

## Dusan Marek: a Landlocked Czech Surrealist in the Antipodes

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### Abstract

Dusan Marek was born in 1926 in Bitouchov, a small village in Northern Bohemia. His elder brother, Voitre, a sculptor, introduced the young Dusan to surrealist art, which made such an impression on him that at the age of thirteen he declared himself a surrealist. Marek went on to study at the Prague School of Fine Arts, where he graduated in 1948. After the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, both Dusan and Voitre fled their homeland on political grounds, escaping to Germany and eventually settled in Australia. Marek continued to be a committed surrealist until his death in 1993. He was active as a painter, filmmaker, jewellery maker and sculptor, as well as a teacher of painting and film. Working for much of his life in relative isolation, Marek is a unique and neglected figure in Australian art history. He spent his formative years surrounded by the rich array of Czech cultural life which was in ferment during the 1930s and 1940s, in particular the Prague School of Surrealism. He arrived in Australia at a time when modernism and surrealism in particular were not easily accepted by the arts establishment. In spite of this, he retained his commitment to surrealism and over the years gradually achieved a fusion between the style he had developed as a student in Prague, and the visual richness and variety of the Australian landscape, informed and refined by his own philosophical and metaphysical preoccupations.

### Lacunae

Scant biographical material has been published about Dusan Marek.<sup>1</sup> His formative years up until fleeing Czechoslovakia in 1948 have been preserved in only the sketchiest detail. The earliest surviving paintings by Marek were thought to have been two works which he painted in the refugee camp in Dillenberg, Germany in 1948, *The Voyage* and *The Birth of Love*.<sup>2</sup> Both these works were painted on wooden panels which Marek appropriated in the camp – they were in fact the slats of his bed. Over the last two years I have begun to unearth works by Marek which pre-date 1948, works in private collections in the Czech Republic and the USA. Works such as *Refinement through Music*, c.1946 [fig. 1.], show the influence of the Poetist movement which flourished in Prague in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as Marek's lifelong concern with using painting to express a metaphysical or philosophical point of view. Nearly 60 years after acquiring this painting, the owner still recalled Marek's commentary on its meaning:

The two trees represent a person's daily life. People are refined by the fantastic birds depicted, as every life is in fact fantastic. When people are exposed to music (represented by the large bird), their souls become enhanced (thus the golden crown). As people return to ordinary life, the musical enhancement gradually fades away (the golden crown falls from their heads).<sup>3</sup>





Fig. 1: Dusan Marek, *Refinement through Music*, c. 1946. Oil on board (irregular), exact dimensions unknown, private collection, USA.

Other works of this period unearthed include paintings of a harlequin and other *commedia dell'arte* figures which are painted very much in the style of Dusan's teacher, František Tichý. Tichý's influence is also apparent in a number of observational drypoint etchings. The discovery of these works, as well as the process of tracking down friends and relatives - witnesses to Marek's life during the 1930s and 1940s - constitutes the beginning of a process of filling in the many gaps in his life and art. Already many significant figures in Marek's life are dead, leaving areas which are likely to remain open to speculation. Another aspect of this research has been the chance discovery of many early works by Dusan's brother Voitre. It has become clear that Voitre was a significant influence and mentor upon his younger brother as well as being an important artist in his own right. Given the close relationship of the two brothers throughout their years in Czechoslovakia, the fact that they fled their homeland and travelled to Australia together, and their closeness during the early years in Australia, the works of Voitre make an interesting comparison with those of Dusan. A great champion of his brother's creative gift, this portrait sculpture of Dusan made in 1946 by Voitre, survives in a photograph from Voitre's Prague Atelier [fig. 2].





Fig. 2: Voitre Marek, *Bust of Dusan Marek*, 1946. Sculpture, dimensions unknown. Photograph made in 1946 in atelier of Voitre Marek, Prague. Original sculpture lost.



