



# THE LULLABY OF INDUSTRY

## Lawrence English's Mine Aesthetics and the RMOA Collection

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In the proclaimed 'beef capital' Rockhampton, the visual culture of cattle farming is close to the heart of Central Queensland identity. It's difficult to miss the life-size statues of brahmans, droughtmasters and other cattle breeds featured heroically around town and cared for as part of the Rockhampton Museum of Art Collection. In comparison, the region's other major industry, the mining and mineral processing industry, remains largely invisible to the casual visitor to Rockhampton. The culture and aesthetics of mining, despite its essential economic, social and environmental role in Central Queensland's contemporary character, go largely unacknowledged within the arts.

While mining's environmental, governance, and economic impacts are frequent and important mainstream news topics, this essay looks exclusively at mining's presence—or lack of presence—found in cultural form. It has been prompted by the November 2023 exhibition, 'Lawrence English: The Lullaby of Industry' held at the Rockhampton Museum of Art, but also offers opportunity to examine the Rockhampton Museum of Art Collection through a mining lens. The RMOA Collection demonstrates this lack of representation in its own holdings; cattle grazing's image is represented over and over again within its Australian landscapes and public art, from the nineteenth through to twenty-first centuries. Meanwhile, the Collection—with its six decades of collecting focus here in Central Queensland—holds only a handful of paintings depicting mining landscapes. They fall within two categories; one is the commemorative public installations of Mount Morgan, an historic gold mining town 40 kilometres southwest of Rockhampton, and its idyllic painted views by artists Charles Haywood, Daryl Lindsay, and William Bustard among others dating back to the early twentieth century. The other category is a series of 2014 and 2016 works depicting the Saraji open-cut coal mine by Rockhampton artist Patrick Connor.

Connor's series of landscapes were a project that built upon the power of European-Australian literary and visual 'bush mythology' conventions that have informed non-Indigenous perceptions of the land since the beginning of colonisation.<sup>1</sup> Frederick McCubbin's 1893 painting, *Bush Idyll (the Flute Player)* is the Heidelberg School's quintessential presentation of Australia as arcadia; existing as both untouched wilderness while also incredibly accommodating of European farming and leisure. From Britain, which was about a century into its first Industrial Revolution, Australia was perceived as an untouched paradise, and the popularity of the Heidelberg wave of Australian landscape painting acted as conscious or unconscious diversionary aesthetics as the colony's cities and ports became more and more industrialised. It was this myth-making power of landscape painting that Connor's minescapes wished to channel: 'Under a romantic, light-bathed horizon I wished to picture a landscape, where in fact, the landscape had been removed.'<sup>2</sup>



Patrick Connor (b. 1971) *Landscape with Traditional Horizon 2014*, oil on linen, 79 x 149 cm. Rockhampton Museum of Art Collection. Purchased 2016.

Could the relative absence of mining from visual culture be due to, as Connor describes it, the literal absence of landscape? It is true that cattle farms can be viewed off the side of the road by any who travel on Central Queensland highways, while mine sites are often highly secure, fenced-off areas, accessed only by workers or stakeholders. Connor himself describes a wait of over twelve months when he sought entry permission. One of his resulting works from the visit, *Landscape with Traditional Horizon 2014*, is in its upper-half an oil paint landscape in the fashion of Arthur Streeton's sun-drenched plains. In its foreground, however, we see a radically different scene of 'deep, excavated trenches with near vertical cliff walls [revealing] horizontal layers of soil, rock and black coal.'<sup>3</sup> The 'traditional landscape' is quite literally interrupted by the open-cut excavations. But instead of this being an absence of landscape, as Connor speculates, the landscape instead appears suddenly, epically transformed and shaken from convention.

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<sup>1</sup> Artist statement on website, viewed 26/08/2023: <https://www.patrickconnorartist.com/about>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Brisbane artist Lawrence English brings a similar conversation to the fore that again considers the place of mines in art history. English is not a painter, but an artist who brings his acute awareness of sound and the human perception of sound to his artworks. For his exhibition at Rockhampton Museum of Art, 'The Lullaby of Industry,' it was the aesthetic presence, or lack of aesthetic presence, of the mineral industry within this region that drew his artistic curiosity.



Lawrence English (b. 1976) *Exhalation* 2023, inkjet print on paper. Courtesy the artist.

Accompanying English's site-specific, temporary sound installation is a framed photograph on the Atrium Gallery's wall. The black-and-white image was sourced by the artist from a newspaper's discarded archives. A smokestack is in mid-collapse; the funnel has broken open near the base, and single bricks have begun to fall loose. The top opening seems to be still emitting smoke, even in its last moments. The artist describes what drew him to the image:

It holds a particular immediacy that I think speaks very strongly to the nature of decline in heavy industry in 'the west'. To me the image also captures the fragility of these material structures which seem so absolute and stable in our daily horizon. There's a poetic exhaling here, the lower opening almost like a

mouth breathing out with force for the last time. I find it an extraordinary and provocative image.<sup>4</sup>

The image, now removed from its original source location or date, could have been taken at any time or place within the Industrial Revolution's vast reach—including Rockhampton's neighbouring city and closest major industrial port, Gladstone. The artist describes his impressions of the city below:

I stopped over in Gladstone for a night in 2020. I drove around the town and stopped at a few of the vantage points and realised how much industry has made that town what it is. It's emblematic of a great many towns. Over the past 150 years a great many urban centres have swelled with industry. They have faced decline and in some cases devastation. There are tiny casualties such as Binnend in Fife, Scotland or Centralia in Pennsylvania; and the much larger ones like Detroit, United States. We assume that the conditions that allow cities to grow are often stable, but like everything, there is no guarantee of this.

