked. The repertoire of designs within each craft and their vocabulary of forms have been continually increased as refinements or embellishments were made to traditional patterns (Trilling 2001; Batterham 2006). This systematic development of motifs resulted in a core of pattern types (e.g. stars, rosettes, vine scrolls). For instance, the vine scroll progressively evolved while remaining recognisable in different media and crafts (for example, wallpaper, textile, architectural reliefs; see figs 25, 26 & 27). Standard elements of the vine scroll, such as the alternating curve of a vine cane and the single leaf placed on alternating sides of the central strand, appear as consistent threads. Thus, vine scroll designs from the time of Christ (such as on the embossed silver cup (30 BC–100 AD, fig. 26) can be linked to a twenty-first-century graphic design for a poster (ca. 2012, fig. 28), even though they were created in different media and in different centuries. I refer to this process as ‘breeding’, as each ‘parent’ design results in ‘children’ that in turn become parent designs that produce many generations of similar designs, all sharing a strong family appearance. I recognised that ‘breeding’ is different to the techniques used to construct a series of picturesque or sublime landscapes. This decorative convention has become a key component of my studio methodology. I have used it to construct compositions, in particular artworks in the series Elaborate Ploy and Sweet Subterfuge. It is also a key means of investigating how meanings can be carried from one image to another.

As artisans generally use patterns as reference-points for new patterns, rather than returning to the original botanical source of inspiration, patterns also become highly stylised. As representations of nature that are obviously artificial, they become an abstraction of nature rather than an illustration of it. In extensively patterned surfaces, decorative designs do not attempt to mimic botanical diversity by including multiple forms but rather feign a ‘natural’ complexity through complication, repetition, and intricate detail. Through being used repeatedly over time, individual decorative motifs have become familiar and easily recognisable depictions of plants. For instance, of the more than 5000 designs reproduced within Batterham’s World of Ornament (2006),
approximately 3500 of the European designs featured a recognisable version of the vine scroll.

By virtue of their consistent form and repeated use, decorative motifs are invested with metonymic power. For example, the popular vine scroll gradually came to represent all sorts of vines because the specific type of vine (a grape vine) that inspired it gradually became unrecognisable (fig. 28). The scroll, however, is recognisable as a plant form because of its general qualities of ‘vine-ness’ (that is, the twisting curves, alternating leaf arrangement, and tendril curls). Through the frequent inclusion of vine scrolls as major elements of patterns, or as a background ‘filler’, they came to represent the botanical world. Due to the close association between vines and plants and plants and nature, they also became metonymic for the broader concept of nature. In this way organic decorative motifs offer a concept of what nature is and present an ideal of natural beauty that is man-made rather than God-made. Such stylisations become part of a visual shorthand for nature, supporting the argument that the concept of nature is a technical and cultural invention. The artificial relies on cultural representations of natural forms rather than on a direct reference to nature. The artificial quality of the forest landscapes of *Panorama II* (2008, plate 10), *Ambush* (2008), and *The Bushes* (2009) invites viewers to consider how nature’s forms are manipulated by the aesthetics historically applied to its depiction.

Images removed

Fig. 25 (left) Designer unknown *Roman Mosaic* (c. 500 BC) retrieved 28 September 2011 from http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2703/4301542710_c4c1edc6fd.jpg
(right) Designer unknown *Capital Detail* (c. 50BC - 100AD) retrieved 28 September 2011 from http://www.essential-architecture.com/IMAGES2/Zvartnots.jpg
The decorative is closely linked with the cultural. The specific characteristics of repeat patterns (regularity, order, reduction, stylisation, and repetition) are attributes that are traditionally associated with ideas of Western culture (predictability, stability, rationality, control, and familiarity) that were established by Enlightenment thinking and science. However, these same qualities of decorative patterns have also been considered as invoking ideas of nature, as they duplicate or reflect the underlying structure of God-made, natural systems. This link between nature and pattern has been of interest for both science and art. Enlightenment philosopher and scientist, Francis Bacon...
suggested that nature could be approached as ‘a set of measurable, re-arrangeable and infinitely malleable components’ (Coates 1998, p. 73). Writing in 1856, Owen Jones rejects the idea that patterning is underpinned by the desire to imitate nature, and suggests instead that patterning is used to conventionalise it, using the inherent laws of nature (such as the principle of radiation and subdivision shown in the structure of leaves) as its rules (p. 54).

The analysis of pattern in nature is a focus of contemporary sciences, particularly physics and mathematics and has become a topic within the wider public discourse associated with understanding the physical world. In the BBC documentary The Secret Life of Chaos (2010) Professor Jim Al-Khalili explains how the structure of the natural world is an intrinsic part of the law of physics and enlists the mathematics of chaos to explain pattern. The investigation of pattern has also lead to an interface between art and science. For instance, the short film The Patterns of Nature (2008) by experimental filmmaker John N. Campbell uses time-lapse photography, microscopy, animation, and cymatic imagery to reveal the geometric structures and pattern present in nature. In Patterns in Design, Art and Architecture (2007), Annette Tietenberg also draws a comparison between natural processes and decorative techniques. This book provides examples of how patterns based on geometric and botanical forms are embraced by contemporary artists, architects, and designers including Tord Boontje (Princess, 2005), Rudiger Lainer (Office and Fitness Centre Hutteldorferstrasse, Vienna, 2003), Fabio Novembre (UNA Hotel Vittoria, Florence, 2003), and Michael Lin (TFAM: 08.09.2000–07.01.2001, 2000). In the introduction, Tietenberg proposes that repeat patterns ‘stick to formalised basic schemes like uninterrupted and broken symmetries, which correspond to nature’s blueprints or mathematical operations’ (2007, p. 7). It is as if, through decorative patterns’ order and structure, nature’s fundamental processes are visualised and able to be grasped.

The proposal that nature and repeat decorative patterns are made from standard units that imitate core components of a natural structure gives patterns qualities associated with both nature and culture. As well as being predictable and ordered, repeat patterns in art are organisning, that is, they exhibit a systematic way of arranging elements in a sequence that creates a particular overall, re-arrangeable, structure. For instance, simplified and stylised fauna and floral elements were key structural components of the ‘block’ and the ‘brick’ (Justema 1976, p. 1; fig. 29). These are essential elements of Western repeat patterns. Different arrangements of these two components enable a
multitude of complicated, decorative designs to be developed and illustrated in design compendiums, such as Batterham’s *World of Ornament* (2006).

I was inspired by this similarity between the re-arrangeable structure of nature and patterns to research pattern construction further; out of this, I adopted a system of manipulating compositions by treating sections of landscapes as re-arrangeable components. This method, which I discuss later in this chapter, can be seen clearly in the *Elaborate Ploy* series, which uses simple reversals of blocks.

Repeat patterns also depend on elaboration. As well as creating visual appeal, elaboration provides the linking elements that unify a design and that enable each block or brick to connect with each other. The various elaborative techniques of branching, filling in, repetition, alternation, symmetry, progression, radiation, and subdivision are used to build the detail of repeat patterns, friezes, borders, and motifs (Jones 1856; Gombrich 1979). These enable an infinitely re-arrangeable set of components to create an equally infinite array of decorative designs.

The simplistic and formulaic qualities of these structural systems reflect a view of nature that places it as part of an ordered universe. It is also associated with the controlling force or mind of culture to which Gombrich (1979) referred. Theorists such as William Justema (1976) and James Trilling (2001) suggest that individual techniques of pattern-building carry particular connotative meanings, which contribute to the associations that ornamental motifs and repeat patterns provoke. For instance, symmetry that is used to
provide formal balance within a decorative design also, ‘in the Western mind connotes power’ (Justema 1976, p. 13), and the extensive use of branching and filling-in creates an intensity of coverage on a surface, which is then invested with connotations of richness and luxury (Trilling 2001).

This survey of decorative techniques raised a number of questions that required further interrogation within my studio research. They included:

- Would using pattern-making techniques in the representation of forests increase or lessen a landscape’s ability to evoke ideas associated with natural environments?
- How would decorative elaboration techniques impact on the relationship of figure and ground in landscape compositions?
- What would be the impact on landscape compositions if they were constructed using blocks of previous images rather than following picturesque rules of organising components that established foregrounds, midgrounds, and backgrounds and utilised vanishing perspective?

To answer these questions and to investigate how repeat patterns and organic motifs are linked to the values and ideas associated with culture and nature, the studio research firstly tested ways of activating attached meanings related to both nature and culture, and secondly experimented with methods of constructing organic repeat patterns within artworks.

