Foreword

Geoff La Gerche was born in Sale in 1940. The expansive landscape of Gippsland has had a lasting impact on the artist as can be seen in this body of work that comprises Searching for Eden. Indeed, a landscape painting by La Gerche, could be up to eight metres in length. For any artist, to produce such a large work is a great feat. This boldness and uniqueness of vision is what sets La Gerche apart from other artists of his generation. It is what motivated Geoffrey Edwards from Geelong Art Gallery to recently shine the spotlight on his work and what has inspired this magnificent exhibition to be showcased at Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale.

It is therefore a privilege for Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale, to host an exhibition of La Gerche’s work. It will undoubtedly attest to his skills as a painter and researcher, of that which beautifies and disturbs our history, and our world. From the richness of colour featured in his works on nature, to the devastating harshness of works such as The Garden of Evil, this exhibition is sure to have wide appeal to all members of the Gippsland community.

Whilst it affords an exceptional opportunity to survey La Gerche’s talent, it also provides an opportunity through the many overt references to artworks of the past, to reflect on the legacy of artists preceding him.

La Gerche has created new nuances and new juxtapositions of content that enthrall and delight. We welcome La Gerche back to Sale and commend him on his commitment to the visual arts.

Anton Vardy
Director
Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale
The themes portrayed in Geoff La Gerche’s paintings are often derived from the artist’s reflections on historical events, acclaimed art works of the past, and his ruminations on the wonder and beauty of nature. Presented in this exhibition are major works in oil as well as smaller works in watercolour – each revealing the artist’s skill in composition and his cultivated understanding of the subtleties of colour harmonisation.

Foremost a draftsman, La Gerche’s preliminary sketches of major works demonstrate his characteristically strong line-work and faithfulness to the overall compositional structure. It is through these series of drawings and watercolours that La Gerche resolves the myriad design problems prior to rendering his subjects in a finished painting. The brushwork in his finished works appear fresh and not overly laboured due to this formative groundwork.

Present in all of La Gerche’s paintings is a marked synergy and dynamic tension between fragmentation or units of colour and their relationship to the pictorial whole. This is certainly the case in Adam and Eve at Giverny, a watercolour in which La Gerche combines one of the most popularised motifs of art history, Claude Monet’s water lilies, with one of the more universalised images of the bible, that of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace. The result is highly decorative, elaborate and ornate. This conscious homage to French Impressionist Monet and his depictions of his home in Giverny is complete with the famed lily pond and Japanese bridge. It overtly acknowledges the profound influence on La Gerche of this celebrated painter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It also reveals a very human desire to convey the omnipresent search for truth and an understanding of the natural world that has gripped not only artists but also the first man and woman as described in the Bible – Adam and Eve.

Beginning with the light-drenched design work from the left side of the picture, our eye moves into the lush saturated greens of the secluded garden setting. The conglomerate of unique parts or compartmentalised blocks of design, merge in a celebration of springtime and the humbling and tranquil qualities of a well-tendered garden. Despite being an outdoor setting, La Gerche has treated the image as an interior with limited depth and an overall flatness.

Adam and Eve in Giverny is a work of unashamed harmony and pleasure – La Gerche revels in its highly stylised design and forms. A self-proclaimed atheist, it is the symbolic narrative of the story of Adam and Eve that has captured La Gerche’s attention as it remains a story pertinent to the human condition – the search for enlightenment and the seductive manifestations of pleasure. Re-contextualising the plight of Adam and Eve is not for the faint-hearted, yet it is common in La Gerche’s practice to blend biblical references with the unexpected – the uncanny.

Some of La Gerche’s paintings invite us to reflect not only on our own humanity and the beauty of nature but also the perils of progress, and the darkness that can afflict humankind within historical epochs. Unnervingly, La Gerche wrestles with such topics with seeming ease. That which disturbs us is simplified, geometricised as evident in Tower of Babel, one of 32 panels from The Garden of Evil frieze. We are placed in a position where we can absorb a human tragedy, in a contained fashion – piece by piece. Despite the vastness of the artwork (comparable to a David Hockney landscape) and its unimaginable horror, we are able to digest and reflect in a civilised manner upon the inhumanity of 11 September, 2001. In this powerful work, biblical narratives and modern events of destruction collide. We are invited to reflect on the symbolic destruction of the Twin Towers through a representation of the Tower of Babel being targeted by a
plane. To draw an analogy between these towers makes sense when considering that these constructions all celebrated the power and glory of humankind. The plane that is pictured hitting the Tower of Babel does not seem out of place perhaps as it is more like a World War II bomber than the jets that hit the World Trade Centre. The billowing clouds of smoke arising from the point of impact represent the 9/11 atrocities but also symbolise the destructive potential of human life. The tower is suggestive of Brueghel’s image of the same name (c.1563). It also evokes Vladimir Tatlin’s Constructivist tower of 1919. As pointed out by Geoffrey Edwards, many artists are honoured through various details including Johannes Vermeer, Pablo Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico and M.C. Escher. The Garden of Eden chronicles La Gerche’s efforts to understand a world that is gripped both by beauty and terror; it represents a tour de force in La Gerche’s oeuvre.

From saturated beauty to horror, we are next greeted by dry humour, parody and wit in Searching for Eden, whereby the comic character Tin Tin is adrift in Katherine Gorge in a boat with his dog Snowy. That a cartoon character might search for perfection at Katherine Gorge is an absurdity to say the least, though it is, as we know – a beautiful place. This small watercolour, however, is more an exercise
of merging two vastly different areas of imagination and influence in La Gerche’s practice. Connecting comical caricatures and an awe-inspiring ravine of Australia, with blocks of luminous colour reminiscent of Paul Klee and Robert Delaunay, confounds the viewer. Popular culture references can be found in many of La Gerche’s work – the traditional dichotomy of high and low culture is fused with an overwhelming sense of “why not?”

The baffling creative methodology of La Gerche is evidence of a remarkable imagination that is at once fluid and instinctual, but also cerebral and astute. This exhibition reveals the artist’s intense curiosity for iconic artists of the past and a fondness for recontextualising history, culture and biblical events. It presents a rich patterning of colour and thought within a tapestry of design elements that evokes, heartens, disturbs and soothes our senses.

Claire Watson
Curator

Images
All works are listed height x width in centimetres

Front and back cover:
Adam and Eve at Giverny (detail) 2008, Watercolour on arches paper, 40 x 152, 2 sheets overall.

2. Garden of Evil (Frieze) 2005-2006, 32 panels 12560 total length.
   Tower of Babel (detail), Oil on linen, 120 x 180.
3. Adam and Eve at Giverny 2008, 40 x 152, 2 sheets overall.
   a) Apple and Serpent (detail), Watercolour on arches paper, 40 x 31.
4. Adam and Eve at Giverny 2008, 40 x 152, 2 sheets overall.
   b) Pair on the Ground with Serpent (detail), Watercolour on arches paper, 40 x 31.

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Endnotes: 1 Two brightly coloured studies complement the image, Apple and Serpent and Pair on the Ground with Serpent. The latter depicts Adam and Eve frolicking in a field of gridded colour in a manner resembling Egon Schiele’s entwined lovers.

2 In the Gardens of Good and Evil catalogue (Geelong Art Gallery, 2007), Geoffrey Edwards highlights many artistic references present in The Garden of Evil including Picasso’s Guernica, Bosch’s visions of hell and de Chirico’s labyrinth of The Village.