Title:

Reconstituting fragments: a dialogue between a contemporary North Queensland landscape artist and some early European etchings

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Summary:

This article shows how the concept of 'fragmentation' has been applied in a very practical fashion, to examine differences of approach, context and perception between the landscape etchings of a contemporary North Queensland artist and those of some early European printmakers. Beyond exposing differences of intention, the authors illustrate how fragments from early prints have been reassigned with new meanings through the reframing of pictorial conventions to suit radically different topographical and cultural demands.
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Context
For me—a landscape artist trained in the European tradition, but living in the tropics (North Queensland Australia)—the development of an individual aesthetic has meant a lifelong conversation between ‘my’ landscapes (the shapes, colours and configurations of rainforest, mudflats, bush and outback) and the painterly traditions I have inherited and in which I have always worked. These traditions grew in response to very different climates and topographies, and are underpinned by centuries of complex, interwoven social and cultural histories. However, what will ‘work’ for the European artist will not translate in any straight forward way to the topography in which I operate. This topography is characterised firstly by harsh colours, radically different perspectival scales and searing temperatures; and secondly by social and cultural features utterly alien to those that underpin European landscapes (for example, my landscapes are empty of human or animal figures). For me, therefore, the attempt to fashion an aesthetic using a painterly language created for very different purposes has meant that I have always lived with a sense of ‘fragmentation’. I have had very consciously to analyse, borrow from, adapt, reject and rework European techniques and idioms for a tropical setting.

The sequence on which I am currently working (‘Artist’s Impressions of Artists’ Impressions’) represents a further strategy in this long interrogation. I have selected a series of European prints from the 16th to the early 19th centuries and have produced a parallel suite of prints that attempt to ‘see’ an aspect of my North Queensland tropical landscape through the ‘lens’ of that artist. My choice of reproduction prints for this experiment has been a deliberate one. Though each print is a point of departure for me, it is also, as a reproduction, a copy of something before itself, and thus part of the tradition of copying that stretches back to Roman copies of Greek works. The artists who executed the prints in my selection fit the broad classification of being reproductive printmakers—artists who copy or reinterpret artworks created by others. These artists not only have the skill to capture the essential attributes of an inventor-artist’s original artworks but, more important to my explorations, they have reduced the complexity of the original to a code of techniques and pictorial attributes that project unambiguous meanings. In this series I am thus working with idioms that have themselves been analysed, explored and refined into a simpler, more rudimentary visual language, and I see myself as joining that tradition as the latest ‘reproductive-artist’ in a long line.

Because no single print can embody an entire culture (with its layers of inherent values, desires and needs) each of the prints I have selected represents a fragment of the visual language of the time it was created, which, in each case, I have unravelled and ‘reframed’ into something that for me is applicable to the tropical landscape.
Discussion
To illustrate my methods and how this ‘experiment with the past’ has worked, I now discuss three of my ‘reframings’ (my preferred word). The first example is my reworking of William Strang’s *The House in the Lane* (1897).

Figure 1  William Strang (1859–1921)  
*The House in the Lane*, 1897  
Soft-ground etching, 15.3 x 10.2cm  

Figure 2  James Brown  
*Referencing Strang*, 2008  
Etching, 2nd state, 15.3 x 10.2cm

When I purchased William Strang’s *The House in the Lane* (Figure 1) in an on-line auction, my only view of it at the time was as a thumbnail-size image in the auction listing. In this small reproduction I thought that I could discern an organic Art Nouveau flow of lines portraying trees and a drawing style reminiscent of Alphonse Legros’ skilfully aligned hatched strokes. After receiving the print through the mail, however, the image did not match this mental picture. On first sight I was dismayed that the organic flow of rhythms I had seen in the thumbnail image was not solely about trees: there was a house that featured strongly. Moreover, it was a house with all the architectural appeal of one of the plastic houses in a Monopoly game. No doubt this house would have held personal significance for Strang, but for me it was an unnecessary intrusion on my wishful vision of what I thought that I had perceived in the reproduction: a broadly drawn landscape designed for aesthetic reverie. After several years of harbouring this mental construction of how Strang’s print might have been, I etched *Referencing Strang* (Figure 2) to recapture my vision in print. Using a similar arrangement of subject material as that employed by Strang, I sought to reconfigure Strang’s imagery with the
mindset and sensitivities of a contemporary North Queenslander. In short, I wished to reconstruct Strang's print in the way I had originally wanted it to appear: a psychological self-portrait in the guise of landscape.

At first glance our two prints are very similar—and of course they are. But beyond sharing the same pictorial features and format there are differences that epitomise and separate Strang's vision of landscape, as a turn-of-the-twentieth-century British printmaker, from the vision shown in my etching, as a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century North Queensland artist.