To deepen an understanding of how specific decorative techniques operate as carriers of meaning, individual pattern-making techniques were used to test the persistence of certain ideas. For instance, whether repeat patterns and decorative motifs (by the virtue of their predictability and regularity) are consistently or exclusively connected to ideas of the rational and the cultural is progressively examined within the first three series of works (Elaborate Ploy, The Forest, and Sweet Subterfuge). To achieve this, pattern-building techniques have been applied in unusual, non-functional contexts; that is, within the context of painted or printed landscapes. Pattern’s primary role in these circumstances is to trigger ideas that have been historically linked to culture and nature, rather than to merely decorate a surface with visually appealing plant forms or to reveal the skill of the craftsman or wealth of the owner. Each series investigates what can happen to the ‘picture’ of nature when images of a wild forest are developed according to processes that include systematic rules of pattern-making. To further disrupt pattern’s functional or purely aesthetic role, a specific methodology of employing pattern has been used. Throughout this research, pattern has been rendered in unexpected or non-
standard scale, incorporated into landscape formats as fragments of pattern, or has been used as a strategy to build landscape components. Different problems were posed in each work of the first three series, and works represented different aspects of the forest environment (the canopy, undergrowth, forest floor, and groves of trees).

Signalling that they investigate historical concepts of nature and culture and how natural environments have been interpreted through cultural frameworks, the artworks were all executed using a linear style of describing three-dimensional forms. The lines of these paintings are very different to those that feature in traditional, printed etchings (such as Gustave Dore’s series of etched plates (1866) that illustrate John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). In etchings, the lines are small, almost invisible, blending together to create an illusion of form. In my works, the enlarged, faux-engraving lines are obvious and so foreground my role as the artist, one who constructs images. They are clearly artificial creations—emphatic products of culture rather than realistic illusions of nature. The viewer is invited to be conscious of the lines and the effort to interpret them, while deciphering the picture and its narrative.

The first series of works—An Elaborate Ploy, which consists of *An Elaborate Ploy* (plate 2), *Clouded* (plate 3), *Entwined* (plate 4), *Earth* (plate 5), *Pelvis, Breathe, An Elaborate Ploy II*, and *The Undergrowth*—was created using a simple but systematised process of constructing compositions. Sections of the work *Present II* (plate 1) were used in different combinations as ‘blocks’ to construct a series of repeat patterns or frieze segments to picture aspects of the forest. As discussed briefly at the end of Chapter 2, this series of works sought to stimulate ideas associated with the broader conceptualisation of nature and the ideological problems associated with the historical conflation of the feminine with nature. Overlapping images of trees and an embroidered torso were configured differently in each work to test the extent categories of culture and nature could be muddled in the viewer’s mind through layering, repetition, reversal, and symmetry.
Plate 3  Jennie Jackson *Clouded* (2007) digital collage on rag paper

110cm x 40 cm
Plate 4 Jennie Jackson *Entwined* (2007) digital collage on rag paper
115cm x 40cm
Earth was the first large-scale digital collage printed on paper. It was also the most significant work of this series, as it generated further investigations into how scale can activate the sensation of natural environments (which will be discussed in Chapter 4). This work was exhibited as an extensive wall installation at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, as part of Fresh Cut 07. Visually conflating the idea of an organic, animate, and female Earth with the rationalist and mechanistic ideology of the scientific Enlightenment, Earth comments on the conceptual struggle for control between culture and nature. The controlling force of a cultural mind is represented by the linear style and the predictability of the repetition of the pattern blocks (inverted with every second block), while the interplay of plant-like shapes, lines, and irregular patterns that result from the process conjure up recollections of the natural aspects of a forest. Indeed, up close the organic abstracted shapes, patterns, and forms suggest bound and intertwined bodies, bones, and entangled roots on a forest floor over which a strange order has been imposed. As Robert Leonard (2007) notes, ‘the costumed woman’s body is subsumed into a Rorschaching pattern, and rendered all but visible’ and the work ‘suggest[s] creatures, seeds and genitalia (as if these were their subtexts all along)’ (n.p.). A feminine, sensual nature is visually entwined into rationalist conventions associated with Enlightenment ideology.

This series also extended a dialogue between various artistic media (printmaking, painting, digital photography, and printing) linking eighteenth- and nineteenth-century techniques with twentieth- and twenty-first-century digital media. By using high-resolution photographs of painted works as source material for printed and painted images, I was able to better experiment in selecting, manipulating, splicing, and fusing compositional elements. During the course of making the works, I progressed through numerous media—from etching to painting to digital photography and collage, back to painting, and then again to digital collage and printing. These resulted in aesthetic qualities of one medium appearing in another. For instance, the final works reveal their reliance on the linear description of form and yet also expose the tonal qualities of paint to describe depth; soft-edged forms and lines were produced by pixellated, enlarged digital printing as well as subtle brush strokes; and the colours showed the layering of painted hues that optically vibrated, while the flat and evenness of the printed surface was obvious. Each of these qualities seemed to be subtly changed by the interaction between mediums; in turn, these ‘altered’ qualities were passed, with the image, into the next medium.
Plate 5  Jennie Jackson *Earth* (installation at IMA) (2007) Digital print on paper 19.5 metres x 3.5 metres
The combination of contradictory qualities (a potential for expansion and a sense of restriction) that are connected with the pattern-making process also appear in this overblown repeat pattern. The work emphasises that repeat patterns promise to be eternally unfolding, and yet also appear to be fixed in time or ‘lifeless’ due to the predictable repetition of blocks of the same motif. I explored this paradox further in The Entangled Forest. In other works, An Elaborate Ploy and Entwined, additional key decorative conventions (the frieze, overlapping, alternation, asymmetry, symmetry, reversal, repetition) were progressively combined with specific landscape conventions (panorama format, division of the composition into background, midground, and foreground, change in scale, vanishing-point perspective). To achieve this blend of techniques, a systematised process of pattern-building was gradually integrated into the methodology and also then applied to different motifs that were used to develop traditional landscape compositions associated with picturesque and sublime traditions. This method of constructing landscapes was progressively refined and extended during the next three series of works.

The initial works of the second series, The Forest, investigate the pattern-making techniques of mirror-imaging (simple reversal) and repetition, as well as the impact of combining symmetrical with asymmetrical elements. In Split (2008, plate 6) and Forest II (2007, plate 7) forest-scenes were constructed using a portion of a tree or a branch, appropriated from nineteenth-century engravings, in combination with fragments of previous paintings. The sections that made up the small digital collage Split were intensively manipulated. Painted components were digitally scanned and layered on top of tree fragments that were then reversed and repeated using multiple lines of symmetry to form larger trunks and background trees. Interestingly, this logical digital construction technique created a mysterious forest reminiscent of the mythological forests of Western fairytales, but one in which tree trunks sprout embroidery, and twisting roots and crevices suggest body parts. Within it, culture and nature seem deeply entwined.
20cm x 16cm
The large painting *Forest II* uses a single line of symmetry to represent a bird’s eye-view of a forest canopy; it’s the type of scene observed when bush walking in the steep paths of the forests of the Lamington National Park, south of Brisbane. The work consists of four canvases combined to form a large canvas (115cm x 360cm), similar in size to an actual section of a forest canopy. The panels, rendered in non-naturalistic tones of blue, break up the work into sections or units. The scene is also flattened by the net of lines, which traverse the surface and form the leaves of a womb-like tree canopy. Across these treetops fly a series of lace patterns that move in and out of the leaves like birds or giant butterflies. Based on organic shapes, lace is a cultural product associated with feminine ideas. Both the lace (metonymic of culture) and the trees (metonymic of nature) share the same structure of interconnecting lines, signalling an interconnection between the two. The symmetry and repetition emphasise the artificial construction of the scene and indicate the ‘controlling mind’ behind the image. The viewer is encouraged to reflect on the contradictions posed by the conceptual conflation of the feminine with the wild forest, the technical construction of the forest scene, and the cultural conceptualisation of nature.

In order to mimic the process of ‘breeding’ decorative patterns, the panels of *Forest II* became the source material for the rest of the artworks in this series—*A Wild Tapestry I* (2007), *A Wild Tapestry II* (2007, plate 8)—and in the following series, *Sweet Subterfuge* (which consists of *Sweet Subterfuge*, 2007, plate 9; *The Bushes II*, 2009; *Ambush*, 2008; *Panorama II*, 2008, plate 10; *Flutter*, 2008, plate 12; and . . . *Her Beauty and Her Terror*, 2008, plate 11).

