



STEPHEN COPLAND
THE MIGRATION SERIES 1992-2002

Cover image:
Final Destination 2002 120 x 100cm

Stephen Copland



Pensimentos 1994 collage mixed media 33 x 23cm

Selected works from:

- 2002 *Dividing Line* BBA Gallery, Sydney
- 2001 *Wattan* Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
East of Somewhere Casula Regional Arts Centre
- 1999 *Ocean* Nonntal Gallery, Salzburg, Austria
Julia's Diary Immigration Museum, Melbourne, Victoria
Imprimerie Catholique Beirut, Lebanon
Arab University Tripoli, Lebanon
- 1997 *Landscape and Memory* Susan Burge Gallery, Sydney
Memories Kudos Gallery, University of N.S.W
Istanbul Art Fair Tnyap Exhibition Palace, Tepebasi Istanbul
Arte Padova Fair 8th Padua, Italy
- 1995 *Julia - An Exile in Love* Otago Early Settlers Museum, Dunedin
Casula Powerhouse Regional Arts Centre
- 1994 *Displacement and Memories* First Draft, Sydney
- 1993 *Suspiros y Ansias* Galeria Fayad Jamis Havana, Cuba
Galeria Mirta Cerra, Bejucal, Cuba
- 1992 *Julia* Northern Territory for Contemporary Art, Darwin

Generations and Traces

One of the earliest images produced in *The Migration Series* was an enlarged hand-print, shown palm side up, its paint applied with fluid immediacy, dissecting and converging the surface to describe tributaries, map a terrain. Looking deeper to understand what these map-like, fleshy contours may represent, themes of biography, genealogy and geography, come to mind. Shifts from micro to macro suggest the idea of human movement.

Keeping a personal account by tracing the stories of migrations between worlds has been the purpose of Stephen Copland's work over the past ten years. As a visual artist he has sought to investigate how the experience of migration and a sense of exile marks and shapes an individual and a community. Visually describing these migrations between 'worlds' takes many turns, however, underlying the whole is the desire to understand what it is that universally defines a sense of identity and 'belonging'.

Initially, visually describing a personal narrative played a major role. With the discovery of inherited objects; a diary, postcard album and embroidery belonging to his maternal grandmother, Julia Elias Menayer, he was able to present a story using collage and hand-made books. Describing her culture, era and experience, extending it beyond his grandmother to first person narrative, (not as an exile, but as a second generation Australian), Copland sought to find an authentic sense of identity and 'place'.

Contemporary themes of exile, migration and post-colonial experience permeate the imagery dealing with Julia's journey as migrant from Cuba, to Melbourne and eventually New Zealand, a journey Copland retraced, making work based on personal experience of the language and culture of his background, not an 'imagined' heritage.

These journeys find parallels in the artists' sense of distance from cultural roots by his family's rapid assimilation into the cultural landscape of 1950's Australia. Acknowledging this merge of culture within family, Copland sought to present an optimistic duality of migrant background and experience being not only expressed as loss and upheaval, but also as renewal in response to 'newness' in the re-invention of heartland.

Copland's journeys with exhibitions developed not only a new form of narrative; they began to take the shape of an installation. In each location, drawing communities together through the telling of stories reaffirmed connections and broadened the scope of the work. They became a lived and shared experience bridging distance and forming networks which encouraged individuals and communities to construct a sense of identity and place by embracing inherited cultural roots physically and spiritually.

By giving a community the opportunity to listen, sharing personal experience and the re-telling of stories, the artist becomes not only narrator, but also facilitator. Individual stories are at the heart of what constructs an individual and a society. They are the common threads that bind a community to provide the links it needs to build on the possibilities to embrace a future which articulates a more authentic, inclusive voice.

No image is without a history and Marshall Berman in his book, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, states: "The rehabilitation of ethnic memory and history as a vital ingredient of personal identity has been one of the vital themes of culture."¹ Artists communicate perceptions through layers of personal and cultural experience. These 'narratives' can be read and communicate as interpretative tools by which to explain or comprehend personal narratives radiating from internal and external issues.

