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Challenging the Paradigm

Eugen von Guérard in Colonial Victoria

Abstract: The well-travelled, Düsseldorf-trained landscape painter Eugen von Guérard arrived in the colony of Victoria (Australia) in 1852. He was fired by a deep curiosity about the 'new' world and committed to a practice based on the empirical methodology and the rejection of racial hierarchies espoused by Alexander von Humboldt, all of which informed his first depiction of Aboriginal people in Australia. Over the following years, the contradictions on which Victoria's colonial society was built played out in his art practice. The visual conceit of 'noble savagery', according to which Aboriginal presence was imagined in primordial, pre-contact landscapes, coexisted with works in which Aboriginal people were erased from portrayals of colonised territory. In response to his direct encounters with Aboriginal people – including a remarkable and significant exchange with the Gunditjmara artist, Johnny Dawson – as a travelling artist in the colonies, and informed by his friendships with the colony's most enlightened ethnological thinkers, von Guérard produced a group of unconventional and enigmatic compositions that speak enduringly of the impacts of colonisation on the colonised and on the colonisers. In the visual archive they are rare records of co-presence and of the lived realities of First Nations people in the colony of Victoria in the 1850s and 60s.

Eugen von Guérard's arrival at James Dawson's pastoral property in Victoria's Western District on 8 August 1855 triggered a cross-cultural artistic exchange unrivalled in the history of colonial Australia.¹ There the Düsseldorf-trained landscape painter met the young Gunditjmara artist, Johnny Dawson, and the two men, each undoubtedly intrigued by the other, connected with each other as fellow artists. The barriers that typically defined the terms of cross-cultural engagement in colonial Victoria fell away as, in a spontaneous act of artistic reciprocation the academically trained European artist and the gifted, self-taught Gunditjmara artist recorded each other's likeness, each according to his own style. Von Guérard drew two sensitive, highly finished pencil studies of Johnny, 'the Artiste', while Johnny registered his acute observations of the focused European artist, poised on his sketching stool, pencil and paper in hand, in deftly applied strokes of lively watercolour (Figs. 1 and 2).

This singular moment of cross-cultural artistic exchange took place in the unique conditions fostered by the enlightened James Dawson at his property, Kangatong. Dawson was a fierce advocate for the Aboriginal people of south-western Victoria, a pioneering ethnologist, and a man with whom von Guérard went on to share a lifelong friendship. Von Guérard's understanding of Australia's Aboriginal people and their culture was extended and enriched by his

1 Johann Joseph Eugen von Guérard used variations of his name throughout his career, often using 'Eugene' while in Australia and sometimes the French form of his honorific, 'de' rather than 'von'. One of Australia's greatest nineteenth-century landscape painters, he was born in Vienna in 1811, travelled and trained in Italy between 1827 and 1838, and studied and worked in Düsseldorf until 1852. He then spent twenty-eight years in Australia, travelling extensively from his Melbourne base. In 1882 returned to Düsseldorf before settling in London with his daughter and son-in-law in 1891. He died in 1901. Johnny Dawson was born at Tarrone, on Gunditjmara country in c. 1840. He died in 1883.

experiences at Kangatong, as the artist's correspondence with the Berlin Ethnological Museum reveals.² The artist's letters, in which, for example, he recognised Johnny Dawson as "the natural heir" of the country on which Kangatong was situated, stand as a valuable benchmark from which to gauge von Guérard's attitudes towards Australia's indigenous people.³

This paper considers von Guérard's portrayals of First Nations Australians in the context of prevailing colonial attitudes, notably as they were expressed in public exhibitions and communicated through the art market. It takes account of the roles played by the artist's friendships with the colony's more enlightened and informed thinkers in shaping his attitudes, along with his activities as a collector and curator, and his direct encounters with Aboriginal people. It explores von Guérard's responses to prevailing conventions and pictorial tropes and, significantly, the ways he found to shake loose from those conventions to produce some of the most original, direct, objective and compelling accounts of Aboriginal lived experience in the art of mid-century colonial Victoria.



Fig. 1: Eugene von Guérard, 'Johnny [sic] the Artiste Kangatong 8 Aug. 55' 1855

Humboldt, objectivity and freedom from prejudice

Von Guérard's first encounter with Australia's Aboriginal people occurred just three weeks into his twenty-eight years in Australia. The experienced forty-one year-old artist, who had travelled and trained in Italy in the 1830s and studied at the progressive Düsseldorf Academy in the 1840s, had come to Australia, "an unexplored field for study", to pursue his career as a landscape painter.⁴ But first he headed to the Ballarat goldfields where, along with the adventure promised by life on what was, in 1853, the world's richest alluvial goldfield, he hoped he

2 See Thomas Darragh, Ruth Pullin: Eugene von Guérard and the Ethnological Museum Berlin: Correspondence 1878-1880; Ruth Pullin, Thomas Darragh: The Artist-Collector: Eugene von Guérard and the Berlin Ethnological Museum; Anna Weinreich: Artists, Archives and Ancestral Connections.

3 Von Guérard to Dr Voss, 7 July 1879. Incoming register 1926/79, Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB).

4 [James Smith]: Men of the Time, p. 75.



Fig. 2: Johnny Dawson, [Portrait of von Guérard sketching], 1855

might have the lucky find that would support him while he established himself as an artist in the colonial city of Melbourne. As he and his party of fellow miners made their way along the dusty track from Geelong to the Ballarat gold-fields, he was acutely alive to his new environment – the blueness of the sky, the dryness of the forests, glorious gum trees, parrots and a bird with “yellow wings and black eyes”.⁵

On 11 January 1853, von Guérard and his party of fellow miners came across “a group of three or four mia-mias, the abode of some eight or ten Aborigines”.⁶ This encounter informed one of the first canvases that von Guérard painted in Australia (Fig. 3). It portrays a group of Wathaurong traders offering a large and luxuriant possum skin rug for sale. These rugs were highly valued on the gold-fields for their exceptional warmth and durability. The painting records their strategic position at the point where the road to the diggings intersected with the Moorabool River, and where miners typically rested and watered their oxen.

5 Eugene von Guérard: [Bullock wagon and figures], verso. Fragment cut from von Guérard's sketchbook no. XIX, 1853, State Library of Victoria; See Ruth Pullin: Not Lost Just hiding, pp. 11; Ruth Pullin: The Artist as Traveller, p. 96.

6 Eugene von Guérard: A Pioneer of the Fifties, p. 11. The edited diary entries from von Guérard's 1853 sketchbook survive in English translation in this typescript document. It was almost certainly created by his son-in-law, Reginald Blunt, as a prototype for a proposed publication.



Fig. 3: Eugene von Guérard, 'Aborigines met on the road to the diggings', 1854

In von Guérard's composition the accepted order of colonial race relations is inverted: the miner kneels – ostensibly to examine the rug – while the standing Wathaurong man is evidently in command of the negotiations. Under the watchful eye of his female companion and with his grip on the rug firm, it seems unlikely that the miner's offer of £3 – as indicated by a raised thumb and two fingers – will be accepted. At the time good quality cloaks and rugs could fetch four or five pounds.⁷

Von Guérard's composition, painted in his Melbourne studio between July and October 1854, was unconventional for its depiction of a cross-cultural transaction taking place at an identifiable location and at an identifiably contemporary time. The parties meet on equal terms, their exchange apparently free of the prejudices that the artist would have encountered in the colony. In its conception this work reflects the views of Alexander von Humboldt on the subject of race. In his hugely influential publications the natural scientist had rejected "the depressing assumption of superior and inferior races of men", maintaining that the "ultimate and highest object of society" was for "all mankind, without distinction of religion, nation or colour, to be regarded as one great fraternity".⁸ Von

7 George Rowe, *Artist and Miner*, cited in Fred Cahir: *Black Gold*, p. 72; J.F. Hughes, *Castlemaine pioneer* recorded the standard price as 'five pounds a-piece', in: Fred Cahir: *Black Gold*, p. 72.

