

DIFFERENT REALITIES

PETER BOGGS



NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY





FRONT COVER IMAGE:

Dawn on the avenue, Boboli 2006

oil on canvas

104.5 x 115.0cm

Newcastle Art Gallery collection

*THE MINDSCAPES OF
PETER BOGGS*

A CONVERSATION WITH
SALLY CUNNINGHAM

ASSISTANT CURATOR COLLECTIONS & EXHIBITIONS
NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY

Peter Boggs' works of art reveal the things we can't see or touch but which run deep within the subconscious of our mind. The New Zealand-born tonal painter uses remembered settings of manicured Italian gardens, and carefully-composed interiors, in works that reflect the uncanny of the everyday. They are at once strangely familiar yet foreign, as ethereal dreamworlds that traverse both time and memory.

On a late autumn day in May, I sat down with Peter in his studio in the Blue Mountains to have a candid discussion with him about his art practice, the exhibition and the dualities of meaning in his poetic landscapes.

SALLY CUNNINGHAM: I'd like to start by talking about your exhibition 'Different Realities'. It brings together key works that span fifteen years of your practice, many of which have been brought in from private collections. What's it like to see and exhibit these works together again?

PETER BOGGS: Well, it's just like seeing acquaintances come together again. When you're working on something it's sometimes difficult to follow the threads of what you're doing. Seeing them again gives you the opportunity to re-join the dots. You begin to see an interconnectedness that you might not have been aware of at the time, but was there, subliminally in your thinking. It's like pieces of a jigsaw.

Of course this isn't the first time you've exhibited in Newcastle. You've had a long history with this city that dates back to a group exhibition you had at the renowned von Bertouch Galleries (1963-2003).

Yes that's right. I think that was back in 1981, '82, along with annual Collector's Choice exhibitions that I was involved in for over a decade or so I think.¹

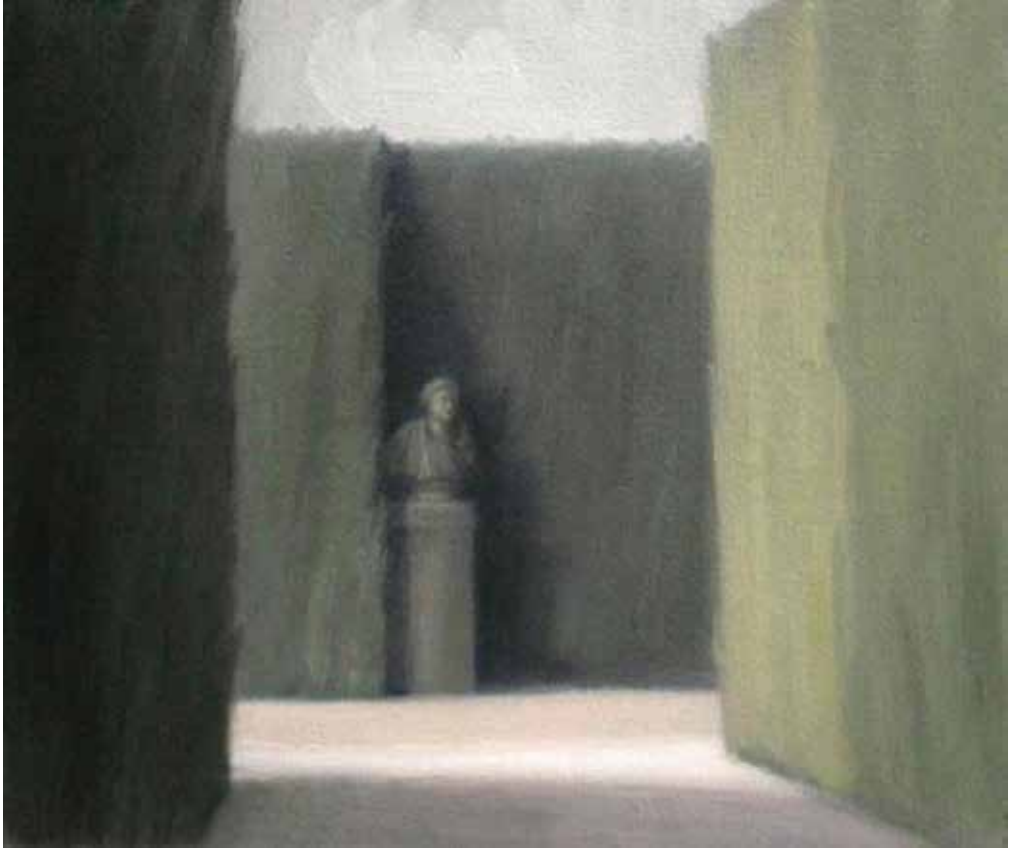
Yes, and more recently again you had a solo exhibition in 2000. What did it mean to you to have the support of someone like Anne (von Bertouch)?

