

Tony Wellington Opening Speech for Landscapes of Presence and Absence Exhibition 20 July 2019

On 20th July 2019 our wonderful Noosa Mayor Tony Wellington delivered this insightful and engaging speech at the opening event for my joint exhibition with Sunshine Coast painter Tony Coles. He has kindly made his speech notes available. Here they are:

"It is an honour to be asked to help celebrate and open this joint exhibition.

Let me begin by saying what a fantastic space this is. It's wonderful to see a gallery space that can safely accommodate such a large body of work. Congratulations to Joe and Erin for their commitment to fine art. Like everything, art and galleries have to move with the times – they must adapt to survive. And this gallery, in its somewhat unlikely location, shows that good gallery curators and owners need imagination, just as do artists themselves. Well done Cool Art.

Now to the paintings. The title given to this collection is "Landscapes of Presence and Absence".

At first glance, that may seem a rather odd title, because, when looking at Georges' works, they may seem more like figurative than landscape art.

But the landscape is very much part of George's symbolism. His figures are embedded in a matrix, and that matrix often includes a brooding landscape form.

I am reminded, when looking at Georges' paintings, that he lives at Kin Kin. Kin Kin is itself a very striking landscape that is dominated by looming hills. And in Georges' paintings, the figures are often paired with a sometimes mountainous, sometimes organic ominous form – the landscape materializes alongside his figures. In one painting, "Dark Mountain", this domineering presence becomes the very subject itself.

Looking at Georges' paintings, one can imagine the artist, himself a character from a very different landscape, in his Kin Kin studio. Georges was transposed here to Australia, to the sub-tropics, to Kin Kin, the land of black ants and domineering hills. In Kin Kin the residents huddle in the verdant valleys, forever under the shadows of the forested mountains. I picture Georges Soler, sensitive, intellectual, in his Kin Kin studio, invoking his demons and his global heritage to layer his paintings with metaphysical meaning. Metaphysics is not the natural interest of the average Australian. But Georges is not the average Australian, thank goodness.

Someone famous once said that a paintings are designed to be looked at, not sniffed. The point being that we have a tendency to get up too close to paintings, rather than stand back and let them work their magic on us in full. But George's paintings pull one ever closer. The layers and patina become more intricate, the closer one gets. George's paintings demand to be sniffed!

Like our own individual personalities, George's figures are full of visceral detail, layered with half-seen and implicit depth. If George's work says anything, it says that humankind is complex, full of mysterious claustrophobic yearnings and urges. But our eyes give us away. Our eyes peer out of all that intensity, all that brooding, swirling chaos that each of us conceals. The eyes seek solace and compassion.

Eyes are what our own eyes go to first, when we meet someone, when we look at a photo, when we gaze at a non-human animal – it's always the eyes that we go to, because, as Shakespeare wrote, they are the windows of the soul.

Where Georges' fixation is very much our inner world, this is marvellously juxtaposed with Tony Coles' sense of wonder of the world around him.

In Tony's work we find ourselves in more familiar settings of coast and rural hills. Tony has immersed himself in his favourite places, and offered them to us in ways that consider the geometry, the changing palette, and the startling shifts of light which cause us to rethink our own memories of these places.

He may render an essentially cool coloured landscape, as in his painting of Mt Ninderry, but do so in predominantly warm colours. Rather than jarring, the outcome is that we are reminded that no landscape is ever a consistent colour. In the warm glow of afternoon light, Mt Ninderry does turn from green to orange.

As warm colours advance while cool colours recede, this playing with colour transforms his works into a constantly moving feast.

At its most focussed, in the painting "Moving Storm", the central rock in the ocean leaps out of the blue of the sea. Elsewhere, paintings appear to evoke many different shifts of light, as though a whole day's worth of light and colour were captured in one sitting - from early morning to midday to late evening. Time doesn't so much stand still in Tony's work, but rather time accumulates to reveal all of its various temperaments.

Tony's depictions of familiar places like the Coolum Coves – a favourite place of mine to surf over the years – are both playful and celebratory. Who wouldn't want to throw the ball for the eager "Mutt" or marvel at the shifting landscape of a sand blow?

And Tony's work is as much about air as it is colour and earth. His paintings are never weighed down by muddiness. Instead, they keep us afloat in their joyous, light-hearted meditations.

And so we have two very different, very distinctive artists to celebrate here tonight. Each of them highly intrinsic, and each artist reaching deep within themselves to create something matchless and exquisite.

Intrigue is the artist's gift to the world. And both of the artists on display here are masters of intrigue.

On that note, I duly declare the exhibition open".