8 Alexander von Humboldt: *Cosmos*, vol. 1, pp. 355 f.

Guérard was one of a cohort of eminent German-speaking scientists and artists who, inspired by Humboldt, arrived in Melbourne in the 1850s to pursue their disciplines in Australia. He responded to Humboldt's call for artists to paint the landscapes of the 'New World' with "sharpness and scientific accuracy", and here that commitment is evident in von Guérard's concern to record details of ethnographic interest, such as the joins in the possum-skin cloak worn by the woman seated near the fire.⁹

Von Guérard's portrayal of Wathaurong people as adaptable and enterprising challenged the assumptions that were often used to justify colonisation. According to the then widely accepted stadial theory, Aboriginal people, as hunters, sat on the lowest rung of human development. Commerce, with which European settler colonists were identified, was regarded as a higher-level activity. 'Aborigines met on the road to the diggings' is one of the rare works in the visual archive that portrays the now well documented participation of people of the Kulin nation in the colonial monetary system – as stockmen, guides, native police, labourers and traders.¹⁰ However, much of the work's significance as a record of Wathaurong participation in money-based commercial activities was lost when it was exhibited as 'Barter' at the 1884 Victorian Jubilee Exhibition, a title which has stayed with it until recently.

Von Guérard's representation of a non-hierarchical cross-cultural commercial transaction as the subject of a major work in oil on canvas, shortly after his arrival in Australia, reveals the remarkable independence of his vision. As an apparently objective account of Aboriginal agency it has become a point of reference for academics and art historians. It is also important to take note of the warning sounded by Boucher and Russell that overstating the 'discovery' of Aboriginal agency at this time in colonial Victoria has the potential to severely underplay the realities of the suffering of a colonised people who were struggling simply to exist.¹¹

The colonial lens

Although von Guérard was primarily a landscape painter – figure painting was not his strength – he produced three major works that portrayed Aboriginal people during his first few months in Melbourne. While 'Aborigines met on the road to the diggings' is a depiction of an identifiably contemporary encounter based on direct experience, the other two, 'Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat' and 'Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies' (both painted between August and December 1854), portray Aboriginal people as synonymous with pre-contact Australia. This may have been, in part, a response to perceived market conditions: 'Aborigines met on the road to the diggings' had received only mild praise in the

9 Alexander von Humboldt: *Cosmos*, vol. 2, p. 438.

10 See Fred Cahir: *Black Gold*.

11 Leigh Boucher, Lynette Russell: *Settler Colonial Governance*, p. 23.

press when it was shown at the 1854 Melbourne Exhibition and von Guérard was forced to sell the painting by public lottery early in the following year.¹²

In October 1854, a few months after von Guérard settled in the city, Melbourne staged its first major public exhibition. It was mounted in connection with the 1855 Paris Exhibition, with one of its goals being to show examples of “native industry” and to “demonstrate how British settlement had improved upon Aboriginal people’s technology”.¹³ For von Guérard the opportunity to see and study the comprehensive collection of Aboriginal artefacts on display was timely and invaluable – even if what he saw, and the way it was presented, was heavily mediated by the attitudes of British colonists. It was the first of the big colonial exhibitions, and one of the public events that, as Penelope Edmonds has observed, “provide insight into the commodification and appropriation of Indigenous culture and reveal how knowledge about colonized Indigenous people was constructed”.¹⁴ Although a diversity of material culture was on display, its presentation was fundamentally shaped by the reductive attitudes of the colonisers. For example, despite the fact that John Hunter Kerr showed a comprehensive collection of worked possum skins, women’s woven baskets, tools and children’s play sticks (weet weet) as well as spears and shields from the “Murray and Loddon Tribes” (the Dja Dja Wurrung), the bronze medal he was awarded was for “Native weapons and Natural History”.¹⁵ The diversity and complexity of the Aboriginal cultural material on display were effectively collapsed into the one category, ‘weapons’ – one that, significantly, emphasized savagery – and one which defined it as ‘natural’ rather than ‘cultural’. With apparent equanimity “Examples of Native Industry” were displayed in one section of the exhibition while Aboriginal skulls were presented as “Specimens of Natural History” in another.¹⁶ In those early impressionable months in Melbourne von Guérard was exposed to a highly constructed view of Aboriginal culture, one premised on the theories of racial hierarchies that were gaining traction at the time. Imperial narratives of progress and racial superiority played out in the exhibition, alongside a narrative of a race doomed by its perceived primitivism and savagery.

The 1854 Melbourne exhibition was also von Guérard’s first opportunity to see a range of representations of Aboriginal subjects by European artists in the colony. The Darmstadt-born Ludwig Becker (1808-1861) showed two drawings of Aboriginal people, along with a pencil drawing “by an Aborigine”, and “Part of necklace made of native seeds, worn by a Chief of the Murray Tribe”.¹⁷ Von Guérard had a personal connection with Becker, having studied with Ludwig’s brother August, in Düsseldorf. One of the works he brought with him to Australia was August’s ‘Midnight Sun in Norway’, which he showed at the exhibition.¹⁸

12 The Exhibition, *Argus*, 14 November 1854, p. 4.

13 Elizabeth Willis: *Gentlemen Collectors*, p. 130.

14 Penelope Edmonds: *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 170.

15 Elizabeth Willis: *Gentlemen Collectors*, pp. 131 f.

16 Official Catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition, 1854.

17 Ludwig Becker: Cat. no. 294, Official Catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition. For Ludwig Becker, see also the contribution by Wulf D. Hund and Stefanie Affeldt in this volume...

18 August Becker: *Midnight Sun in Norway*. Exhibited by “De Guérard, John E.”, Cat. No. 328 (2), Official Catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition.

Von Guérard and Ludwig became central figures in Melbourne's tightly knit German-speaking community of artists and scientists.

Von Guérard was evidently impressed by Douglas T. Kilburn's daguerreotypes of Aboriginal people as, on 20 January 1855, soon after the doors of the exhibition closed, he made copies of two of them in ink and wash.¹⁹ One of the drawings is dated and inscribed 'Eingeborne [sic] v. Victoria / Port Philip / Melbourne', and the other, 'Eingeborne [sic] v. New South Wales'²⁰ (Fig. 4). The latter was based on a Kilburn daguerreotype now held by the National Gallery of Victoria.²¹ While von Guérard may have been seduced by the objectivity implied by the photographic daguerreotype process, Kilburn's daguerreotypes were in fact staged, romanticized and anthropologically-driven studio productions. They were informed by the photographer's concern to record "the curious race of Aborigines by aid of the Daguerreotype", before they disappeared.²² The idea that the demise of the Aboriginal race was inevitable was one that von Guérard would have heard expressed even among his more enlightened contemporaries and also within his immediate circle of German-speaking scientists and artists. For the Prussian natural scientist, Wilhelm Blandowski (1822-1878), "it was a universal but mysterious law" that white settlement across the globe would sweep "the backward races from the face of the earth".²³

Von Guérard kept the drawings made after Kilburn's daguerreotypes in a folio he called 'Australien Reminiszenzen', along with a comprehensive set of his

