

# Australian Garden

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## HISTORY

Gardens and ideas

Foundation myths

Reflecting on writing



This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
On the earth the British Spirit said, "Look at the  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
colours." They showed us the red that came  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
from the blood of their fighting and  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
hunting the secret white pipe clay that is  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
kept by a giant kangaroo the globe that  
This happy breed of men, this little world  
marks the cliffs of our land and is the sacred  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
colours of the Yirratja, and the bark that  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
they made with the great fire they used to burn as  
On its of note, defensive to the house,  
They showed us the charcoal from the trees  
Against the army of less happier bands  
of their great Dreaming tracks and told us,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
With these colours you can keep the Dreaming

# Strangers on the Shore

Jacques Charoux

The heroic image of Australia's foundation myth, 'The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay' by E. Phillips Fox, provides the raw material for a startling triptych of paintings.

## Landing at Botany Bay

I discovered the iconic, momentous image of 'The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay', by E. Phillips Fox some time after moving to Australia. I admired the imagination of the artist in concretising an historical and political event of significance with such narrative technique; being able to tell us a story through such lyrical imagery. I was so inspired by it that I thought of deconstructing and reconstructing the painting in a more contemporary way and with hindsight of a century. A few years earlier I had painted a negative of Jacques-Louis David's 'Napoleon Crossing the Alps' (1801) and it was a challenge I wanted to repeat, but this time with an Australian painting as the subject matter.

But before going further I have to introduce myself. I was born in Mauritius from four generations of Franco-Mauritians on both sides of the family.

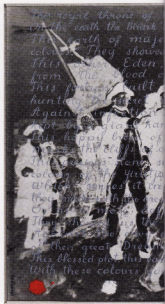


My ancestor Pierre Charoux came to l'Isle de France (Mauritius) from Corrèze, Limousin (France) in 1790. On my mother's side Pierre Jacques Tanguy Desmarais came from Brittany in 1796. The Dutch had exploited the desert island for just over a century and then left. In 1715 the French East India Company claimed Mauritius for France and established the colony. The British invaded and took over in 1810.

At school we learnt everything in French. At high school we shifted to English (mainly taught by Irish Jesuits, in my case) which was hard for a Francophile. My only talent and passion was in the arts. My first job, for three years, was as a cartoonist, photographer, and journalist in a local daily paper. I had already started exhibiting, winning prizes, and having solo shows in Mauritius and Reunion Island. At twenty one I took a cargo boat around the Cape of Good Hope on my way to London. Art education was at its best there, more avant-garde than the rest of Europe. That was 1961.

Notting Hill Gate was to be my base for another twenty two years. I gradually travelled around Britain and the rest of Europe, with longer periods in Belgium and France. Soon I found I had a foot in both cultures—I felt at home in 'la perfide Albion' and 'naughty France'. The countryside became familiar on both sides of the Channel from the north of Britain to the south of France. Chauvinism had faded away a long time ago. After a month or so in France, in my dreams people spoke French, then English, and vice versa. Since I was teaching art part time, holidays would be spent in Spain and Morocco, Italy, Greece, or Turkey, later on America and finally Asia and Australia.

I visited Australia in 1982 and gave a few lectures at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, UNSW College of Fine Arts, and at tertiary institutions in Brisbane. I had been enticed by Clive James



after seeing the television programme of his first visit back home—the bird's-eye view of Sydney's Harbour and the Opera House certainly had the wow factor! I had followed his reviews in Britain for years, and on the plane to Sydney I read *My Unreliable Memoirs*.

Apart from studying with Barbara Hanrahan at the Central School of Art in the early '60s (and being one of the characters in her book *Michael and Me and the Sun*, later on), as students we discovered Sidney Nolan and Brett Whitely and other Australian artists from both cultures, by visiting their sometime first shows in London. Later on there was a wave of late '70s and early '80s Australian films which had hit the capital. But basically I knew not much else of this island continent.

In 1983 on April Fool's Day, I moved to Sydney. Since then I have traveled the east coast from the Daintree Forest to Tasmania. But I yet have to discover the Outback—having only flown over it numerous times (those Nolan landscapes again). Since I have been here for 27 years, I have inevitably absorbed some of the local cultures. Apart from Tasmania, the landscape is so drastically

different. A wilderness, an emptiness, and a vastness that is part of its beauty. I can't help but be in awe of the Aboriginals who have survived and prosper physically in some of the land's most inhospitable environments. I also empathise with the way such people live with a foot in both cultures. In this way it reminds me of my own experience of growing up deracinated from a French background and spending nearly half a century in Anglo-Saxon countries. Having a foot in two cultures broadens and enriches one's experiences and understanding of the world. It had been my choice to spend most of my life in English-speaking countries.