Artists dealing with personal histories not only communicate stories, (as is the role of history), they may shed light on who we are collectively; where we have come from, giving a context in which to act in the present. In the sense that the role of the historian is to think and construct from the evidence of the passage of time and events, a 'reality', so too the artist as participant in history can take responsibility, thinking historically, looking backwards and forwards simultaneously to describe and define cultural movements.

The artist as narrator, or perceiver, attempts to find answers to questions about life, drawing together historical threads to weave a pattern through space and time to address aspects of who we are; perhaps to find a common pattern recognisable in individual or cultural contexts.

Recording personal histories, decoding experience and commenting on traces of the ordinary have become the replacement for the great historical narratives previously occupying artistic subject matter. Personal histories as a source of identity provide the artist with the raw material and opportunity to creatively explore, analyse and record journeys through the ritual of the telling of tales. The artist communicator decodes the narrative from the material of life putting the viewer in the picture. From there the dialogue begins and a 'reality' is constructed. In some instances, the journey of coming to terms with personal history, loss or trauma has involved the restorative capacity of recording the personal as narrative, which can act as a structuring device, linking the ritual of creative effort with personal history to 'find the story'.



Julia's Diary (1911) and *Postcard Album* (1907)



Traces 1990 crayon and paint on paper 90 x 80cm

Generations and Traces

On return from visits to Cuba, New Zealand and Lebanon, Copland made a series of collages, handmade books and paintings which became the means of fixing 'moments' in time and place, strengthening a sense of identity. Securing the fragments of experience, binding and making them into a personal record to be shared, fulfilled the objectives of the artist; to present a visual account to inspire and provide the experiential framework to structure individual and collective histories, memories and identities. Using 'scraps' or mementos and the medium of collage, images were constructed to reference the cultural texture of each place. Discarded fragments and photographs were integrated in the imagery appearing as precious thoughts suspended in much the same way memory operates, drifting and shifting across a stage of consciousness.

By formulating a visual language to construct an identikit picture of familial heritage, Copland worked with concurrent and equally important themes; language, memory, displacement and books. These formed the basis for future work. In this he was influenced by artist Anselm Kiefer's definition of a book as a 'history container'.² Images were constructed with collage, which would evoke aspects of time and memory to bring the past to life and celebrate ideas associated with cultural separation and a 'rehabilitation of an ethnic memory.'³



Claudio 1993 collage 20 x 14cm



Journey 1994 collage 20 x 14cm



Open book I 1995 collage 60 x 23cm



Open book II 1995 collage 60 x 23cm



Translations (detail) 1993 mixed media (set of 3) 20 x 14cm

On the topic of exile, migration, and the Postcolonial experience, Salman Rushdie speaks of personal loss of homeland and faith and his attempt to fill the 'God-shaped hole' which was left with art; thereby embracing it as a surrogate religion or presence. In *The Satanic Verses* he writes of an 'imaginary homeland', referring to the fictional homeland which the migrant creates equating it with a work of art, a construct. He came to this conclusion as a child reading *The Wizard of Oz*, seeing Dorothy return to the world of her imagination until it had finally become her home. He states: 'The imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all...for once we leave behind our childhood we learn that there is no such place as home except what we create.'⁴ Here migration becomes an allegory of maturation.

Reaching deeper to investigate notions of the desire to feel 'at home' and connected and to analyse its substance has been the preoccupation of all kinds of scholarship, not the least, sociologists, art historians, critics and artists. In these works Copland 'constructs' a personal space or 'place' to define at deeper levels of attachment.

A series of works took their reference from the original diary and were created in 'open book' format showing windows embedded with photographs or painted versions of a previously 'imagined homeland', set against familiar local views. This assisted the memory-bank or 'container', becoming deposits to define identity and familial heritage. Drawing the viewer closer to examine the detail, these small works engage on the level of a private conversation.