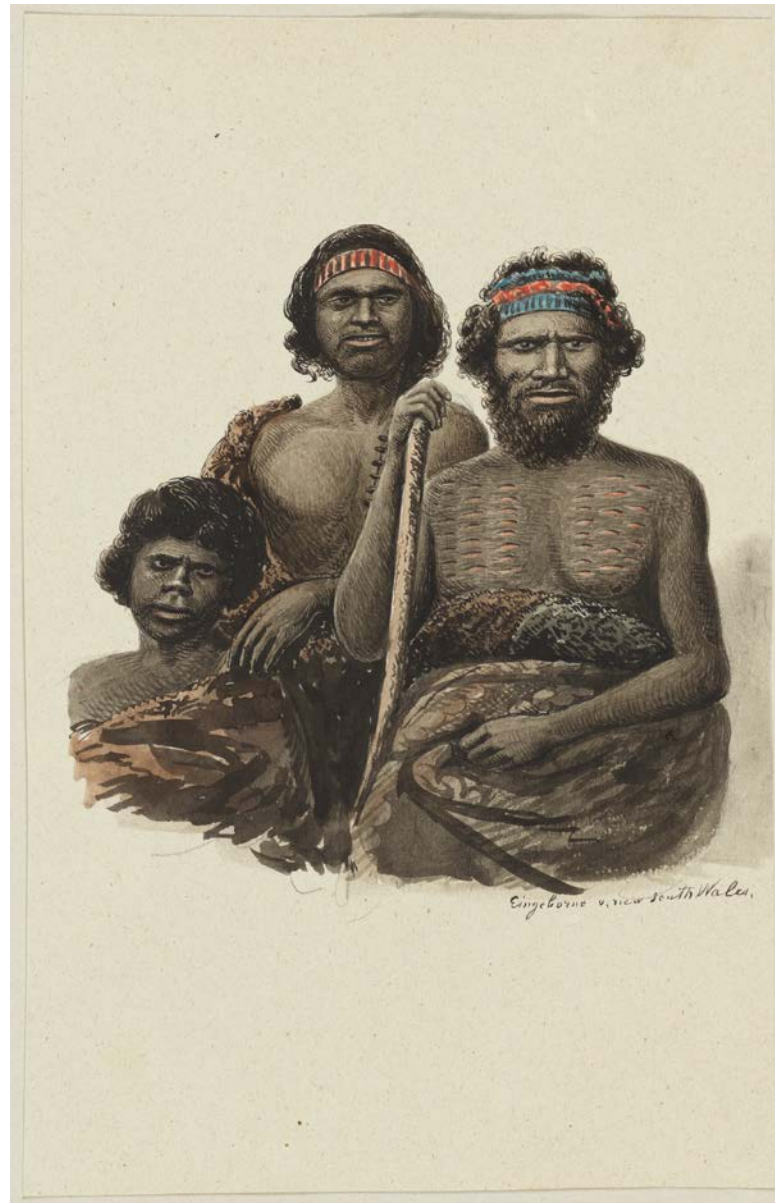


Fig. 4: Eugene von Guérard, 'Eingeborne [sic] von New South Wales' [after Kilburn], [1855]

19 Nine Daguerreotypes by Douglas T. Kilburn were shown by Alfred Selwyn Government Geologist. Cat no. 312, Catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition.

20 The same group is depicted in John Skinner Prout's *Family Group, Australia Felix*, 1846, Museum of Mankind, British Museum, London. See Sasha Grishin: *Australian Art*, p. 81.

21 Douglas T. Kilburn: *No Title (Group of Koorie Men)*, c. 1847, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Isobel Crombie describes von Guérard's drawing as "largely faithful" and suggests that he misinterpreted the men's cicatrices as open wounds. See Isobel Crombie: *Australia Felix*.

22 *Illustrated London News*, 26 January 1850, p. 53, cited in Crombie: *Australia Felix*.

23 Blandowski, 1855, cited in Richard Broome: *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 98.



Fig. 5: Eugene von Guérard, 'Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat', 1854

own copies of illustrations from T. L. Mitchell's publications, a pencil copy of a Thomas Hannay photograph of three Gunditjmara men in mourning, an engraving of 'Instruments used by the Aborigines of the Port Phillip District' published by Thomas Ham, and engravings of Aboriginal subjects by S. T. Gill and Ludwig Becker.²⁴ It was a reference collection of images that the artist compiled from secondary sources and through which he engaged with a distinctly European construct of 'Aboriginality'.

In this context, it is not surprising that 'Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat' and 'Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies', both painted in late 1854, were conceived within the ubiquitous framework of 'noble savagery'. With the frontier violence of the 1840s fresh in the minds of colonists, works which positioned Aboriginal presence on the other side of a "temporal boundary" defined by the moment of colonisation were reassuring.²⁵ In these works, Aboriginal people were imagined as existing in an arcadian pre-contact world. Identified with the past and with their demise considered imminent, they could be safely idealized and eulogised as 'noble savages'. As Greg Lehman notes, it was an idea that was too often used

24 Eugene von Guérard: *Australien Reminiszenzen*, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. The drawing, inscribed 'Schwarze von Victoria in Trauer', of three Gunditjmara men in mourning was copied from a photograph taken by Thomas Hannay, a travelling photographer who worked in the Portland region in 1858-59.

25 Russell Macneil: *Time after Time*, p. 49.

as “a form of benign recognition, when, in reality, it is a dense and ambiguous term used rhetorically to validate the destructive outcomes of British invasion”.²⁶

Von Guérard’s ‘Warrenheip Hills, near Ballarat’ (Fig. 5) is an archetypal image of noble savagery: the classicized figure of the Aboriginal hunter and his fishing companion are portrayed as part of, and in harmony with, the idyllic and bountiful natural world they inhabit. It is an image that is totally at odds with what the artist must have seen on and around the Ballarat goldfields. On 5 February 1854, when he drew the study for this painting, von Guérard had escaped from the noise, dust and chaos of the goldfields – where he would have seen Wathaurong people working as “police, gold escorts, guides to new goldfields, bark cutters, prostitutes, trackers, posties, child minders, fur merchants, bushrangers, entertainers and prison guards” – to spend a few hours sketching in a secluded valley near Mount Warrenheip.²⁷ On an earlier visit to the area he reported having seen “many magpies, black cockatoos, parrots” and “much relished the exquisite clear water of the Leigh Creek”.²⁸ His focus on this occasion was the landscape and the vegetation – the messmate stringybark, ‘*Eucalyptus oblique*’, the white-trunked ‘*Eucalyptus rubida*’, the Cherry Ballart, ‘*Exocarpus cupressiformus*’ in its local form and the tufty clumps of ‘*Poa labillardierei*’ at the water’s edge – all of which were faithfully reproduced in the painting.²⁹ The grazing kangaroos and two Wathaurong men do not appear in the drawing. The contrast between the imagined figures, conceived within a Eurocentric concept of classical nobility and pictured as living harmoniously in a pristine natural setting, and the actual realities of life on the goldfields, is stark. It is possible that von Guérard did record the lived realities of Wathaurong people on the goldfields in his sketchbooks, but if so those sketches did not survive the dismantling of his goldfields’ sketchbooks later in the century.³⁰

In ‘Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies’ 1854 (Fig. 6), also known as ‘Natives chasing game’, von Guérard adopted the visual language of heroic European battle scenes to represent a subject he could never have witnessed.³¹ While Aboriginal hunters typically relied on stealth to hunt prey, these men rise into clear view at the top of a rocky ridge. They are not painted for battle but the weapons they carry – the long spears lined with single rows of deadly barbs, the heavy war clubs and the narrow parrying shields, examples of which von Guérard had seen at the 1854 exhibition – are designed for combat.³² Time is suspended in this theatrical composition, the two lead figures fixed in silhouette against the light of the setting sun and their heroic status emphasised by the low viewpoint.

