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Book Review

Images of the Pacific Rim: Australia and California, 1850-1935, by Erika Esau, Sydney, Power Publications, 368 pp., 21 colour and 146 black and white illustrations, AUD\$59.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780909952396

Images of the Pacific Rim contributes to an emerging consciousness of the historic cultural intersections between Australia and the United States. The work strikes me as the pièce de résistance of art historian Erica Esau and her long-standing immersion in the aesthetic waters shared by both places. A native Californian who has taught Australian art history in Australia, Esau outlines the transmission of popular cultural images that occurred between these two frontier societies during a critical period (1850-1935) of identity-formation for each. Coupled to increasingly sophisticated methods of mass-communicated artisanal forms, the circulation of leitmotifs across the ocean would produce a 'Pacific Slope culture' (77). Esau argues that an aesthetic consanguinity arose with notable alacrity during the eighty-five years between the gold country rush and the onset of the Depression. Key artisans, politicians and entrepreneurs, like Benjamin Batchelder and Alfred Deakin, figured in the development of a modern Pacific Rim style of art and architecture. The time span of the research is purposive, since globalisation, spurred by film, radio, television and the internet, altered the nature and documentability of the post-1935 trans-Pacific conversation between California and Australia.

On the whole, *Images of the Pacific Rim* is an accessible and visually persuasive account of the emergence of the modern 'Pacific

Rim' style. Its framework summons Walter Benjamin's prescient statement from 1936 that the 'mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art' (quoted on 17). Indeed, the thrust of the originality of this book is its focus on vernacular images rather than 'high arts' which, as Esau (17) observes, 'were available to so few in these frontier societies that aesthetic ideas were more readily accessible and understood through portable and reproducible artistic mediums'. The author builds a strong case for a mutual 'aesthetics of place' (331) made possible by the inter-workings of three characteristic agents of modernity: the *itinerancy* of artists and artisans, and the *reproducibility* and *portability* of images facilitated by technological developments in the mass media. For example, widely-dispersed commercial depictions in the form of citrus crate labels (17), brochures for bush bungalows (190) and advertisements for Shell service stations (321) coalesced a Pacific Rim aesthetic as the juxtaposition of iconographies from both sides of the ocean. Esau shows that a common 'reaction of the masses' entailed the uptake, absorption and digestion of exotic iconographies. As cultural peripheries in relation to Europe and the eastern United States, the formation of sense of place in California and Australia depended on popular magazines, posters and commercial advertising to disseminate meaning-making images. Studebakers, eucalypts, red-tiled roofs, Spanish Style homes and Mediterranean backdrops constitute some of the easily recognisable symbols deployed by popular artisans of this period. Accessible to an increasingly itinerant

public, visual depictions would assert nascent regional identities, burgeoning marketplace economies and the transfiguration of the land by settler and, later, suburban expansion.

The readability of *Images of the Pacific Rim* is enhanced by its chronological and thematic organisation. Set against impressive migrations between Australia and California during the mid-1800s, Chapter 1 suggests that visual records reveal some of the ideological and capitalistic prerogatives underlying the ventures of artists and photographers in gold country. Through the example of the controversial *Euchre in the bush* by 'Alphabetical' Johnson, Chapter 2 details the popularity of wood-engraving as a medium of aesthetic modernism, employed also by sheet music illustrators and advertisers of the era. Chapter 3 illustrates trenchantly the exchange of aesthetic ideals through the *Picturesque atlas* movement of the late 1800s. Chapter 4 describes the 'bungalow craze' (197) sweeping California and Australia, through which a shared architectural iconography developed along with mass media in the form of lifestyle magazines. Australia's participation in the California Expositions promulgated 'emblems of modernity' (245), as Chapter 5 explains. Up to this point in the story, 'aesthetic exchange' seemed biased towards a uni-directional flow from California to Australia, but Chapter 6 marks a considerable shift through the fascinating account of the eucalypt's absorption into popular Californian motifs. Finally, Chapter 7 goes on to argue that Spanish Style architecture derived from the Californian precedent has moulded Australian building as significantly as

European forms of architecture. The Coda intimates that images render an aesthetics of place as ‘the result of prolonged interaction between two peoples whose societies came of age at the same time, and in an environment that had much in common’ (331).