Over time, the artist has pursued a selective focus or theme in the imagery by a reductive process streamlining subject matter to give emphasis to personal concerns. These images are themed by the presence of the dividing or horizon line which becomes a 'fix' or key for navigating memory, personal experience and perspective. In much the same way memory is selective, Copland shifts the placement of the line in the composition allowing it to become the organising principle, alluding to states of adjustment, shifts and breaks in understanding and interpreting experience and meaning, memory and identity.

The position of the horizon line gradually assumes less significance in the overall proportion of the composition, draining in some instances to the bottom of the picture, creating a visual break. It is as if the area of sea has become a substitute for the body, sinking as sediment in the alchemist's beaker. The two elements, sea and sky, (liquid and gas), allude to themes beyond the temporal, reiterating a sentiment Marshall Berman expressed; 'All that is solid melts into air.' These underlying themes relate to abstract notions of other homes or states of transcendence.

Generations and Traces

Michael Carter, in a perspectival discourse, 'Vanishing Points and Horizons', discusses limits and the movement from near to far, and that particular moment that describes where what is seen vanishes. Referencing the pictorial regime that has underpinned European oil painting since the emergence of the perspectival system at the time of the Renaissance, he states: 'What is intriguing (about this perspectival discourse), is not only its actual deployment in the picture, but the metaphors that are reached for to describe the horizon that lies in the far distance at the back of the picture. He draws a conclusion from the observation of Erwin Panofsky's account of the rise of the European perspectival system that, 'perspective opens art to the realm of the psychological, in the highest sense, where the miraculous finds its last refuge in the soul of the human being represented in the work of art.' He reinforces Panofsky's argument; 'it follows that the region behind the eye of the spectator – their mind or soul, matches the region beyond the vanishing point.....Thus within the depiction, horizontal recession becomes spiritual transcendence and this is why the vanishing point in these images is not just the end of this world, but also a point that opens onto the infinite, the sublime and the Divine.' Carter emphasises the metaphorical significance of horizontal recession by stating; 'I can think of no figure that better captures the profundity of oil paint's imagination where, in the deepest recesses of the image, we see 'far horizons, the infinite, the Absolute'.⁵



Wave 2001 oil on canvas 23 x 35cm

In a 'captured' moment a single wave appears, suggestive of movement or a wave of emotion. The visual narrative expressed as a shifting moment, according to art historian James Elkins, 'pulls at our sense of time in its own particular way. Paintings show us a single moment, even though they remain fixed for centuries. The ephemeral instant and unending duration are forced very close together, and that is one of painting's special strengths, one of the properties that sets it apart from other art forms. The instant, the very definition of change, is pressed flat like a dried leaf in a collectors book and made to remain in place indefinitely.'⁶

Painting for Copland provides the opportunity to present this drama. His paintings become a stage set for a theatre to express emotion. The personal narrative constructs an emotional landscape of discourse on love and loss, absence and presence. James Elkins expresses a similar idea when he states; '...Pictures are not just decoration. They are peculiar objects that pull at us, tugging us a little out of the world', interrupting the physical and material world to encounter inner terrains and territory beyond.⁷

Later, in the *Ocean* series, the artist articulates a new response to landscape. Copland as a painter is primarily interested in the portrayal of light. Light in relation to nature and culture. The images appear as slices through sediment, or as captures of temporal moments; impressions concerned with compression, time and space.

Linking with the necessity Julia expressed 'to find a voice', and seeing her diary as a 'container' or containing device, a depository for holding and preserving memory as a means to record personal experience, Copland works within the frame to integrate the voice of exile with his own to determine a sense of place. These paintings are reminiscent of sacred 'objects' that attain a form of 'presentness'. In their large scale they physically absorb the viewer to observe the alchemy; in the merge and blend of layers of paint they expose flashes and spectrums of colour-filled, prismatic light. Employing this energetic explosion of painterly light-filled expanse to describe broad vistas of sky and sea, their unified layers draw the viewer to encompass the drama of life. The high chromatic values and transcendent vision have hope at their core, encouraging the viewer to see and engage the spectrum of possibilities.