26 Greg Lehman; *Regarding the Savages*, p. 28.

27 Fred Cahir: *Black Gold*, p. 2.

28 Eugene von Guérard: *A Pioneer of the Fifties*, 13 March 1853, p. 17.

29 Identified by Neville Walsh, Conservation Botanist, Royal Botanical Gardens, Melbourne, in conversation, 2006.

30 See footnote 5.

31 Von Guérard’s ‘Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies’ was listed for sale by lottery in the *Argus*, 30 December, 1854, p. 8. The work is catalogued as ‘Natives chasing game’ by the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

32 I acknowledge and thank Wathaurong Traditional Owners for drawing my attention to the absence of body paint. Annual General Meeting of Wathaurong Traditional Owners, Ballarat, 17 April 2021.



Fig. 6: Eugene von Guérard, [Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies] 'Native chasing game', 1854

The animated interplay of expression and gesture between the jostling warriors behind them, like the chorus in a Greek play, underscores the drama of the moment. Von Guérard had seen the way his influential Düsseldorf School contemporary Carl Friedrich Lessing had, in works like 'Riflemen Defending a Narrow Pass' 1851, intensified the focus on the most dramatic moment of a narrative by reducing the elements around it.³³ Here, like Lessing, von Guérard brought the warriors up close to the picture plane while pushing the generalized forms of the landscape back into the distance. In its heroic and elegiac tone, it recalls Emanuel Leutze's treatment of a similar theme in 'Last of the Mohicans' 1849/1850, a work which was painted and exhibited in Düsseldorf prior to von Guérard's departure for Australia in August 1852.³⁴ The nobility of the great Native American chief on his rocky pedestal is emphasized by the low viewpoint, and the fading light of day alludes, metaphorically, to what, it was believed, was soon to be lost. In the

context of the recent and ongoing frontier wars, the depiction of Aboriginal warriors preparing for conflict was a potentially confronting subject for the colonists. By framing his subject within the visual language of the European tradition, von Guérard effectively distanced it, locating it in a place where "the colonial 'us' could observe" – and even eulogise – "the colonized 'them'", assured that this was the past and that it presented no threat.³⁵

Von Guérard continued to imagine Aboriginal presence in ostensibly uncolonised passages of the Australian landscape throughout his career. By implication Aboriginality was a "natural rather than a cultural phenomenon", both concomitant with, and a signifier of, precontact Australia.³⁶ The inclusion or erasure of Aboriginal presence had the power to completely shift the way a landscape was understood, as illustrated by the substitution of European tourists for the Aboriginal man in 'Weatherboard Creek Falls, Jamieson's Valley, New South Wales'

33 Carl Friedrich Lessing, 'Schützen einen Engpass verteidigend' 1851, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. See Bettina Baumgärtel: *The Düsseldorf School of Painting*, p. 42.

34 *Kölnerzeitung*, 27 August 1850, cited in Katharina Bott, Gerhard Bott: *Vice Versa*, p. 328.

35 Rod Macneil: *Time after Time*, p. 52.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 55.



Fig. 7: Eugene von Guérard, 'Weatherboard Creek Falls, Jamieson's Valley, New South Wales', 1862

1862 (Fig. 7). In the painting, the Aboriginal man is located in, and identified with, an ancient, elemental and ostensibly pre-contact landscape. By contrast, the European tourist-travellers who contemplate the identical view in the 1867 lithograph, 'The Weatherboard Falls' (Fig. 8), exist in the present, having probably just walked the short distance from the Weatherboard Inn where visitors to the site – including Charles Darwin in 1836 – had stayed from as early as 1830. For educated mid-century travellers the awe-inspiring panoramic vista framed by massive, eroded sandstone cliffs spoke of the recent discovery of deep geological time, the magnitude of which is here metaphorically suggested by the unfathomably deep valley that yawns below them.

The urban fringe

In 'Aborigines outside Melbourne' 1855 von Guérard engaged directly with the contemporary experience of Kulin people living on the "contested and highly transactional spaces" of the "urbanizing frontier" (Fig. 9).³⁷ Melbourne (Narrm)

37 Penelope Edmonds: *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 11.



Fig. 8: Eugene von Guérard, 'The Weatherboard Falls' 1867

was expanding rapidly with the gold-fuelled population growth of the early 1850s. With their land stolen and their social structures “brutally altered”, the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung and the Bunurong / Boon wurrung people of the Kulin nation had to quickly “develop ways to carve out an existence within a speedily transforming settler colonial social, cultural and economic system”.³⁸ Despite the efforts of the Assistant Protector of Aborigines William Thomas to deter them, the Kulin returned to their traditional meeting places on Narrm and, in order to survive, they ventured into the metropolis in search of casual work, to beg, barter or to sell goods such as skins or lyrebird feathers.

Von Guérard may have encountered this party of eight men and women, two carrying infants, as they made their way along Port Phillip Bay towards Melbourne – possibly from the Mordialloc Creek Aboriginal Reserve – while he was sketching in the Brighton area in April 1855.³⁹ They are depicted navigating safe passage along the “incompletely colonised” corridor of a sandy path: a simple wooden fence declares that the Bunurong country on the other side has been claimed as private property.⁴⁰ A substantial colonial residence now dominates the headland and a ship at anchor in the bay signifies the ongoing influx of new arrivals.

38 Ibid., pp. 46 f.; Lynette Russell: *Settler Colonial Governance*, pp. 11 f..

39 Von Guérard sketched a group of nine Bunurong men setting off in a canoe, spears in hand, from Brighton beach, ‘2 miles from Melbourne’ on 18 April 1855. Eugene von Guérard ‘An der See bei Brighton’. In: ‘Victorian Sketches 1855’, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

40 Penelope Edmonds: *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 148.



Fig. 9: Eugene von Guérard, 'Aborigines outside Melbourne', 1855

This image was one of two selected by von Guérard to represent Victoria in an article published in the 'London Illustrated News' on 15 November 1856.⁴¹ In the first, two Aboriginal figures are pictured drinking from a stream in one of the "primeval forests" of "towering" tree ferns found at Fern Tree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges.⁴² The text for the article was based on the artist's experiences and mediated by an unidentified English correspondent – most likely von Guérard's friend, the journalist, art and theatre critic James Smith. No mention is made of the Aboriginal figures in the text.⁴³ They are simply 'natural' presences in a primeval world.

By contrast, the passage that relates to the wood engraving of 'Aborigines near Melbourne' is, in effect, a catalogue of the attitudes towards Aboriginal people that prevailed in 1850s Melbourne.⁴⁴ It is a text that says as much about the colonisers as the colonised: in such writing, Russell observes, the colonisers "were themselves written and defined".⁴⁵ Here the Kulin are patronized as "children of Nature", their movement over Bunurong country misunderstood and derided as aimless "wandering from their wild encampments to visit the town".⁴⁶ In von

41 A Correspondent: *Sketches in Australia*, p. 491.

42 Ibid.

43 Phrases like "a dash of the serio-comic" indicate the authorship of James Smith rather than von Guérard.

44 Von Guérard may have considered 'Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies' as a subject for publication in the ILN, as his *Australien Reminiscenzen* contains line drawings of both compositions.