### **The Surrealist Map of the World – a speculation**

According to Daniel Thomas, Marek was widely read in the writings of André Breton, though he was not a follower of the extremist surrealist writer Georges Bataille.<sup>4</sup> During his Prague years virtually all of the major surrealist texts would have been available to him in Czech as they were translated very soon after they appeared in French. It is intriguing to ponder just how widely Marek may have read surrealist texts of the period and whether he was aware of the 1929 Surrealist Map of the World, which placed New Britain (Papua and New Guinea) in the centre of the world. It is impossible to ascertain, but we can surely wonder whether this map was in Marek's mind in 1948, as he waited in the Dillenberg camp to decide where his new domicile would be. France and Canada as well as Australia were possibilities for resettlement. Not only did Marek decide to settle in Australia, but in 1954 he moved to Port Moresby, New Guinea, eventually settling in Rabaul, New Britain, where he stayed for five years. He is, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the only surrealist artist to undertake such an extended odyssey in New Guinea.

Both Australia and the south East Asian region held an interest for Marek as exotic paradises where 'primitive' indigenous artefacts and art were produced. But there remains the possibility that the decision to move to Australia was governed by some arcane surrealist principal in Marek's mind. It would be consistent with Marek's unbending, lifelong devotion to surrealism that he followed surrealist texts and principles in the charting of his life, though it is impossible to definitively prove that this was the case.

### **Marek's journey into terra incognita**

Dusan and his brother Voitre travelled to Australia in 1948 by ship, the SS Charleton Sovereign, a long and arduous voyage compounded by the ship running into engine trouble, and needing to spend unscheduled time in several ports – particularly Gibraltar, where they were delayed by several weeks. This voyage and its attendant delays resulted in a number of memorable artworks by both Voitre and Dusan. These include their best known works, and the only works which have ever been on permanent public display.

At the time of writing, the Art Gallery of South Australia has on permanent display Dusan's monumental two-sided painting, *Equator* and *Perpetuum Mobile*.<sup>5</sup> *Equator* was created as a celebration of the crossing of the equator, on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1948, accompanied by the distribution of a ration of pineapple juice served to the passengers. It was created using paints and materials that Dusan had preserved from his time in the Dillenberg Refugee Camp, as well as supplies given to him by the ship's crew. The support for this work is a wooden gaming table, which was stripped of its felt covering. Two oil paintings by Voitre Marek also hang in this gallery and make an interesting comparison with Dusan's painting *Gibraltar*, a two-sided work also completed on board ship, which is part of the Agapitos/Wilson Collection of Surrealist Art.<sup>6</sup>

A number of supporting materials which would further illuminate the voyage on board the Charleton Sovereign remain unpublished: sketches, many in private hands; letters between



Marek family members; and a notebook which was begun by Dusan in Dillenberg, and which he continued on board the Charleton Sovereign containing diary entries, observational drawings and other important material. Damaged during Marek's stay in New Guinea, the Notebook (1948) is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, awaiting restoration and translation from the Czech.

### Arrival in Australia

The Charleton Sovereign docked at Sydney on October 29th 1948, and the Marek brothers were transferred to the Immigration and Training Centre at Bathurst, New South Wales. A drawing in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, *Peaple stript of Pritentions* [sic] is possibly the first drawing Dusan made in Australia.<sup>7</sup> The title suggests his interest in indigenous peoples and cultures, and the annotation 'communicating vessels' (in Czech) appended to the drawing relates to the amorphic figures depicted, their arms culminating in orifices. The figures seem to be communicating with their surroundings at some primal level of consciousness. Another annotation reads 'first reaction to Gibraltar in new environment of Australia,' implying that Marek is concerned with tracing some deep capillaries of correspondence between the various lands and cultures he has encountered on his journey to Australia.

In Bathurst Voitre was reunited with his fiancée, Vera Podperova, who had travelled to Australia in another ship. During the voyage Dusan had met Helena Jakubova, who would in time become his wife. The question of where to settle in Australia had to be confronted, and on asking for advice from an administrator in the camp, Adelaide was recommended, enthusiastically described as the 'City of Churches.' Thinking that Adelaide must in some way resemble Prague, the Mareks elected to move there. Dusan was on a contract to work for the South Australian Government for two years, and took a job with SA Railways. After a few weeks, both brothers found themselves able to negotiate with their skills as jewellers, and found employment with Sheppard's Jewellers in Adelaide. The area of Czechoslovakia where they spent their childhoods had been a centre for the making of jewellery, a skill that both brothers had acquired while studying at their local art and craft school in Turnov, Czechoslovakia. The making of jewellery was to sustain them both financially for a number of years.

