



*a note on the privilege of making art*

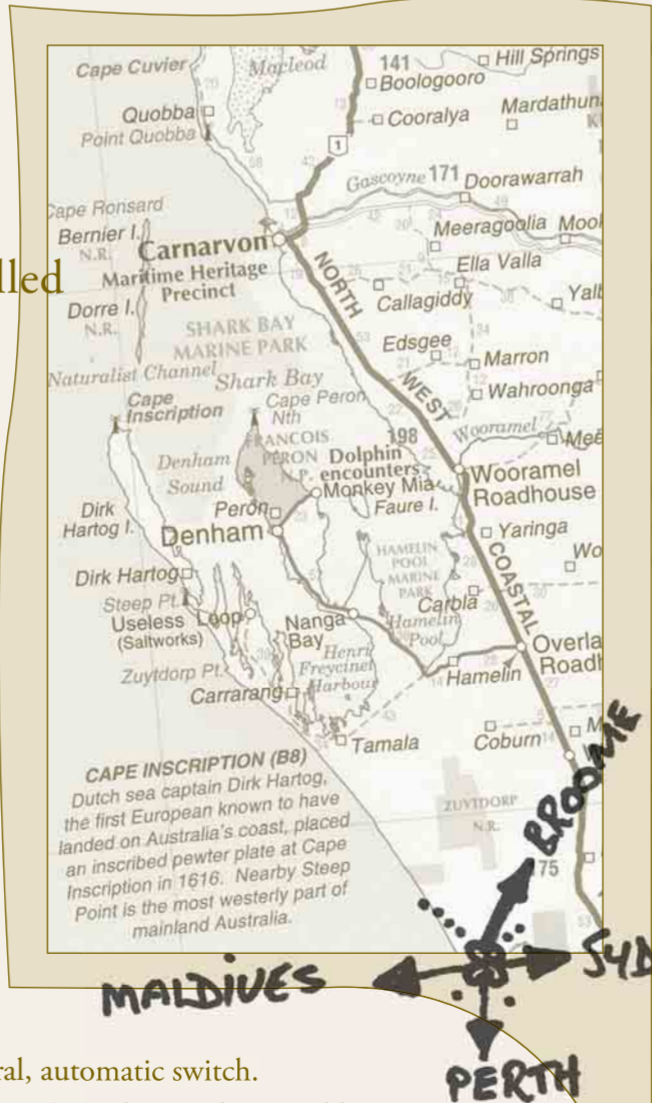
news and recent work  
WAYNE ASHTON

HIGH ABOVE IN THE MARKLESS BLUE SKY, FROM THE WINDOW OF A COASTWATCH PLANE, WE PROBABLY LOOK LIKE COMMAS, THREE SMALL BOATS AFOAT IN THE WILDERNESS OF THE REMOTE GULF. ON THE WATER, I SLIDE OVER THE SIDE TO SNORKEL WHERE THE FIRST EUROPEAN LANDED IN AUSTRALIA, AND, ONCE IN, THE INSTINCT IS TO TURN A CIRCLE TO SCAN FOR SHARKS, WHICH FROM UP THERE NO DOUBT LOOK MORE LIKE EXCLAMATION MARKS. THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING HERE IS STRONGLY LINKED TO THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING ABLE TO CONCENTRATE ON A NOVEL OR A PAINTING. THE WATER IS CLEAR AS GIN, DEPTH FOUR METRES, SO THE EYES CONFIRM THAT THE UNDERWATER LANDSCAPE IS OK FOR NOW...

But gut instinct cares nothing for optical fact, so the edgy sense persists. Even the rampant natural beauty all around us, above are the cliffs, headlands and beaches, below us the ocean and its caves, valleys and hilltops; even all this magnetic, compelling beauty that is buzzing a pathway into the spirit cannot remove the slip of panic from the small snorkelling expedition.