The digital collage *A Wild Tapestry II* depicts a painted forest that was inspired by the groves of interlocking tea-trees that line the bay beaches at Blairgowrie in the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. The daily walks I took on these paths over five years profoundly influenced my personal memory of being within a grove of trees (fig. 30). Reminiscent of the ‘cathedral groves’ of Caspar David Friedrich and a sacred bower, the arrangement of these tea-trees suggest familiar Western ideas of the sublime and blur the divisions between natural and sacred architectural forms. The ‘cathedral grove’ according to Schama has,

> a long, rich, and significant history of associations between the pagan primitive grove and its tree idolatry, and the distinctive forms of Gothic architecture. . . . it goes directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality . . . (1995, p. 15)
Plate 7 Jennie Jackson *The Forest II* (2007) acrylic on canvas 360 cm x 115cm
The ideas attached to such groves in Western art are referenced in the images of the studio research, even though I have not used the illusionist method traditionally employed to depict them. The various components of the forest composition, the undergrowth, and the trees and bushes were built using pattern construction methods. Traditional techniques of expanding and creating new decorative patterns (such as successive enrichment, filling, and branching procedures) were used to elaborate upon a simple basic unit. Each component is created using reconfigured sections of the single engraved branch used for preceding works and interpreted using a painted sequence of lines. The mirror-imaged branches create the background line of trees and evoke a sense of natural enclosure as well as reminding the viewer of decorative wallpaper or a patterned frieze. This method of constructing compositional elements is systematic and ordered in its approach and curiously results in the creation of a distinctly artificial environment—an obviously culturally mediated presentation of nature that is encased in a web of lines. However, the artificial forest that is created combines decorative beauty (based on balance and intricate detail) with an eerie sense of claustrophobia. Trunks and branches twist into elaborate decorative patterns, emulating the cathedral grove that artists such as Friedrich used to communicate the sublime spiritual power of nature. However, the forests in my works are not the verdant or sacred groves of classical, Romantic, or sublime landscapes that pull a viewer towards them, and that rely on the tension between light and dark and/or the hidden and the seen. Enticing and yet resistant to penetration, the lines of the trees and bushes
connect to form a screen that simultaneously attracts and repels the viewer. The urge (common to decorative patterns) to fill any void with detail (the horror vacui) takes over in this work to create not just a flat decorative surface but a densely embroidered tapestry of physical marks and meanings. The different strands of meaning are finely stitched together in an image that recalls the psychological danger associated with the Australian forest since colonisation. In this instance, pattern acts in the way that Kit Wise describes: as a ‘spider’s web of interconnected claustrophobic signification’ (Wise 2006, n.p.). This forest illustrates the paradox associated with pattern that Wise outlines in the following statement:

A taxonomist in whatever field of research can be seen as a maker of patterns. We assume and trust that pattern is order, implying meaning; but mathematicians will admit that the identification of structure in a system is often only a mask for ‘desire’—that which is chaotic, contingent and ineffable. As a consequence, the archive is itself an ‘erotic’ space, brimming with assumptions and urges as well as information. (2006, n.p.)

The idea that pattern is inherently linked to eroticism and unbridled desire was also proposed by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) in his influential essay *Ornament und Verbrechen* (*Ornament and Crime*) (1908). In it he argued vehemently that decoration and ornament of all types were an expression of moral corruption and revealed a primitive lack of sophistication. With regards to pattern, Loos wrote:

With children this is a natural condition, their first artistic expressions are erotic scribblings on the nursery walls. But what is natural to children and Papuan savages is a symptom of degeneration in modern man. I have therefore evolved the following maxim, and pronounce it to the world: the evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects. (cited in Banham 1980, pp. 93–94)

He described pattern as ‘a dependable index for criminal energy, childish behaviour, sexual recklessness and dissipated hedonism . . . a sure sign of the degeneration of society’ (cited in Banham 1980, p. 93).

Reflecting on the four works *Split*, *The Forest II*, *A Wild Tapestry I*, and *A Wild Tapestry II*, I questioned the proposition that pattern is rational and exclusively connected to ideas of order. These works suggest that Gombrich’s theory that patterns are rational does not offer a complete explanation of the way pattern communicates, especially when it is removed from its usual functional context and incorporated in painted landscapes. To interrogate further how ideas have been attached over time to patterns and how elements of the Decorative can evoke the emotional or irrational, historical research into Decorative motifs was extended. The research focused on how the subconscious, the instinctive, and the irrational were connected to ornamental motifs of the Grotesque.
Plate 8  Jennie Jackson *A Wild Tapestry II* digital collage on rag paper
138cm x 38cm
The Grotesque: Categorical Distortion

The Grotesque is a technical term used to describe a type of decorative ornament used extensively in Europe between 1500 and 1800 that featured a mixture of animate and inanimate objects ‘often impossibly or illogically combined’ (Harpham 1982, p. 7). Primarily intended to be a beautiful form of ornament and often used to fill areas left void in decorative scenes, grotesque motifs are difficult to define (Barasch 1971, p. 77), as they underwent constant change over the centuries, reflecting what each society regarded as operating at the edges of the natural. In his book On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (1982), Geoffrey Galt Harpham provides numerous examples of how grotesque motifs were created from combining sections of human form with plant, insect, or animal parts to create fantastic creatures. Jungle vegetation, the tropical forest, and its vines were elements especially favoured in grotesque designs for their ‘ominous vitality, in which nature itself seems to have erased the difference between plants and animals’ (Kayser 1966, p. 183). Bizarre amalgamations of humans, spiders, snakes, toads, other reptiles, and bats often sprouted from swirling branches of the more familiar vine-scroll. Designs such as Cornelius Floris & Franz Huys Grotesque mask (1555, fig. 31) combined the fantastic with recognisable natural elements (leaves, seeds, flowers, lobsters, and birds). They reflect an enduring fascination for the qualities of the puzzling, the mysterious, and the obscure that have been incorporated within Grotesque design for hundreds of years (Justema 1976, p. 51).

Even a modest survey of grotesque designs makes clear that the world of the grotesque ornament is one in which the uncanny, the alien, and the surprising is unleashed; however, the familiar world of reality is never fully dismissed—rather, it is immersed or disguised in apocalyptic or monstrous constructions. Ornamental wall paintings, such as the Decorative panels from the Gallerie D'Apollon in the Louvre (ca.1660–1711) by Jean Berain (1638–1711), which features grotesque motifs, show that logical systems of the decorative are destroyed and in their place is a ‘regression to the unconscious—madness, hysteria or nightmare’ (Harpham 1976, p. 462).

Over the centuries grotesque designs were regarded as either the result of a mischievous usurpation; a corruption of God’s creative powers or an expression of the hidden drives of the unconscious. As such, grotesqueries

... stood at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of
organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles (Harpham 1982, p. 3).

To the viewer, grotesque designs are perplexing, an affront to the scientific systems of classification of natural organisms. They are ambiguous and ambivalent, ‘simultaneously invok[ing] and repudiat[ing] our conventional, language-based categories’ (Harpham 1982, p. 4). As such, grotesque ornaments and motifs fit into multiple categories. They fall between or blur the classes to which they can be tentatively assigned—a capacity that is of particular significance to this enquiry. The following questions then became relevant:

- Could the introduction of grotesque-like elements within the forest landscapes help to blur ideas connected to nature and culture?
- Would the distortion or mixing of categories be alarming in contemporary society where the certainties attached to rationalism and the belief in a divine sense of order has perhaps waned?
Harpham describes the intellectual process of dealing with the uncertainties and typological incoherence of grotesque ornaments as ‘non-things’ as follows:

The mind does not long tolerate such affronts to its classificatory systems as grotesque forms preset; within an instant of its being exposed to such forms it starts to operate in certain ways, and it is these operations that tell us that we are in the presence of the grotesque (1982, p. 3)

The compulsion to make sense of the perverse—the things that do not make sense—and to uncover the recognisable within the strange, is reminiscent of the process that seemed to drive early colonial artists’ interpretations of the foreign new forms of the Australian flora and fauna that was discussed in Chapter 2.

This capacity of the grotesque to elicit associations of the emotional and the aberrant contrasts markedly with the qualities of the rational and normative associated with pattern to which Gombrich referred in The Sense of Order: A Study of the Psychology of Decorative Art (1979). This suggests that Decorative designs have, over time, operated as both a simplified and ordered version of a chaotic natural world, as well as an expression of the monstrous psychological drives of man, intent on disturbing the natural order. The stylised plant forms of repeat patterns were mostly separate to grotesque motifs (perhaps because of this conceptual contradiction), however many designs of ornaments incorporated both elements of the Decorative in a single design. For instance, the designs of Limoges Grisaille work: Counter-enamelling, embroidery and painting (ca. sixteenth century) and Heinrich Aldegrever, Grotesque Ornament Panel with a Mask and Two Triton and Putti (1549, fig. 32) incorporate grotesque masks of human and animal blends with repeat border patterns of leaves, vines, and curling tendrils. These designs provoked me to question whether decorative motifs (repeat patterns and grotesque ornaments), when used together within a landscape composition, are capable of generating multiple associations of the rational and irrational, the decadent and the pure. This capacity to generate complex, contradictory, and unexpected associations would enable the merging together of pattern and grotesque motif in a landscape and enable them to act as a conceptual bridge between opposing concepts associated with nature and culture.
The artworks of the third series, *Sweet Subterfuge*, sought to investigate the power of contemporary artworks to blur culture/nature categorical boundaries through incorporating references to the grotesque in addition to other decorative techniques and patterns. Experiments combining landscape conventions with pattern-making conventions further refined the methodology that had been used in the preceding works. This was done to extend an understanding of how contradictory or opposing ideas (such as the rational and irrational, predictable and strange, repetition and disruption) could be evoked simultaneously in an image. By being able to trigger qualities that have been associated with civilised, ordered culture, and wild, irregular, nature, the Decorative has been crucial to the progress of this research. The *Sweet
Subterfuge series provides evidence that the boundaries between traditional dualist associations of nature and culture can be interrupted or eroded, thus making a visual bridge between the two concepts.