One of these differences is underpinned by an attitude to cleanliness. This attitude is not about the value of hygiene but rather a mindset revolving around the value of keeping an image blemish-free. Essentially, the difference here is about best practice—the ideal work processes for creating prints.

At the time when Strang etched *The House in the Lane* (1897), the best practice for a printmaker was to ensure that accidents, such as unplanned scratches on the etching plate, are eradicated or minimised. Strang's print fits this ideal of best practice well. Moreover, the value that Strang placed on this print representing his notion of best practice is suggested by it being showcased as the front piece to his treatise on the art of etching co-authored with Hans W. Singer. Although contemporary artists are no less fastidious in executing and editioning their prints, the attitude to pictorial cleanliness current in Strang's time has shifted. Take for instance the treatment of the sky in both prints. In Strang's print the sky is free of surface imperfections whereas in mine this same area is visually buzzing with the serendipity of incidents—what Strang may have viewed as accidents—arising from the process of etching. From an aesthetic standpoint, Strang's attitude is arguably about negating evidence of unpremeditated outcomes; whereas, my attitude—supported by a different set of expectations arising from a century of evolving aesthetic values—is about retaining such evidence. Beyond the aesthetic appeal of surface scratches to me, I value such accidents in the creative process as conceptually capturing the integrity of the process of making a print; much the same way that Jim Dine values the evidence of a 'previous life' in the 'roofer's copper' used as the etching plate for some of his prints.

Another difference separating the two prints has a lot to do with visual perception. By this I mean an artist's unique way of looking and portraying what is observed. From my interpretation of Strang's vision, his portrayal of the featured subject is built upon a strong sense of pictorial convention. For example, his perception of trees and how to portray them is likely to be based on their conventions of structure—pictorial constructs laid out and celebrated

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2 In an interview with Thomas Krens (1976), Jim Dine discusses his use of industrial plates:

   I used a roofer's copper instead of polished engraving plates. Roofer's copper is used in the construction industry so the plates are unprotected; they are scratched and marked, and instead of beginning with a blank surface, you begin with a totally full surface. (n.a. 1977, *Jim Dine Prints: 1970–1977*, Thames and Hudson, London, p. 31.)
in books such as Jacob George Strutt’s *Sylva Britannica* (or *Portraits of Forest Trees*) published in 1826. My vision is the antithesis of this way of looking and portrayal. My way of perceiving a landscape is more to do with immediacy of reflexive response—an unpremeditated and largely subconscious balance of thinking and feeling—whereas Strang’s perception may be more about an endless moment of reflective deliberation. This difference can be seen by comparing Strang’s discipline and skill in hatching strokes to conform to the foliage masses against my morphing of the tree forms by quick marks standing as visual equivalents of saying: ‘this arrangement fits best with my feelings.’ To give more insight into my approach, the following discussion of the development of my print may be helpful.

As preparation for the reconfiguring of Strang’s imagery, the first state of my print (Figure 3) reveals the initial tentative and exploratory drawing stage. At this point the interest is to establish the key pictorial components of my vision of Strang’s landscape by loosely denoting its important tones and broad structures. In achieving this goal, I was not copying Strang’s image but an analogue in line of its essential filtered through my experiences of a similar landscape in North Queensland. For instance, my experience of foliage mass in the tropical trees of the North is not the English fluff balls depicted by Strang. Instead, I perceive foliage as wildly ragged without a hint of manicure and have depicted the foliage masses in this way. In comparing this early state with the final outcome (state 2), there is a clear progression in realising my vision. The later stage shows an overlay of hatched and aligned directional marks. By intention, this layered grouping of marks expresses a mindscape of rhythms and tensions that I envisage are conceptual and pictorial complements of Strang’s mimetic portrayal of surface reality.

Figure 3 James Brown
*Referencing Strang*, 2008
1st state, etching

I now turn to a very different style of print, the *Defespoir de l’amour qui a perdu Psyché et n’en a conservé que le Portrait. Douleur, rage de tout ce qui Laccompagne. Arrivéé de Mercure, qui annonce alAmour le changement de sa destinée of S.Le Clerc.*

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3 Although this print signed ‘S Le Clerc’ was acquired with the attribution to Sebastien Leclerc (1587–1633) and with the proposed date of execution as circa 1630, the author does not
Sometimes a collector is drawn to a print simply because its image epitomises everything that the collector is not; for instance, a city-dweller may view images of rural life as a subconscious escape from everyday urban commitments. This is certainly a part of the reason I acquired Le Clerc’s print portraying the myth of Psyche and Amor (Figure 4), but the allegory itself holds little interest for me. No doubt to the print’s early audience the allegory would have been pertinent, meaningful and perhaps even morally instructive. With the passing of the centuries and a swing to less romantic concerns (e.g. global warming, terrorism and technological advances) the potent significance of this fable is minimal for me. This lean away from romanticism is not to say that I cannot enjoy Le Clerc’s subtlety of representation and his considerable graphic skills. Moreover, I suspect that most viewers would be challenged not to be charmed by his depiction of the lethal love-battle of putti shown in the foreground and the tableaux-like arrangements of Amor, Psyche and other Arcadians in the distance. But for me the attraction of the print is less about the figures and their relationships as a narrative and much more about the landscape itself.

