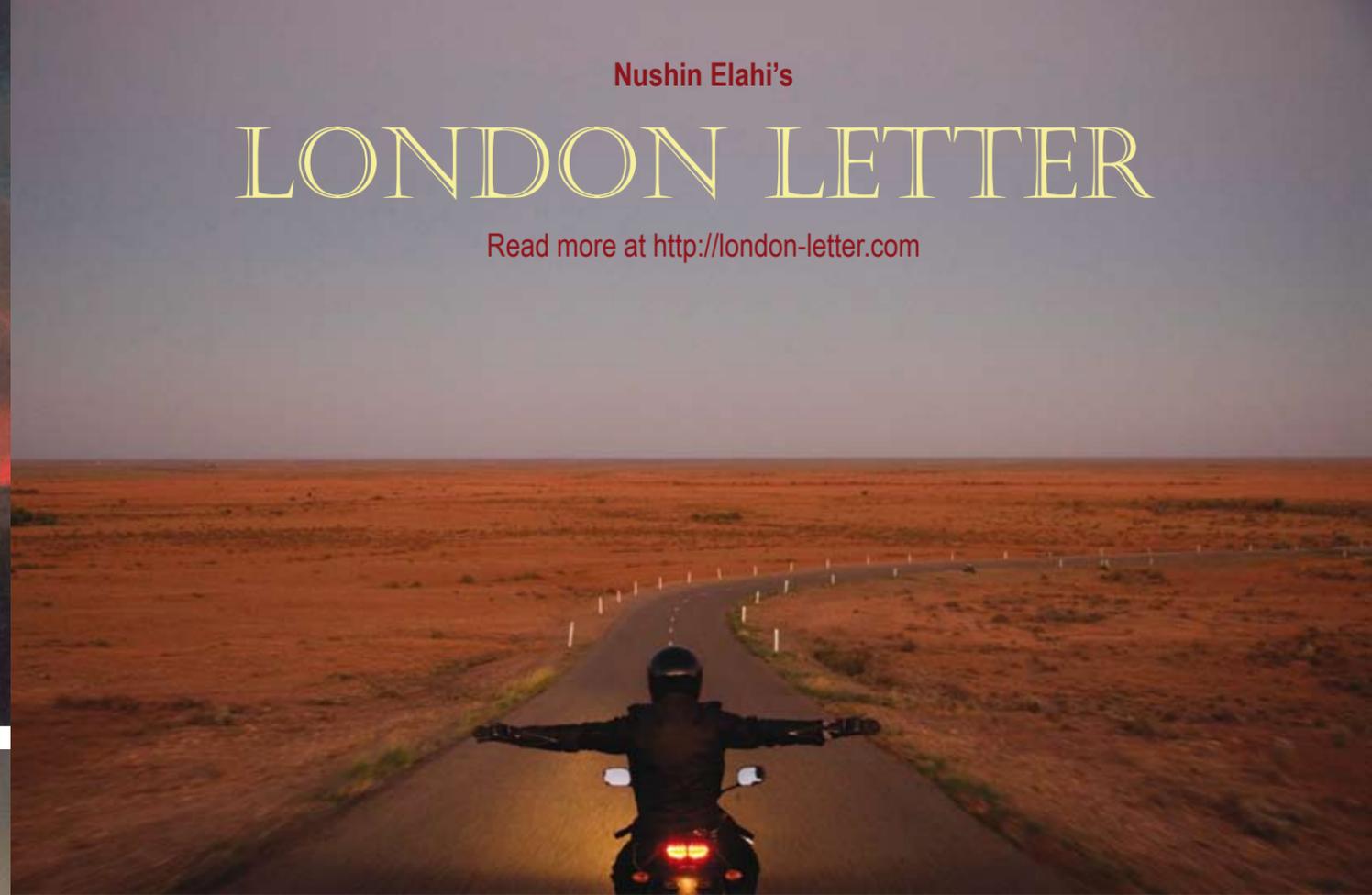


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(Top right) Shaun Gladwell, Approach to Mundi Mundi 2007

(Top) Eugene von Guerard Bush Fire, 1859

Sydney Nolan's Ned Kelly series | Floodplains and bushfires - Australia at the RA

Detail from Fiona Hall's Paradisus Terrestris 50 | Bark paintings - Australia at RA

(Bottom left) Installation shot of Imants Tillers Shadow of the Hereafter

I remember travelling through Spain with an Australian friend. We'd both look at tall bluegums in the dry countryside and sigh for home. There are many similarities between Australia and South Africa, not only in the wide open spaces and the big skies, but also in a complex historical view of indigenous and colonial cultures.