In 1616, the Dutch mariner Dirk Hartog landed here, at Dirk Hartog Island. Had Dirk chosen to enjoy a snorkel he'd be left gobsmacked by the privilege. Shark Bay is one of the world's greatest places, two huge gulfs running North-South on the West Australian coast. Long before it was called Shark Bay, it was called Cartharrugudu, meaning two bays. Which together is good, because it is, in point of fact, two bays brimming with sharks. The pilot, shaking his head, may be re-naming it Idiot Comma Bay For Jumbuck Dickheads. Our three tinnies were anchored just inside the second gulf, near the wide channel to the open Indian Ocean.

Swimming slowly for the reef it became obvious the shelves overhanging the clean sandy floor were crammed with crays, bream, garfish and a huge spectrum of reef fish. With the hyper-abundance of food dingling around, I gave myself a second panic-circle. In fact, the whole time in the water I was making panic-circles, for this is ocean wilderness that brings the chemicals of fear into your



spirit with a natural, automatic switch. Arithmetic doesn't tend to work around here to comprehend the vastness, neither does language, at least not English, what works is gut instinct. By all means watch for where you step or swim in this massive landscape of oceanic ramparts, but for direction go with instinct.

The reason this kind of place inspires is that basically everything around a bobbing head is a breathing history of time. Whether I pause to marvel at the red cliffs, emerald inlets, blue reefs, white dunes, sienna headlands or the trembling grey stromatolites – and the colours I mention are a gross piece of brevity – or whether I try to take it all in together, either way, the place just warps common sense.



This place purveys no answers, it is obstructionist, and yet it says it all. Had it half a chance, it would hang, draw and quarter common sense, especially the shortsighted type that's used in the technological age. And anyway the consequences of Dirk's arrival, to Shark Bay, are almost nil. The breathing two-gulf of time, this optical buzzing that dissolves the mind, still today reflects off the underwater sand, shimmering out into space just as it did a million generations ago in an epoch when Dirk's dreams were yet to wade from the slurry of the Dark Ages. Two-bays gives me the loosening to not just snorkel with its creatures but to snorkel in time.

This vast corner of the world has another effect. The place is pristine, no B&Bs or sensitive developments like the remote gems of the more populous states, so Shark Twobays is a good, in-your-face example of just exactly what the headlong creativity of the technological age cannot create. We can make art, ipods and bombs and we can take satellite pictures of backyard pools, but we cannot make a gulf like Shark Bay. Under the famous blue sky of WA the double-gulf sparkles. Brims with wildlife, turtles, dugongs, manta rays, and over 300 species of fish are fed upon by 200 species of birds, including the sea eagle. Crayfish, prawns, crabs, dolphins, huge snapper, baldchin groper, spanish mackerel and tiger sharks have jammed their DNA into the food chain here for a thousand millenia. The effect, then, is plain: we did not make this. A reminder more than an effect.

Five hundred metres across the open passage from the southern tip of Dirk Hartog Island where we snorkelled drops a headland on the mainland. It is remote, yes, but in a way that again inspires the bending of common sense, yet directions to it are clean, no chance of getting lost.

Twelve hours from Perth, turn left at the Overlander Roadhouse onto a dirt track called Useless Loop Road. The track is mind-bending, because for another two hours we were winding along the lower end of Shark Bay in terrain that looks exactly like the southern Sahara of the Hausa tribe I visited during my university years. Then we simply arrived at Australia's most westerly landfall, the fabled Steep Point. I slept on the beach for a week, along with a friendly crew of fifteen others.

We had boats, two-way radios, a kitchen under canvas, cases of wine and scotch, and one of the guys, a carpenter, constructed a coolgardie



safe to store and cool the vegetables. Another guy got to snorkel out in the azure, sun-drenched deep with a 12metre whale shark.

The placid filter feeder cruises into the Indonesian-warmed waters of Shark Bay every March. It vacuums a tonne

of pin-sized animals and plants into its ten-foot mouth each day, so shrimp don't find it placid, but to a snorkeller it is utterly indifferent, a sitting duck in South-East Asia from whence it came using the Leeuwin stream.