### Adelaide

Both Dusan and Voitre began exhibiting shortly after moving to Adelaide in December 1948. They made an explosive impact upon the arts community. There had simply been nothing exhibited in Adelaide to prepare viewers for the works Dusan was exhibiting, and the views he expressed in the press tended to alienate people, who were generally looking to art for reassurance of their middle-class values. This is what Dusan had to say in a press interview from 1949:

Art cannot speak through nice social forms. It must not fear to speak



plainly. I do not want people to come to my exhibitions and look with the appreciative eyes of oxen. I want my pictures to make people think and try and see things as I see them.<sup>8</sup>

He even took out advertising space in the *Adelaide Advertiser* where he proclaimed:

Man is not privacy.  
Break the mirror to see who I am.  
Empty yourself to see what you are.<sup>9</sup>

Both brothers took part in a 1949 exhibition organised by the Adelaide branch of the Contemporary Art Society. This exhibition was groundbreaking in that it included a number of Indian paintings and naive artworks. In addition, the Contemporary Art Society committee had visited the Woodside Migrant camp in the Adelaide Hills and collected a number of works by European artists who were living there. In spite of the eclecticism of the exhibition, two works by Dusan were declared obscene, causing considerable controversy and speculation in the press. It has never been fully resolved whether the works were banned at the selection stage and later displayed, or whether they were completely withdrawn. There have been various explanations for the scandal – faction fighting within the Contemporary Art Society, the fact that the works were not framed, the presence of nudity in the works (particularly *Equator*). Whatever the cause and final resolution, this hostility towards Marek's work, from committee members as well as from the press had a lasting effect on him, and it became clear to both brothers at this time that they would not be able to sustain careers and earn their living as artists in Adelaide.

Marek can hardly have realised the unfortunate timing of his entry into the Adelaide art world. He had missed the forward-looking and heady days of the early 1940s when the original Contemporary Art Society had been formed by artists such as Douglas Roberts, David Dallwitz, Ivor Francis, Jeffrey Smart and Ruth Tuck. Their first exhibition in 1942 included a number of works displaying surrealist tendencies and although the exhibition was controversial, the artists themselves, united by the experience, considered it to have been a success. By 1949, when the Mareks began exhibiting, the climate had altered considerably. A combination of the Ern Malley Affair and the William Dobell trial in 1944 had resulted in a swing towards extreme conservatism in the Adelaide art world, and Australia in general. Nor did it help to be a migrant, with an imperfect command of English. To complete the anathema, proclaiming oneself a surrealist in the post-war climate of Australia was tantamount to openly professing a belief in communism. Ironically therefore, by declaring himself a surrealist, Dusan was linking himself to the same communist regime that had caused him to flee his homeland in search of freedom. In anger, he left Adelaide in 1951, spending a period in Tasmania, but soon moving to Sydney, where he lived until 1954. This initial contact with the Australian arts community left scars that Marek carried for the rest of his life. As Bernice Murphy wrote:



Even the first timorous signs of sympathy from later champions of his work ... did little to mollify the effects of that early run in with the withering, jingoistic narrowness of vision inevitably rampant in Australia after a war, a depression and isolation from Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Although a number of Dusan's works which were criticised in these early exhibitions are today among his most admired, an examination of the works created immediately after his arrival in Australia reveal a number of deeper causes behind his failure to find an immediate place in post-war Australian art. Many of his works deal with war, the denial of individual liberty, and contain an exhortation to self-examination and change. His painting *Equator* incorporates a text – 'Break the mirror to see who I am,' a challenge few members of the art-loving public were ready to respond to. It is possible at this distance only to imagine the kinds of traumas the Mareks may have been exposed to, not only as refugees escaping from post-war Czechoslovakia, but also as Czechs living under the Nazi regime during World War Two. Although no documentary material survives which could illuminate these issues, the works produced by Dusan certainly give rise to speculation about his experiences during World War Two, and the traumatic effects of fleeing his homeland. In an obituary for Marek written in 1993, Margaret Boynes noted that:

