

## Cave/Quarry/Creek: On Alex Seton's *The Great Escape*

'Time, said Austerlitz in the observation room in Greenwich, was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and being bound to the planet turning on its own axis was no less arbitrary than..., say, a calculation based on the growth of trees or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate.'

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001), p. 141

'To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience,' writes the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. 'It is depth that counts, not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane...these are as much as a [human being] can fully experience.'<sup>1</sup> For Kavanagh, amassing a breadth of surface knowledge does not lead to a greater understanding of the world. Instead, it is the direct attention and care given to a particular place that allows for a discovery of true knowledge. What can you possibly know of a mountain range, asks Kavanagh, if you do not know the ground at your feet?

For his solo exhibition, *The Great Escape* at Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, Alex Seton returns to the landscape of his childhood. In doing so, Seton is undertaking a form of vertical and horizontal mapping—where depth becomes more crucial than width. There is a particular concentration to Seton's perimeters—a specificity of place—with four key sites functioning as the map's coordinates: Wombeyan Caves, the now-defunct Wombeyan Quarry, Guineacor Creek, and the family home—the off-grid and purpose-built 'Greenhood'.

Part tribute, part investigation of place, part familial return, *The Great Escape* twists and folds geological time into our personal experience of memory, and the formation of our older selves.

### 1. Throw

What do you learn when you're skipping stones? You learn about hesitation, and how to count the leaps. You discover that you hold your breath between each jump. You learn to argue over which stone will be the most competitive. You learn about weight and balance, the length of the throw, and the exact way you need to bend your elbow. You learn that the strength with which you throw the projectile is not the key to success.

There is a thrill in following a skipping stone's trajectory. You learn gravity can be a friend or a foe, and that what appears to be heavy might also have a lightness that can bounce on water. You learn luck. You learn all things must sink. You might become superstitious. You might start to collect the stones.

For *Anything Will Bounce If You Throw It Hard Enough* (2020), Seton takes two skipping stones from the banks of Guineacor Creek and (re)presents these as large-scale sculptures. Guineacor Creek was a site of childhood discovery for Seton, a landscape that offered up clay and driftwood and quartz crystals in the dirt. But it was also the site of childhood boredom—pre-Internet, pre-Smartphone—and he and his brothers squabbled and fought and threw stones at the river.

While these two sculptures speak to Seton's preoccupation with rendering realistic objects in calcite, there is also a sense of distortion in their size. That is, their magnitude elicits a feeling of disorientation, a sense that these stones are slightly off kilter. Just as the original skipping stones function as stand-ins for Guineacor Creek, these doubles also

function as stand-ins for the Wombeyan Caves and Wombeyan Quarry. One stone has been shaped out of polished Marulan Onyx, while the other has been formed out of marble extracted from the quarry. In using these materials, Seton enables these works to become pins on the exhibition's larger topographical map. They not only become the geological evidence of a particular landscape, but also the temporal evidence of Seton's childhood.

The skill with which these stones have been carved also gives a push/ pull softness to their hard shells—the onyx almost looks as if it will dissolve into liquid; the marble gives off the 'veiny' appearance of the flesh inside the thumb. They feel as if they *could* move or transform, even if they remain solid. Hidden behind this movement is a question—what is it you are looking at? And the answer: a mirror, a trick, a drop of water, a paperweight, a featherweight, a creek, a quarry, a cave, a stone.

## 2. Tunnel

'The past is present', writes Daniel Birnbaum in *Chronology* (2005). 'Something has happened and the echoes are still resonating in my head...The past lingers on, yesterday reverberates into today.'<sup>2</sup> Step into a darkened tunnel and you might be reminded of what came before, or you might be thinking of what will come after. (Deleuze: '[Time] has to split'—it moves in two directions, or loops around itself, or remakes itself.)<sup>3</sup> Some of the moving images presented in Seton's *The Tunnel* show the landscape of Greenhood and the interior of his childhood home. Others show marble. Or they show ants crawling in the quarry. These videos are linked in that they are 'crystal-images' of moments filled with gestures, actions, and geological material.<sup>4</sup> And they are also *not linked* in that they have been shot across different time periods. Chronologically, these works span from 2007 to 2017, but, when viewed as a whole, we can shift and splice them together. We can move from a two-seater chair, to moss, to the splitting of marble. In creating our own montages and jump cuts, we are able to juxtapose differing temporal frames. But although the tunnel offers an escape from linearity, we can also decide to attend to smaller moments—zooming in and focusing on one in particular before moving on to the next.

(There is an added frame not visible here, but it still haunts this darkened tunnel. Another present incurs on the past—the landscape of Greenhood and its surrounds altered and reconstituted by fire. So, we look at moss and think of ash, or we look at water and think of drought, or we look at Seton carving in a claustrophobic tunnel and think of shelter. We look at marble and wish for permanence, rather than change.)