Again borrowing from pattern-making techniques, the works of this series were all constructed from an engraving of a single branch. The branch was first painted and then photographed, reversed, inverted, sliced, and collaged and then painted again to make the various elements (trees, bushes, and undergrowth) of Sweet Subterfuge (2007, plate 9), the first painting of the series. The final artwork was then the source, manipulated in the same way to create another set of elements for the next work in the series. In this family of works, where each new image was bred from its parent, the recurring elements function as basic components in a myth or ‘mythemes’. Lévi-Strauss proposed that mythemes are ‘the true constituent units of a myth [and that they] are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations’ (1963, p. 211). As mythemes, the recurrent elements of pattern mediate contradiction and connect the past with future, tying the strands of previous narratives, ideas and protagonists together with the present, and projecting them into the future. By this process, the different works of both series The Forest and Sweet Subterfuge are linked.

The long horizontal scenes of the painting Sweet Subterfuge and the digital collage Panorama, (2008, plate 10) depend on a blend of pattern-making techniques with traditional landscape formats (the panorama) and illusionary conventions. The illusion of distance and three-dimensional space is created by three conventions working together; layers work as backgrounds, midgrounds, and foregrounds; optical vibrations caused by the careful placement of colour counteract the flatness of the linear format; the change in density of the linear structure pushes forms in and out of the picture frame. Inspired by the patterns and forms of nineteenth-century engraved fashion plates, lace, and Australian landscape engravings, Ross Woodrow described each landscape as ‘draw[ing] the viewer into the labyrinth of . . . phantom woods’; into forests that are the ‘more tangled, sometimes impenetrable version conjured up in academic discourse on nature versus culture’ (2008, n.p.). The bushes and groves of trees, which should be familiar forest forms, are complicated by their transformation into inexplicable motifs that are somewhat strange. They incite comparison with other known things, hinting at human or animal faces, ribcages, limbs and orifices.
Plate 9  Jennie Jackson Sweet Subterfuge (2007) acrylic on canvas
570cm x 95cm
Plate 10  Jennie Jackson *Panorama* digital collage on rag paper mounted on dibond

434cm x 40cm
in a somewhat vain attempt to resolve ambiguity. A similar interpretative activity to that which Harpham describes (in relation to the grotesque), as ‘seeking closure’, may drive the viewer to make sense of the dilemmas ‘either in the discovery of a novel form or in a metaphorical, analogical or allegorical explanation’ (1982, p. 18). As patterns out of place they seem,

to stay with the Freudian model . . . to be allied with the id. Patterns remained a symbol of the wild instincts; they still stood for the uncivilised, the unrestrained and the sensuous. (Tietenberg 2007, p. 6)

Although the artworks developed as part of this research did not literally combine animal or human parts with plants within compositions (as do grotesque motifs), the patterns created within the trees and bushes of the forest landscapes are aimed to remind viewers of grotesque distortions that make categorical blends. Bushes that may remind viewers of animals and groves of trees that evoke body parts, (orifices and bones), subtly break botanical/animal/object classifications to create a tension between ontological categories that is similar to that described as belonging to grotesque motifs; one that creates a ‘civil war of attraction and repulsion’ (Harpham 1982, p. 9).

In his essay The Uncanny (1919), Sigmund Freud argued that certain sights arouse horror because of an uncertainty of whether an object is alive or not. The strangeness of the uncanny is seen in the painting …Her Beauty and Her Terror (2008, plate 11) where the bushes populate the forest, either as gentle sleeping beasts or creatures lying in wait in the undergrowth. The second of the two kinds of Arcadia, which Schama maintains has always been part of Western ideas, is evoked as ‘a place of primitive panic’ (1995, p. 517). Huddled together, the lines of bushes stare, with closed eyes, at the viewer who is uncertain as to what is about to happen next. A disquieting sensation is evoked, which is part of a broader fear of being lost in forests. One is reminded that fear can cause a benign form to transform into a malignance. When I showed this work to Queensland Art Gallery curator Julie Ewington, she reflected on her own experience of being lost in a European forest and the sense of panic that set in. As discussed in Chapter 2, the fear connected to forests is also an experience that is part of Australian cultural memory that arose from the colonial discomfort of being in a strange landscape. As if to counteract the dangerous element of the unknown, the background trees of this painting lock together in a pattern that may remind of the familiar intricacies of textile or wallpaper designs. The detail of the image and the uniformity of the painted brush-strokes give a quality that is similar to
the stitching of a tapestry—a craft that is careful and laborious. The coherent net of lines that describes all the forms links them together in one larger pattern and unifies them. The faux engraving line renders the subject ‘safe’ by calling up Western empirical conventions of analysis and knowledge. Whether this artwork is really a metaphor for cultural fear or ambivalence, a patterned product of an orderly mind, or a fantastic creation of the subconscious is left to the viewer to decide. It oscillates between these things; evoking ideas of a controlled, constructed garden, patterned wallpaper and a wild, vaguely sinister place.

This major work raised a further set of questions regarding the impact of combining decorative and landscape conventions. They included:

- How much had the blurring of the categorical boundaries of nature and culture been produced by the inclusion of grotesque like motifs (animal/plant blends)? Could this blur be achieved without grotesque motifs?
- How much was the combination of pattern and various landscape conventions responsible for calling up of ideas associated with nature and culture? Was this also due to the fact that these were painted images?
- Did the qualities of ambiguity and uncertainty primarily arise from the amalgamation of aesthetic traditions that had different purposes—one that sought to abstract, stylise, and simplify natural forms to decorate and one that sought to either document or to create an illusion of an ideal, awe-inspiring natural world?

In order to further understand how the uncertain or unknown can be evoked by artworks, the series of works *Not what it seems* (2009-2012) used the medium of photography.

Photographs have been extensively used to document natural environments; they are persuasive due to their historical association with ‘truth’. In the twentieth century, photographic images of nature have been used extensively to communicate cultural values assigned to nature. As discussed in Chapter 2, wilderness photographers, such as Peter Dombrovski, Olegas Truchanas, Richard Woldendorp, and David Stephenson express ideas of a pristine or primeval forest in photographs that romanticise and revere nature, as well as document the qualities of a specific site. Contemporary advertising campaigns present a hyper-real, glossy nature, photographed and packaged seductively to entice sales of products including tourism to wild natural environments. For instance, the power of beautiful images
Plate 11 Jennie Jackson …*her beauty and her terror* (2011) acrylic on canvas 420cm x 200cm
of Tasmania’s Tarkine region that ‘freeze’ dramatic moments make beautiful photographs persuasive. As Thomas in the introduction to *Uncertain Ground: Essays between Art + Nature* remarks, ‘Art is now instrumental in maintaining a nature that looks like nature’ (1999, p. 12).

My participation in an artist residency on Peel Island, located in Moreton Bay, provided an opportunity to develop a series of artworks using photography. The landscape on this island provided contradictory experiences of nature that were profoundly influenced by both its isolation as an island and its history as an Aboriginal feasting and ceremonial site, Quarantine Station, Lazaret (1874–1959), educational camp site, and current registration as a National Park. The site features beautiful beaches and bays, abundant wildlife, dense forests, cleared areas for settlements and cemeteries, and the remnants of buildings in various states of restoration and decay. The history of the island is a disturbing one, with many stories of forced settlement of patients, of disease, harsh treatment, and of isolation. Awe, alienation, oppression and beauty are threads that feature in the present experience of the island and these provoke ideas of both island paradise and prison. The series *Not What It Seems* sought to engage with the history of the island by communicating a sense of what is both present and now absent. Writing on Rosemary Laing’s photographic works, Abigail Solomon-Godeau comments on the difficulty of achieving this aim:

> any attempt to find a mode of representation that recognises what is paradoxically both absent and present, what is repressed and disavowed beneath the surface appearance of physical reality, must acknowledge the limitation of visual documentation, of literal transcription. . . . finding a representational language that encompasses both invisible histories and complex social realities has long been a central concern. (2005, p. 42)

To make this next series of works, I altered ‘straight’ photographs of the forest that bordered the Lazaret settlement using simple decorative conventions used in pattern making—symmetry, repetition, and alternation. The patterning created by simply altering a section of the image (a mirror-image) was easily achieved through using Photoshop computer software. As a thoroughly postmodern device, digital manipulation has become a familiar mark of the digital age and a convention that both enables and reveals the technological manipulation of ‘truth’. The resulting series of landscape images represents the forest as a complicated site of nature and culture. They suggest an environment that is strangely both God- and man-made; one that is predictable and unpredictable and refers to both past and present.
In *Not What It Seems II* (2011, plate 14), the architectural form created by the simple reversal of the image down a line of symmetry could remind of a stage set deep within a forest. Empty without its players, the forest platform is partially lit under the dark canopy of the trees. Strangely, it recalls two quite different pasts; the history of the drama troupe that visited the island to entertain the leper patients and the European ideas of mysterious woodland groves where mythical creatures could enact a story. This photograph of a cluster of quite ordinary trees and undergrowth is transformed into an image that makes clear the intrusion of humans and the organising, interpreting capacity of culture. This artwork and the others in the series, *Not What It Seems I, III, IV, and V* (2009–12) seek to record the sense of absence and presence that is an eerie part of the present day island experience, combining the dark with the beautiful, the known with the unknown, and blurring the cultural with the natural. The construction of each image by digital manipulation is obvious and foregrounds my control, as the artist, over the scene. As well as reminders of the natural, the conventions of the decorative have proven themselves to be powerful markers of culture—evidence of the ‘controlling mind’ to which Gombrich (1979) refers.

