Two Rooms

Michael Shepherd
Gond
21 July – 19 August 2023

P O Box 68643
Victoria Street West
Auckland 1010
New Zealand

16 Putiki Street
info@tworooms.co.nz
tworooms.co.nz
+64 9 360 5900

Associated through much of his career with Auckland, Waikato and the Hauraki Plains, Michael Shepherd was able to investigate 'pastures new' in 2021 (and subsequently) through receiving the invitation-only Henderson House residency in Alexandra, Central Otago. Not surprisingly given his sensitivity to environment in its many aspects – historical, social, ecological – Central Otago figures prominently in Shepherd's new works, whether in the big skies and low horizons, the distinctive geomorphology of the region (*Matins in Manuherikia*, *Tyger YHWH*), the botany and natural life (*Three Thickets*, *Gond*, *1914*), the characteristic climate and weather (from the snow-covered terrain of *Corsage for a Cortège*, to the horizonless, misty prospect of *Wild Irishman*). But don't expect Grahame Sydney-like spectacular scenery, azure skies and dramatic cloud formations from Shepherd's paintings; his sensibility is attuned to other effects – quieter, deeper, more subdued, inviting reflection and contemplation over more purely visual responses.

Two paintings in *Gond* make immediate connection with Central Otago through their titles: *Matins in Manuherekia* and *The Lauds in Lauder.* The Manuherekia River flows south from the Maniototo and joins the Clutha River at Alexandra; Lauder is a small settlement on the main road between Alexandra and Ranfurly. These place names – Maori and Scottish in origin respectively – evoke the precolonial and post-colonial history of the region. 'Matins' and 'lauds' are early morning prayers offered in Christian churches as part of the canonical hours marking the temporal divisions of the day. These are morning paintings, the time of day suggested by the low-toned and sombre colouring of *Matins* and the slightly brighter tonality of *Lauds*, as if lightly touched by early sunshine. The big skies and low horizons of the region recur but Shepherd's is largely a wintry vision with low light, relatively featureless backgrounds and with skies – often painted with exhilarating freedom and panache (as in *Custody of the Eye* and *Three Thickets*) – which range from pearly opalescence to threatening darkness.

In *Gond* the canvases (in three cases) or paper supports (in the other ten), painted throughout in polymers with occasional mixed media elements, are similarly structured with a dominant, centrally-placed foreground object, a structure emphasised by the squarish shape of the supports (invariably 580mm x 760mm), and reminiscent, Shepherd informs me, of the Vanitas tradition in early 17th century Dutch painting.[1] The foregrounded object may be a tree, a rock, an insect, a shrub, a vase. In *Matins in Manuherekia* this central object is a massive striated rock, a schist tor from the Dunstan Mountains, a deposit from the ancient breaking-up of Gondwanaland – the vast continent of which India, Australia New Zealand, Antarctica and South America once formed a part, also evoked by the series title, *Gond*. In Shepherd's rendering this enigmatic geological excrescence calls to mind obsolete military ordnance such as an abandoned tank, while simultaneously appearing to sprout antennae like some fossilised insect. *Tyger YHWH* also transforms a striated rock into a complex symbol by allusion to William Blake's 'The Tyger' ('Did he who made the Lamb make thee?') and Yahweh, the God of the Israelites.

The central object in *The Lauds in Lauder* is a bunch of dried grass stems in a vessel. These are typical of the vegetation imported with the settlers to establish the farming regime which inevitably displaced the original native vegetation, often to the point of near

[1] Some of the details in this essay come from a phone conversation I had with Michael Shepherd in July 2023. My grateful thanks to Michael for his generosity in discussing the paintings with me.

extinction. Ecological colonialism, a recurrent theme in Shepherd's work, is the origin of much of the warfare and battleground imagery in the paintings. In this case the plants are not depicted in pigment but are actual preserved stems collaged to the surface, a mixed media technique also employed in *1914* and *Res Publica*.

One of three works on canvas, *1914* also employs battleground imagery to evoke environmental degradation. The title recalls the beginnings of aerial warfare in World War I with what appears at first to be a fragile-winged German aeroplane (perhaps a Fokker or Albatros) disintegrating and falling to earth. Closer inspection reveals that the object is in reality the remnants of a decomposing insect – a giant New Zealand dragon fly (uropetala carovei or kapokakowai) – which has been preserved and fixed in transparent resin on the surface of the canvas.