Journey 1994 collage 20 x 14cm



Fragments Cuba 1994 (details) 100 x 14cm

Generations and Traces

There are paradoxical dualities present in these paintings. Experiencing the 'void', or silence reveals to the viewer a sense of isolation, loss, loneliness or alienation. Devoid of a figurative human element they could register as a vacuum to occupy an echo of post-modern irony, cynicism and loss to mirror a gap. Conversely, they could be seen as images where the process of unification and integration is complete; the 'voice' in the diary and that of the artist has been answered.

Therefore, we can perceive then, that these images are not simply mere representations of a view. They are images laden with metaphorical references for coming to terms with notions of homeland and heartland, renewal, seeing the possibilities, of hope and wholeness. In their ability to hold the view within the narrative frame they are inclusive, asking something more of the viewer.

In *The Migration Series* exhibition the artist has also explored notions of identity and place. We observe a journey where ideas of home as a creation or construct have been nurtured to fruition. From a decade of experience we see the narrative process of a reflexive artist. Copland has engaged the journey with a fresh and direct vision to add a socially relevant voice to the encounter of new territory to find meaning, inviting the viewer to share the journey and see the story as a means to understanding who we are and where we belong.

Meredith Brice
November 2002



Flag 1999 oil on canvas 27 x 14cm



Flags 1999 oil and wax on canvas 63 x 110cm



Memories and displacement 1997 oil on canvas 25 x 18cm



Home 1997 oil on canvas 90 x 90cm



Felicidad 1998 oil and wax on canvas 90 x90cm



Postcard 1998 oil and wax on vanvas 94 x 126cm



Peace (detail) 2000 oil on canvas 63 x 55cm



Asrafieh 1999 oil on canvas 20 x 14cm



Dividing line 2001 oil on canvas 65 x 55cm

Curriculum Vitae Stephen Copland

Born Sydney 1950

- National Art School, Diploma of Painting ASTC
- 1987 Diploma of Education, University of Technology
- Master of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales

Solo Exhibitions

- Dividing Line* BBA Gallery Sydney
Ocean Nonntal Gallery Salzburg Austria
Julia's Diary Immigration Museum Melbourne Victoria
Imprimerie Catholique Beirut, Lebanon
Arab University Tripoli, Lebanon
- 1997 *Landscape and Memory* Susan Burge Gallery Sydney
1995 *Memories* Kudos Gallery University of N.S.W
Julia - An Exile in Love
Otago Early Settlers Museum Dunedin
Powerhouse Regional Arts Centre
Displacement and Memories First Draft Sydney
- 1993 *Suspiros y Ansias* Galeria Fayad Jamis Havana, Cuba
Galeria Mirta Cerra, Bejucal, Cuba.
- 1992 *Julia* Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art
- 1992 *Body in Question* drawings 1977-1990, Orange Regional Gallery
- 1991 *Selected Works 1985-90*
Lake Macquarie Regional Gallery
- 1988 *Environment* Access Gallery, Balmain
- 1986 *Sexus* Australian Visual Arts Gallery Sydney

Group Exhibitions

- 2001 *Group* BBA Gallery Sydney
Istanbul Art Fair Tınyap
Exhibition Palace Tepebasi Istanbul
Arte Padova Fair 8th Padua Italy
Group XV, Soho Gallery Sydney
- 1992 *Salon Obscura* Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art
- 1989 *Inside Greenhouse* Tin sheds Sydney University
- 1989 *Endangered Spaces* Art Space Sydney
- 1988 *Maiden Voyage* First Draft Sydney

Reviews

- 1999 *Middle Eastern Herald* March 26
Al-Bairak March 20
Herald Sun Mary Viscovich March 7
- 1995 *A.B.C.Radio* interview with Angela Weber November 6
- 1995 *Daily Times* Dunedin Sean Brosnahan October 11
- 1995 *Otago Times* Charmaine Smith March 16th
- 1993 *Sydney Morning Herald*
Arts & Minds Deborah Jones
Spotlight Peter Cochrane