It's a brave attempt to sum up an entire country in a single exhibition, but the Royal Academy's ambitiously titled *Australia* (until 8 December) is a superbly faceted portrayal of the red continent and its people in 200 works.

Sidney Nolan, one of the country's most famous artists, said, 'A desire to paint the landscape involves a wish to hear more of the stories that take place in the landscape.' So much of Australian art is inextricably linked with the land, whether it is the instantly recognisable and yet inscrutable Aboriginal art, the realism of early painters or the more politically charged contemporary ones. They weave the stories of a vast and ancient land so evocatively one wants to know more.

The exhibition opens with a telling image: a motorcyclist alone in a vast empty desert landscape as the sun's rays pick him out in relief. Man against the backdrop of an often forbidding land is the theme around which this exhibition has been built. The sheer scale of the land, the drama of floods and bushfires, the arid plains and sweltering heat all play out in the images of the country dating from its penal colony days in the late eighteenth century. But of course, there was an ancient culture already there, and all the oral history handed down over the generations informs the powerful Indigenous art throughout the show. The colours are earthy and subtle, brown, ochre, umber, sienna and even a glowing white. The swirls and dots, the cross-hatching and lines tell of other-worldly animals, 'Dreaming' and sacred rituals. At ankle height a flat canvas ripples with the ridges of the sand hills of Wurrunga, an ancestral birthing place for the women of one tribe. Rover Thomas shows the utter devastation of Cyclone Tracy in three simple colour bands, and the white plane of a communal piece of art is rimmed with jewel-like colours. Different types of Indigenous art, some with the double perspective of looking from above and across, others more detailed animal forms on eucalyptus bark, show the intricacy and scope of the genre.

The settlers started out simply mapping the land, many of the first pictures being done by military draughtsmen. An exuberant catch of fish, a close-up of nature's bounty, is listed as the first oil painted in Australia. British artists arrived and sent home images of the expansive space; people such as John Glover, whose depiction of his neat new home, set against an incongruously wild landscape, was once exhibited in Bond Street in London. Ventures into the interior often ended disastrously and the shimmering heat of Ludwig Becker's *Outback* was found after the explorers had died of thirst. Europeans brought a new perspective; the

German Romanticism of Eugene von Guerard shown here with grand oils of mountain outcrops, or the poignant sun setting on an Aboriginal tribe, where a single child bodes ill for their future.

The strong Australian light inspired an Australian Impressionism with artists such as Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton who felt at home in the bush, creating evocative scenes with huge bluegums and dusty farms, or mining in the inhospitable rocky land. By this time the country had established its modern image inextricably linked with the vitality of sea and sun, captured here in Max Dupain's iconic 1937 photograph *Sunbaker* and a host of other beach scenes. Nolan is represented with four of his Ned Kelly series, which have become so much part of Australian culture that the artist's version of this fabled bushranger was featured in the Opening Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

Some of the most striking contemporary works are the sparse landscapes of Fred Williams, a brooding comment on being an artist from Arthur Boyd, Brett Whiteley's fabulous *Big Orange (Sunset)* and a photograph of the pristine wonders of the Franklin River. Surprisingly, the only image of Ayers Rock or Uluru, that glowing red symbol of the country, is in pure white!

There is ample kitsch too – from the Victorian excesses of silver trophies and inkwells through to the fluff of what looks like giant balls of wool (Woolmark is one of the sponsors) and the floral trim of an apocalyptic vision, not all of the work strikes a chord.

The exhibition is supported by the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, with loans from across the country. It tells a more complicated story than one expects, even if some of the recent work lacks the stature of its predecessors. It's a monumental survey and a landmark exhibition that simply mustn't be missed.

The estuary of any river is often a bleak and moody place, where sea and river merge, and the Thames is no exception. The exhibition *Estuary* (until 27 Oct) at the Museum of London in Docklands celebrates the Museum's first decade, and if you haven't yet seen this offshoot of the London Wall museum, it is definitely worth a visit. Set in the heart of the Docklands, in an old warehouse conveniently close to Canary Wharf, it tells the story of the city and its relationship to the sea in a series of engaging displays.

This is an appropriate subject for its first art exhibition, although awkward hanging doesn't always allow sufficient room for paintings and some exhibits are more eco than art. My favourite was Michael Andrews' huge oil of the Thames estuary that seems to dissolve as you look at it, but there are striking films of the rising tide, of the changing moods of the sea and of the intriguing Maunsell forts that still stand like alien warships in the river. It's a small show, but one that captures this no-man's land very evocatively.