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Trees as farms: painting the new landscape

by

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Abstract

A tree farm, in simple terms, is an area of land that has been planted with seedlings of a single timber species to be harvested for its wood. An agricultural farm can be defined as land planted with food crops or pasture for grazing animals. From a visual perspective a farmscape evokes historic, nostalgic notions of the pastoral landscape; whereas a tree farm is silent, moody, ambiguous, and unintelligible.

A consideration of the impacts, both positive and negative, of timber plantations on farming districts and the environment provides the context for this investigation. Discourses of geography and land use, biology, economics and industry contribute to a multivalent viewpoint. I use painting to represent the removal of pasture and the reforestation of the farmscape where traditional crops are replaced by monocultural plantings of trees.

Repetitive flora motifs of *Eucalyptus nitens* leaves symbolise the plantations enveloping former pasture. Common farming items are utilised as artefacts, remnants of a history lost. The modular, multi-panelled format employed is informed by Imants Tillers; with particular reference to *Kangaroo Blank* 1988 and his series *Nature Speaks* 1998-2000. Dividing the picture plane into a grid facilitates the removal of random sections, enabling the images to be broken down; with the empty pockets of space providing ambiguity, mystery and a sense of demise. Other artists referenced include David Keeling and Ray Arnold who take decisive political standpoints in their Tasmanian landscapes; Patrick Grieve and his highly stylised farmscapes; Richard Wastell and his portrayal of the vulnerability of the land; and Megan Walch, whose hauntingly dark depictions of tree branches in *Skeletal* 2010 pares back into their dark, grotesque beauty. Edward Hopper's *Gas* 1940 was a pivotal painting presenting the eerie, foreboding, cipher-like characteristics of plantation pine forests.

The significance of the effects that tree farms have on the transformation of the rural landscape has proved a valuable topic for theoretical and visual research. Initially I paid no heed to the existence of tree farms in my local area, but gradually over the course of the project I began to question the impact on and changes to the rural community. Timber plantations loom large over the traditional agricultural landscape, superficially disrupting the pastoral and the picturesque while, as this project has identified, also impacting upon the environment and rural communities.

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