With Anne you felt as though she had taken you into the family. I remember being in her gallery - it was a bustling, energetic place, full of interesting works. She had [Jon] Molvigs, early Arthur Boyds, great Lloyd Rees', and they were all there, lining the walls of her gallery and in her home upstairs. As an artist you could sense that she had a great eye and could bring works together into a conversation - and she was also fantastically encouraging and supportive. You know I still lament to this day that there is no-one like Anne von Bertouch around anymore.

You've also spoken about the ongoing influence of your teacher Colin McCahon; a seminal figure in New Zealand art.

Yes, Colin is always at the back of my mind.

Tell me about this...



Boboli i 2009
oil on canvas on panel
21.0 x 25.0cm
Private collection



Which way now? (Boboli Gardens) 2013
oil on canvas
60.0 x 81.0cm
Private collection

Well, he doesn't influence my work in a direct sense, but I do think about him a lot. As a student he simultaneously imbued in me two things; a healthy degree of uncertainty - that questioning and questioning - as well as a dogged determination to keep going no matter how uncertain the path. One of the key things McCahon impressed upon us as students was to form a language of your own. And integral to that process was the 'unlearning' of what you had learnt and then to reassemble it into your own language; a constant re-examining if you like.

You could describe the works in this exhibition as reflective of 'your language' as an artist. Starting from the earliest work on display, 'Boboli Gardens' 2000, they mark a significant shift in your practice whereby you started to develop a style that is recognisable in your works to date. Do you remember what led the shift?

Well it was hard to get away from my early work, but by the mid 80's I had begun to run out of puff with it. I was still living in New Zealand, much younger of course, and trying to find an approach that felt right for me. The influence of McCahon on that generation of us as young artists was still very palpable, and hard to escape. I was primarily interested in the New Zealand landscape, and as I struggled along, my approach to the subject shifted in and out of abstraction and representation.

By the early to mid 90's I had travelled to Europe and it was there that I was exposed to artists I had never been exposed to in my training. Among others, the work of [Giorgio] d'Chirico, [Jean Baptiste-Camille] Corot and Giorgio Morandi. I connected immediately.

These were painters whose work was based upon the 'real and visible' world coupled with invention and personal vision inviting you to inhabit their worlds; this struck a real chord with me. The idea of the commonplace and the ordinary as subject matter felt like the avenue to explore. So for me it then became a question of motif...

And where did you find your motif?

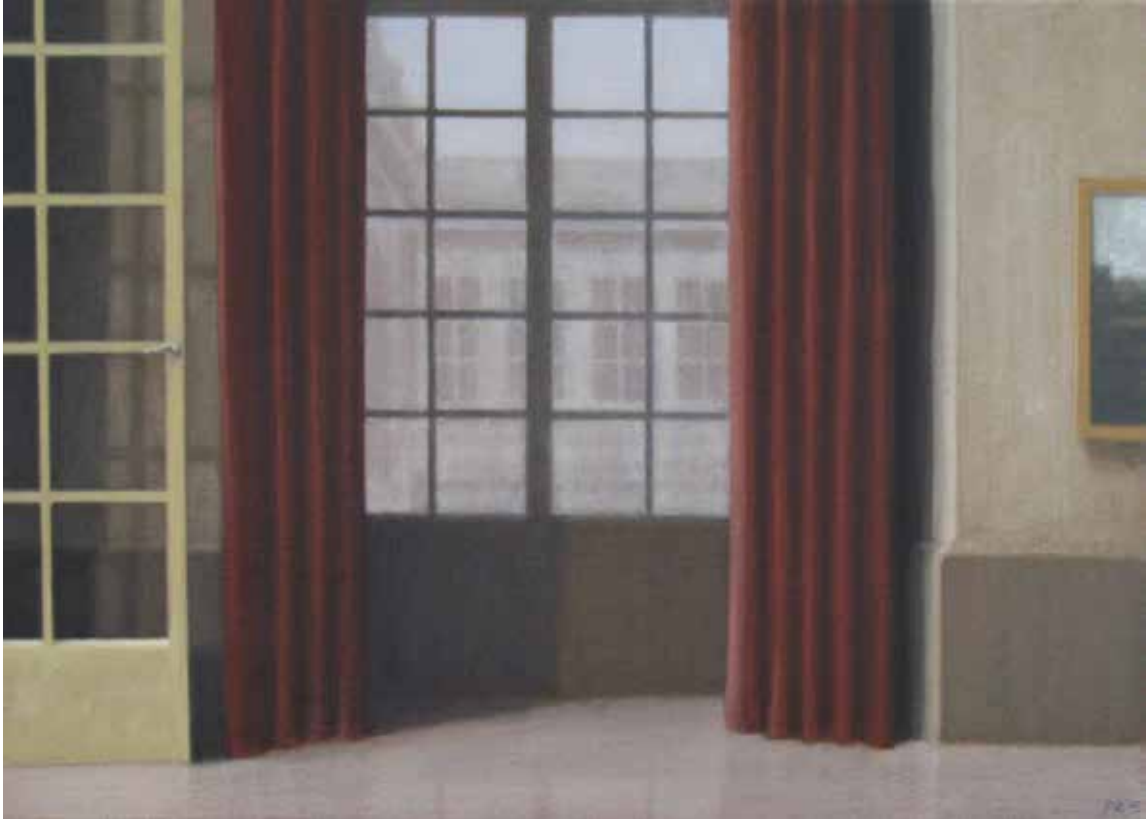
You could say in the Boboli Gardens [Florence, Italy]. The first time I came across the Boboli, I thought 'this is it'. It gave me all the things in terms of a motif that I felt I needed - formality and structure in the landscape, recurring themes around every corner, geometry, atmosphere. The way light worked against the darker elements with reference to the scale of the garden was particularly intriguing, and the potential to be able to draw metaphor from mixing each of the elements together.

