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.
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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