



Anna Kristensen Indian Chamber, 2010. Oil on curved ply. Dimensions: 2.6 metre height, 11 metre circumference, 3.66 metre diameter

Outside In

A short introduction to the Indian Chamber panorama of Anna Kristensen



The cave is arguably the most complex and culturally loaded locus in Western Art; as the site of its oldest paintings and the allegorical agency of some of its earliest theorising, the cave is the defining immersive pictorial environment and as such ground zero for experimental art, then and now.ⁱ I use the metaphor of a zero here not so much for the disquieting vividness of recent imagery but because zero is most commonly represented as a circular or ovoid symbol. The O is suggestive of the moment before commencement, of time or a mathematical sequence for example; but also as an elliptical shape with no discernable beginning or end, it is evocative of an elemental type of enclosure, or by extension into architecture, a rotunda. In so concluding this train of thought, I may end my introduction to the *Indian Chamber* panorama of Anna Kristensen by inviting the Ladies and Laddies present, to cross an entirely arbitrary threshold between inside and out.

The correlation between *motif*, what a work of art looks like, and *motive*, what it connotes, is crucial to the wider relationship that the work of art has to time, place and the contextualising discourses of social and cultural history. The subject of the work you are now within is the Indian Chamber of the Jenolan Caves – a large complex of subterranean grottos, tunnels and cavities variously described as *stupendous*, *magnificent* and *superlatively grand*.ⁱⁱ Among the most popular tourist destinations in country New South Wales and each year attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors, they are a system of caves recognised as the most important in Australia and among the most impressive in the world.

The act of going underground, other than as part of the ritualised passage from this life to the next,ⁱⁱⁱ is physiologically and physically harrowing. A visit to the Indian Chamber poetically provides a physical experience that oscillates between interment and the classically transcribed transit of the underworld.^{iv} Subjectively, the cave therefore could be understood as a representation that contrasted exhumation with archaeology as concurrently creative methodology and authorial process. The *Indian Chamber* panorama ironically drags the formal attributes of Foucault's panopticon, overturning his canonical post modernity by replacing its prefix of after with a framework of the perpetual. The artist, by picturing a motif that is literally and literarily beneath the surface, allegorises investigative processes that are similarly concerned with revealing the concealed. It is true and necessary that the image surrounding you is gorgeously painted, a persuasively slick, seductive similitude congealing at the junction of Vermeer and View Master. To be a really good painter is a wonderful thing best surmised within the current circumstances as a bringing of light into dark places.

This is the subject of the object of the *Indian Chamber* panorama. A cave, its salient attributes of stalactites rendered in exquisite detail by a painter of consummate skill, function as conscious and sublimated metaphors of compressed time, history and the act of silent witness.^v The cave, as well as being the site of art's originating images, is also in and of itself a frequently represented sight. It is a place to which hermits such as St. Jerome retreated and is as such an abiding emblem of contemplation and reflection. As an enclosed space it is evocative of the panorama, which in the instance of Anna Kristensen's *Indian Chamber*, is simultaneously the substrate for the

image and its historically validated mechanism for display.

The mendicant portrait painter Robert Baker introduced the panorama to the early modern world in 1792 with his painting of Edinburgh, Scotland. As a term panorama is a mash-up of the Greek *pan* meaning all and *horama* to view; as a concept it was somewhat more revolutionary than the simple juxtapositioning of extant elements. Initially audiences were transported by the illusory experience of being both at home and somewhere else at the same time and panoramas were among the most creatively and financially successful enterprises of their time. That was then. These days most cultural commentators would agree that the tendency of art towards spectacle, entertainment and the commercial emphasis



on big, participatory crowds as the dominant index of an artwork's *value*, begins with the panorama.

A painted panorama therefore in 2011 might seem at first glance anachronistic, dislocated from time and current technologies. However on closer scrutiny (the sort of focused observation needed to discover a cave) it cleverly inverts some of the recent past's facile assumptions about contemporaneity by reloading quite possibly the most persistent praetermodern experience – that of locating the spectator within an image, not beyond the frame looking in. The panoramic picture is aggregated not composited; not a montage of overlapping sensations but rather a continuous, cohesive spatial extrusion. To paint this, moreover to paint this beautifully, is to reprise art as a site of resistance to conformity or as Nicholas Bourriaud stated at the 2005 Art Association of Australia & New Zealand Conference,^{vi} to reaffirm *the possibility of producing singularities in a more and more standardized world*.

The zero is the additive entity and comes before 1 in the same way the panorama precedes cinema. Corporeally, zero or nought stands in for the panorama's painted periphery, reminding us that both suggest things without points of commencement or termination; inside them you are paradoxically outside at *the still point of the turning world*. *Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered.*^{vii}

Gary Carsley. Amsterdam. 2011



ⁱ There are examples of cave paintings that are almost incalculably ancient from all over the world. They constitute humanity's first attempts at visual representation. The *Allegory of the Cave* from Book VII of the Philosopher Plato's influential text *The Republic* is accepted as one of the seminal texts that have as its subject the object of representation. The cave therefore conflates art with its processes of explication.

ⁱⁱ In the course of the last 100 years or so numerous publications and documentaries have extolled the rich visual and corporeal experience of a visit to the Jenolan Caves, for a comprehensive overview see *Jenolan Caves*, by B.T. Dunlop, published by The Department of Tourism, New South Wales, 1969. Sydney.

ⁱⁱⁱ Burial.

^{iv} Many figures from Greco-Roman mythology such as Hercules, Odysseus and Aeneas visited the Underworld as part of their hero's journey.

^v It is probable that most simple reed stalactites represent at least some hundreds of years' growth, and that the age of long massive ones must be expressed in thousands of years.

Jenolan Caves, by B.T. Dunlop, published by The Department of Tourism, New South Wales. 1969. Sydney. p.8.

^{vi} Hosted by Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. 30/11 – 2/12, 2005

^{vii} *Burnt Norton. The Four Quartets. Collected Poems 1909-1935*. T.S. Elliot. Faber. London. p.8

The artist would like to thank: Gallery 9, Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust, Bundanon Trust, Jonathan Hochman, Leif and Christine Kristensen, Thor Kristensen, Sheila Wing, Tom Kristensen, Oscar Prieckaerts, Gary Carsley, Craig Bender, Marley Dawson, Chris Hanrahan, Piers Greville, Jennifer Leahy, Axel and Michael, Mary MacDougall, Pia Van Gelder and Anna John.

The Janet Holmes à Court Artists' Grant is a NAVA initiative, made possible through the generous sponsorship of Mrs Janet Holmes à Court and the support of the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council for the Arts.

All photographs Jennifer Leahy, Silversalt
ISBN: 978-0-646-55093-0

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Anna Kristensen Indian Chamber

23 February – 19 March 2011
Opening: Wednesday 23 February 6-8pm

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