



Juan Ford
Lord of the Canopy

JUAN FORD LORD OF THE CANOPY

Juan Ford has developed a reputation as one of this country's most accomplished painters. His works, photographic in nature, have covered imagery as varied as portraits, macro stills of nuclear tests to his most recent iconic images of Australian flora. He is a painter who is a descendant of past masters while also being firmly rooted within the present. However, there is more to Juan Ford than just being an amazing technician, a painter of national and more and more so international repute. He is, in the truest sense of the word, an artist.

While debate will rage about what constitutes an artist – particularly today in a world of cross-discipline, multi-media, hybrid practice – I would suggest that there is a short-list of prerequisites. Firstly, an artist needs to be technically competent. Secondly, one needs to be artistically engaged, both with what has come before and what is happening now. And finally, the work needs to say something: a strong, vigorous and intelligent conceptual base needs to inform one's practice. Juan Ford passes on all these fronts. He is an artist whose technical brilliance is matched equally by the thoroughness and intelligence of his conceptual framework. This exhibition, *Lord of the Canopy*, is testament to that.

This new work, while initially seeming to be a major diversion from Ford's recognisable painting practice, is in fact an extension both aesthetically and conceptually. Consisting of a major sculptural element and a monumental anamorphic painting, *Lord of the Canopy*, has a strong resemblance to Ford's painting practice, in particular his most recent works, which have depicted the Australian eucalypt: sometimes wrapped, sometimes dripping in thick paint, sometimes juxtaposed with a skull, a modern day *memento mori*. In many ways this installation is a Ford

painting where the viewer can enter and begin to further explore the key conceptual ideas, which have concerned the artist for over a decade. *Lord of the Canopy* continues to investigate the relationship between the natural and the constructed world, man and the environment and the relationship between art history and contemporary practice. While it is a giant leap from painting to installation the medium becomes irrelevant when, as Ford himself states, the work is underpinned by ideas.¹

In 2007 Ford held an exhibition of paintings under the title of *Inverted World*. While seemingly executed within the context of the long-standing portraiture tradition these works were in fact intended to be read as landscapes: each photographically rendered portrait was covered by the unmistakable shadow of a eucalypt. '*Artists have always responded to the Australian landscape, but so often in a way that involves some direct or abstract depiction of the sky, earth and horizon line. The figure always plays a minor part, or is completely absent*', declared Ford in his artist statement.² '*This series depicts an inversion of this paradigm, the Australian landscape imposing on a figure. Yet the landscape is secondary to the figure presented, far too often this is how we think of it.*'³ Continuing, Ford suggests that we are '*but a clutch of smart animals living tenuously on the moist outskirts of a massive desert, forever looking away from the centre, vandalising the landscape to hell. We forget that the environment that spawned us will laugh last, and reign on long, long after we have ceased to matter.*'⁴ This new work engages with many of these themes.

Upon entering *Lord of the Canopy* the viewer is confronted by a 15-metre tree wedged into the gallery, its trunk and canopy pushing against the containment of the walls. However, on closer inspection one realises the brutality of human intervention to achieve such an outcome. Galvanised plates and bolts, gothic in nature, have constructed this tree: constructed in the truest sense

as this is not a re-construction of a felled tree but rather a form of genetic modification where multiple trees of different species have been utilised to sculpt this monumental intervention. While on the one hand such a process reveals the dominance of homo sapiens over nature it also highlights the folly of such thinking. This is not a real tree. Moreover, it is one that if left will dry and wilt away, taking with it the life-giving energy nature provides for the human species. In this work the viewer becomes secondary to nature and just as in the *Inverted World* paintings, the landscape begins to impose itself on the human presence. Nature either pushes against the intervention, causing in all likelihood damage to the constructed world or alternatively, it dies away taking with it its life-giving properties causing an equal amount of damage.

The tension between nature and the folly of anthropocentric attempts at containment and subjugation is further illustrated in the jewel like possum ring attached to the base of the tree. Now a common site across suburbia, including the many public gardens in Melbourne, these devices are designed to stop possums from climbing up into treetops, an activity that is both natural and required. However, as ingenious as they may seem, these devices are futile: the marsupial, nature, finally wins out. In this installation, the device becomes even more redundant, clasped around a horizontal tree, allowing ease of navigation for this nocturnal creature.

It is this object, the possum ring, which ultimately informs the large anamorphic painting on the wall. Ford has been creating anamorphic works for over a decade, progressing from early planar experiments to the more recent catoptric (cylindrical mirrored) works. Originally used in the 13th century as a mechanism for projecting figures in space, the technique has been viewed simply as trickery and not for serious art making.⁵ Ford, however, has challenged this perception and continues

to explore the possibilities of incorporating anamorphosis in contemporary practice. His 2006 exhibition *Revelation* included a number of catoptric anamorphic works where the reflective structure informed the final image: an exhaust pipe reveals a young macho youth, a water jug shows a half empty/half full glass, Duchamp's *Fountain* appears in a polished toilet brush holder. While being magical in their scientific precision, Ford's anamorphic endeavours are, as Edwina Preston notes, 'a sliver of parallel reality', deeply engaged with 'questions about existence and the human condition'.⁶ Moreover, Ford embraces the philosophical notion of hiding and revealing that anamorphosis allows, utilising it as a means to question what we can control and more poignantly in this work what we can lose.

In *Lord of the Canopy* a large wall painting hovers above the tree as if a mystic shaman, its two large inverted eyes protecting nature and warding off the constant human visitor. Reflected in the aluminium ring, this painting reveals itself as a possum, staring out at the viewer from the dark. The very device that is meant to restrict any form of grip and movement up the tree no longer works. This creature, revealed due to the magic of anamorphosis stares back at us, fixed momentarily until we walk away. Anamorphosis in Ford's hand is no longer trickery, but rather it is about the very nature of concealment and revelation, about what can and can't be. Has the possum scampered up the tree or has human intervention impacted on the survival of this species: questions left intentionally ambiguous by the artist.

Great artists have the ability to create works, which are about new ways of looking, seeing, reading and understanding. Ford has achieved this throughout his career and this work, partly sculpture, partly installation, partly painting continues to achieve this objective. Walking into the space we are overcome by the monumentality of the work just as one is usually overwhelmed by the technical mastery of his paintings. We are overcome by

the dexterity of the artist's draughtsmanship with the simple tools of his eye, a saw and bolts. We are overcome by the eerie mood of a darkening forest and the revelation of the painted image. However, when all this is stripped away and we are left standing in solitude, we are confronted with the very nature of our relationship with the natural world and our attempts to try to contain, model and even overpower it. We will begin to question the folly in this. We will begin to view the Australian landscape in different ways and most importantly we will begin to see the endless possibilities that great art offers us in understanding not only ourselves but also the world in which we live.

Dr Vincent Alessi

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¹ Interview with the artist, 4 May 2012.

² Juan Ford, *Inverted World*, Jan Manton Art, Brisbane, 2007.

³ Ford, 2007.

⁴ Ford, 2007.

⁵ See Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphic Art*, Chadwyck-Healey Ltd., Cambridge, 1977, p. 149.

⁶ Edwina Preston, *Juan Ford: Revelation*, Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne, 2006.