I wanted to record in Gladstone because I feel like this moment captures a very particular reflection of these ideas I've been interested in. The industries and facilities that have fed Gladstone are in a period of change, and in some cases decline. The NRG Gladstone Power Station for instance is presently scheduled to close in 2035, although that may not actually end up being the case. What is certain though is that the scale of the factory's labour force has significantly diminished since it opened. This reduction in employment is a common theme in many towns that were once flush due to industry and with that reduction comes new pressures and challenges for the communities living there.<sup>5</sup>

Like Connor, English was interested in extending his first impressions and gaining access to some heavy industrial sites to experience their aesthetics firsthand.

My desire to record in Gladstone is to capture an acoustic glimpse of what those environments and locations sound like. The field recordings I made are a sensory impression of the spaces that have seen so many pass through them. I almost felt that recording them was a way of reflecting on the role these places have played there, and by default play elsewhere in the world too. Nothing holds, even if we expect it to.

The recordings for this exhibition were made in two sittings. One was more rogue, I guess you could say, and was about listening at a distance. It was how we perceive these places as sites of ambience, an almost monochrome sonic state that occupies the air like an atmosphere. I made a lot of recordings at fences, in car parks and next to train tracks. These were the kinds of sounds we might encounter as an outsider to the sites.

The second collection of recordings I made were more intimate. Both the Wiggins Island Coal Export Terminal and the NRG Gladstone Power Station were exceptionally generous with their time and access to their facilities. I was able to record the working environments, machinery and atmospheres of these sites of heavy industry. This close relief recording revealed a more

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<sup>4</sup> Communication between the writer and artist, 27 August 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

nuanced and dynamic sensing of those places. There was also a very physical sense of them too, as the vibrations of machines, motors and other industrial plant created a very material sensation that was elegantly overwhelming at times.<sup>6</sup>

The Industrial Revolution makes a roaring entrance in David Hendy's *Noise: A Human History of Sound & Listening* about halfway through its timeline. Not only did the emergence of factories change people's visual surroundings, it also affected their aural environment in drastic ways. Any first-time visitors to the industrial hubs of Manchester or Birmingham in 1848, likely to arrive by the 'shriek, and a roar, and a rattle' of steam train, were encountering an alien soundscape of machinery, crowds, detonations, and clashing metal.<sup>7</sup> The city-dwellers, especially boilermakers, railway workers, iron-turners, and weavers, were among those whose hearing was almost constantly saturated (to the point of damage) with a cacophony of new sounds. 'It was as if super-human, or rather *inhuman*, noise was smothering an organic soundscape that had gone undisturbed for centuries.'<sup>8</sup>

As hearing safety became identified and mitigated, the industrial soundscape has of course improved for people's health over the decades. Perhaps as a result of the lingering power of the 'bush myth,' the din of factories and heavy duty vehicles, or even their visual presence in highly populated cities, is still not a common source of inspiration for Australian artists.

Nevertheless, constant industrial noise remain characteristic of Gladstone's 'almost monochrome sonic state,' as English observes. The artist's on-site sound recordings of machinery have been mixed and presented to make a soundscape best suited to Rockhampton Museum of Art's Atrium Gallery. With its 14 metre-tall ceiling and almost all-glass perimetres, it is a space in which visitors often start or finish their gallery visits. In addition to the regular 'non-art' sounds of people's conversation, the automatic doors sliding open and the closing, the internal lift announcing its arrival or departure, and muffled outdoor traffic, English adds an atmospheric listening experience that gently invites pause and reflection. In addition to standing-height and above-head height sound sources, the artist provides the more embodied listening experience he describes as a 'sound bed.' Measuring around the same dimensions as a queen-sized bed, the piece is designed to accommodate visitors who are seated or even lying down on top. Instead of simply taking in the sound of industry through the ears, the sound bed offers the chance to feel the vibrations, as the artist felt them during his experience on site.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens quoted in David Hendy *Noise: A Human History of Sound & Listening* 2013, Profile Books: Suffolk, p 218.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 219.



Exhibition view of 'The Lullaby of Industry,' Rockhampton Museum of Art, November 2023.

When these aesthetic experiences based on Gladstone's industrial soundscape are paired with the discarded image of a collapsing smokestack, English invites audiences to contemplate the impermanence of this state of being. When Gladstone's coal ports and power stations come to the end of their life, the everyday noise of its connected trains, ships and mineral processing will end too.

English is following an archival urge to preserve the sounds of contemporary life. Like the fallen smokestack, one day the sounds are part of our lived environment; and one day they are not. Without cultural records, how will we remember what this moment sounded like, or reflect on what this age meant for human history? Through English's poetic examination of the aesthetics of mining and minerals, 'The Lullaby of Industry' offers Rockhampton Museum of Art's audiences access to a lesser-acknowledged aesthetic element of Central Queensland identity for our own posterity.

*'Lawrence English: Lullaby of Industry' is a Rockhampton Museum of Art exhibition curated by Emily Wakeling. Presented in partnership with Haymans Electrical. Lawrence English and Rockhampton Museum of Art thank Wiggins Island Export Terminal and the NRG Gladstone Power Station for their support of this project. The artist extends a specific thanks to his site hosts for their energy and enthusiasm.*