

## Tips for Anxious Gardeners: a catalogue essay

I was lying in bed the other morning, ruminating on writing this catalogue essay thing when I was accused by my wife of a 'Carbon Crime'\* for letting my tea go cold and the unnecessary boiling of a kettle!

Well that seemed to hit the nerve.

I had proposed a 'kinda landscape show'. A visual art exhibition that dealt with space and the land and our environment but steered away from the easy common abstraction of 'The Environment' or the elsewhere romanticism of 'Landscape' in art\*\*. If it did use these abstractions at least I wanted them acknowledged. I knew I didn't want no Tasmanian wilderness porn or socialist realist lino cuts of tram stops. I envisaged works that had a real immediacy to place. Or maybe it could wrestle with these abstractions?

I had also observed that most discussions about 'our environment' seemed to be anxious ones. Whether it be about graffiti or garden watering the common tone belies anxiety.

I wondered was the phenomenon a particularly Australian one? For there are certainly peculiarities. Is it all tied in with **The Drought**? Or the widening of the shipping channel? Is it the To DeSal or Not DeSal debate that is keeping me up at night or at least making me more inclined to buy the bathroom cleaner with the smiley dolphin on the front? (or *I* argue not clean the bathroom at all!) Is it simply the repressed subliminal epiphenomena of our postcolonial condition? Could we alleviate it with a treaty with the indigenous peoples or by at least mentioning them before every local council meeting? Or will the Murray still call up images of a salt pan rather than a rich and vibrant watercourse? Is it all those silly hooved animals (on two legs and four)? Or just the damn 4Wheel drives that que up outside the urban schools twice a day? Or those fricken 'one less car' Nazis and the somewhat strange state of play that makes it *de rigueur* to display ones piss in the public trough but still total unacceptable to leave a floater?

Then I thought of England, that "green and pleasant land," and noted the hysteria of mad cow disease outbreaks, those troughs of disinfectant they single you out to walk through at the airport, the heated and contentious philosophic debates over the personal feelings of foxes, the anti GM crop stockades and the illegal attack on the infant Euro by some poor bastard selling bananas by the pound rather than kilo.

Then I sighed and thought maybe it has always been this way. The trepidation with which we look to the sky and try to predict the weather. Maybe it's the very hallmark of an agrarian culture. The anxiety over the crops and the trade they allow. When the soil turns political. A hang-over from when the soil was religious and the attempt to make bread a religious token in place of some dancing animal totem. Perhaps ever since Eden we know we are no longer welcome. Perhaps tilling the soil *is* rape and we never can reconcile with the remaining few and embattled hunter-gatherer societies. Perhaps an attempt to package, divide, fence and own the land was a response to this innate anxiety.....for even now all writing about real estate is built on the emotional underpinning of a drive for 'security'. Be it the Financial Review or the advertising lifestyle billboards for a housing estate (or fucking chardonnay labels for that matter!).

Is it this very anxiety (and some inverted perversity) that leads me to wear fur, collect taxidermy and eat whale? (and find it bloody delicious! - Though nobody will yet entertain my harvesting ideas). Not to mention the endless debate of vegetarian vs vegan and under what ideology a fish can be considered a vegetable.

I would love to just forget it all and get my hands into the earth as Douglas Coupland recommends at the end of *Life After God* with the grounded epiphany of a hand going numb in a cold mountain stream.

I would love some dirt beneath my nails but I fear I have already bitten them all off.

## Benedict Ernst

\*Isobel Harcourt would like her ownership and coining of this term acknowledged and on record.  
Sunday August 16 2009.

\*\*Did you know that Fred Williams iconic (and now very expensive!) landscape paintings were painted under contract with a mining company and the result of two trips and a total of 15 days in the actual environment they depict?