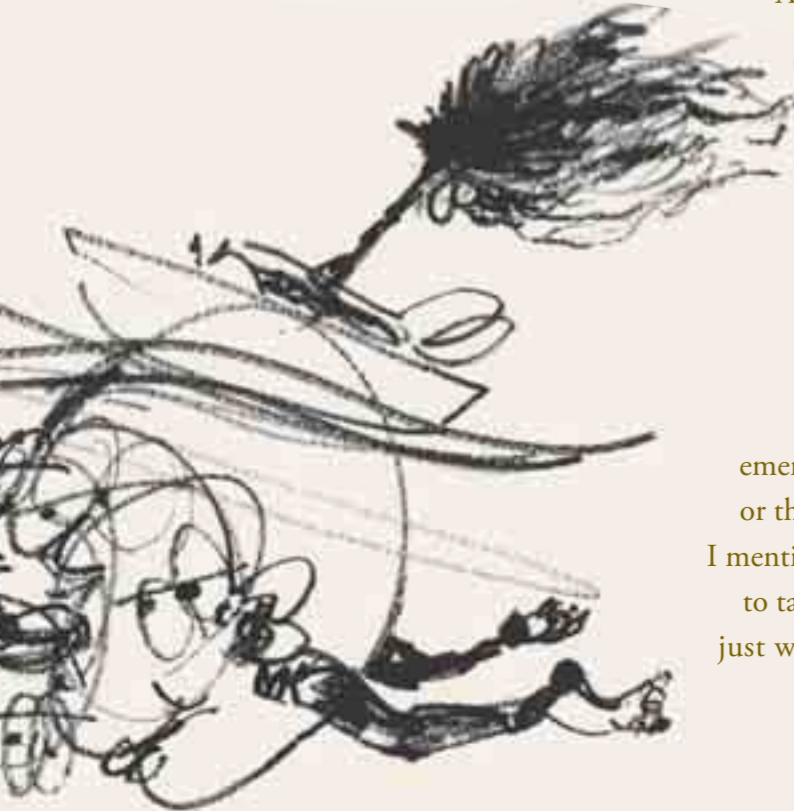
Morning three I strolled to the water at our base camp of tents to watch as one of the crew of the expedition filled a balloon and tied it to his line to prepare for an hour's quiet fishing. The red balloon caught the strong land breeze out for half a kilometre into the gulf. The morning was calm, the water calm.

The calm made the Czech sing a long sigh as he sat back on his stumpy fishing chair to shake his head at the preposterous vast beauty he was in. He'd up and left Prague the moment he saw the Russian tanks rumbling down the main street, came to Australia, Fremantle, and set up a small shop of sparkies that turned out successful.

He'd vanished into a working-class sunset, the best of its kind in the world: sneaky devil, he called himself with a grin. Fishing and maritime legend are his passions. His batteries, he said. In a long-winded way, Dirk Hartog guided him here. Down through fifteen generations of whispers, anecdotes, legends, bartalk and exotica-fuelled longings, Dirk's ocean adventure landed on the ear of a young electrician in Prague as a distinct possibility to start a new life far from the dubious promises of the Velvet Revolution. In fifteen minutes his balloon speck jabbed up and down. Sneaky battery shot off the stumpy chair.

He reeled in a shark, and the crew suggested that I curry it since I was their idea of a curry expert. That night we dined on what I called Prague Hot Fish Curry, a huge reddish dish for fifteen afloat in olive oil, onions, garlic and masalas. Catches are strictly limited as this is a world heritage-listed place, but if you fish, then you're allowed to feed yourself and your friends, sup off the ocean, to honour it as a bringer of life to the planet by virtue of its billions of tonnes of diatoms. By contrast, in our cities, we make a concerted green noise and yet we persist in degrading the oceans in our thousands of creative ways. This green noise is no more than a warm-hearted pretence at respecting nature. When you share a shark under the stars you've made a pact you simply have to keep.