In these four series of paintings, digital collages, and photographs, the ideas of nature that originally were spun in Europe over centuries are twisted together to create peculiar but also familiar landscapes. The landscapes are however not nostalgic longings for a long-past image of a world that was safe or more magical, but artworks that remind of the ways nature has been seen and understood, images that reflect how the Australian landscape played on the psyche of an immigrant population and that articulate ways culture has interacted with nature. By adopting the techniques of pattern building and combining them with landscape conventions, the works of the studio research demonstrate that it is possible to stitch into the fabric of a landscape the contradictory threads of meaning associated with the Decorative as well as the sublime, the panorama and engravings. The play between illusionary painting methods and decorative techniques, have enabled these images of the forest to simultaneously evoke multiple and contradictory qualities, such as wildness/emotionality/sensuality at the same time as restriction/rationality/order. They picture the complex interaction between concepts traditionally associated with both categories, build an awareness of the visual and conceptual ways that have been used to ‘see’ and represent the world, and propose ways to blur and mix ideas of culture and nature together. In Chapter 4, I explain how my methodology blends...
conventions and techniques in my final painting of this project, *The Entangled Forest*. This large-scale work creates for the viewer an immersive experience that evokes ideas of both nature and culture.
Plate 13  Jennie Jackson *Not What It Seems I* (2009) digital collage on rag paper
45cm x 45cm
Plate 14  Jennie Jackson Not What It Seems II (2011) digital collage on rag paper
26cm x 26cm
Plate 15  Jennie Jackson Not What It Seems IV (2010) digital collage on rag paper
35cm x 35cm
Chapter Four: Immersion, Scale, and Ideas of Nature

...it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.
—Schama 1995, p. 10

For most of my life I have been a keen bushwalker. I enjoy the intense, sensual experience of being in a forest; the refreshing coolness of the air, the smell of the earth and trees that surround me, the sounds of leaves falling, branches crunching under foot and birds calling. I also revel in what the forest demands of my body to negotiate it; the constant surveillance of the ground, the heaviness of the pack, and a concern for where I place my feet as I navigate obstacles. These many sensations constitute (in addition to sight) my experience of being within a forest.

Standing in the gallery space in front of my two largest paintings, Sweet Subterfuge (2007, plate 9) and ... Her Beauty and Her Terror (2008, plate 11), I quickly scribbled down viewers’ impressions as they spoke to me. These included ‘an impenetrable mysterious landscape’, ‘a paradise garden’, ‘ungovernable wild nature’, ‘a mythological forest of the imagination’, ‘a serene forest glade’ ‘a trigger for all the memories of walking in a forest’. The first four of these descriptions had been expected—these referred to how qualities such as wildness, the unknown, and the
mysterious are connected to longstanding ways of conceptualising nature. However, the last two reactions were unexpected; they were focused on how the works stimulated the recalling of an experience of being in the forest. These, as well as my own experience as a bushwalker, prompted the questions that guided the final stages of the research.

- How do landscapes that emphasise the artificial activate sensations and memories of a natural environment?
- How closely are ideas of natural environments tied to recollections of experience that are prompted by physical sensations?

The small digital collage Flutter (2008, plate 12) was the first attempt to address these questions through my studio work. Created to communicate part of the multi-sensual experience of being within a forest, Flutter was inspired by the phenomenon of leaves, seeds, and fruits fluttering through the canopy to reach the forest floor. This small work (30cm x 30cm) relied on approximating the ‘look’ of this observed event, freezing a single moment in time to prompt recollections of movement and sounds. Compared to its imagery, the forms of the larger works …Her Beauty and Her Terror and Sweet Subterfuge were more abstracted; their background trees connect in a decorative pattern and strange, monster-like bushes, in various shade of pink and purple, populate the foreground. However, it was still these larger works that reminded more vividly of the experience of being in a forest. The significant element in activating this recollection seemed to be the size and format of the works. The impact of scale, immersion, and the long horizontal format used in them required closer scrutiny.

This final chapter analyses how the panorama format, immersive large canvases, and life-size scale are used to stimulate sensations and recollections of the natural environment of a forest. It explains the implications of using these strategies in The Entangled Forest in conjunction with the set of aesthetic conventions used in previous works that emphasise the artificial. In so doing, this chapter presents the major findings of this research.
Plate 12 Jennie Jackson *Flutter* (2008) digital collage on rag paper

40cm x 40cm
The Panorama and Immersion

In Chapter 1, the historical research revealed the panorama as a rational, cultural means of documenting the details of a place. The following examines the panorama in relation to its ability to evoke ideas of nature. By immersing the viewer in a scene, large panoramas remind of the physical experience of being within natural environments as well as stimulating ideas of continuity and vastness associated with sublime ideas of nature. This is significant as these were some of the associations that I wanted my artworks to evoke.

For several hundreds of years, the large-scale panorama has been used as a means of communicating the experience of being within a place—of working to suspend the viewer’s disbelief so successfully ‘that the medium of the image becomes invisible’ (Grau 2000, p. 5). This proposition that the natural world and the canvas can become indistinguishable is a tantalising one, particularly as it suggests that a scene, which uses panoramic format and closer-to-life-size scale, is able to shrink the distance between representation and reality. In panoramas the ratio between height and width is altered so a viewer can observe the details of a 360-degree scene in either a long continuous strip, displayed on a single wall, or on walls that encircle the viewer. The massive panoramic tapestries of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Europe—such as Laurent de La Hyre’s Diana and Her Nymphs (1644) and Anton von Werner’s depiction of the Franco-Prussian War, The Battle of Sedan (1883)—portrayed extensive scenes in a large format. In nineteenth-century Britain vast, immersive scenes of the cities of Europe and the far-away places of the Pacific and Australia were displayed in purpose-built venues (fig. 33). These huge panoramas gave a bird’s-eye view of familiar cities or transported the viewer to foreign places. They created a feeling of ‘being there’ as well as showing what ‘there’ was like. By using a scale that was different to that of most paintings or engravings that depicted similar scenes, these panoramas created a spectacle. They felt significantly different to small-scale paintings as they surrounded the viewer and more closely replicated the scale of a human body to a physical environment. The size of these scenes provoked an emotional response that could be tied to an experience of a real place. Praeterita: The Autobiography of John Ruskin (1978) reveals how Ruskin was enthralled by a large-scale panorama of Milan, which he recalled when he saw the real city:

There I had seen, exquisitely painted, the view from the roof of Milan Cathedral, when I had no hope of ever seeing the reality, but with a joy and wonder of the deepest;—and
now to be there indeed, made a deep wonder become fathomless (cited in Oettermann 1997, p. 114).

Image removed

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the 180- or 360-degree screens of the cineorama and the IMAX 3D films, such as *Space Station* (2002), *Wild Ocean-3D* (2008), and *Wild Antartica-3D* (2012), use 3D image-acquisition technology to provide an audience with idealised experiences of nature, transporting them to the exotic ‘wilderness’ of space, Antarctica, or the depths of oceans. Visitors are offered a spectacle of expansive, untouched environments. The power of an immersive image to generate a sense of ‘being there’ and engender an emotional response of awe or wonder was, for me, most memorably demonstrated in the film *Solvent Green* (1973). Set in a grim, polluted world of the future, this science-fiction film included a scene that I have long remembered. It featured a 360-degree immersive video of natural environments that was screened to people when they elected to die. Offering a last chance to experience the beauty and grandeur of the natural world, the death chamber was filled with images of places long lost—nature’s pristine wild prairies, forests, and flowing rivers. The emotional power of immersion was revealed through the reactions of the characters Sol Roth and Detective Thorn who are overcome with emotion (a reaction mirrored by the audience) as they watched the beauty of a world that had been destroyed. This sensual experience, in the tradition of the Romantic
sublime, presented nature as a medium of transcendence—a glorious nature, able to bring one closer to God.