...people living in Australia had been spared the appalling firsthand experiences of war and destruction but the group of artists who came to Adelaide between 1947 and 1955 sought to bring an energy charge into this passivity. The incoming artists found the communication gaps difficult to bridge, even when welcomed by enlightened artists of the calibre of Ruth Tuck. Lesser artists in the community failed to understand the surrealist idiom and its application to the harrowing experiences of the 30's and 40's.<sup>11</sup>

A further dichotomy is presented in the works created shortly after Marek arrived in Australia. He already had an established style and iconography, a personal blend of Czech baroque and gothic art and architecture, Eastern European folk art and the artistic movements that fermented in Czechoslovakia from the end of the nineteenth century, in particular poetism and surrealism. Marek might have remained a Czech surrealist in exile, painting nostalgic works throughout his life, evoking the land and culture he had been forced to flee. While these themes remain an element in his work, Marek also fell in love with, and was endlessly fascinated by, the Australian landscape and the coastline – something which his homeland lacked.

*On the Beach* (1949) is a painting that highlights this duality, which took Marek a number of years to resolve.<sup>12</sup> This painting is a reminiscence of a summer's day on Glenelg beach in Adelaide. A realistic face to the right side of the painting depicts the artist's wife, Helena, sitting beneath clouds and a passing rain shower. Amorphous forms inhabit the beach, while a pair of upturned feet depicts a hapless surfer. The frame of the painting provides a further dimension. The loins of the creature painted on the frame seem to be giving birth to the painting itself, while a studio lamp is apparently illuminating the picture, imbuing the work with



something of a voyeuristic quality, and pointing to Marek's later work in three-dimensional assemblages and film. A work of power and virtuosity, it is perhaps Marek's first attempt to incorporate his own surrealist vocabulary with the Australian land(sea)scape. Against the multiplicity of surrealist devices, however, the background remains undeveloped; although a seaside setting is clearly depicted, it could be almost anywhere. The metamorphosis of Marek's surrealist iconography and the landscapes and natural formations of Australia did not reach a full resolution until his return from New Guinea in 1959.

## Sydney

Shortly after arriving in Sydney in 1951, Dusan and his wife, Helena made the acquaintance of Rosaleen Norton, and as a result found living quarters in her building in Brougham Street, Kings Cross. In interviews Dusan recounts the bohemian community which resided in this building, a world of eccentrics and colourful characters.<sup>13</sup> Dusan earned his living by making jewellery, and in their tiny flat he continued to draw and paint – the cramped circumstances of his life at this time accounts for the relatively small scale of many of his works.

It was during this period that Marek acquired a small movie camera and began to experiment with film-making.<sup>14</sup> The two films he completed during this period are among the earliest avant-garde films made in Australia and abound in surrealist elements. *Light of Darkness* (1952) was filmed in colour and consists of a series of visionary scenes loosely tied together by a story which revolves around a wizard-like figure who creates a large egg, which turns up in subsequent scenes.<sup>15</sup> Blocks of apartments, reminiscent of central European cities hover above the streetscape, where one encounters an Australian-style corner shop advertising Peter's ice cream. A pair of cut-out kangaroos perform a quirky dance; an apparently chance encounter between a man and a woman lead to the final scene of the film, where they meet on a beach, the colour scheme of which resembles a painting by Jeffrey Smart. The man has metamorphosed into a sexually charged, striped animal. Within the space of five minutes, an extraordinarily rich array of images flashes past in a stream of consciousness-like procession. Created with minimal materials, under primitive conditions, this film demonstrates Marek's ability 'to create something from nothing,' to be endlessly inventive with a minimum of means.<sup>16</sup> It also demonstrates the conflict in his work - his established European, surrealist style attempting to merge with the many new visual stimuli he found in Australia. The second film, *Fisherman's Holiday* (1952) is a frankly nostalgic look backwards to his homeland.<sup>17</sup> It is set on a bridge in a medieval European town, bearing a strong resemblance to the Charles Bridge in Prague. The storyline, laced with black humour, has a man fishing from the bridge, swinging his line and catching a passing cyclist, whose head he decides to use as bait. A friend appears, with a bottle of wine, and the nude female statue which was on the bridge is now replaced by the cyclist.