So the new oceanic landscapes that I've painted are an integral part of this pact. The series, titled, **Captain Logic and the Blue-Ringed Octopus**, comes from journeys to many other oceanic ramparts, but they do not make politics, they celebrate the poetics of colour and the poetics of nature. The lagoon of Ihuru in the Maldives. The Straits of Malacca at Pangkor before it was converted into a Hyatt wonderland. Broome and Derby. The wild and fearsome Great Southern Ocean ramparts of WA. The dangerous lagoon at Sugarloaf Rock on Cape Leeuwin, and the nearby Margaret River coast world renowned for its hill-high swell. Cape Gloucester at the unspoiled northern tip of the Whitsundays.



20 years 12 solo shows



The lagoons of the Bight of Benin in West Africa. The Eastern cape of Jervis Bay, at Point Perpendicular. These sentinels, and many others, are the inspiration behind the new paintings.

The centrepiece canvas, *The Blue-Ringed Octopus*, is in a private collection in Perth. Other works are in collections in Sydney and London. A box of smaller paintings was taken to Perth by David Bromfield to show as a solo at his gallery, *The Kerb*.



Currently I'm working on *Five Seasons*, a painting for George Kailis over five panels spanning four metres. It's about the seasons of the southwest part of Western Australia. During the past year he has watched the development of the oceanic landscapes and asked whether I could translate their style into a piece relating to the five seasons.

The new novel progresses into a part of the book that becomes for authors, the ones I've spoken with anyway, a 'knowing mystery'. You know what you're doing, but of course you also do not. If I know too much of what I'm doing, the writing loses that tone that gives the characters their pesky life.

**The Equator is a comedy about an artist having the art kicked out of him** by friendship with an old seadog, to be replaced with a sense of living; and with the clandestine way that our moments gather like moths in the night and become the glow of memory. This makes his art harder to bring off well. The story is set in London, the Bahamas, Broome, Margaret River, Perth and Sydney. The project won funding from the Australia Council. I'm around halfway to completion.

The new radio drama, broadcast nationally on Airplay in September, **The Tasman Angel from Hell**, featured Paul Capsis as a storm that heads for Sydney with his Bird of Regret looking for the culprit who drowned his friend. The culprit, William Zappa, turns out to be a dealer in uranium whose cover was about to be blown by the drowned friend, a woman with whom he broke off an affair. Sydney's great for storms, hail one moment, sunny the next, lightning, thunder, downpours lasting two minutes, subtropical heat, howling winds. And **Paul Capsis's voice is great for exactly all that mega-stylish mayhem.**

How the idea clicked in my mind was seeing, for the first time ever, so that it utterly stunned me, Capsis perform at the Opera House in Kosky's **Boulevard Delirium**.

Perform is not really what he did, it was more like he ate the Opera House whole. So in the play

I thought he could eat the city whole as he searched for the uranium dealer. Airplay has 40,000 listeners a week.



Also in September the ABC commissioned another Airplay. This time it's William Zappa with the amazing Kerry Walker, who often did roles in Patrick White's plays. It's called **The Oils and Mirrors of Dorothy Hoffkoff**. Dorothy is a society girl of fifty-two who lives in Bellevue Hill down the road from the Packer mansion. She is well-known for being generous, unconventional, rude and kind, but she is generally bored with her friends because her real love of life is with the song and richness of the rural working class into which her maternal grandmother was born just outside Goulburn. Zappa plays **Applecrumble, a failed security man**. He tries to win back Dorothy Hoffkoff from a "lovely, grotty" fling they had eight years ago.