45 Lynette Russell: *Colonial Frontiers*, p. 12.

46 A Correspondent: *Sketches in Australia*, p. 491.

Guérard's image, this "wandering" is set against the social stability represented by solid, domestic residences – the rewards of hard work, Christian values, and colonial enterprise. Dispossession could be justified by the perceived inability of the Kulin to keep "pace with the improvement of the territory which they once called their own".⁴⁷ Their "inclination for strong drinks" – signified in von Guérard's image by the bottle protruding from the coat pocket of the leading male figure – was, by implication, the result of the poor character that their "ready aptitude in imitating the faults and vices of the colonists" demonstrated.⁴⁸ According to the article, the women in their thin government-issue blankets were slightly less "ludicrous" than the men, who "present a motley aspect, being for the most part dressed in left-off clothes they have obtained from the European colonists, with hats and caps of every conceivable form".⁴⁹ As Greg Lehman has observed, "the Aboriginal man who wears an English coat" is considered to be "'mistaken' in exercising such agency", and so a "capacity for cultural change" becomes "an expression of foolishness – as if an Aboriginal person can never understand the value of clothing".⁵⁰

An entry in von Guérard's goldfields' diary describes his encounter, on 16 March 1854, with a group of Wathaurong people outside Geelong. In the English translation of the diary entry they are described as "miserable", "clad in the most ludicrous odds-and-ends of European wearing apparel and nearly all in a drunken condition".⁵¹ Despite the corroborating correlation between the two texts, there are suggestions of a more nuanced response to the complexities and ambiguities of the situation in his watercolour. Is there a proud defiance in the bearing of the lead man and an element of wit and mimicry in his jauntily tied kerchief and the walking stick he carries? However we read it, this work stands as a rare visual record of the impacts of colonisation and the existential realities faced by Kulin people on the urban fringes of 1850s' Melbourne.

Cross cultural encounters

Von Guérard's 1855 visit to Kangatong in Victoria's Western District was a pivotal event in his career. He arrived at James Dawson's pastoral property on 8 August, having disembarked at Port Fairy on the return voyage from South Australia. Over the preceding four weeks he had filled his sketchbook with drawings of the South Australian landscape and a series of studies of people from the "Lake Victoria tribe" (Barkindji) at their winter camp on the site of today's Adelaide Botanic Gardens. Each year people from Lake Victoria and the Murray River would gather there "for the annual Queen's Birthday distribution of blankets and rations".⁵² Von Guérard's sketchbook drawing of the camp, dated 25 July 1855,

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Greg Lehman: *Regarding the Savages*, p. 28.

51 Eugene von Guérard: *A Pioneer of the Fifties*, p. 41.

52 Philip Jones: [untitled catalogue entry], p. 99.



Fig. 10: Eugene von Guérard, 'Winter encampments in wurlies of divisions of tribes from Lake Bonney and Lake Victoria in the parkland near Adelaide', 1858

is direct and objective. He recorded the length and width of the "My my" or "wurlies", and he observed that they were "not a man's height" and covered with old cloths.⁵³ This objectivity was compromised, however, in the 1858 presentation drawing of the same subject with the introduction of "significant and fanciful additions", such as the "tree-climbing figure" and the "dead game lying near one of the wurlies" when, as Philip Jones notes, von Guérard must have known that game had "long since vanished from the city's parklands"⁵⁴ (Fig. 10). The drawing was commissioned by John Bakewell as one of a set to be taken back to England, and, no doubt, von Guérard was aware that such additions would increase the narrative interest of the drawing and appeal to his patron. On the two other visits he made to the camp von Guérard persuaded "Jimmy", "Mary", and 16-year-old "Carlolin" [sic], "the most beautiful of the tribe", to sit for him while he drew sensitive pencil portrait studies of each of them.⁵⁵ A waddy, which he described as a "War club made from Mayal wood from a Tribe at Lake Victoria on the Murray River, South Australia", and which he later sold to the Berlin Ethnologi-

53 E. von Guérard, 'Blackfellows camp bei Adelaide', Sketchbook XXIV, 1855, State Library of New South Wales, DGB16, v. 3, p. 37. Cf. Berlin-born Alexander Schramm (1813-1864) 'Adelaide, a Tribe of Natives on the Banks of the River Torrens' 1850. NGA 2005.216.

54 Philip Jones: [untitled catalogue entry], p. 99.

55 Eugene von Guérard, Sketchbook XXIV, 1855, State Library of New South Wales, DGB16, v. 3, pp. 80-85.



Fig. 11: Eugene von Guérard, 'Tower Hill', 1855

cal Museum, was almost certainly purchased from the people he met there.⁵⁶ It was probably the first cultural object to enter the collection of thirty significant cultural objects that he acquired over the following years.⁵⁷

On his August 1855 trip to Kangatong von Guérard produced the large preparatory drawing that was the study for Dawson's commission for a painting of the spectacular and environmentally significant lake-filled nested maar volcano, Tower Hill (Koroitj) (Fig. 11). The enlightened pastoralist recognised the unique environmental values of the site and he campaigned ardently for its protection.⁵⁸ It was both an important early commission for von Guérard and his introduction to the volcanic landscape of Victoria's Western District, the geological and artistic significance of which, as a result of his knowledge of the volcanic German Eifel region, he understood immediately.⁵⁹

Dawson's respect for the Aboriginal people of southwestern Victoria and his recognition of their "intelligence, common sense, integrity", informed the research that he and his daughter Isabella undertook to record the languages and customs of the local people, not "on the word of a white person" but as received directly from them.⁶⁰ He was also, sadly, resigned to the view that the degradation exacted on Aboriginal people by the "white man" would "no doubt ultimately lead to their extinction".⁶¹

⁵⁶ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, SMB.

⁵⁷ See Ruth Pullin, Thomas Darragh; Thomas Darragh, Ruth Pullin.

⁵⁸ Tim Bonyhady: *The Colonial Earth*, pp. 338-366; Ruth Pullin: *Nature Revealed*, p. 114.

⁵⁹ See Ruth Pullin: *The Vulkaneifel and Victoria's Western District*, pp. 6-33.

⁶⁰ James Dawson: *Australian Aborigines*, Preface, p. iii.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. iv.

At Kangatong von Guérard was given the rare opportunity to engage with Aboriginal people in an environment of trust and respect. Dawson's property was a place of refuge for many Gunditjmara and Kirrae wurrung people during the years of continuing violence that followed the peak of the Eumeralla Wars. According to family history, the Gunditjmara artist, known today only as Johnny Dawson or Johnny Kangatong, had been entrusted to James Dawson's care by his father as a child to protect him from an outbreak of small pox.⁶² The boy grew up to become Dawson's stock keeper and a self-taught artist who, with great originality, used European materials and techniques to depict European subjects.

On the day they met, von Guérard produced two portrait drawings of Johnny, the young man he subsequently acknowledged as a descendant of one of "the original families who had possession of this stretch of country before the British seized Australia".⁶³ In a profile study he captured the striking features and steady gaze of an intelligent and confident young man (see Fig. 1) and in a beautifully realised full-face portrait, Johnny is portrayed wrapped in the luxurious furs of his possum-skin cloak (Fig. 12). Von Guérard kept the watercolour drawing that Johnny painted of him for the rest of his life (see Fig. 2). Mrs Dawson gave von Guérard a further four sheets of Johnny's drawings, two of which he gave to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin". I place great value on these artistic productions," he told the Museum's curators in 1878.⁶⁴ He was impressed both by the natural ability of the young artist, who had never "received the slightest instruction", and his dedication, noting that he usually drew "in the evening hours, after a hard day's work with the large herd of cattle".⁶⁵ He was fascinated by the creative process of his fellow artist, describing how Johnny's memories of the circus he had attended with James Dawson in Melbourne "whirled around like a mad dream in his imagination", compelling him to commit his impressions to paper



Fig. 12: Eugene von Guérard, 'Johnny [sic] Kangatong 8 Aug. 55', 1855

62 Gilgar Gunditj Elder, Eileen Alberts, great great granddaughter to Johnny Dawson. Personal communication, 15 September 2022.