Overall though, my real objective has been to explore the universal - and the garden provided me with the vehicle for that. If I were to draw comparisons, similarly to McCahon who found fertile ground in using the New Zealand landscape as a backdrop for his symbolism, perhaps in my own way, humble a subject as it is, I've set out to explore the mystery of the garden in the same way. Who knows?

Another motif that reoccurs in your work is the presence of the portal, be it an open door, a window, a passage of light, or pathway cut into a hedge. What does the idea of the portal symbolise to you?



Silent witness 2014
oil on canvas
34.7 x 48.8cm
Artist collection



Salon view (Carnavalet) 2015
oil on canvas
34.7 x 48.8cm
Artist collection

I don't know... I don't want to focus on why I paint things because that's too dangerous a territory. The only thing that I can say is that often there is a pathway or entry point to my paintings - and an exit. It's a subliminal device I draw on to place the viewer into the picture, rather than being left as just an observer. The edge of the canvas, or tension between what sits in and outside of the picture plane, in the imagination if you like, is important as well - what you cannot see. For me it's the provision of just a few clues that is the main aim - some within the picture, others suggested outside.

The most recent works in this Newcastle exhibition have again taken a new turn to the interiors of museums and other empty spaces. What interests you about these spaces?

Over the years from time to time interiors have appeared in my work, but a couple of years ago, I became particularly intrigued by an empty room I had seen in a villa in Italy. The room had a shaft of light falling into and across the floor and wall, from a partially observed window. It was a natural piece of abstraction and I immediately did a small drawing. It got me thinking about interiors and views within those spaces, as well as the views from within those spaces looking out towards the landscape.

It was a reversal if you like - being inside looking out to glimpses of the landscape, rather than standing in the landscape itself. The windows provided a frame for the view. In this show a pivotal work includes *By the light of the sky* which has begun this new journey of these more recent interior works. The very latest works like *Silent witness*, *Salon view*,

happen to be drawn from museum interiors, but are simply spaces with remembered and invented components - again in pursuit of the universal.

Your approach in these works, similar to all your paintings, is the same, whereby you tirelessly return to repaint the same subject again and again. What lures you back to a particular subject?

It's to do with whether or not I feel I have extracted enough from the first work, or whether I sense incompleteness that I haven't told the full story. Often the revisiting of subjects is an attempt to reveal yet more information - an ongoing process of observation; interconnectivity, where each canvas speaks to another, each revealing something further than the other. My process involves working with my memory of the scene. I ask myself questions like; 'Is the light different and how can I explore that? Is there more material in there that I can pull out? Is the geometry right? Do I need to add an element, a park bench, or even just a part of a park bench? What do I recall in the recesses of my memory about that scene?' Ultimately though, with any subject it is not about simple depiction; it's about revelation of an idea or a thought through symbolism. It's about paring back the material to its essence where the reference to the real becomes immaterial; that's the purpose I feel.

The involvement of memory in your process is particularly interesting. It also allows you to move outside of traditional notions of landscape painting; the practice of studying a subject in a drawing and then reproducing it into a painting. Take for example your works related to the 'Underpass' series, the drawing came a couple of years after the painting.



Cloister 2014
oil and graphite on board
43.0 x 62.0cm
Stephen Spinak collection



The way beyond 2014
oil on canvas
76.0 x 102.0cm
Artist collection



The road leads from here to where? 2014
oil on board
51.0 x 71.0cm
Artist collection

How do you see drawing as part of your practice?