In W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (1995), the titular character investigates our concept of time (and its relationship to place) and finds it wanting. 'Is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather,' ponders Austerlitz, 'and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, which does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies.'<sup>5</sup> We leap back to our childhood home in an instant, we hear the sound of the insects, we leap forward to the marble we are carving in our hand, we leap back, or in reverse, or we overlap it with an adjacent track. We escape our history, or we find it again; we capture a moment because wish to revisit it. (But is capturing the same as being there?) Like his stones from Guineacor Creek, Seton's *The Tunnel* skips away from a linear apprehension of place—it works to create a maze *around* the landscape.

## 3. Track

If, as Austerlitz suggests, humans respond to weather cycles more than the construct of time, then these weather cycles are only becoming more insistent in their presence. Indeed, Seton's exhibition takes place during a summer marked by an unprecedented bushfire threat and a global ecological crisis. It also takes place at a time when public anger towards government inaction on climate change is reaching its own tipping point. As Bill McKibben argues in 'This is How Human Extinction Could Play Out' (2019), 'the physical world is going from backdrop to foreground.'<sup>6</sup> Another way of putting it: the air in the gallery is the same as the air outside.

And so Seton has brought geology, science and the weather into the gallery space. *The Track* is constructed out of Wombeyan marble dust that Seton has gathered from the refuse of other carvings. (The first step: collection of the past.) Seton has then baked this loose marble dust in the kiln, creating a series of tiles that rest on steel sheets in the gallery. (The second step: reusing and subsequently transforming what would otherwise be considered expendable.) But, depending on when you visit the gallery, these tiles will be at various stages of disintegration. They will break down, swell, and oxidise back into the original marble powder. (The third step: a kind of alchemy, an eternal return, 'from dust to dust'.) The shape of this track will grow as the length of the exhibition grows.

But what is causing such a metamorphosis? Calcium Carbonate (Marble) is baked in a kiln at over 825 degrees celsius, which causes it to transform into Calcium Oxide (Quicklime). Quicklime is not a stable property, and, as it cools, it will begin to react to the carbon dioxide in the air. What you are seeing in the gallery is Calcium Oxide absorbing Co<sub>2</sub>, which, in turn, returns it back to Calcium Carbonate. Quicklime is also what we would call a hygroscopic substance: it takes in the water from the surrounding air, which allows it to swell to at least two and a half times its original size. In its own way, *The Track* operates as a carbon offset loop (sequestering the carbon dioxide baked out of it in the kiln), a smaller version of carbon-capture—that much sought-after process of removing emissions from the atmosphere en masse. And, in doing so, it reveals the ways in which this natural material we so often think of as stable, hard, and immovable, has an ingrained ability to recalibrate and regenerate itself.

As with Seton's *The Tunnel* and *Anything Will Bounce If You Throw It Hard Enough*, here meaning and intention are carried along multiple lines. You can think of *The Track* as a time-machine, as a desire to undo a process that has already begun, as an environmental prototype, as a scientific experiment, as an artist considering the ecological cost and expenditure of working with a non-toxic geological material. (A non-toxic material still quarried, extracted and removed at commercial scale, nevertheless).



When someone uses the word 'escape' we most often take it to mean two things: 'a flight from confinement', or 'a distraction or relief from routine or reality.' And yes, you will find all these modes of escape hiding in Seton's exhibition. The escape from the everyday, the flight from a childhood home, the flight *back* to this same home, the retreat into memory and history, the artist's escape into material and aesthetic form.

But 'escape' is one of those words that has multiple meanings, some of them contradictory or not commonly used. 'Escape' can also mean 'to fail to be noticed or recalled by.' Another definition: 'a means of evading responsibility or commitment.' And as much as the title of this exhibition comes from Paul Brickhill's novel *The Great Escape* (1950), when reading this phrase in summer—a *particular summer* when the sun is a flare and the air is a mask—I also think of these second meanings. I think: what knowledge and

care is escaping us? I think: what action and responsibility is being avoided? I think of 'the great escape' as that which is being given permission to escape into the atmosphere unchecked.

There are some things we mustn't let abscond and dissipate, even if the air becomes clearer for a time. There are some things we need to capture—just as *The Track* is attempting to do—before they leak out.

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick Kavanagh, as quoted in Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House, 2016), p. 63

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Birnbaum, 'Crystals' in *Chronologies* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005), p. 33

<sup>3</sup>p. 36

<sup>4</sup>p. 36

<sup>5</sup>W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001), as quoted in D. Birnbaum, *Chronologies* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005), p. 9

<sup>6</sup>Bill McKibben, 'This Is How Human Extinction Could Play Out', *Rolling Stone* (09/04/19), <<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/bill-mckibben-falter-climate-change-817310/>>

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