63 Eugene von Guérard to Dr Voss, 7 July 1879, SMB.

64 Von Guérard to Dr Adolf Bastian, 25 August 1878, Incoming register 2232/78, SMB.

65 Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, SMB.



Fig. 13: Johnny Dawson, 'Cavalry man and family with a crowd in the background', [1855], [Circus audience and performers]

on his return to Kangatong (Fig. 13).⁶⁶ The 'circus' drawing is one of the two that von Guérard gifted to the Berlin Ethnological Museum; the other five, on three sheets of paper, were acquired by the State Library of New South Wales in 1913. Together these drawings constitute the artist's entire known oeuvre. As a result of von Guérard's foresight they have survived and, with them, our knowledge of the Gunditjmara artist's practice.

In May-June 1856, von Guérard returned to Kangatong and during this extended visit drew large portrait drawings of at least three of the other people living there, one of whom, Kaawirn Kuunawarn, was one of the key informants for the Dawsons' ethnological study.⁶⁷ The interaction between the artist and the senior Kirrae wurrung man (also known as King Konewarre, Davey or King David) extended to Kaawirn making handles "in the old and original manner" for two stone axe heads – one "of great age" – that Dawson had given to the artist.⁶⁸ Von Guérard sat and watched closely as the "wood from the young wattle (*Acacia*)" was "stuck together with gum from this tree and bound with kangaroo sinews".⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ This drawing is known only from the following catalogue entry: "Eugene von Guérard, 'Portrait of King Koonewarre [sic], Highly finished pencil and crayon drawing, Kangatong, 9-in. × 11½-in. 26 June, 1856". Cat. no. 3752 in Francis Edwards, *Booksellers: Supplementary Catalogue*.

⁶⁸ Von Guérard to Bastian 25 August 1878, SMB.

⁶⁹ Von Guérard to Voss, 9 July 1879, SMB; The Berlin Ethnological Museum object identification numbers for the stone axes are: VI 2575 and VI 2576.

Von Guérard's account speaks of the Kirrae wurrung man's generosity and of the unhurried and respectful nature of the exchanges that were possible at Kangatong.

While he was based at Kangatong in May to June 1856, von Guérard set out on a fourteen-day sketching expedition to the northern end of the Gariwerd-Grampians. At Mr Carfrae's Station, Ledcourt, he made sketches of some of the Djabwurrung and Jardwadjali people who lived on the property. The drawings of 'Lady Missis [sic] Stuart' suggest that she was required to stand while being recorded in her government issue blanket, with her digging stick and a woven basket on her back (Fig. 14).⁷⁰ She is fixed in an anthropological gaze – which von Guérard may have felt aligned with Humboldt's empirical methodology. The scrutiny to which she was subjected is more disturbingly evident in his observation that: "Die Blacks von d. Grampians fand ich im Allgemeinen viele heller in d. Hautfarbe als in irgend einer anderen Gegend v. Australien". [Overall I found the Blacks from the Grampians much lighter in skin colour than those from other areas of Australia].



Fig. 14: Eugene von Guérard, 'Lady Missis [sic] Stuart', 1856

Imagined absence / imagined presence

In the 1850s most Aboriginal people in rural Victoria lived on or near the pastoral properties that then occupied their traditional lands. However, they are conspicuously absent from the portrayals of the Western District properties that von Guérard was commissioned to paint for the then well-established squattocracy. On Djargurrdwurrung country (the Camperdown region), von Guérard spent time with the Manifolds at Purrumbete, Peter McArthur of Meningoort, John Lang Currie at Larra and the Ware family of Koort Koort-nong, all of whom

70 Eugene von Guérard, Sketchbook XXV, pp. 31 f.



Fig. 15: Eugene von Guérard, 'Meningoort', 1861

commissioned paintings of their properties. Contemporary records confirm that Djargurdwurrung people were living and working as labourers, stockmen and domestic staff on these properties.⁷¹ The travelling school inspector and writer James Bonwick observed "the Blacks" working at Purrumbete in 1857, and Tasmanian-born artist, Robert Dowling's 'King Tom and the Mount Elephant Tribe' was painted at Meningoort in 1856, shortly before von Guérard's first visit in March 1857.⁷²

Von Guérard's portraits of Western District pastoral properties were painted for patrons keen to assert and legitimize their possession of the country they had seized, illegally and violently, less than twenty years earlier. Theirs was a colonised landscape: it was ordered and controlled, and it spoke of progress and the future, all of which is expressed compositionally in von Guérard's 'Meningoort' 1861 (Fig. 15). Axial trajectories, seen from an elevated vantage point behind and looking over the homestead, are established by the straight lines of the formal garden at the front of the house and extend out over the fertile volcanic plains.⁷³ Conceptually they anchor the homestead to the scoria cones of mounts Leura and Sugarloaf on the horizon: Djargurdwurrung country is here claimed and defined by a European linear and cadastral system that is seemingly embedded

71 Ian D. Clark: *An Ethnology of the Djargurdwurrung people*, p. 59.

72 James Bonwick: *Western Victoria*, p. 43; Robert Dowling: 'King Tom and the Mount Elephant Tribe,' National Library of Australia, Canberra.

73 On the garden design, see Timothy Hubbard, p. 246.



Fig. 16: Eugene von Guérard, 'Stony Rises, Lake Corangamite', 1857

in the landscape. The Djargurdwurrung people that von Guérard had seen at Meningoort in 1857 were erased from this view of claimed and colonised country.⁷⁴

Bordering the open, light-filled landscape of von Guérard's Camperdown property, portraits is the rough, undulating terrain of geologically recent lava flows known as the Stony Rises. Strewn with basalt boulders and scrubby vegetation, this rugged region was the barrier that the Manifold brothers had to overcome to get their cattle to the "wished for" land that became their property Purrumbate.⁷⁵ During the 1840s the rugged and inaccessible Stony Rises became a locus for the squatters' fears of ambush and attack by the local Aboriginal people and, in the 1850s, a literary trope which saw von Guérard's contemporary, James Bonwick, describe its basalt boulders as rearing up like "waves petrified in their rise", and as creating, at twilight, "a most unearthly appearance".⁷⁶ It was into this dramatized vision of the landscape that – despite the objectivity of the sketches made as he travelled though the Stony Rises on 3 April 1857 on his return to Melbourne – von Guérard chose to project a constructed Aboriginal presence. He had not seen any Gulidjan people in the Stony Rises and nor did he see the exaggerated boulders that loom large in his 1857 composition, 'Stony

74 For example, a small group of people gathered around a campfire is visible in the middle distance of a large pencil drawing: 'Cloven Hills and Mt Elephant [...] f. Meningoort', 12 March 1857, pencil, private collection, Victoria.

75 W.G. Manifold: Peter Manifold, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

76 James Bonwick: *Western Victoria*, p. 19. See also Harriet Edquist: *Stony Rises*, p. 72.

Rises, near Corangamite' (Fig. 16). While actual, visible Aboriginal presence was erased from the open, ordered, light-filled present of the colonised landscapes of Camperdown, it was identified with the dark shadows and irregularity of a primordial wilderness.