The emotional impact of a large-scale panorama format was evident in the two largest works of the studio research, *Earth* (2007, plate 5) and . . . *Her Beauty and Her Terror* (2008, plate 14). Made at the very beginning of this project, *Earth* is the only work that is not a landscape; it does not obey any of the picturesque or sublime conventions that became the later focus of the research. However, *Earth* had been inspired by memories of a forest’s undergrowth and was composed using the specific, decorative, construction techniques discussed in Chapter 3. In the tradition of the grand eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wallpapers, this digital collage (printed on paper) was adhered directly to the wall. However, it was much larger in format (approximately twice the height and many times the length of the wallpapers) extending 3.5 metres in height and 19.5 metres in length. As I’d created the work using a computer and thus viewing it on a small screen, the final massive scale of this printed work and the way it was installed by the IMA’s gallery installation crew (while I was overseas) led to some unexpected revelations. Importantly, on my return, the installation led me to experience the work anew: as a viewer.

The panoramic format and massive size of the installation of *Earth* meant that it could only be seen in its entirety from a side viewpoint; a viewpoint that emphasised the movement of the undulating pattern as I looked down its length and ‘out’ into an unknown distance. The wall of the space was completely covered by the paper that jutted up against the ceiling and floor. As a viewer, I felt engulfed by the artwork and this evoked visceral and phenomenal responses. The pink tones and the rhythmic wave of the pattern marked this image of a forest as thoroughly artificial, but it also reminded of a vast and entangled, forest floor. The sensory experience of immersion, the colour shifts, and vanishing-point perspective, which were part of the experience of the installed work, seemed to enliven the experience, providing points of resistance to the ‘deadening’ impulse of the dominant repeat pattern. Although the artwork was only adhered to one wall, it extended many times beyond my field of vision when I stood directly in front of it. I was pulled into the work with a feeling of being surrounded. Associations connected to Romantic ideas of nature and sublime landscapes (such as awe, power, and grandeur) were evoked not by the imagery (as it was not a landscape) but by the sheer size of the artwork and the relationship between it and myself. The phenomena of its scale altered my perception of it—an
impact that is explained by perception theories and the analysis of my experience of panoramic artworks and large-scale landscapes.

**Immersion, the Body, and Perception**

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the importance of bodily relationships to the perception of objects. He states that

> Any perception of a thing, a shape or a size as real, any perceptual constancy refers back to the positioning of a world and of a system of experience in which my body is inescapably linked with phenomena . . . but it is lived by me from a certain point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception. (1978, p. 304)

The close connection between perception and phenomenological stimuli suggests that the objecthood of a two-dimensional artwork could trigger responses in line with what Merleau-Ponty described as the experience of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Baldwin 2004, p. 27). The relationship between phenomena and experiencing the world is a complex one, explained in part through the immediate phenomenological encounter a person has with objects. In his book *An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Dermot Moran refers to how Merleau-Ponty stresses that ‘our bodily intentions already lead us into a world constituted for us before we conceptually encounter it in cognition’ (2000, p. 402). This notion of pre-conceptual experience offers an explanation of how the size of a very large artwork has the potential to ‘reawaken our immediate contact with the world’ (Moran 2000, p 402). Merleau-Ponty emphasises the significance of embodiment and asserts that people are not floating, disembodied minds; rather, he regards the embodiment of each person as fundamentally important to perception. Applied to viewing art, the notion of pre-conceptual experience suggests that a viewer of a two-dimensional artwork will initially perceive the work as an object covered with lines, shapes, and colours that bombard the senses. It follows from this that very large artworks, which impose significantly on the physical space occupied by the viewer, will be perceived initially as significant objects. The artworks *Earth*, . . . *Her Beauty and Her Terror*, and *The Entangled Forest*, though flat and thin, are objects that extend below and above the viewer and past an individual's field of vision. Because of this, they invite a significant bodily response and each artwork becomes a compelling part of the ‘lived experience’:

Merleau-Ponty confirms the primacy of lived experience by saying that the ‘perceiving mind is an incarnated mind’. Furthermore, perception is not simply the result of the
impact of the external world on the body; for even if the body is distinct from the world it inhabits, it is not separate from it. (Lechte 1994, p. 30)

This emphasis on the physicality of the artwork seems to contradict both Grau’s assertion that ‘the medium becomes invisible’ (2000, p. 5) and the longstanding notion that painted landscapes are like transparent windows, through which a replica of the world is revealed. However, Merleau-Ponty’s argument that the body and the world, cognition and perception, are interwoven (Moran 2000, p. 403) helps to explain how an artwork could be perceived both as illusion and material object. The relationship between the viewer and the object of the painting (its surface, its size and materiality) is equally as important as the relationship between the viewer and the cognitive stimuli of a painting’s illusionary surface. The significance of these relationships was made clear to me on two separate occasions when viewing large-scale artworks; firstly, when I stood in front of Claude Monet’s *Nymphéas* (1920–26) and secondly, when viewing Australian artist Mary Tonkin’s large scale works of the forest.

In 2008, I had the profound experience of visiting the Musee de l’Orangerie, Paris. There I found myself surrounded by the three large canvases of Monet’s *Nymphéas* that stretched around the curved walls of the purpose-built gallery space. The reflective surfaces of the water and the loosely painted forms of the lilies told me what I was looking at—a large waterlily pond. Lilies were intermittently scattered from the top to the bottom of the canvases as if they were floating in serene pools. This created an illusion that I was positioned in the middle of the lake, rather than at its edge. The feeling of ‘being there’ was enhanced by the bodily sensation of being surrounded by the set of panels covered with thick paint in shades of blues, greens and purples. Applied in swirling, broad, brushstrokes these painted panels made me aware of the physical surface of the work and reminded me of the experience of being surrounded by water. I was conscious of perceiving the work as both illusion and physical object.

I had a similar experience in the same year when viewing the large forest landscape *Madre I, Kalorama* (2008, fig. 34) of Australian painter Mary Tonkin at Australian Galleries in Melbourne. The large scale of the tree trunk and the overall size (2.44 x 5.08 metres) of this painting created a feeling of being overwhelmed. The illusion of three-dimensional space, the depiction of recognisable natural forms, and the scale of the work stimulated memories of the forest and the bodily sensation of being immersed within it. The complex relationship between the painting’s materiality, my
body, and the illusionary image of trees and undergrowth encouraged an emotional involvement with the scene, a recollection of forests and a sense of ‘being there’. When discussing her work, Tonkin suggested that viewers experience her landscapes in ways that generate a sense of their own physical presence in the world. She comments on the phenomenological impact of physical presence, and on how a viewer may interact with her large paintings, stating that,

when unable to immediately grasp all that is before them, [viewers] may be forced to engage with a longer process of exploration, to move into the image in a process of discovery, or at least forced to let their eyes rove over and probe the dimensions of the surface. The physical scale of the image may give them a heightened awareness of their physicality, their gravity as in the experience of many Rothko paintings. (Tonkin, 2002, p. 44)


Linking the experience of viewing the large landscapes of Tonkin and Monet with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas clarified the importance of scale and format to me. I recognised that these conventions could influence how ideas of nature could be evoked by my works, such as Earth and . . . Her Beauty and Her Terror. The physical scale of each artwork together with the image of the forest could stimulate recollections of similar phenomenological experiences in which a viewer’s body had been dwarfed by forest surroundings. Cognitive associations, the memories of past ‘lived experiences’, and the physical presence of these artworks all informed the complex interaction of bodily experience and cognition. This meant that large forested landscapes could be perceived not separately as material objects or cognitive illusions but as ‘real in one blow’ (Merleau-Ponty 2000, p. 403).
Immersion and the Frame of Art—Detachment and Involvement

How an artwork stimulates a sensation of immersion and prompts a cognitive response was further understood by considering Ronald Hepburn’s view of the difference between art and nature. Peter Coates discusses Hepburn’s view stating,

. . . we perceive and evaluate natural objects and objects of art differently. Aesthetic experience of nature [Hepburn] argues involves immersion rather than detachment. Whereas a piece of art is framed, nature is frameless and offers more scope for the individual imagination because it has not been deliberately created. The question of seeing what the artist intended us to see does not arise; the perceiver provides the frame. (1998, p. 110)

Two aspects of this discussion have contributed to understanding how the forest landscapes made during this research could simultaneously trigger ideas of culture and nature. These are, firstly, that a distinction between how one perceives art and nature is based on an emotional sense of immersion or detachment and, secondly, that both immersion and detachment are directly connected to the extent to which a view is limited. This exegesis argues that artworks that replicate a feeling of immersion by offering multiple viewpoints within a scene can produce the sense of being in nature that Hepburn identifies. How the view is framed and the positioning of the viewer in relation to a scene contributes to how associations are invoked.