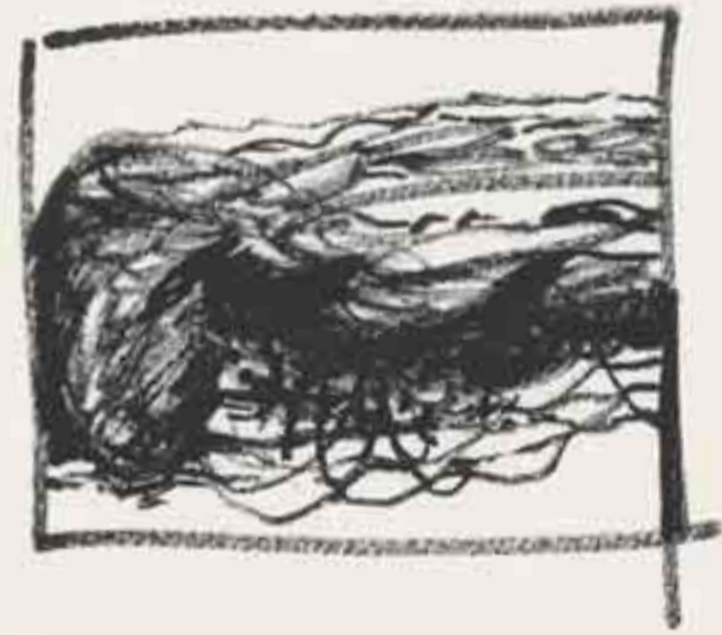
A completely new gig for me was when art dealer Tim Olsen flew me to Melbourne to write catalogue notes on two of his painters' latest works, David Bromley and Matthew Johnson, two utterly different and very good artists. Although I was buried in my own work, I accepted it because Tim has a great sense of style and humour and is absurd enough to be able to recall entire Noel Coward songs at the bar. But what I learned about myself from it after accepting was significant indeed. Half a century ago they asked T.S. Eliot why he consistently went to Auden for a first opinion when he finished a poem.

Eliot said it was because Auden had the knack of never, ever making suggestions based on his own predilections but instead made suggestions based on what the work itself was attempting.

I found I actually could point to significant things in Matthew and David's paintings for what their paintings were doing and not from what my predilections are doing. Tim initially suggested we both go down there and make a scruffy time of it, but sadly he got busy and I went off solo, but saw friends in Fitzroy after work anyway, including Shane Maloney whose latest book **Sucked In** is out soon.

Recently a **New Yorker** flew in from Moscow where he works, and came around with his wife to view the new oceanic landscapes. He the next day ordered my first novel from Gleebooks. This is something that still induces a grateful reverie, and here's why.

Ray Coffey and Clive Newman at Fremantle Press launched **Under a Tin-Grey Sari** four years ago, doing a fantastic job. That privilege still ticks along today, just a few books here and there, but this little object you can hold up in your hand is the central reason behind so much of the good things that have happened since the launch. It made me a **guest of the writers' festivals** around the country. Alan Dodge at the Art Gallery of Western Australia made it Director's Choice at the gallery bookshop. It was shortlisted at the WA Premiers Prize. And it found good readers who really got off on it.



The instinctive energy it gave, hoisted me from the inspiration of a sentinel like Shark Bay to a cracking night of performance fire at the Opera House, working all the way across many cities and remote places on new ideas, both in painting and writing. This privilege has been helped along by thoughtful collectors and by thoughtful friends who have brought collectors to the work.

Bennelong Point in Sydney where the Opera House stands would've been a quality snorkel in the pristine waters of 1616. But Dirk Hartog chose to turn left off the main thoroughfare of the Indian Ocean and landed atop the crayfish colony of the time, opposite Steep Point, one of the most beautiful places on earth's oceanic ramparts. Dirk's contribution to the booming Dutch world of high finance of the age, along with many other intrepid seafarers, scouring the globe for wealth, helped to construct the sophisticated Amsterdam that forty years later would scoff at Rembrandt's **Night Watch** when it was presented for the first time at an A-list evening in the city centre. Of course today the Dutch master's painting is Holland's key artwork, heavily guarded, heavily insured, heavily loved.

But then, knowledgeable A-listers scoffing at it might have been impossible that night had Rembrandt chosen something else to paint. If he'd chosen one of the stories of the old seadog merchant Dirk, perhaps a quite different reaction might have dominated the evening. **Had Rembrandt painted, instead, a rugged red cliff dropping mercilessly to a strident blue ocean, the Amsterdam opening night crowd might have burst out laughing. Not from ridicule, their ridicule being a lust for the status quo, but from panic. Because that's what Cartharrugudu does, it forces one to confront the realisation that one knows nothing. And my bet is Rembrandt would've painted it with that vortex firmly in mind.**