I perceive a distinct difference between Le Clerc’s type of landscape fabricated with a Rocco taste for folly and lolling about in and my experience of the harsh North Queensland scrublands where even the idea of having a relaxing time while sweltering in tropical heat quickly evaporates. I like Le Clerc’s landscape because it is so resonantly unlike my experience of a tropical landscape that simply looking at his depiction triggers a moment of reverie—like having a soft chair to relax into and dream. In particular, I enjoy the way that his treatment of landscape takes the eye on a visual journey. At first, attention is caught by a soft predella-like arch of trees connected by

believe that the style consistent with this French artist but rather with that of Sebastien Jacques Leclerc (1734–1785).
cloud-borne Mercury. The eye is then drawn spiralling into the distance—as if looking into the shell of a cornucopia—following the meandering course of a stream.

By comparison with my print, *Referencing Le Clerc* (Figure 5) that references Le Clerc’s imagery, the central differences in our dual visions of landscape as a concept becomes evident. Le Clerc portrays the iconic, critical and endless moment of drama using body-language and theatrical lighting to communicate his mythological narrative. My adaptation of this imagery, by contrast, is about creating visual equivalents in angled and broken line for sensory experiences of a specific moment—like the sounds of insects buzzing and the feeling of oppressive and unbearable heat. Such a conceptual gulf between our projected meanings highlights significant differences in ambition as artists.

Allegorical and narrative-based imagery up to the end of the 19th century has served printmakers very well by providing pictorial subject material for creative invention. After the advent of photography, film, video and now new-media in all its variant possibilities, however, the reason for a printmaker to continue with this pictorial tradition seems unnecessary and even anachronistic. Arguably, the new technologically driven mediums are often better suited to this role and, from my standpoint, have taken it over. Regardless, the necessity to continue is not part of my mindset, whereas finding ways of encoding non-visual reflexive responses certainly holds my interest.

In trying to capture the authenticity of my response to the harsh tropical terrain, *Referencing Le Clerc* evolved through three states. The first of these (Figure 6) encodes my reflexive response to experiential phenomena by the disposition of sharp strokes similar to a screen of barbed wire. By intention, the spikiness of drawing and the broad notational style is lightly suggestive of the thorn-bush and razor-grass scrub surrounding Townsville. After reflecting upon the print at this stage, I decided that the image lacked pictorial ‘tooth’ and tonal contrast. To remedy this shortfall in pictorial dynamics the second state (Figure 7) addresses the problem with a fresh layer of emphatic marks denoting key tonal rhythms and nodal points of weight and directional change. In the final state (Figure 5) the plate has been polished to give clarity to the marks and, in turn, emphasis to the projected response they connote. By comparison with Le Clerc’s print, the final state is a bit like...
negotiating meaning from the arrangement of tea leaves stranded in a cup: a
difference between thinking and feeling.

Finally, I turn to a print by Huet, *Le Pont* (1834) (Figure 8), which I include in
this discussion because in this particular case the notion of ‘the fragment’ has
a certain added piquancy. The copy that I have of this print was once beautiful
but is now ruptured, through damage to the surface. However, this very
rupturing has enhanced it for me—prevented by the spoliation from ever being
able to see the image as a coherent whole, I have had to focus on the
fragments of the print, and have become more and more intrigued by each
particular fragment.

![Figure 8 Paul Huet (1803–1869)
*Le Pont* (‘The Bridge’), 1834
Etching on chine colle, 27.5 x 35 cm](image)

![Figure 9 James Brown
*Le Pont*](image)

To my eyes each fragment of the print
reveals the confident ease with which
Huet mimics natural appearances. He
is able to portray the changes of light
and texture on surfaces with the most
subtle transitions of mark—ranging
from densely hatched lines to the
most delicate lace-like embroidery of
line and dot. As a fragmented image,
the print has strong appeal. The
tessera-like breakup of the print into
pieces suits my personal disposition to
examine images in small sections. This
preference for looking at a fragment rather than an intact whole image does
not mean that I prefer to see impoverished images rather than masterpieces.
Rather, I like the mystery of open-ended readings that an imperfect image
allows. Moreover, I enjoy contemplating an artist’s sensitivities of touch and
gesture captured (as trace evidence) in isolated marks rather than feeling
compelled to see an artist’s broad meaning—the meta narrative—expressed
by an image as a coherent whole.

