

The Spirit of Place

It seems frivolous to be discussing the 'Spirit of Place' for a sculpture festival with that title at a coastal resort just when the president of the world's largest country has invaded a neighbour, not only for geopolitical reasons, but because that nation shares the same mythologies, religion and culture. He reasons that the newly independent country has stolen much of the 'spirit of place' of his own empire and so, to get it back, he is causing the destruction of its cities, the massacres of its people and the misery of millions driven into exile.

However, as in all things Australian, the same grim nouns hover in the background for what happened here to the Indigenous population in the 19th century, remaining unaddressed until relatively recently. So the Spirit of Place might be found to be a tougher, less whimsical, concept than first perceived.

The contributors to the 2022 Lorne Sculpture Biennale, nearly all express awareness of that loss, and the concept of an Indigenous Welcome to Country for such an event becomes not just a standard ritual but emotionally, and thus spiritually, necessary. The moving opening ceremony on the old Erskine House lawn at the Mantra Lorne conducted by Richard Collopy and his Gadubanud family did indeed generously evoke the spirit of place. Collopy later spoke of his forebears, who inhabited the area and how they tended the surrounding hills and coastline. On hearing him, they suddenly become not shadowy ghosts of people who disappeared with white settlement (the iteration giving the listener that regular tinge of 'unsettlement') but real individuals, in real space, who existed here, moving through the landscape,

Their beliefs chime with the Roman reverence for the *genius loci*, the traditional spiritual guardian of the home. This concept was extended by the pastoral poets during the rule of Augustus Caesar to celebrate special places in the countryside. The poet, essayist and gardener, Alexander Pope, introduced the idea of the *genius loci* into 18th century English garden design and these ideas were brought to the Antipodes by the early classically educated settlers who saw themselves as Australian Augustans.

Here are but some of the sixteen main exhibits of the extensive and varied festival, all of which speak to their chosen environment in imaginatively different ways:

The official starting point of the linear display, at the start of the old Tramway Track, is Geoffrey Ricardo's *The Haunting Tide*. Lorne is not a boaty town anymore and the charming, towered, clinker-built fishing boat is somehow redolent of a Cornish fishing village, and the art of the fisherman Alfred Willis, the naïve inspirer of the St Ives School. Similarly, though in complete contrast aesthetically, the crushing grandeur of Stevens Vaughn's *Throne of Potentiality* occupies the end of the pier as powerfully as it would any other space where it might land. It takes no prisoners.

Robert Hague's elegiac *What remains - a ruin of 12 vessels* with its boldly sited giant plinths and broken urns, echoes the forms and scale of classical antiquity. It elicits a strong, if imported, sense of *genius loci*. Louttit Bay becomes an Aegean setting manipulated by Salvador Dali, whose surrealism was staged on the rocky Catalanian coast where he lived.

Monument is Ryan Kennedy's ambitious symbolic recreation of the remarkable construction of the Ocean Road after World War 1 by 3,000 shell-shocked returned soldiers. Kennedy's use of khaki tones and tents, and tools and instruments of the time, evokes the period and celebrates the great achievement in both road building and veteran rehabilitation. Is performance art, sculpture or theatre? His occupation of the site is a continual three week presentation. Kennedy's night-time performance used his allotted spaces to dramatic effect; pounding out of the darkness along the narrow coast path; rushing through the bush below trailing a whooshing pink flare; and driving himself to exhaustion and injury trying to ascend a steep slope time and time again until he lay panting and bleeding on the path. He and his creative partner, Ben Michael, would seem to embody the concept of a spatial endurance artwork, as pioneered by such practitioners as Marina Abramovic and Stelarc, who performed at a previous Biennale.

Nearby Maree Clark turns a glade of trees into a memorial of 38 lost and endangered languages in the region. It evokes the burial grounds Major Mitchell sensitively drew on his expeditions in the 1830s when they were, already, the resting place of smallpox victims. His publicity of 'Australia Felix' would ensure the survivors displacement and loss of their spirit places.

Adjoining this, on The Point – where surfers check the waves – Simon Buttonshaw and geologist, Philomena Manifold, take the theme eons into the past and back to the present by making rubbings on canvas from rocks on the beach directly below. They speak of how impermanent the site is. On each day of their project, they returned to work to find that, pounded by the fierce tides of Bass Strait, the rocks were never exactly the same: a restless spirit of place energised by the force of two oceans meeting over a narrow shelf.

In total historical contrast Deborah Halpern recreates a night club where it stood in the 1960s. Here Lorne veterans can find the, nicely un-hallowed, spirit of place of the *Wild Colonial Club* and remember awkward dancing, first kisses and the effects of first spirits imbibed. In daylight the spectacularly hideous furniture Halpern has gathered becomes an installation defying any known aesthetic standard, while on the memorial park above, a mosaic Halpern sculpture, which she has generously donated, now welcomes visitors to Lorne – a 21st century *genius loci*.

At the end, or the beginning, David McKenzie's *Barnstormer*, the reconstruction, from Ross Dimsey's research, of a biplane that landed on the beach in 1921, and took people for joyrides, is as astonishing as the original event would have been. The perfect recreation, it wittily captures a moment in time and the breezy bold Spirit of Lorne.

Edward Coleridge, April 2022