Esau sketches the concept of aesthetic exchange in light of the common Mediterranean environment between areas of Australia and California. Discussions of aesthetic discourses, however, prompt questions of aesthetisation and its implications as part of a post-colonial critique. While reading, I therefore became keenly interested in the impact of visual representations of flora, fauna and landscapes on values towards the natural worlds of each place. The author’s claim that ‘Australia’s greatest aesthetic, one could even say iconographic, contribution to popular culture centred, as it still does, on its unique flora and fauna’ (76), though intriguing, goes underdeveloped and points to broader considerations.

To my mind, this raises a number of pertinent questions. For instance, the iconography of eucalypts in California as detailed in Chapter 6, contrasts starkly with the ‘aesthetic aversion’ (254) of early Australian settlers to gum trees. Why was there an enthusiastic uptake of the eucalypt in California when it clearly inverted aesthetic sensibilities inherited from Europe and was consistently disparaged on its own soils? Was it simply the ‘urge to vegetate’ (254) that propelled gum trees into the southern Californian iconography? Or were there colonial attitudes at work, blazing the way for the ‘settlement’ of the Californian biota by exotic species? Unfortunately,

questions of the politics of aesthetic exchange between these two frontier societies are not largely addressed by the book.

Images of the Pacific Rim further reiterates the modern conceptualisation of aesthetics as the science of images with an ocular-centric emphasis. As such, it hinges on historicised readings of appearances in popular sources over the tacit exchanges of smell, taste, touch and sound that accompany material networks of aesthetic productions, architectures, plants, animals and other lived spaces and bodily experiences. The notion of aesthetic exchange invariably leads into the contextual discussion of the colonisation of the land, first peoples and the non-visual senses. For example, the illustration 'Semi Tropical Northern California Pictures' (figure 3.26, 212) glorifies resource-intensive agricultural practices that impose a two-dimensional managerial grid over the land. The aesthetisation of naturalised flora in 'Eucalyptus King of the Forest' (figure 6.10, 218) consists of orderly rows of pin-straight tree trunks occupying the distance with the composition centred on a gracefully winding track through the trees, all symbolising the inroads of colonisation. An aesthetics of the sublime in the latter subtends the erasure of original habitats as *terra nullius* devoid of the first peoples of both California and Australia.

Esau's notion of aesthetic exchange implies the underlying structuring of power relations between settler societies, the land constructed as landscape, and the marginalisation of pre-existing networks of sustenance. Comparably, the development of landscape

photography by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams in the early 1900s framed the national parks movements in the United States that would later influence Myles Dunphy and other Australian conservationists through the idea of wilderness as a pure visual construction demarcated from cultural spaces. A wilderness aesthetic associated with what Giblett (2011, 9) calls 'sanctuarism' accompanied images that propounded the trope of conquering the wilderness through modernist expansion, with the land itself broadcast as a series of visual representations.

Images of the Pacific Rim raises multiple questions of colonial power hegemonies, leaving them unanswered and offering potential for future research on what the aesthetic exchange between regions actually has entailed. A related work could focus on aesthetic dialogue between California and Australia through representations of flora and fauna, and the evolution of landscape values in each place. This kind of research presented by Esau could readily be broadened to the rest of the United States, not only California, and the rest of Australia, not only the eastern half. For instance, the aesthetic exchange between Western Australia and the western United States included works of artists such as itinerant landscape painter Marianne North who produced popular renderings of karri trees as well as depictions of the Californian flora. The resistance to the Americanisation of Australian aesthetic identity would also be an interesting outgrowth of Esau's research.

Images of the Pacific Rim, nevertheless, is a glowing addition to the emerging canon of interdisciplinary scholarship querying the relationship between Australia and the United States. Whilst the complex ambiguities of globalisation increasingly obscure the idea of an 'aesthetic exchange' in a range of contemporary contexts, *Images* has set a strong standard of scholarship for its designated period. Academics specialising in the study of the relationship between Australia and the United States will be interested, although the book's targeted audience is a general readership. I would suggest this meticulously researched and impressively presented text as required reading for anyone interested in the cultural relationship between the two nations. In light of globalisation's rapid dissemination of leitmotifs worldwide towards often instantaneous effects, *Images* prompts us to re-visit the influence of regional character linked to climate and the genesis of local artisanal and architectural styles.

Reference

Giblett, R. (2011). *People and places of nature and culture*. Bristol: Intellect.