In *Referencing Huet* (Figure 9), this pleasure of closely scrutinising the upper-
right section of *Le Pont* (Figure 10) is taken further. Here, my interpretation of
Huet’s print is not only about revisiting his complex overlays of twisting marks and tonal phrasing of foliage masses. I also wished to capture my reading of Huet’s vision: a state of turmoil in landscape. Based on this interpretation, I view the bridge with the cascading water beneath and soft light illuminating the scene—perhaps the brooding light of imminent rain or storm—as a metaphor latent violence. This perception goes beyond the portrayal of natural phenomena. I also sense a dark mood resonant in Huet’s print evidenced by the artist’s dense, convoluted and jagged line work. Although not all viewers may share this perception, the suggestion of impending trouble underpins my reconstruction of Huet’s vision. And, important to my interpretation of this vision, the fractured surface of Huet’s print also plays a significant role in connoting a state of unease.

To project my perception of psychological unrest in *Le Pont*, I used the ill-registered and missing sections of Huet’s print as visual surrogates for the violent natural phenomenon of forked-lightning in my print. Going further, use of tortuous rhythms constructed out finely hatched lines in *Referencing Huet* mirror my concept of Huet’s mindset. Of course, the big difference between Huet’s vision and mine is manifest in the idiom of the image. My print showcases some of the essential details of Huet’s restored print that are relevant to my perception of his mindset whereas Huet’s print showcases his vision of the scene with its portrayed drama.

In arriving at the final state of *Referencing Huet* (Figure 12), the two preceding stages of its evolution are revealing. They demonstrate how small incremental changes can adjust an image to express the desired meaning. The first state (Figure 9), for instance, places emphasis on the disposition of dark tones arranged broadly in an oval. By design, this pattern of darks is a path of soft stepping-stones for the eye to navigate the composition. After reflecting on the outcome, however, I decided that the dark tones are too emphatic in attracting attention. Moreover, I considered that they are too opaque to allow the expressive potential of the myriad of small marks creating the tones to be seen. In the second state (Figure 11) the tonal contrast is diminished resulting from the plate having been burnished with leather. Unfortunately, this softening of the contrast happened at the expense of an equivalent softening of the line work. In the final state (Figure 12) the critical line work (particularly in the sky and surrounding the tree limbs) is
redrawn so that the desired vigour expressed by line quality of the first state is revived.

With hindsight, I now value the initial state of my print (Figure 9) as having authentic passion capturing Huet’s dark vision even if this stage is compromised by harsh tones and impenetratable darks. By comparison, the last state (Figure 12) is inspirationally dull. To my eyes the image has become too conceptually homogenised and visually integrated by well-intended refinements. This unfortunate outcome is not unusual and often happens when an artist relies too much on conscious preplanning rather than on immediacy of creative intuition.

Concluding Remarks
Through my extended ‘interrogations’ and ‘reframings’ of early reproductive prints, exemplified in the three foregoing discussions, I have found a new and rich vein of inspiration for the development of my own aesthetic. In the perspective I have taken, I have seen each print as ‘an intersection of textual surfaces’, a kind of palimpsest, already containing (sometimes concealing) within itself dense layers of tradition and meaning to which I am simply adding another ‘fragment’, in the sense of another textual strand. Though each ‘version’ can be seen as a whole in itself, it is also a fragment of a larger sequence of artistic meditations over time (and across many different spaces) upon a theme, a sequence that is complete at any point in time, but that contains the dynamic possibility of a further interpretation by a later artist—in this case myself.

It is perhaps fitting to close this discussion with a final thought—this time on the changed nature of the audience for the reproductive print. For the age in which they were created, the prints with which I am working would have been the main way that visual imagery was disseminated and implanted in the consciousness of most people. However, the 21st century audience is a very different one. The visual sensibility of most people today is richer and more varied than at any time in history. For each of us now our mental landscape is a unique and idiosyncratic amalgam of images that have been fully sensed, images that have been mediated to us by TV and internet, as well as manipulated by digital technologies. Though staggeringly rich, the multiplicity that we each experience (daily) is a melting pot of clashing visual paradigms, in many ways a heap of fragments. Ironically, perhaps the only thing our individual visions share is the fact that they are composed of fragments.

The creation of my sequence, Artist’s Impressions of Artists’ Impressions, is an attempt to validate elements of continuity in this visually fragmented world. Through my careful and honest ‘reframings’, I am reaching back to the past and reaffirming the continuing relevance of its techniques and traditions to the present. I hope that in this way I am able to give my audience some sense for

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the continuity of traditions, and thus a kind of ‘wholeness’ in a visually fragmented world.

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