

*Exhibition: Lauraine Diggins Fine Art,
Melbourne. September 2006*

LAND

MIKE GREEN

In Mike Green's studio is a table littered with the small plastic toys of other decades, other cultures, everything from kewpie dolls and baby Christs to superheroes and thimble-sized Mexican cakes. They sit there like actors and props, waiting to be transformed into the protagonists and scenarios of the metaphoric dramas that are Mike Green's recent paintings. There they re-emerge as innocents, menacers or what-have-you, bathed in various shades of the not-quite-supernatural light that has always been a mesmerising subject of Green's paintings. Some of them take starring roles: a nylon blonde-bombshell Earth Mother, a cosmic plastic-vegetable juggler, a dodgy dictator whose bland plastic face has blurred with John Howard's features. Some, like the dictator, are nasty; others are bizarrely humorous, like *Supermarket Man* flying by with his shopping bag past two folkloric Mexican bystanders, who look askance.

The events in these paintings are all impossible, but something real is happening here and Mr Jones probably doesn't know what it is. The Mexican bystanders might. Maybe the source of their unease is not so much the goofy superhero as the emblem featured on his shopping bag: a detail from a mural by the great Mexican painter, Diego Rivera. Perhaps they sense this kind of appropriation as a debasement of their culture.

Plastic supermarket bags dance windborne across the Australian outback in *Land*, just like the detritus that blows in endless streams across the deserts of Mexico that Green speaks of. Is this a painting about environmental issues? Yes and no. It's more than that. From a purely aesthetic point of view it could equally be a painting about how even a plastic shopping bag can be transformed into a thing of beauty, and how an artist of Green's facility can make it appear to be floating in the wind. Also aloft in the painting's wind is a tattered tapa, one of Green's constructed family totems from his earlier

Reconstructing Memory series. So the painting could also mean that personal histories as well as entire cultures, caught up in the winds of change, leave their traces, their detritus. All of these stream-consciousness paintings are resonant with similar meanings and allusions.

This exhibition marks an unexpected and exciting turn in Green's trajectory as a painter, and not only in his choice of images. His paintings have always been metaphors for his psychic landscape, but with *Land* his interior world has opened up to embrace increasingly disturbing aspects of the outside world and the culture we all share. A glamorous cyclamen high-heel is magnified into an object of idol-worship in the lurid *Moonlight Shoe* landscape, a symbol not only of the seduction of consumer goods, but the seduction of ideas. "What Chicken?" asks the self-styled dictator of public opinion, adept at denying the truth of what he holds before the people's very eyes. What is Virginia telling the assembled throng of innocents about the Mexican cakes miraculously raining down like bombs? That they're delicious? That it's not happening? Either way, whatever spin she's putting on it, she's letting them know they'll be much better off when it's happened.

During his travels, Green was impressed by the Mexican and Tongan tradition of assembling detritus - squashed bottle tops or beer cans, for example - into objects of remarkable beauty. In *Strange Night* illuminated beer cans wryly become cosmically charged objects of meteoric wonder. Overhead, a comet flashes by. salt lake in Green's *Shootout at Lake Ballard*. Green's lines, however, are made not by natural phenomena but by hoons riding their motorbikes across the surface of the lake. He compares them to the mysterious Nazca lines in the Peruvian desert; from the air they, too, resemble enormous drawings that have a strange beauty to them.

In *Land*, not only personal histories and cultures are caught up in the winds of change, but entire landscapes as well, be they scarred by man or weathered by nature, be they rubbish-strewn or aflame with white-hot nuclear threat. This leads to the overwhelming

question of whether or not this land - which in a crucial sense defines us all - can still, as it has in the past, be considered as eternal and immutable as time itself.

Victoria Hammond

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