In Landscape and Memory, Schama discusses the frame of a work of art and the role that borders play in limiting the frame of view and triggering associations. He explains that elaborate borders that appear as part of the image highlight the selection and framing of a view. These draw attention to the artist’s intentional construction of a scene, and therefore act as,

a kind of visual prompt to the attentive, that the truth of the image was to be thought of as poetic rather than literal; that a whole world of associations and sentiments enclosed and gave meaning to the scene. (Schama 1995, p. 11)

Although the works of this research do not incorporate borders, works such as Panorama II include a similar device, that of breaking the image into sets of panels separated by a small space. The eight separate panels bring attention to the deliberate framing choices made by myself as the artist. They disrupt the continuity of the image and, importantly, invite the viewer to detach from being involved in the illusion to consider how and why the work is constructed.
The arguments of Coates (1998) and Schama (1995) suggest that the framing of a view within an artwork has the potential to affect viewer detachment and immersion determining the types of associations or ideas an artwork may provoke; viewer detachment fosters a process of reflection and the calling up of cultural ideas, and viewer immersion and a frameless view evokes a recollection of natural environments. How the traditional conventions of the panorama, the engraving line, Romantic landscape, and decorative traditions could be used to either increase emotional detachment from a scene or increase involvement became important to consider. This analysis informed decisions concerning the scale and type of imagery as well as the size of the final artwork, *The Entangled Forest*, and raised the last set of questions to be investigated by the studio research:

- Would very large artworks using a set of conventions that provoke a sensation of immersion blend concepts of nature and culture more convincingly than smaller works?
- Is the balance between detachment and involvement crucial to the simultaneous triggering of ideas of culture and nature?

To investigate these questions, the initial studio works were evaluated to identify the techniques and conventions specifically used to encourage emotional detachment and involvement.

The studio research methodology had been developed and refined over the course of the four series of works. Throughout, similar strategies had been used to create a sense of the artificial, generating a matrix of ideas associated with the cultural. I recognised that these strategies also worked to heighten the emotional *detachment* of the viewer. For instance, the *Sweet Subterfuge* series used unnatural lighting and hues of blue and pink to depict trees and bushes to dispel a sense of the natural. Works in *The Forest* series used monochrome colour schemes, which made them appear as if viewed through coloured lenses. The artworks of both series included stylised forms within decorative patterning and used sets of panels that interrupted the continuity of the image. These devices highlighted that each landscape was an imaginative interpretation of a natural scene rather than a document or illusion of a natural environment. The most significant convention that worked to encourage emotional detachment of the viewer was the linear format used in all of the works. Though the regular lines used to describe the plant forms unified each image, they also made an almost impenetrable grid that acted like a screen placed in front of each scene. Together with the repeat patterns, this grid emphasised that the images were flat, constructed artworks. Because the lines were many times larger than those used...
in small etchings they were noticeable, both up close and at a distance. They became a signpost that pointed to my construction of the scene as well as being a metaphor for the rational. Together, these strategies functioned to emotionally distance viewers and encourage them to consider how codified schemas (stylisation, linear translation of forms, repetition, and symmetry) have been applied to botanical forms and the forest environment.

However, as landscapes, these works also used various strategies that encouraged emotional involvement of the viewer by evoking mythological ideas of nature and recollections of experiencing natural environments. The images in the *Sweet Subterfuge* series pictured forests that were unpopulated and wild, places where the unknown could reside. The ambiguous, grotesque forms provoked uncertainty and a sense that the forest was somehow conscious. The inclusion of recognisable elements, such as trees and bushes, the use of perspective, and the division of the composition into foreground, midground, and background were strategies that could remind one of how forests appear in the world. These works also referred to how natural environments have been interpreted and idealised in Western art to create feelings of sensual beauty, sublimity, or wonder. In her book *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society and the Imagination* (1990), Rosalind Williams argues:

> The emotion of sublimity is, above all, related to perceptions of immense scale. The immensity of time as well as that of space, arouses fear and awe, the shudder that arises from the apprehension of one’s unimportance and impotence before grand natural powers. (p. 87)

The large size of the artworks, *Earth, Sweet Subterfuge*, and …*Her Beauty and Her Terror* had used immersion to prompt recollections of experiencing the natural power of the forest. Because these types of landscapes are familiar ways of ‘seeing’ nature in Western art, the landscape conventions drew the viewer into the scene, aiming to convince that what was being depicted was nature.

Through this particular process of creating detachment and involvement, the artworks in these series stimulated both cultural and natural ideas (order and chaos, rationality and irrationality, predictability, and irregularity), twisting them together in ways that disobeyed strict categorical boundaries. The works resolve as fictitious, artificial forests and as such belong to a transition zone between the man-made and the God-made. I recognised that in these artworks, the strategies of the decorative that evoke ideas of culture and its control were more successful than those that prompted
sensations or recollection of natural environments. In the final work I wanted to ‘stretch’ the transition zone between the cultural and natural by changing the balance between detachment and involvement. I resolved to combine the strategies used in the initial series with additional techniques that could provoke a greater recollection of the sensations of being within a forest, and ideas (including the tranquil, the mysterious, the beautiful and the unspoiled) connected to the experience of nature. In *The Entangled Forest*, I incorporated immersive scale, a panorama format, life-size elements, a more extensive palette of colours (including green), and tonal variations to create an illusionary space. I speculated that these strategies could increase involvement and may encourage a persistent rocking back and forth between cultural and natural associations; a process that would assist in further eroding categorical distinctions between nature and culture.

*The Entangled Forest*

*The Entangled Forest* offers both a unique view of a forest and one that weaves the longstanding strands of meaning that constitute Western cultural ideas of nature with ideas and recollections of a forest. It is also a landscape that simultaneously invites the viewer to become involved and remain detached.

Measuring nine metres by almost 2 metres, *The Entangled Forest* is a massive landscape. The size of the canvas establishes an immersive scale to prompt a phenomenological experience of a forest. This panorama cannot be easily absorbed in one glance. In order to navigate this long work, the viewer is required to walk along its length and let their eyes flit from section to section, so as to take in multiple views. This multiple framing of the view is similar to the process required in real forests and seeks to replicate the immersive, sensual qualities of a natural environment. The relationship between the viewer and elements within the scene contribute to a phenomenological perception of the forest. Clumps of bushes and trees occupy the immediate foreground, and press forward as if to include the viewer in their midst. The relationship between the human body and the scale of the eucalypt trees contributes to a sense of being able to reach out and touch the trees or be amongst them. It is, as Jones describes, ‘a subversive mimesis’ something that depends on ‘proximate distance—rather than as distance collapsed’ (2006, n.p.). The scale of the vegetation and the size of the canvas panels of *The Entangled Forest* are involving,
generating recollections of being within a forest and reminiscent of the physical sensations of being surrounded by vegetation.

Drawn from the details of photographs taken within Brisbane Forest Park and on Peel Island, the eucalypts of *The Entangled Forest* are rendered in a more naturalistic manner than previous series, mimicking colours and bark patterns. Because of this, the forest is recognisable as an Australian coastal forest. The forest feels familiar. However, like the works in the previous series, this forest also feels strange. Though contradictory, both these ‘feelings’ are an indication that the image invites involvement. The undergrowth is painted in both expected and unexpected colours. Various shades of ochre, blue, and green (more saturated than in reality) define the bushes. The scene is organised around the picturesque device of grouping trees asymmetrically on either side of the canvas in order to frame a distant view. However, this is not done with the usual intent of creating an idyllic or peaceful, pastoral scene that stretches comfortably out into the distance. Instead, the distant view is like an opening in the forest, as if it was a rupture in the fabric of the image. The background clump of trees, which forms a decorative pattern stretching across the work, is rent apart, pulling the viewer’s gaze downwards to the very bottom of the canvas to give a feeling of falling forward into the painting and over an imagined precipice. Methods of manipulating a viewer’s placement within a landscape are borrowed from Romantic landscape paintings discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. These conventions, combined with the immersive size of the image, trigger a sense of ‘being there’, of suspending one’s disbelief so that ideas and recollections of the experience of nature can be activated.

