A tall painter
Liang Luscombe

Heidelberg Artists Trail
Yarra Flats Park
The Boulevard
Ivanhoe East 3079
Victoria, Australia
Melway 32 B6

6th August –
4th November, 2016
Opening Saturday
6th August, 2 – 5pm

Situated alongside the Yarra Flats component of the Heidelberg Artist Trail, Melbourne-based artist Liang Luscombe presents a series of outdoor paintings, that speak to the looming historical narrative that has been built around the figures of the Heidelberg School of the 1890s. Collaging and contrasting newspaper cartoons, exhibition invitations and photographs of the Melbourne that these artists inhabited, Luscombe contemplates the lineage and myth-making surrounding painters such as Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin in relation to conceptions of the figure conducting plein air painting. *A tall painter* not only sits alongside but also speaks to the Heidelberg Artist Trail by activating it as a place to reflect on questions surrounding the construction of cultural histories in Heidelberg; and in Australian painting more broadly.

P Exhibition starting point and site of opening event

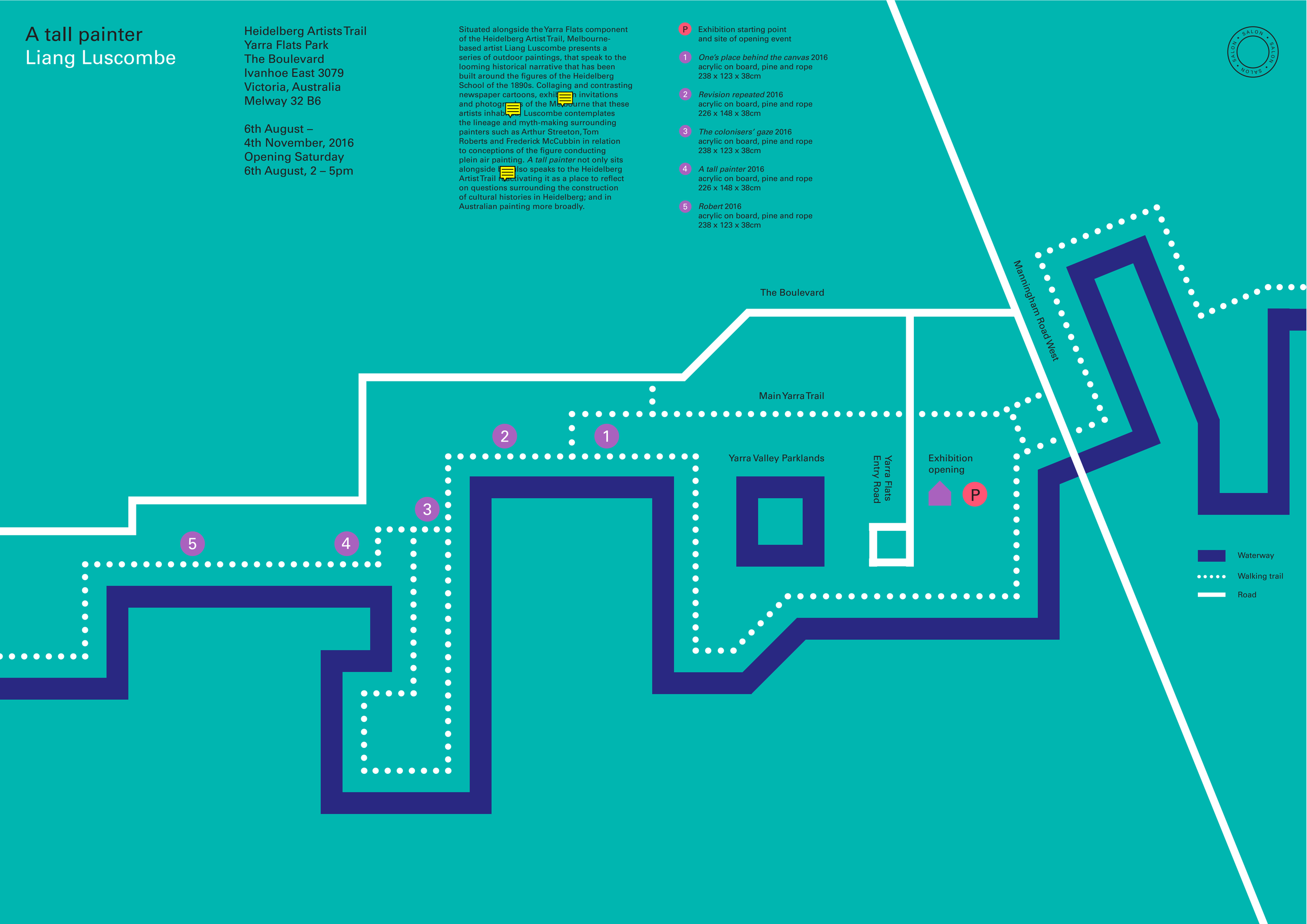
1 *One's place behind the canvas* 2016
acrylic on board, pine and rope
238 x 123 x 38cm

