Joel Wolter

An essay by Dr Colin Holden

A particular redwood tree in Melbourne's Royal Botanical Gardens; a trunk resembling a piece of driftwood in a rural landscape; a shell and a pinecone. These are very specific subjects, and the artist concentrates all his effort in capturing each one in its individuality and uniqueness. He convinces us that we are not looking at a generalised scallop shell or pinecone, something that he has envisaged in his imagination after seeing many such shells or cones, but a particular one. In Geelong, we are invited to look towards the light from under the arched roof of one of the tiny handful of covered railway stations remaining from the 19th century in Victoria. Again, the setting is highly particular.

At the Victorian College of the Arts, Joel Wolter's skills as a draughtsmen were quickly recognised by his teachers, who included Alan Mitelman, John Scurry, Julie Irving and Simon Cooper. These draughtsmanship skills play an important role in persuading viewers that here is an artist who is accepting a challenge from the things that are directly present to him, and which in turn he presents to us. It is not only the case with small individual objects such as the scallop shell or the pinecone. It is equally true of many of the landscape subjects. Geelong Skyline or View of St Mary's Cathedral, Geelong from North Shore, the Oil Refinery are not images created from memory, but as the artist works in the open air with oils or an etching plate, attempting to capture immediately and directly what lies before him.

As a Fine Art graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts (2002), his awareness of historical tradition grew rapidly under the stimulus of Caroline Miley. It is no accident that his skies, or the structure of a whole composition, recall Constable or Rembrandt. Wolter has revisited these two artists again and again. Further, for a printmaker with a historical awareness, it is highly appropriate that he should excel as an etcher. Etching, the print medium in which his gifts are best seen, was revived in the 19th century by artists who consciously looked back to the work of earlier centuries from their increasingly industrialised society, often in reaction against it. And even if his preference for creating his landscapes (whether in print or oil) outdoors in the face of the subjects of his work, rather than in the studio from sketches, comes from a sense of accepting a challenge from his subject, it also satisfies him to know that in this too, he is an inheritor of a historical tradition.

But is this all that his works embody? A possible answer is suggested in his skies. Landscape or cityscape often occupies a much smaller proportion of these compositions than the infinity above. It may be an uninterrupted space from which a clear, almost Northern European light pours out onto the landscape below. Or it may be inhabited by clouds in a variety of moods, from the quietly brooding, almost threatening ones hanging over the Oil Refinery or The Parting of the Ways, to the cheerful fleeciness that sits like a canopy above the verdant Geelong from Barwon Heads. These clouds, like the moods they convey, are essentially transitory, escaping capture or definition. And in the end, an urge to capture the highly elusive, the seemingly indefinable, underlies most of these works, even when subject is as specific as a small shell or a pinecone. The search for an elusive essence drives Wolter to such highly individuated objects. Where words falter, an unspoken medium may provide the net to capture it.

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I wrote this reflection in August 2006 when I spoke at the opening of the first public exhibition in Geelong of Joel Wolter's works. His most recent etchings now exhibited as part of Scape-ism, demonstrate the ongoing development and maturing of directions that the artist was already taking in his earlier work. All these new works continue to demonstrate his considerable skills in draughtsmanship. The best of them reveal far more. In them, his quest to capture individuality and uniqueness continues. In earlier, small format works, it was particularly a quest to render a particular object in its entirety. The land-, city- and sea-scapes that feature in the recent works are specific sites and settings in Geelong, Melbourne or Western Australia. However, what holds the attention of the viewer is not so much the loving detail bestowed on rendering buildings or trees, but the sense of the atmosphere of a

particular moment in time. That, more than place or object itself, now seems to be the object of artist's quest. Earlier states of the View of St Mary's Cathedral featured a wide open sky — perhaps the clear sky of a spring or summer day, but a sky that was also reminiscent of the wide open skies above many Dutch seventeenth-century views. In the third state, not only has the middle and foreground been completely populated with the shapes of Australian flora, but the sky, laden with cloud, belongs to a particular time of afternoon, a specific moment of intensity, perhaps before the breaking of a late afternoon shower. The Parting of the Ways features an equally evocative sky that broods over the landscape below. It is at the opposite pole to the bright, almost relentless sky of Geelong from Rippleside.

The capturing of a mood is a quality of other etchings, particularly Universal Laneway and The Watchers. In Universal Lane, the viewer almost feels the tactile quality of handmade bricks and the irregularity of their surfaces. This work is equally satisfying in terms of composition, with its strong sense of geometrical forms and regular patterns — the Greek key pattern, the pair of columns, and the patterns created by the bricks. But above all, it is the mood of the laneway at a particular time that is powerfully conveyed — not threatening, let alone sinister, so much as of haunting loneliness, as the bright lights from two windows dramatically illuminate dark but unpeopled spaces. A haunting, indeed brooding sense of desertedness also characterizes The Parting of the Ways. Something similar also informs The Watchers, with its dark, perhaps angry sky, its landscape, with only sparse vegetation and windswept, gnarled trunks.

The sense of the precise moment may be the key to what makes these images compelling. They contain echoes of the awareness of transience, and remind us that it is not just the moment, or the particular, that is passing — 'But at my back, I always hear Time's winged chariot, hurrying near'. Ultimately, it is us, as much as the moment suggested by the images; in other words, the images reveal something essential to ourselves.

Colin Holden, August 2010

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