### 'Strangers on the Shore' (1995–96)

But let's go back to the Phillips Fox painting. It is so beautifully constructed, from Captain Cook (the painting is about him after all), a majestic figure with his controlling gesture to the soldiers aiming at the two Aboriginal figures, as if to say: 'don't shoot!' The seamen are ready with their guns or at work securing the lifeboat from the *Endeavour*. At the edge, Banks the botanist is slightly alarmed at this turn of events. No wonder this fictitious arrangement has become engraved in the nation's subconscious.

Then I wanted to reinterpret it. Alter its meaning in subtle ways, and leave the viewer to decipher them. 'Strangers on the Shore' became the first of three related works I eventually painted. The idea

Jacques Charoux, 'Strangers on the Shore', 1995–96, Wollongong City Gallery (1998.034); 'Colours Dreaming', 1996, Wollongong City Gallery (1998.035); 'Real Estate', 1996, Wollongong City Gallery (2008.004).



Against infection and the hand of war,  
*kept by a giant kangaroo, the yellow that*  
 This happy breed of men, this little world  
*marks the cliffs of our land and is the sacred*  
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
*colour of the Yirritja, and the black that*  
 which serves it in the office of a wall  
*they made with the great fire they used to shape us.*

Or as a mote defensive to a house,  
*They showed us the charcoal from the fires*  
 Against the envy of less happier lands,  
*of their great Dreaming tracks and told us,*  
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.  
*'With these colours you can keep the Dreaming.'*

Going through that slow process I realised that the Australian text contained four colours and the English one ('silver sea', or metal and sword). So I decided to add the five colours at the bottom of the work, with silver strategically and symmetrically placed in the middle. But instead of using paint I chose an adhesive with the pigments to go on top, in accordance with a long-established Aboriginal practice. But are the colours themselves characteristic of these two nations, the silver of the sophisticated weapon or dagger, and the black, red, white, and yellow of burnt wood, blood, clay, and sandy cliffs? The last line of the text was perfectly suited. So I called the work 'Colours Dreaming', with its Aboriginal resonance.

### 'Real Estate' (1996)

Through the process of painting 'Colours Dreaming', the idea of doing a triptych emerged. But I now see the finished triptych more as a trilogy, a group of three related stories, or tragedies, each one with its own identity—three different yet complementary statements. For the third painting I thought a positive would be more suited as a counter balance to the other two negatives. And wanting to analyse its structure or composition, I kept overlaying black lines on the picture—and the next day changing them again.

Phillips Fox was among 'Australia's most gifted colourist and figure painters', wrote his biographer in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. 'Celebrated for his painting of sunlight effects, he combined Impressionist-oriented vision with an academic training. Apart from portraits and

landscapes he mainly painted elegant female figures and family groups; his repertoire extended to market and Arab scenes and rural subjects.' So he was well suited to be the painter of choice to depict such a scene. In 1900 he was given a commission (under the Gilbee bequest) to paint a historic picture for the National Gallery of Victoria. A condition was that the picture had to be painted overseas. Fox accordingly left for London in 1901.

He certainly had studied the dynamics of group figures created by the great classical masters. The rapport and movement of the characters in this painting infuse it with energy and purposefulness. As I dissected it, the compositional lines eventually seemed to converge on one area: a circular idyllic vision of a landscape. Was I imaging this or was it Phillips Fox's subliminal intention? After all was not it the purpose of Britain to actually discover new pastures, new land to colonise, since America was fighting for its independence (which it was to obtain six years after Cook landed at Botany Bay).

*the compositional lines eventually  
 seemed to converge on one area:  
 a circular idyllic vision of a  
 landscape*

Once I had understood the statement, the execution was swift compared to the two earlier paintings. Here both identity and cultures clash. The mercantilism of the modern world where everything has a price tag, can be bought and preferably fenced; as opposed to the timeless approach of the Aboriginal culture, where the land is not just territory but the soul, the self, and above all, ancestral. The connection is spiritual, mystical. The tragedy is the near impossibility of reconciliation. Without judging or being negative, one can feel the cruelty of an almost insoluble dilemma.

Today, isn't it still the dream of 'this happy breed of men' (to quote Shakespeare), to own their individual parcel of land preferably as close to the littoral as possible?

Artist Jacques Charoux works from Thirroul, New South Wales—an archive of his work can be found at [www.jacquescharoux.com.au](http://www.jacquescharoux.com.au)