Co-presence on Country

Different realities converge in two of von Guérard's most enigmatic and original works, 'Mr John King's Station' (Fig. 17), and 'View of the Gippsland Alps from Bushy Park on the River Avon' (Fig. 18), both painted in 1861. Within the framework of the colonial property portrait, and in works painted for patrons who had been directly involved in the violent dispossession and murder of Gunaikurnai people, von Guérard found ways to address the contemporary reality of co-presence on Gunaikurnai Country. While apparently conforming to the expectations of the genre, von Guérard found ways to subtly subvert it and to bear witness to the legacy of colonisation on Gippsland's rural frontier.

Von Guérard reached John King's property, Snake Ridge, on 18 November 1860, early in his seven-week expedition on Gunaikurnai country. King was one of the first squatters to reach Gippsland, and by 1860 his run was one of the largest. The painting was commissioned as a celebration of his achievements and



Fig. 17: Eugene von Guérard, 'Mr John King's Station, Gippsland', 1861

undoubtedly this was how it was received by King and his contemporaries. King and his gardener, in the middle distance, are bathed in light: the gardener tends a rose garden, his rake and watering can nearby, while King surveys the pastures on which his cattle graze. For colonists like King such industry spelt 'progress'



Fig. 18: Eugene von Guérard, 'View of the Gippsland Alps, from Bushy Park on the River Avon', 1861

and it justified their seizure of the land. Ironically evidence of the active management of Country that had been practiced by the Gunaikurnai for centuries prior to King's arrival – and on which his wealth was predicated – lay directly in front of him. Von Guérard saw and recorded, but could not have understood the significance of, the fertile 'necks' of grassland screened by promontories of bushland that are visible in the middle ground of the painting and that were the result of controlled burns carried out by the local Brayakaulung clan to regenerate the land, to encourage new growth and to attract game.⁷⁷

The Gunaikurnai family and their dog occupy an anomalous position in the painting: their prominence in the immediate centre foreground of the composition is undermined by the shadows that fall over them. For colonists like King the group's shadowy presence would have been readily understood as a reference to the apparently "immutable law of nature that", in the face of 'progress', "such inferior dark races should disappear".⁷⁸ In its staged frontality the group has an emblematic – perhaps symbolic – presence.

Unsettling tensions play out in this work, firstly in the prominence given to the Gunaikurnai while King, von Guérard's patron, is relegated to the middle ground, with his back to the viewer. There is a disconcerting disconnect between the two groups in the painting: despite their physical proximity – within the boundary

⁷⁷ See Bill Gammage: *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, 2011.

⁷⁸ Westgarth, cited in Richard Broome: *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 98.

of King's domestic garden – the Europeans and the Gunaikurnai family are each seemingly unaware of the presence of the other. The ambiguities continue with the Gunaikurnai man presented in traditional dress, wearing a possum skin cloak and white feathered headdress and holding boomerangs, a digging stick and a spear, while the woman and child are draped in the government-issue blankets that identify them as subject to the paternalism of one of the very men who had been involved in the massacres of their people. There are no records of von Guérard having met any Gunaikurnai people at Snake Ridge and at least one of the figures was imported from another source: the kneeling child is based on his sketch of "Carlolin", the Barkindji child he had met in South Australia in 1855.⁷⁹ The unresolved tension in this work mirrors the anomalies and ambiguities of its subject. The Gunaikurnai family may be cast into shadow, but Gunaikurnai presence on Country is, the painting suggests, enduring and immutable.

The emblematic reference to Aboriginal presence in 'Mr John King's Station' is brought emphatically into the realm of contemporary, lived experience in von Guérard's paired canvases 'View of the Gippsland Alps from Bushy Park on the River Avon' 1861 (Fig. 17), painted for Angus McMillan. When von Guérard met McMillan in November 1860, the Scot was revered as "the discoverer of Gippsland", "a successful squatter, and a citizen of whom the colony may well feel proud".⁸⁰ By 1860 he was an apparently benign Honorary Protector of Aborigines: the full extent of his involvement in the brutal massacres of hundreds of Gunaikurnai people (the Brayakaulung and the Brataulung) in the 1840s has emerged only in the last forty years.⁸¹

During the days he spent at Bushy Park, in November 1860, von Guérard engaged with Gunaikurnai people on the property, watching as in just "1 ½ Stunde" a canoe was made out of "Gum Rinde" [the bark of a eucalyptus tree].⁸² As in 'Mr John King's Station', the focus of these works is the land, its expansiveness and the lushness of its grasslands. Into the foregrounds of each of the two canvases that form this panoramic celebration of property, von Guérard introduced a narrative vignette, each of which can be read as a reference to its contested history. The pair of fighting bulls, one light, one dark, in the first of the Bushy Park canvases, may allude to the destructive impact of cattle on Country and the conflicts generated by their introduction or, symbolically, to frontier violence between the European squatters and the Gunaikurnai.⁸³ In the second canvas von Guérard eschewed metaphor for a direct and objective account of the anomalous contemporary experience of Gunaikurnai survivors. The two men the woman and her child are depicted as both *on* Country and dispossessed of it. They move across it, negotiating a path between two worlds: a parrying shield and two spears sit alongside a man whose European dress suggests that he was

79 Ruth Pullin: *Mr John King's Station*, 2017, p. 55.

80 See A toast proposed by Dr. G. D. Hedley at a dinner in McMillan's honour, 3 March, 1856, in: Don Watson: *Caledonia Australis*, p. 209. McMillan's claim was complicated by Paul Strzelecki's exploration of the region.

81 See Peter Dean Gardner: *Our Founding Murdering Father*, 1987; Don Watson, *Australis Caledonia*, 1984.

82 Eugene von Guérard, *Sketchbook XXXII*, p. 5.

83 See Nicholas Thomas: *Possessions*, p. 74.

employed on McMillan's station. The woman and child who move towards them, wrapped in a blanket issued by McMillan, would have lived in a fringe camp on the property, where they would have received basic provisions. In this understated observation of Gunaikurnai people on colonised land that is Country, von Guérard exposed the ambiguity and fragility of their lived experience. It is a work that, Thomas states, "insists forcefully on co-presence as a historical fact".⁸⁴

The number of works in which von Guérard addressed Aboriginal subjects is relatively small – perhaps twenty to thirty of the hundreds he painted in Australia. His sustained focus on the Aboriginal experience in colonial Victoria is, however, chronicled in his sketchbooks. For example, his drawings of the Mohican Aboriginal Station, near the Cathedral Range in north-eastern Victoria, are rare visual records of the short-lived and ill-conceived settlement on the cold, damp and unhealthy site to which Taungurong and Wurundjeri Woi wurrung people were moved in 1860. A double-page view of the camp drawn on 26 January 1862 was followed the next day by his sketch of an Aboriginal man, a shovel over his shoulder, leaving the Mohican 'Begräbnis Platz d. Schwarzen Eingeborene nahe von Mt Cathedrale [sic] Victoria' [burial place of Black Natives near Mt Cathedral Victoria].⁸⁵

Von Guérard's practice as a landscape painter was predicated on his extensive sketching expeditions throughout Australia's south-eastern colonies, expeditions on which he engaged directly with Aboriginal people and accrued a collection of significant cultural belongings. His knowledge of Aboriginal material culture was informed by his close friendships with the colony's founding ethnologists and anthropologists, James Dawson and Alfred Howitt, and extended through his association with Robert Brough Smyth. In 1879, as the founding curator of the National Gallery of Victoria with responsibility for its ethnological collection, he worked with Brough Smyth on the National Gallery of Victoria's display of Smyth's recently acquired collection. Brough Smyth's 'Aborigines of Victoria', published in 1878, included an illustration of a kangaroo teeth necklace from von Guérard's private collection.⁸⁶