- 1992 *Central Western Daily* . June 3rd, Alan Sisley
- 1992 *8DDD FM ABC Radio*. Interview with Liz McGrath Darwin
- 1991 *Newcastle Herald*. 7th Jan 1991 Jill Stowell
- 1991 *2 NUR FM Radio* interview with Libby Dickeson

Selected Exhibitions

- 2001 *Wattan* Powerhouse Museum Sydney
East of Somewhere Casula Regional Arts Centre
Alumni Show Ivan Dougherty Gallery Sydney
Blake Art Prize S.H.Ervin Gallery Sydney
- 1993 *Northern Territory University* -
Recent Purchases, University Gallery
- 1992 *Conrad Jupiter Art Prize* Gold Coast City Art Gallery Gold Coast
- 1990 *Winsor Newtown Art Award*
Coventry Gallery Sydney
Maritime Art Award Blaxland Gallery Sydney
Westpac Gallery Victoria Kintore Gallery
Adelaide Myer Exhibition Hall Brisbane
- 1987 *Lake Macquarie Regional Art Prize*
Lake Macquarie Regional Gallery
- 1987 *Sydney Heritage Award* Blaxland Gallery
- 1987 *Newcastle Art Prize* Newcastle Regional Art Gallery
- 1986 *Wynne Art Prize* Art Gallery of New South Wales
- 1986 *Sydney Heritage Award* Blaxland Gallery NSW
- 1985 *Sulman Art Prize* Art Gallery of New South Wales

Prizes & Awards

- 2001 *Migration Heritage Grant*
MHC Premiers Department
- 1999 *Pat Corrigan Marketing Grant* NAVA
- 1995 *Pat Corrigan Artist Grant* NAVA
- 1994 *Pat Corrigan Marketing Grant* NAVA
- 1993 *University of N.S.W.* Research Grant
- 1992 *Cultural Grant* Gosford City Council
- 1991 *Pat Corrigan Artist Grant* NAVA
- 1988 *R.A.S Bicentennial Art Prize* (3rd Prize - \$3000.00)
Judges: Edmond Capon, John Bailey and Nancy Borlese
- 1986 *Transfield Art Prize* Wyong Festival of Art -
Judge: Garry Sangster
- 1985 *Macquarie University Art Prize*
Highly Commended
- 1985 *Warringah Art Prize* Highly Commended
Judge: Elwyn Lynn
- 1984 *Lane Cove Art Prize* Highly Commended
Judge: Lloyd Rees

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Gosford Regional Gallery and Art Centre 12 December 2002 - 2 January 2003

New England Regional Art Museum 17 February - 27 April 2003

Orange Regional Gallery 2 May - 5 June 2003

Acknowledgements:

Photography: Irena Conomos

Curator: Meredith Brice

Notes

1. BERMAN, Marshall. *All that is Solid Melts into Air* – The Experience of Modernity. USA, Penguin 1982 p33
2. ROSENTHAL Mark, *Anselm Kiefer*. Chicago & Philadelphia, Prestel-Verlag, 1987 p41
3. BERMAN Marshall, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Experience of Modernity. Penguin 1982 p33
4. STEINER Wendy, *The Scandal of Pleasure* - Art in the Sge of Fundamentalism, University of Chicago Press 1995 p114,115
5. CARTER, Michael. *Putting a Face on Things*, Studies in Imaginary Materials. Sydney. Power Publications, 1997 p 225-242
6. ELKINS, James. *Pictures and Tears*. A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings. New York and London, Routledge, 2001 p140
7. *ibid.* p54

Back cover image:

Book 1996 mixed media 25 x 18cm

This project was partially funded by the National Association of the Visual Arts with financial assistance from the NSW Ministry for the Arts



The Migration Heritage Centre (MHC) is an initiative of the NSW Government through a partnership of the Community Relations Commission, Heritage Office, Ministry for the Arts, Tourism NSW and the Premier's Department.

The MHC's purpose ranges from the identification and preservation of the historical and contemporary material heritage of migrants and refugees, to providing a voice in public discussion about the role of cultural diversity in the community and the value of a multicultural society.
www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au



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