Marek only held one painting exhibition during this period in Sydney, a solo exhibition with the short-lived Mack Gallery, in Pitt Street, Sydney. Over fifty works were displayed, including paintings, drawings, sculpture, a three-dimensional assemblage and jewellery. A



newspaper article of the period characterises Marek as an Australian Salvador Dalí, posing with a sculpture and a Sydney fashion model.<sup>18</sup> The exhibition however was not well received in the press, for instance by the critic Paul Haefliger, who was a supporter of the Sydney Charm School of painters which flourished at that time.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of interest in Marek's was certainly a factor in him quitting Sydney and moving to New Guinea. However Marek seems to have also had a deep, lingering attraction to New Guinea and in 1953 had made an abortive attempt to sail there in a hollowed out log.<sup>20</sup> He travelled with two friends to Cooktown, heading to New Guinea, and from there to find Shangri-La. Owing to an injury sustained in an accident, the trip was abandoned. Marek finally left Sydney in March 1954 and travelled to Port Moresby.

### **Into the epicentre of the Surrealist Map**

Marek remained in Port Moresby for six months, then moved to Rabaul, New Britain, remaining there until 1959. The reasons for departing Sydney are unclear, but a number of paintings and drawings testify to his interest in so-called primitive art and artefacts, an interest that began during his student years in Prague. On arriving in Port Moresby, Marek held an Exhibition of Surrealistic Painting in the local Red Cross Hall. It must have been one of the strangest events ever held there, but drew many members of the local émigré community. Marek brought to New Guinea his entire studio of paintings, drawings and sculpture from Sydney, which he proceeded to display. Ironically, his journey to the centre of the surrealist map destroyed or damaged much of his artwork. Most of the works painted before 1954 show the effects of the extreme humidity encountered in New Britain. In addition, when the Mareks departed Port Moresby, a crate of paintings was left behind on the docks, and subjected to storms and excessive humidity. Many works had to be discarded. Most of the paintings sustained some form of damage, and even realistic observational drawings were strangely transformed by the climate.<sup>21</sup>

Marek's own attitude to the damage his works sustained is a little unclear. He maintained a lifelong fascination with the way different materials react with one another – an interest that possibly stems from his time as a refugee when he had to find ways to create with whatever was available. But there was also a mystical side of him that believed objects had a life of their own and that unseen cosmic processes were at work beneath what we are able to perceive on the surface.

During his time in Australia he continued to have 'chance' encounters with materials, working with unorthodox materials in an unorthodox manner. He executed a painting on a brick, and another on the underside of a drawer in the house of friends where he was staying – waiting patiently until the owners discovered his work. During the 1960s he regularly painted on aluminium sheets, and old used printer's plates, where the existing engraving contributes to the overall form and texture of the painting. He also worked extensively in the unusual medium of charcoal on canvas or calico. His interest and delight in the chance ways that



different materials reacted to different surfaces was a form of automatism, a means of subjugating his own will and leaving part of the course of a painting's evolution to chance.

Marek's 1951 painting *Ego* suffered severe damage in New Guinea, and was later sold to the Art Gallery of New South Wales by the artist on the condition that it not be restored.<sup>22</sup> The reason was given in a letter to the gallery, written by Helena Marek in 1998:

I know that Dusan did not want it restored.....Dusan's attitude was determined by his surrealist pleasure in the transitory nature of art works.

The journey to the centre of the surrealist map proved to be a nadir. In addition to his artworks being damaged, Marek's creative activity reached an impasse. During the five years Marek remained in New Guinea, he completed only a handful of observational drawings of coastal scenes and a solitary painting (*Rabau*<sup>23</sup>). Paradoxically, when Marek entered the epicentre of surrealism's reconfigured world, his creative spark faltered. With the exception of a short film,<sup>24</sup> Marek completed no major works during his time in New Guinea, and this period marks a significant fallow period in comparison to the constant need to work and create that marks the rest of his adult life. By way of comparison, Dusan's brother Voitre spent a similar period away from civilisation during the 1950s, when he left Adelaide and went to live on Kangaroo Island, working as a lighthouse keeper. This period in isolation resulted in a number of intensely personal drawings in a surrealist style executed on out-of-date photographic paper – a cheap and available medium for him. A representative selection of these drawings is held in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia.<sup>25</sup>

For five years, Dusan photographed and filmed the natives in their villages, counted the trees on a coconut plantation so the owner could obtain a bank loan and assembled a collection of native art. He also worked on coastal copra boats as an engineer - a career for which he had no training and was helped out by the natives who painted the engine different colours to assist him in his labours. Marek's reasons for remaining in New Guinea for so long are not known, but it seems that this was a happy time for him as well as a necessary period of reflection and regeneration.

