Celebrating Townsville

EDUCATION RESOURCE

Hervey's Range [detail] by James Brown 1992, JCU Art Collection
ARTIST: JAMES BROWN
ARTWORK: Hervey’s Range Diptych

James BROWN
b.1953 Australia

Hervey’s Range 1992
Encaustic on canvas
144 x 114 cm [each panel]

Donated by the Artist in 1992 to the James Cook University Art Collection, Photograph: Michael Marzik

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

At the time that James Brown created Hervey’s Range (1992) he was exploring the painting medium called encaustic painting. Brown’s approach to this medium was to mix oil paint with melted beeswax in a frying pan. His manner of working allowed for quick gestures. If he did not move quickly, the paint began to dry as the brush moved from the hot wax mixture in the pan to his canvas.

The process also allowed for an equally quick potential to layer colours and make alterations. More important to Brown, however, is that the wax-based medium took on the appearance and “feel” of skin that seemed to float above the canvas, even though the paint in reality was firmly attached to it.

This idea of the paint film being likened to physical skin underpins this painting. Brown’s vision of this portrayed landscape—as a screen of thin trees wedged amongst boulders—is all about seeing landscape as a skin or a veneer of superficial forest features underneath which lies the growing humus and burnt remnants of trees.

To capture his vision of landscape as a skin overlaying an internal support, Brown initially drew his subject in charcoal. This charcoal drawing signifies the landscape’s internal support—its grit and structure. He then overlaid this drawing with translucent encaustic colours. By intention, the charcoal drawing is left exposed through gaps in the encaustic layers of paint.

In short, Brown’s process in creating this painting mirrors his view of landscape as a system of internal structures supporting an outer layer of surface details.
QUESTIONS/DISCUSS

**Look** closely at the painting. Can you **locate** some of the underlying areas of charcoal that were initially laid down by the artist?

**Read** about the artwork and find what is meant by the term encaustic. **Explain** it here:

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**Compare** the encaustic process used by the artist in *Hervey’s Range* (1992) with the oil painting process used in his other painting in the exhibition titled *Referencing Strang* (2011).

If you look at both paintings can you **describe** any difference in the type of paint marks that the artist has used?

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ARTIST: JAMES BROWN
ARTWORK: Referencing Strang

James BROWN
b.1953 Australia

Referencing Strang 2011
Oil on canvas
100 x 80 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph: Michael Marzik

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Sometimes paintings have their origins in uncommon circumstances. This is certainly the case with James Brown’s painting, Referencing Strang (2011). About five years ago Brown was purchasing antiquarian European etchings from an online auction site and found the soft-ground etching, House in the Lane (1897), by the British printmaker, William Strang (1859–1921). Brown was only able to view a thumbnail illustration of this print before purchasing it.

Brown’s interest in Strang’s etching was based on what he could see of its composition and curving rhythms. Sadly, on receiving the print through the post, his vision of what he had seen in the thumbnail picture did not match with the reality of the full-size print. Essentially Strang’s print was “too English” for Brown’s North Queensland taste and it lacked the strong dynamic lines and visually arresting features that Brown wanted to see.

Disappointed with his print by Strang, Brown sought to reconfigure the composition of the etching into a painting that captured his vision. In short, he transposed the essential compositional structure of the print into the painting, Referencing Strang, but added the colours of the North Queensland bush, the awkward structure of the gum trees, the spikiness of tropical foliage and, importantly, he presented the centre-of-interest in the painting as barren of key pictorial features — unlike Strang’s print which focuses attention on a distant house.

House in the Lane (1897), by the British printmaker, William Strang (1859–1921) from the artist’s Print Collection. Photograph: James Brown.
Examine the William Strang etching and the James Brown painting. List the main differences between the two?

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Do you agree that Brown has given his painting a certain quality that reminds us of the Australian landscape? Explain how he has achieved this?

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Throughout history artists have been influenced by earlier artworks and made reference to them in their own work. If you intended to make reference to an important historical artwork in your own art, which artwork and artist would you choose and why?

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Celebrating Townsville EDUCATION RESOURCE for secondary students

The aim of this resource is to offer insights into the works of art featured in the exhibition. It is intended as a starting point for generating ideas, for encouraging student research, and as a basis for discussion during exhibition visits. The resource provides background information on the development of particular works, and offers focus questions and suggested activities. It can be used in a variety of ways, both for student groups, and for individual study and research.

Acknowledgment: Thank-you to the artists who provided a statement about their work to assist with the development of this resource.

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