ART IS A STRANGE POSING of discoveries, a display of what was no more than possible. For it is the task of the creative artist to come up with ideas which are ours, but which we haven’t thought yet. In some cases, it is also the artist’s role to slice Australia open and show it bizarrely different, quite new in its antiquity.

Half a century ago, Sidney Nolan did just this with his desert paintings and those of drought animal carcasses. I recall seeing some of these at the Peter Bray Gallery in 1953 and being bewildered by their aridity: a cruel dryness which made the familiar Ned Kelly paintings seem quite pastoral. Nor could I get a grip on his ‘Durack Range’, which the NGV had bought three years earlier. Its lack of human signs affronted my responses.

The furthest our littoral imaginations had gone toward what used to be called the Dead Heart was then to be found in Russell Drysdale’s inland New South Wales, Hans Heysen’s Flinders Ranges, and Albert Namatjira’s delicately picturesque MacDonnells. Nolan’s own vision was vastly different: different and vast. It offered new meanings and posed big new questions.

A city man, Nolan carried the spacious Wimmera days with him when he went to see the Centre and the north-west. Their staggering space could be augmented by the use of an aerial viewpoint, and the Nolans took a number of flights with mail runs over those rusty ranges and biblical distances, taking in the ‘sphinx demolished and stone lion worn away’ of trans-human Australia. And, as Geoffrey Smith’s catalogue makes clear by frequent quotation, Cynthia Nolan’s distinct perceptions, articulately concentrated, played a large part in focusing her husband’s.

In 1949 they spent almost three months in the desert country, flying, gazing, noting, drawing and taking photographs. The resulting pictures are utterly arresting: against glowing skies of pale blue, the miles of brushy ridges spread their rusty tapestry. With their prophetically barren crags, some recall the imagined Thebaid of Patinir and his contemporaries. One mysteriously includes a scapegoat poised on a tiny mesa. Some feel almost like abstract painting. They are utterly the Other: monotony as drama in the wilderness.

And they gave postwar Australia, so strongly concerned with national identity, another landface to brood upon. After all, the early 1950s were the cultural moment in which writers like Vance Palmer, A.A. Phillips and Russel Ward were rediscovering our late nineteenth-century landscape and giving it a central role in the imagination. By 1957 Voss would appear, exquisitely complementing Nolan’s journeying. A decade later, Randolph Stow could turn the whole white man’s desert dream into broad comedy with his cute tale Midnite. A very different art, that of Papunya and Utopia was soon enough to retell the whole visual story.

An egg had been maturing in Nolan’s nest ever since the rich Ned Kelly years; it was of turning back to history painting, with the disastrous, tragic-comic journey of Burke and Wills. As Geoffrey Smith notes here: ‘In the public libraries of Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, Nolan compulsively researched aspects of Australian history.’ As well as human figures, the resultant paintings were going to boast that fascinating creature, the camel, along with gravity-defying birds in their improbable flight. Two of these pictures, ‘Burke at Cooper’s Creek’ and ‘Departure from Melbourne’, are particularly beautiful, deservedly well-known, but the large portraits of the two explorers are no more than curiosities of Heide-school mannerism.

At the beginning of World War II, Nolan had come upon a new medium: a commercial enamel with the trade name of Ripolin, which was mainly used in house painting. As his Ned Kelly pictures showed, it could be used to create sleek, luminescent...
nous skies which would throw the human or the topographical drama into relief. In these desert pictures, it allows the rubbed-back paint of the land to possess its own drama. Moreover, it corresponded to Nolan’s sense of this continent’s peculiarity. As he wrote in his diary: ‘Whatever problems painting will have to solve in Australia will be around this absolutely objective light. No mood, no essential change, just faultless transparency.’

Another wave of dry-country paintings appeared in 1953. As Smith tells us, someone at the Courier-Mail had decided to commission Nolan to travel into the Northern Territory and ‘make a series of black-and-white drawings for publication of the worst drought in recorded history’. The trip resulted in the ‘Drought’ paintings, odd pictures of dried-out animal corpses, each seen on a dead ground. Although a couple are convicing, notably the down-plunging ‘Carcass of Ram’, these are factitious constructions, their milky sfumato dullness betraying the arbitrary gestures by which they were set up, as in Sid’s admission: ‘Shortly afterwards we pass a dead horse which Jack Jones and Brian prop up with a stick.’ Most of these carcasses display a temporary, cardboard deadness at the artist’s heart, a loss of faith in his transforming vision.

But this is an exhilarating exhibition, one in which a painter of great talent scratches the margins of a wilderness, and lets us in. The late Vincent Buckley used to ask of a poet, ‘But does he have the sense of a poetic subject?’ Standing a long way, I would say, from Bernard Smith’s formalesque tradition, Nolan had a wonderful sense of the poetic subject. Unlike such disciplined painters as John Brack and Fred Williams, he seized upon the evocative instant. And sometimes he seized the day.

It is ironical that Nolan’s art is that of a deeply literate man, and so liberally annotated with intelligent observations. As it happens, elsewhere in the angular NGV at Federation Square, there is a Colin McCahon select retrospective, and McCahon is a painter many of whose signs or images are words. To have the Australian and the Kiwi in one building proves to be an intriguing challenge. Wandering around the gallery in wonder, an old friend, an observant novelist, asserted that McCahon must be the greatest of all Australasian painters. Clearly, there was something there for him that transcended Nolan’s achievement.

For me, it was like comparing chalk and cheese. Or the desert and the Bible. The question about signs and their effective meanings brought back Elgar’s fussy complaint about the visual arts: that they are only imitation. In the end, how puritanical do we need to be about iconography? Whatever one’s conceptual answer to this frowning cross-examination, Nolan’s ‘Burke at Cooper’s Creek’, lyrically evoking a very bad explorer in the Irish tradition, is a knockout of a painting.


Geoffrey Smith, *Sidney Nolan: Desert and Drought*, National Gallery of Victoria, $49.95 hb, 160 pp, 0 7241 0219 1, $39.95 pb, 0 7241 0220 5