Early in 1878, von Guérard received a letter from his fellow numismatist, Dr. Julius Friedländer in Berlin, asking whether the artist would be willing to purchase specific Australian Aboriginal cultural belongings on consignment for the Berlin Ethnological Museum Berlin, which was under the direction of Dr Adolf Bastian.⁸⁷ Von Guérard agreed and he also offered the Museum his own significant collection of Aboriginal cultural objects. He would have understood Bastian's drive to collect "everything possible", and his ambition, in the spirit of Humboldt, to build a library-like resource for future scientific research. Von Guérard was keen that his own collection be kept together and gratified to know that it would enter "the most important national Museum".⁸⁸ The information he was able to

84 Ibid., p. 76.

85 Eugene von Guérard Sketchbook XXX, p. 51.

86 Fig. 27, p. 278, in Robert Brough Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1.

87 Friedländer to von Guérard, 14 January 1878, SMB. Incoming register: 852/78. See Thomas Darragh, Ruth Pullin: Eugene von Guérard and the Ethnological Museum Berlin.

88 Von Guérard to Dr Bastian 25 August 1878, SMB. See Ruth Pullin, Thomas Darragh: Eugene von Guérard and the Ethnological Museum Berlin.

provide about the objects from his own collection, specifically their provenance, was unusual among collectors and particularly valued by the curators in Berlin.⁸⁹ As his correspondence records, the objects in his collection had been either purchased directly from their traditional owners or makers, or given to him by squatters, notably James and Mrs Dawson, who are likely to have received them in accordance with practices of cultural reciprocity and exchange.⁹⁰

The complexities and contradictions that play out in von Guérard's portrayals of Australian Aboriginal people reflect the complexities and contradictions of the contexts in which his works were created. He arrived in Australia with a Humboldtian mindset, one shared by the German-speaking artists and scientists with whom he was closely associated in 1850s' Melbourne.⁹¹ Like his fellow Humboldtians in Melbourne, Bastian in Berlin, enlightened thinkers such as James Dawson and most of his generation, he almost certainly believed that the demise of the Aboriginal people and their culture was inevitable. The narrative of noble savagery and the myth of the 'dying race', with Aboriginal presence written into ostensibly pristine, pre-contact landscapes, informed some of his earliest Australian works and continued to do so for the rest of his Australian career. At the same time, in a handful of unconventional, enigmatic and compelling works, von Guérard looked beyond the predictable tropes, and, with a singular clarity of vision he addressed the impacts of colonisation and the realities of the lived experience of Aboriginal people in colonial Victoria. As such, these works have opened up and supported significant lines of research for academics and the communities for whom they have significance. In the context of the power disparities of colonisation, von Guérard's exchanges with the Aboriginal people he met on his sketching expeditions – and his acquisition of their cultural belongings – can only be seen as "fraught" and problematic.⁹² At the same time, his sketches, notes and letters record moments of cross-cultural connection of great sensitivity, reflecting a deep and respectful interest in people and culture. In the history of Australian colonial art, such moments were rare. His capacity for genuine engagement is nowhere more eloquently expressed than in his exchange with his fellow artist, Johnny Dawson, an artist whose visual imagination was so very different to his own. In the watercolour drawings that he valued so highly von Guérard witnessed a reversal of the accepted colonial world order, with a proud Gunditjmara man turning the lens squarely back towards the coloniser.

89 Dr Voss, Report to the General Administration, 12 November 1878, SMB.

90 Philip Jones: Reciprocity Artefacts of Aboriginal Trade and Exchange, pp. 38-49.

91 Leading members of the German community presented addresses in honour of Humboldt at the 'Humboldtfeier', Hockin's Hotel, Melbourne on 14 September 1859. Their speeches were published in full in the *Melbournier Deutsche Zeitung*, 9, 16, 23, and 30 September, 7 and 21 October 1859.

92 A term used by Nicholas Thomas: *Possessions*, p. 19.

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List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1: Eugene von Guérard, 'Johny [sic] the Artiste Kangatong 8 Aug. 55' 1855, Folio 77, in volume 03: Sketchbook XXIV, No. 6 Australia, 1855, Pencil, 9.8 x 15.8 cm, Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Fig. 2: Johnny Dawson, [Portrait of von Guérard sketching] 1855, watercolour and pencil, 18.2 x 20.2 cm, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Fig. 3: Eugene von Guérard, 'Aborigines met on the road to the diggings' 1854, Oil on canvas, 46.0 x 75.5 cm, Geelong Gallery, Victoria.
- Fig. 4: Eugene von Guérard, 'Eingeborne [sic] von New South Wales' [after Kilburn] [1855], ink and watercolour over pencil, Australien Reminiszenzen, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Fig. 5: Eugene von Guérard, 'Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat' 1854, oil on canvas on plywood, 46.0 x 75.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Fig. 6: Eugene von Guérard, [Aborigines in pursuit of their enemies] 'Native chasing game' 1854, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 37.0 cm, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- Fig. 7: Eugene von Guérard, 'Weatherboard Creek Falls, Jamieson's Valley, New South Wales' 1862, oil on canvas, 122.1 x 183.3 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Fig. 8: Eugene von Guérard, Hamel & Ferguson, Melbourne (Printers), 'The Weatherboard Falls' 1867, colour lithograph, Plate 7, 'Eugène von Guérard's Australian Landscapes', 30.0 x 49.3 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Fig. 9: Eugene von Guérard, 'Aborigines outside Melbourne' 1855, watercolour over pencil, 20.0 x 30.5 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
- Fig. 10: Eugene von Guérard, 'Winter encampments in wurlies of divisions of tribes from Lake Bonney and Lake Victoria in the parkland near

- Adelaide' 1858, pen and ink and wash over pencil, 27.5 x 47.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Fig. 11: Eugene von Guérard, 'Tower Hill' 1855, oil on canvas, 68.6 x 122.0 cm, Warrnambool Art Gallery, Victoria, on loan from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Gift of Mrs. E. Thornton, 1966.
- Fig. 12: Eugene von Guérard, 'Johnny [sic] Kangatong 8 Aug. 55', 1855, Folio 78, in volume 03: Sketchbook XXIV, No. 6 Australia, 1855, pencil, 9.8 x 15.8 cm, Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Fig. 13: Johnny Dawson, 'Cavalry man and family with a crowd in the background' [1855], ink and watercolour on paper, 25 x 41 cm, Berlin Ethnological Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
- Fig. 14: Eugene von Guérard, 'Lady Missis [sic] Stuart' 1856, Folio 31 in vol. 04, in Sketchbook XXV, Kangatong, Grampians 1856, pencil, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Fig. 15: Eugene von Guérard, 'Meningoort' 1861, oil on canvas on board, 55.0 x 90.5 cm, Private collection.
- Fig. 16: Eugene von Guérard, 'Stony Rises, Lake Corangamite' 1857, oil on canvas, 71.2 x 86.4 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
- Fig. 17: Eugene von Guérard, 'Mr John King's Station, Gippsland' 1861, oil on canvas on board, 40.7 x 83.9 cm, private collection.
- Fig. 18: Eugene von Guérard, 'View of the Gippsland Alps, from Bushy Park on the River Avon' 1861, oil on canvas, 36.1 x 94.1 (overall), Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

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