2 *Revision repeated* 2016
acrylic on board, pine and rope
226 x 148 x 38cm

3 *The colonisers' gaze* 2016
acrylic on board, pine and rope
238 x 123 x 38cm

4 *A tall painter* 2016
acrylic on board, pine and rope
226 x 148 x 38cm

5 *Robert* 2016
acrylic on board, pine and rope
238 x 123 x 38cm



Thoughts for a tall painter
Isabelle Sully

When considering the title of Liang's exhibition, I can't help but recall the idiom *a tall story*. This, I am sure, leaves me susceptible to the undisclosed requests of the painter. Treating history as the tall story in question, as I presume is requested, my train of thought goes as follows:

In a survey article written by Mira Schor in *Art Journal*, titled 'Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory and Activism: An Intergenerational Perspective', she asks eleven female artists and art historians:

> How would you place your own work within a historical continuum from 1970s feminism to the present? Has the influence of feminist theory affected your practice as an artist, teacher, critic, or historian? What is your experience of an intergenerational dialogue around feminist ideas and histories?[1]

Coincidently, I was reading this article as I began to consider Liang's latest paintings. The fact that Liang is a female painter attempting to participate in – both within this project and more broadly within her practice – a recontextualisation of the unquestionably male genealogy of history painting (landscape and plein air painting being of particular interest) is not the sole reason that this article brings her practice to mind.

Schor's article presumes the following: that the real triumph of feminism is the moment when women can work without a sense of obligation to overt feminist concerns. When considering the ways in which Liang's project physically, conceptually – and unapologetically – locates itself within the chronology of the Heidelberg School, and by extension Australian art history more broadly, it could be said that this sense of obligation has been turned on its head. Instead of feeling burdened, Liang takes a complex and at times problematic history and uses its own aptitude for fiction as creative license, allowing her to pose a much larger sociological question. That being, what is the possibility in revising this history? And moreover, what can the materialisation of this infiltration be?[2]

I was recently told that the rejection of histories because of their patriarchal nature is a dangerous position to take. While such a position may offer a transient form of relief, this discounts the importance of the trajectory of thought that can exist, beyond gender, in a historical narrative's logic. It was also noted that it discounts the possibility of using their flaws as ammunition at a later date. Liang's current investment in the Heidelberg School supports this argument.

The Heidelberg School was a movement that pioneered Australian Impressionism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, predominantly doing so from the 'rural' area of Heidelberg. Its key protagonists included Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin and Charles Conder. Despite their lack of representation, Jane Sutherland and Clara Southern were also very active within the movement, and there have been efforts more recently to return these two painters to the canon. Reproductions pertaining to the Heidelberg School often adorn colonial paperbacks or postage stamps, even Australian citizenship tests, thereby propagating a very particular image of Australia's past. Subsequently, the School's relationship to the more problematic forms of Australia's colonial history and present cannot be ignored.

It is here where Liang's paintings simultaneously occupy my mind and heart. Simply by being revisionist paintings, they refuse to accept history as a given, nor the project of contemporary feminism as one concerned solely with the future. The adoption of the process of collage within Liang's works uses the modalities of painting to depict not only archival snippets, but also painterly styles and associative pallets. Through doing so, she uses collage as a tool to actively overlay sources, proposing a more horizontal approach to reading history – an intersection of sorts.

This is further evidenced in the use of the map, which is a motif that appears throughout a number of the works (as well as on the back of the paper where this text now resides). Often standing as the diagrammatic example of intersectionality, the map functions by making it possible to locate crossovers and meeting points between different poles, thus dislocating them from a linear, and therefore patriarchal, logic. It is an entanglement of sorts.

Liang uses these approaches to not only discuss the history of painting, but also to look at the way in which landscape painting in Australia has historically naturalised the process of taking Aboriginal land. While the map has its positives, it also historically denotes occupation. The fact that the indigenous history of the site exists as an alternative map that is often unseen by those that use the park stands as proof of this. This lack of acknowledgement surrounding our position as colonisers of this area shows the falsified triumph of landscape painting and its key male protagonists. The ignorance regarding the possibility of coming from an ancestry where the relationship to land and countryside is not romantic, where instead, this narrative was interrupted and disrupted by the colonial project, is quietly questioned.