In *Res Publica* (Latin for 'public affairs'), also on canvas, Shepherd has constructed the central object out of closely packed native reeds (oi-oi or apodasmia similis, also known as jointed rush) together with an axehead made from pieces of wood thereby replicating the symbolism of Republican Rome (and revived in Mussolini's Italy). The word 'fascism' in Latin signifies a bundle of sticks ('fasces') bound together with an axehead and used by Roman rulers as a symbol of the power and unity of the state. What are the implications of such imagery in *Res Publica*? Shepherd is not, of course, using a known fascist symbol in a spirit of emulation or admiration. On the contrary, he seems to imply scepticism (widely shared by Maori) about the efficacy and desirability of republicanism for New Zealand.

In this respect *Res Publica* connects with several other paintings which include imagery with political or religious implications, as in the monarchical symbolism of the orb and crown in *Three Thickets* and *Orb*, the religious connotations of *See* (ecclesiastical power – as in Holy See – not 'sight') and the allusion to a deconstructed New Zealand coat of arms in *Corsage for a Cortège*. Painted deliberately before the death of Queen Elizabeth II, and completed after as a vanitas in 2022 (note that this is the only work in *Gond* not dated 2021) this last-named painting presents a pale-coloured floral offering, primarily white and pink, in a vessel festooned with the deconstructed insignia of the New Zealand coat of arms – the Southern Cross, the golden fleece, the sheaf of wheat, the crossed hammers, the three ships, the Pakeha woman and Maori man – plus a cascade of pearls (doubling as tears?), presumably from the rim of King Edward's crown also from the coat of arms. This symbolism seemingly implies commitment to the idea of constitutional monarchy and concern about its dissolution with the Queen's passing. *Orb*, also known as *Rootmass* (the name inscribed in the bottom right corner), resembles a hairy coconut with a cross on top, identical in form to the cross-and-orb familiar from the Crown Jewels as used in British coronation ceremonies. Presumably the association of this symbol with a mass of roots is suggestive of the constitutional origins of New Zealand in the partnership between the Crown and Maori in the Treaty of Waitangi.

In *Three Thickets*, against an exquisitely painted pale sky, a crown constructed of thorns suggests both the 'crown of thorns' from the symbolism associated with the Crucifixion and the crown as a symbol of worldly authority in a monarchical system. The crown is constructed from branches of matagouri, also known as Wild Irishman), a tangled, thorny shrub ubiquitous in the region. Matagouri is hated by pastoral farmers who try to eradicate it but to Shepherd it represents the ineradicable spirit of the land as a remnant of the original and drastically altered post-colonial landscape. Far from useless in the ecological sense, it is a 'nitrogen fixer' which enriches the surrounding soil allowing other plants to

survive under its thorny protection. In *Wild Irishman*, the flimsy but enduring shrub, almost invisible in the misty atmosphere, assumes the lineaments of the Christian cross and thus becomes a symbol of sacredness, suffering and survival. *See* shows a cruelly pot-restricted plant reaching earthwards and skyward like King Lear's 'poor bare forked animal'.

In *Apollo and Daphne* Shepherd turns to Greek myth to embody his intimations. A subject famously treated by artists such as Pollaiolo (1441) and Bernini (c. 1625), Daphne is transformed by her father into a tree to escape the pursuing Apollo; in Shepherd's version, an image of benign metamorphosis, a frail juvenile tree form (matai? miro?) emerges from a rotting trunk which doubles as a kind of blunderbuss or grotesque beheaded toad.

Myth of a different sort lies behind the painting *Gond*. Shepherd informs me that the plant depicted here is Charmichaelia Crassicaulae: 'A remarkable broom that has adapted to subalpine conditions. Leafless, it photosynthesises through its stems. It is black, and known as black coral bloom… Specimens over a metre high are probably pre-European. It has an unearthly presence, and it comes to me as a Gond'.[2] It easy to see why such a plant appeals to Shepherd's sensibility. The Gonds (from whom 'Gondwanaland' is derived) were an ancient tribe in India with a remarkable mythology. Gonds venerated animals and plants, especially the saja tree, the abode of their Goddess.

Collectively the remarkable paintings in *Gond* celebrate the sacredness of the earth and mourn its desecration. In William Wordsworth's great lines: 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,/With rocks, and stones, and trees'.

Peter Simpson, July 2023

[2] Michael Shepherd, personal communication, 16 July 2023.