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Talk title: Perception, History and Ecology: the Heritage of Molyneux's Question in Representations of New World Landscapes

Molyneux's Question concerned the powers of visual recognition of a blind man newly restored to sight. Answers by John Locke, David Hume and others produced conviction in the tactile origin of visual perception in aesthetic writings from Joseph Addison, William Hazlitt, John Ruskin to Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Inness and Walter Pater. Such writings and the paintings that inspired them assume an identity between the painted canvas and the retinal image based on 'the classical assumption that two-dimensional vision is immediate, primitive or sensory, while three-dimensional vision is secondary, derived or perceptual' (James J. Gibson).

For William Gilpin the Picturesque was an essentially empirical process that transformed observations of nature into general impressions. But if, according to Locke, retinal images are unintelligible without prior tactile experience of their objects, then problems arise for artists making, or writers appraising, paintings of 'untouched' nature in new worlds that suffered from 'the want of associations, such as arise amid the scenes of the old world' (Thomas Cole). For the Transcendentalist Emerson, however, we do not perceive the world empirically, 'but as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity, for the contemplation of the soul.' This is because, following Bishop Berkeley and Immanuel Kant, he believed that the optical realization of the third dimension was determined by divine revelation rather than the habitual association of separate sense memories. As the century proceeded, evolutionary science put perception on a subjective footing that sanctioned the prophetic intuitionism that James Hinton advocated in 'Seeing with the Eyes Shut' (1862). This found its corollary in the expressive thickening of paint and flattening of space in Impressionist paintings across the globe.

Paintings are not statements of ideas, yet many in this exhibition are broadly informed by the perceptual alternatives I have outlined. Some evoke interchange between natural and human history that includes oblique awareness of ecological devastation and indigenous dispossession. This paper looks at how their acquisitive or disinterested qualities of compositional cohesion in representing new world landscapes expresses a sense of fit or misfit between perception, human history and ecology.

Biography

Richard Read is Emeritus Professor of Art History and Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. He has published in major journals on the relationship between literature and the visual arts, nineteenth and twentieth-century European, American and Australian art history, contemporary film, and complex images in global contexts. His book *Art and Its Discontents: the Early Life of Adrian Stokes* (2003) was the winner of a national book prize. His major research project *on The Reversed Canvas in Western Art* was funded by an ARC Discovery Grant and sections have appeared in several major journals. In recent years he has taught and lectured at the University of Bristol, the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the University of Aberystwyth, Tate Britain, University of East Anglia, King's College, Cambridge and the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Durham. He is the convener of this symposium.

Painting for discussion: Fitz Henry Lane, *Brace's Rock, Brace's Cove*, 1864