

Tony Windberg: Wonders of the Worlds

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Photo Bohdan Warchonij

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Always a thoughtful and rigorous practitioner, Tony Windberg's concern for our natural environment and his interest in how we see and, more importantly, how we interpret what we see, underscores his motivation to make paintings. Windberg crafts his work from ideas, from the landscapes he encounters, images he uncovers, and his extraordinary ability to manipulate paint on a surface. They are beautiful, poignant, contemporary narratives exploring our ability as human beings to shape our future through the knowledge of our past.

As a young art student in his first weeks at Curtin's School of Art in the early 1980s, he created a painting of the studio wall with great veracity to capture the passage of time. A nondescript wall overlain with decades of white paint burying the activities of his predecessors, this *Trompe-l'œil* painting documented his interest in history and in our unique ability to leave a trace of engagement as a prompt to future action. It also cleverly played on our ability to read paint on a surface as an illusion of reality. Later in the year, at the School's art camp at Rottnest, he painted an aerial, topographical record of the island's rhythmic structure and botanical adaptation in a painting entitled *Exploring the Island – Five days in Winter 1986*. It was clear from these

♦ Tony Windberg in his studio. Photo Rob Baker.

early works that Windberg was an artist committed to learning more about his craft and using those skills to provide information and prompt deep thought about the world we inhabit.

His exhibition at Bunbury Regional Gallery, four decades later, elaborates this fascination in intriguing new ways, while staying close to his initial impulses. His sophistication as an image-maker makes these new works a powerful commentary on our relationship to our planet and our aspirations to conquer new worlds. In this series of paintings, remarkable remnants of past civilisations rise up from dry terrain. Their awesome beauty reminds us of our capacity as humans to create structures and ideas that have survived millennia. But, of course, it also reminds us of our ability to kill, maim, destroy and decimate the environment that supports us.

In the five large triptychs and the painting of Petra at BRAG, Windberg combines images of ruins from Egypt, Jordan and Athens with sourced NASA images of the surface of Mars. Rendered with pigments made by grinding up marble, limestone and iron oxide, the



♦ *Wonders of the Worlds VII*, 2022, conte crayon, oil, 40.5 x 153cm, above, and *Wonders of the Worlds IX*, conte crayon, oil, 50.5 x 130cm, by Tony Windberg. Photos Rob Baker.

disparate landscapes merge together. An Egyptian sand dune arches into a hill on Mars, a pyramid into a Martian mountain. The colouration mimics the old tome in which he found the images he has transformed in these paintings, and suggests a certain ambiguity. As he explains in his diary notes; “Are we looking back; or is it of the now, seen from an unknown point in time – the future?”

In one large painting the carved façade at Petra is so convincingly rendered its gritty surface almost demands physical contact to ensure it isn't a replica. This ambiguity with what exists physically and what we construct in our brains is a further elaboration. It has long been a fascination for Windberg and in this new body of work, he brings all his breathtaking technical facilities to the task with great effect.

In some paintings, single and occasionally small groups of men populate the vast spaces and massive structures, reminding us of the scale of these enterprises and also of our relative insignificance in the grand sweep of history. The young man contemplating the pyramid prompts a conversation about what we both see. What is similar in our readings of this strange structure, and what do we see differently? Our past informs the future, but as Windberg says, “the term future always seems bundled with persistent optimism.” Is this something we need to critique?

Windberg posits “human civilisations have built great monuments and achieved extraordinary heights. As we look to other worlds, do we have the power to save our own?” He convincingly draws us into a realm of possibilities. What is our future? When we can no longer inhabit our planet, will we litter Mars with a collection of great monuments to our hubris? What role do we as individuals have to play in this grand narrative?

Tony Windberg's work is compelling. His meticulous craftsmanship and rigorous intelligence are immediately engaging. Once trapped within the beautifully wrought surfaces of his works, we find ourselves contemplating the significant issues that niggle away constantly at our consciousness. These are not only beautiful paintings but also prompts for action, reminders of our responsibility as citizens of this planet to remain alert, critical and engaged.