To return to Mira Schor's article, she mentions Emma Amos' painting titled *Tightrope* (1994), which struck me as one of those rare works where the didacticism manages to somehow emancipate itself from its own conclusive stupor, thus prevailing as the apt mode of address. A self-portrait, Amos appears in motion, striding assertively forward with a paint brush in one hand and a t-shirt bearing a reproduction of Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women with Mangos* (1899) sagging from a coat hanger held in the other hand. Seeing this t-shirt, I am reminded of touristic merchandise and admire this witty role reversal proposed by Amos. Of course, Gauguin has long been known as the poster boy for the voyeuristic positioning of 'otherness', and so Amos doesn't hesitate to caustically defer this imagery to the context it belongs.

It is also important to note that *Tightrope* has its own internal frame. Hugging each bordering edge of the pictorial surface are strips of African fabric, and where each of these edges meet at a corner, an image transfer of Gauguin's painting reappears. If we are to again take up the discussion of intersectionality posed earlier, it could be read that Amos' critique grapples with how an equation involving four directions or trajectories (materialised through the four strips of fabric) still somehow manages to be commandeered by an orientalist depiction of a scene, thus standing in as the dominant 'knowledge' of cultural practice. Still today, the oversaturated visibility of this particular Gauguin painting stands as a glorification of the colonial project. Indeed, Amos calls this into account, and the canvas is thusly treated as a place of revision. Radically, it also manages to frame itself.

If something can be garnered from a conversation between contemporary feminism, post-colonialism and contemporary art, it could be that a similar proposition is put forward in each. The indeterminacy of the artwork is treated as a proposition in relation to this body of work. Liang puts her own contest with a problematic history into play, simply by working from her own indeterminate position. This again brings to mind the conundrum of coexisting with histories that simultaneously have social value – as is proven in the celebration of the Heidelberg School – but which also failed to retain some necessary traits pertaining to social progression. Acknowledging the complexity of this history seems the first step. The second could be the questions of authority – as in, who has the authority to speak and when – that are central to this project, and to the practice of queering history. As Judith Butler noted:

> Engaged in 'arts of existence' the subject is both crafted and crafting, and the line between how it is formed, and how it becomes a kind of forming, is not easily, if ever drawn. For it is not the case that a subject is formed and then turns around and begins suddenly to form itself. On the contrary, the formation of the subject is the institution of the very reflexivity that indistinguishably assumes the burden of formation.[3]

In the case of the many discussions I had with Liang throughout the development of this project, it became apparent that we preferred to work through and with, rather than against, the structures that we simultaneously disagree with, and which enabled us to make this work. This denotes so clearly the tension that Butler refers to, between identification and renunciation in claiming (in this case) a female subject position for ourselves. This burden of formation characterises the competing political claims of universality and difference that we are faced with. For us, it becomes a question of finding a way to negate this paradox of wanting to identify with something, but not wanting to be identified *by* it. Momentarily, this seems like a chronological reality. As is shown by the huge local pride and investment in the Heidelberg School, there is a fracture between being invested in the place you are in, and acknowledging the history of how it came to be. For how much can we be called responsible? As Butler proposed, and as I see Liang enacting, perhaps this needed negation of the paradox comes from a practice that seeks to 'yield artistry from constraint'.[4] In the process of critiquing the history of the Heidelberg School, Liang envisions a different kind of politicised landscape.

[1] Schor, Mira, Amos, Emma, Bee, Susan, Drucker, Johanna, Fernández, María, Jones, Amelia, Kaneda, Shirley, Molesworth, Helen, Pindell, Howardena, Schorr, Collier, Wilding, Faith, 'Contemporary Feminism: Art Pratice, Theory, and Activism: An Intergenerational Perspective', *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 1999, pp. 8-29.

[2] I recently came across an article in which the journalist talked about seeing a huge sculptural mass in a German museum. At first confronted by its size and volume, the journalist came to realise as he moved closer to it that it wasn't necessarily a sculpture but rather a giant paper mache blob. It was a heavy relic, in more ways than one, from when the Wall fell and the Stasi shoved all their paperwork down the drains in an attempt at disposal. Though instead of doing that, the paper congealed and caused a blockage in the drains. As it stands now, I can't help but read it as a metaphor. When thinking of a possible materialisation of infiltration, maybe a blockage is an example. Of course, causing one knowingly and intentionally would be a key difference.

[3] Butler, Judith, 'What is Critique?', *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, David Ingram, ed., Basil Blackwell, London, 2002.

[4] ibid.

Salon is a roaming curatorial project that organises exhibitions in various non-gallery locations. It is primarily interested in extending the possibilities of artworks through situating them within the so-called binary of art and non-art audiences, therefore aiming to move beyond it. It is organised by Isabelle Sully, and was established in collaboration with Simon McGlinn.
www.salongallery.info

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