

# CHRISTOPHE STIBIO

## *Reading landscapes*

Certain traps are hard to avoid. If I tell you that Christophe Stibio trained as a painter in France and then, by way of rebellion, or was it simply an extension of his education, took himself to China and studied in the Chinese way before moving to this country, where he continued to paint the landscape ...

If I start like that, you will probably think that he shouldn't be too hard to place. We can look at the long line of landscape painters who've responded to Australia in various ways, and we should be able to fit him in somewhere, shouldn't we? In fact, Christophe is not at all easy to relate to the traditions of France, China, and this country.

We'll start with France. Can we see anything French in his work? Yes? No? Both. French thinkers are generally credited with being 'logical', that is, if their thinking takes them in a certain direction they feel compelled to act in accordance. Thinking is not idle. It has force. One must go where it directs. Thinking can precede impulse, and control it. Any given matter can be taken apart by logic, and put together again, a little more purposefully than before. Christophe's painting is still very French, if we look for its controlling logic. Why, then, did he go to China?

I think he felt the best way to develop himself was to come to terms with, expose himself to, a tradition as strong as, but different from, the one in which he began. It is a measure of his courage that he was prepared to throw himself in at the deep end and work under Chinese teachers for several years.

Foreigners are likely to think of Chinese art as one long, heavily-controlled tradition. This may be true, in part, but anyone looking hard enough will find that many of that country's artists have found alternative ways of doing things, and of course, China's art is connected to its writing – its calligraphy, the very forms of its letters and therefore its thought – in ways unfamiliar to westerners. China is not only a different place from Europe to look at, it has a different way of looking, and different methods of rendering what it sees. This expansion of mind was an addition the young Christophe sought.

And so he reached Australia, where he has painted in a number of places, most recently and consistently in the Lake Mungo region of south-west New South Wales. Why there? Largely, I think, because nobody owns it. It's there for the claiming, despite the aboriginal presence over many thousands of years, and the fascination it holds for literary and artistic whites (see *The Custodians*, by Nicholas Jose, Macmillan 1997). Man hasn't done much to it, but its subjection to nature's forces is evident in Christophe's work and/or in photographs if that's the way you prefer to make your approach. It's distinct, yet so undefined, at least to our minds today, that it cries out for interpretation, and this makes it, in a way that I want to propose, ideal for Christophe's painting.

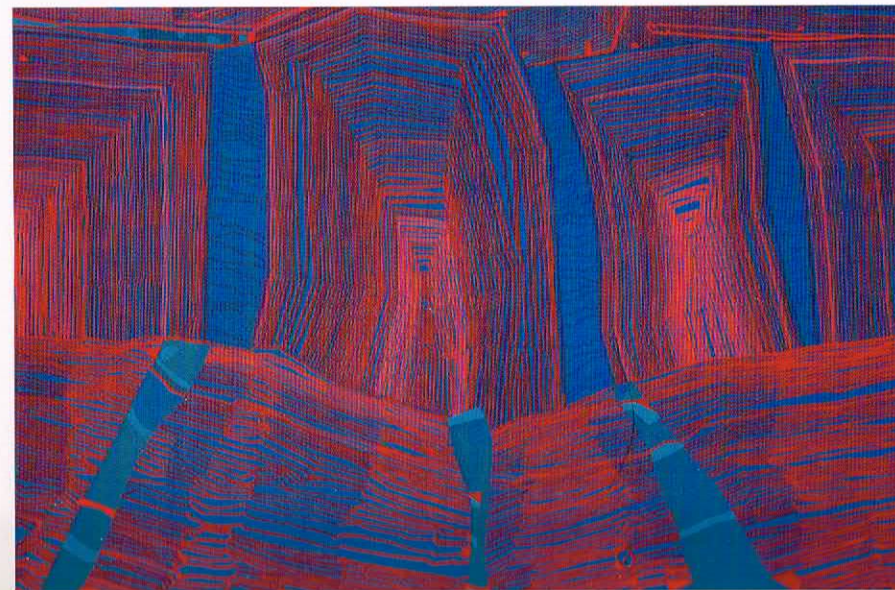
The way to look at a Christophe Stibio painting is not to see it as depicting, portraying, something in front of the artist, but as a reaction, a response, to what's seen. This sounds simple, but he will tell you that he has set out to deconstruct the 'monolithic' point of

view of Renaissance perspective. He does not claim to be alone in this, but will mention Cezanne as the starting point: Cezanne, and those artists since who have seen artistic creation as a process of reconstruction or reorganisation. This is more simply done – becomes more possible, if you wish – if you put aside some of the choices, alternatives, available to artists.

In Christophe's case, it is quickly seen that he eliminates colour as an area of conjectural response to what he sees; for the most part, he uses one colour for areas and another for line. It's paradoxical that this restriction adds power to the picture rather than takes it away! Similarly, viewers may notice that the scale is hard to read in many of his pictures. Are we looking at a small space, or a huge one? Quite commonly, both readings are possible. If asked about this, he will tell you that he doesn't try to explain either the landscape in front of him or what he is saying about it. He simply – simply? It's very complex! – sets down his reaction, and he does this by re-creating the space under consideration, not by depicting it according to notions already existing in his or the viewer's mind.

This is a chancy business, and he will surprise you by comparing what he does to what death does to life: that is, it forces a last reorganisation of what we think about things. Finality means the last, definite reorganisation. So I think we can look at Christophe's paintings in terms of a clarification of the self, of the thought in the mind, taking place in front of a landscape, a place depicted, it's true, but shown, not so much for what it is, as for what it causes to happen in the painter's mind.

Chester Eagle



*Where were you when it happened* #14 2010 natural pigments on paper mounted on cotton duck 56 x 96 cm