In this work, the idealised beauty of a perfect, picturesque landscape is combined with a wilder and more unsettling aesthetic. The natural beauty of Peel Island forests and the disquieting atmosphere that arises from the disturbing aspects of the island’s history leave their mark. Ambiguous forms hint at something slightly sinister, suggesting grotesque category blends; plants flow out of the claustrophobic undergrowth, like fingers reaching toward the viewer; bushes are shaped like animals or orifices; bowers twist in strange decorative shapes. All of these make this a landscape that is difficult to pin down. It is both safe and unsafe, familiar and unfamiliar. I am reminded of the words of Geoffrey Halt Harpham describing the capacity of the decorative Grotesque to stand,
... at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles. (1982, p. 3)

Indeed, throughout this work are threaded the longstanding ideas of the alien and the unknown that have contributed to the persistent mythology overlaid on the Australian landscape, and describe an emotional response to a land conceptualised as foreign. However, these threads do not dominate to create an utterly fearsome forest that reflects only a colonial way of seeing and thinking about a landscape. Along with these ‘dark’ ideas of nature, less malignant associations are stitched in place. Notions of pristine, and sacred mountain forests and associations of the predictable and the ordered that are evoked by the regularity of the decorative are strands of meaning woven into a complicated forest. This work reveals that contemporary artworks can reinterpret the Western forest motif as a metaphor for the coexistence of (rather than the dramatic competition between) good and evil, life and death, thinking and feeling.

Though depicting a natural environment, *The Entangled Forest* is also clearly artificial. By combining multiple conventions and by foregrounding the artwork’s construction, the viewer is invited to consider the unique process of ‘seeing’ nature that artworks provide. The brightly coloured filters and the orange strokes that seem randomly placed throughout the image, point to the constructed nature of the scene, the artist’s intentional framing of a view. They play with the viewer’s simultaneous perception of the painting as a flat surface of sensory data and as an illusionary, three-dimensional image. The sections reversed along lines of symmetry and the pixellated background evidence the twenty-first-century digital processes involved in its making. They highlight how art manipulates the notion of ‘truth’ as part of the process of representation.

The linear technique of rendering forms also emphasises that this is a product of an artist’s mind that interprets what is seen, felt, and remembered. It highlights my engagement in a conceptual process, which involves organising visual stimuli, making sense of the world and assigning and comparing cultural values and ideas. The scale of the lines of this large painting makes it difficult for the viewer to ignore them. More loosely rendered than previous works, the varied colours and tones in *The Entangled Forest* provide the illusion of receding space. Changes in the width help establish a distance between objects and spaces between trees. Up close, however, the grid of lines asserts itself and the flatness of the painting’s surface becomes obvious. The viewer is encouraged to make repeated movements—to come up close and then back away—in order to examine how the illusion of the forest is created and to
experience how the grid of lines gradually transform into plants. This process emphasises both the construction and the illusion, and encourages a rocking back and forth between the natural and the cultural, detachment and involvement, considering and sensing.

The Entangled Forest addresses the major questions of this research and brings together the practical strands of this investigation. It combines the motif of the forest, aesthetic conventions associated with landscape, scientific documentation, and the Decorative with elements of life-size scale and immersive, panoramic format to trigger associations of the natural and the cultural. In so doing, it offers visual evidence of how pictorial traditions act as organising schemas, interpreting and representing ideas of culture and nature. It demonstrates how the visual language of art can weave separate strands of meanings together to form a complicated image of a forest—one that stretches the transition zone between concepts of nature and culture and that may assist in eroding categorical distinctions.
Plate 16 Jennie Jackson *The Entangled Forest* (2012) acrylic on canvas, 9 metres x 1.9 metres
Plate 17 Jennie Jackson *The Entangled Forest* (2012) (detail) acrylic on canvas 9 metres x 1.9 metres
Plate 18 Jennie Jackson *The Entangled Forest* (2012) (detail) acrylic on canvas, 9 metres x 1.9 metres
Conclusion

The project *The Constructed Forest: Weaving Landscape, Pattern and Ideas in Contemporary Art* investigates how the visual language of artworks has been used to communicate ideas associated with nature and culture. The theoretical and studio research has examined longstanding ideas that have been associated with depicting nature as landscape in Western art and has investigated how these ideas have influenced the way one type of natural environment, the Australian coastal forest, has been represented by Australian artists. The works of Rosemary Laing, Simryn Gill, James Morrison, and Fiona Hall have been important exemplars to this research, showing how the complex interaction between nature and culture can be pictured in artworks that combine disparate conventions.

The exhibitions arising from this research reveal how artworks can act as mirrors to the long history of associations and the framing of concepts of nature and culture, by bringing attention to the various ways that nature has been thought about or ‘seen’ and reflecting these back to the viewer. In particular it has focused on how the forest has been portrayed by landscape traditions as a pure place, an ideal pristine environment or as a wild or dangerous site, outside of human control.
The studio research has shown how contemporary artworks can distort or blur traditional ways of seeing nature by creating alternative ways of visualising it. By linking ideas that are usually regarded as separate or opposing, these artworks resist the oppositional framing of the concepts of nature and culture and build on the contemporary theories of Schama (1995), Seddon (1998), Coates (1998), and Madson (1999) to show that a more ambiguous and complex relationship exists between these two concepts. This research has found that blending contradictory associations as if they are multiple strands of meaning stitched together gives voice to ideas that either transgress or expose the usual limits of the nature and culture categories. This process creates a transitional zone where the boundary between concepts is blurred and the artificial flourishes.

The works in the four series, *An Elaborate Ploy*, *The Forest*, *Sweet Subterfuge*, and *Not What It Seems*, and the final work, *The Entangled Forest*, demonstrate how longstanding ideas connected to pictorial traditions of landscape, scientific illustration, and the Decorative transfer to contemporary images that mimic them. In these works, ideas associated with nature (such as wildness, chaos, sensuality, emotionality, fecundity, and purity) and ideas associated with culture (such as predictability, control, rationality and order) become entwined in images that combine aesthetic conventions connected to different traditions. Like the threads of different hues that run under the surface of an embroidery and are intermittently pulled through to the surface to be stitched in place, longstanding ideas reappear in artworks to form contemporary images of nature and culture.

The studio works of this research depict aspects of nature. All are forest scenes. Densely populated with trees, they are devoid of the signs of human settlement. What the viewer sees within the frame appears to be but a snippet of a larger, continuously unfolding picture of nature. All of the studio works present ideas of nature that have been formed through the lenses of human culture. The works of the *Sweet Subterfuge* series and *The Forest* series depict obviously constructed, artificial scenes that are pieced together using aesthetic conventions of traditions that have over time represented botanical forms and natural environments. They depict a forest wilderness; a pristine environment that represents how nature ‘was’ and ‘should still be’ before human intervention. However, they are not direct copies of sublime or picturesque landscapes, nor are they illusionary representations of natural scenes imitating nature’s forms with accuracy; they are landscapes—culturally mediated interpretations that bear the mark of the artist’s hand and the mark of culture’s
controlling mind. As cultural images they communicate ideas about rationality. They translate into visual form the patterns and mythic connections generated by an ordered mind trying to understand and know man’s place in the world. They are created using aesthetic strategies employed to know natural environments (linear description, classification, pattern identification) and comment on methods (such as idealisation and stylisation) that have been used to sublimate the dangerous, the unknown, and unpredictable. This process allows the recurrent myths concerning an alien and foreign land that have been attached to the depiction of the forest in Australian art to resurface, but this time to be mixed with other associations of transcendence and beauty, predictability and ambiguity, which are connected to the sublime, the picturesque, scientific illustration, decorative repeat patterns, and grotesque motifs. The artworks created as part of this research weave together associations of the natural and cultural by referencing and subtly distorting these Western conventions. By doing so, this process sheds light on how longstanding ideas might contribute to current attitudes to nature, and how artworks can assist in understanding the interdependence of conceptual and visual traditions.

In order to blend ideas of the natural and cultural in the major painting *The Entangled Forest*, the research has focused on combining strategies that stimulate viewer detachment and involvement. The ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962), Hepburn as discussed by Coates (1998), the history of panoramas, and my first-hand experience of the large-scale artworks by Monet and Tonkin emphasised how a large artwork can be perceived simultaneously as object, illusionary image, and an immersive experience. *The Entangled Forest* clarifies how the meanings attached to a forest landscape are not only dependent on the cognitive power of the imagination and the historical layering of ideas relevant to a place, but that ideas of nature (including awe and wonder) can also be called up by an artwork’s size and scale. This research has found that bodily sensations caused by the physical relationship of the viewer to very large images of the forest can play an important role in shaping meanings.

Western landscape paintings usually offer the viewer a framed window through which they can observe a scene—a world that is created by the artist in miniature. However, this research demonstrates that a sense of the natural can be stimulated by the size of two-dimensional artwork, even when combined with conventions that foreground the construction of the image and emphasise its artificiality. Immersive scale has a compelling capacity to evoke recollections of the experience of a natural environment.
Throughout this exegesis, the process of speculative research has been documented. I have explained how visual methodologies used by artists, including myself, offer alternative ways of visualising the relationship between the natural and the cultural. It has examined visual methods I have used to conflate and interweave longstanding ideas in both printed and painted artworks. By weaving the conventions of landscape and pattern with ideas to create a constructed forest, it offers new visual metaphors for representing the complicated relationship between culture and nature.
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