I guess I see drawing as just another medium and not just as a precursor. You know, I'll approach a work on paper in precisely the same way I'd approach it on canvas or on board. I don't view it as inferior, or a lesser platform on which to paint. It's of equal significance to me and it will often just depend on my mood and what I have available. With the works of the *Underpass* for example, the drawing came about in the middle of the sequence simply because I thought "well I'll do a drawing of that". I felt legitimately like it could go with the painting that came earlier, it's just a different take on it.

What about your restrained colour palette? It favours such close tonal relationships.

My palette's intuitive. I don't really think about it too much. I studied photography early on at art school and I guess you could say I draw influence from people like Ansel Adams, [Henri] Cartier Bresson, Edward Weston; great tonal photographers. My paintings are inherently constructed monochromatically. I build up colour through layering it onto the work, supported by glazes. Colour is more a veil than anything else.

Is photography what's drawn you back to the more nocturnal tonality that you've begun to work with lately?

Maybe subliminally. I feel as though I'm at my best when I have fewer colours to deal with; where the relationship between the darker tones is close and is contrasted against strong patches of light. I can articulate the shapes in a way to best reflect what I'm pursuing with fewer colours and it enables me to

explore the 'push and pull' within the picture. As I've mentioned already, my pictures are not meant to be mimetic or descriptive, and so exactitude is of little interest to me - this extends to colour as well.

You mentioned colour being like an atmospheric veil on your works.

Yes, in earlier pictures the colour adds a diffused quality to the image. I wanted to achieve a kind of uncertainty in the reading of the image - to achieve an almost veil-like quality. I think this came about as a way to not display the exactitude of the image or subject, and to render it more dreamlike, as though it was half in and half out of the viewer's consciousness. In the last few years, I have dispensed with that approach, favouring something that gives more immediate clarity to the reading of the image, especially in regards to space and my handling of it.

The dreamlike quality of your work, and the reference to manmade, manicured or urban settings, also seem to play on expectations of a human presence. Tell me about the absence of the figure.

Well, I could answer that a couple of ways, but the obvious answer is that the viewer is the human component in the picture. Very rarely do you find a picture by me that doesn't consider the position in which the viewer is placed, in relation to the structural elements of the painting. When I'm developing a painting, that human element is me. There is a play on the idea of the mirror within my work - looking out and into a view, or being within the space a figure would occupy when viewing the subject along with the idea on one

that reverses back to the observer. I think underlying my work there is a benign humanity, maybe this is because of the manmade or influenced subjects in my work.

People have referred to your works as ‘quiet meditations’ or ‘meditations on the metaphysics of place’ that allude to things lying beyond the surface. Do those kinds of descriptions resonate with you?

I suppose so. People use words like quiet and still, poetic, meditative, contemplative. There is an idea of reverence and homage that I aim for as well. What I’m really trying to do is to give elevation to what are really quite humble ordinary things. There is nothing terribly significant about a corner of the Boboli, or a pathway in a garden per se, but add to it the relationship between objects or the suggestion of a pathway to ‘somewhere’, be that in the viewer’s mind or imagination, and it becomes an opportunity to partake in a journey. All I’m really trying to do with all my pictures is to provide a kind of stage set for the viewer to participate in and to engage with.

My work is about recollections, remembered settings, secrecy in a way- surface realism concealing a kind of off-stage drama.

Different Realities explores the last fifteen years of Boggs’ practice through thematic and visually interconnected works of art. Drawn from both real and remembered settings, they transcend the lens of historical, social and political contexts and instead invite the viewer to enter ethereal worlds that allow the mind to wander.

Newcastle Art Gallery would like to acknowledge the generosity of the lenders associated with this exhibition as well as the assistance of Maunsell Wickes Gallery, Sydney. *Different Realities: Peter Boggs* will be on display from 13 June to 30 August 2015.

Reflecting on the fifteen years of work in this exhibition, how do you think these ideas in your work have evolved?

In the more recent pictures of the last five years or so, there are probably even fewer clues. There is less information. They seem to be getting a bit more oblique, esoteric. The uncanny aspects of them are becoming more apparent I feel. There is less in the way of any clear answers in them, which I like. It’s something I want to strive towards but I never want to understand how it works or is arrived at; just intuitive. I’ll leave it to others to interpret it.

As it’s such a rare opportunity to see these works on loan from private collections, will it be hard to say goodbye to them again?

Yes, but I still ‘see them’ and remember them.

¹The ‘Collector’s Choice’ exhibitions at the von Bertouch Galleries began in 1963 and involved offering the exhibited works of renowned artists at very affordable prices.



In the garden of dreams iii 2009
oil on canvas
50.0 x 56.0 cm
Artist collection



NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY

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