### Return to Australia

Marek returned to Australia in 1959 and became the caretaker at the Kym Bonython Gallery in North Adelaide. He had time to concentrate on creative work, and the opportunity to meet a variety of artists, breaking the pattern of creative isolation which had been the case in New Guinea. The period spanning the 1960s was one of intense growth and activity. He began to work in a style that was a merging of his own surrealist iconography with abstraction and abstract expressionism. The fallow period in New Guinea had led to a new clarity of vision. His new works were first exhibited at the Bonython Gallery in 1963.<sup>26</sup> Many of the works from this period are painted either on aluminium sheets, or on old printer's plates – the existing engraving being incorporated as an element in the picture. Perhaps as a result of the damage his works suffered in the tropics of New Guinea, Marek began to paint works which



incorporated a patina of age into their form. A number of works from this period look aged, or distressed, having been conceived to look as though they are in various states of deterioration.

During the New Guinea years Marek had continued to experiment with film. In addition to making a number of purely documentary films, he had completed a surrealist/cubist-style film, *The Nightmare*. Shot in colour, the work incorporates wooden puppets made by Marek, with costumes made by his wife. As well as the original print of the film, the puppets are in the collection of the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra. In 1956, Marek made a brief visit to Adelaide, where he completed a short animated film, *Spaceman Number One*.<sup>27</sup> Although of only two and a half minutes duration, this was Marek's first use of two-dimensional cut-out animation and was the precursor of an intense period of involvement with animated film during the early 1960s.

Marek produced a series of animated films which brought him with much recognition and a number of awards, including a Gold Medal at the Australian Film Awards in 1963, for *Adam and Eve*, as well as international awards at festivals in Vancouver, Venice and Chicago.<sup>28</sup> As a result of his success as a filmmaker, Marek was invited in 1963 to join the staff of Fontana Films, a Sydney-based company which employed a number of Czech émigrés. Marek was provided with a studio and a salary. Apart from a fairly light workload making some TV commercials and animations, he was free to continue his creative work using the resources of the Fontana Studio. During this time Marek embarked upon his most ambitious film project to date, a full-length surrealist feature film entitled *Cobweb without a Parachute*. Marek's own précis gives some idea of the scope of the film:

Today uniformity, convention, hypocrisy, hatred and other habit-forming pressures provide the dominant recipe for life. Man is becoming deprived of the vital experience of beauty and of the natural processes of love. Reason, imagination, the importance of living and even his true identity becomes unknown to him. This film unfolds the problem facing every person on earth, the problem within himself, the fight between the conscious and the sub-conscious mind. It is a document of the human mind. Through this quiet and savage conflict we experience the sub-consciousness as it gains new strength that enables man to realise the excitement of living. To free man from being conditioned, to be able to enjoy life fully, to experience life and nature without prejudice.

*Cobweb* is essentially a self-portrait, a seventy-minute surrealist monodrama where Marek reflects on his life and world, pursued by a creature that represents his sub-conscious. This highly virtuosic film would, if it had been completed, hold a claim to being Marek's magnum opus. Unfortunately a dispute between Marek and his employers broke out about the ownership of the film. The uncut negative was seized by Fontana, and all that remains today is a black and white work print, lacking the dissolves and superimpositions that Marek had planned. The break with Fontana films and the loss of a final version of *Cobweb* resulted in a creative crisis for Marek, which he attempted to resolve by beginning a series of charcoal



drawings – large scale works executed on canvas or calico, mostly black and white, but some incorporating colour.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 3: Dusan Marek, *Self Portrait*, circa 1971. Photograph, Adelaide.

In 1969 Marek returned to Adelaide and settled in Bridgewater, a semi-rural area in the Adelaide Hills. He lived in an isolated farmhouse (a painting of the period, *The End of*



*Radbone Road*, depicts Marek's vision of his surroundings) and continued to paint, living an almost subsistence existence on the farm. Interest in his work grew among the local community and he held a number of exhibitions both in Adelaide and the Adelaide Hills. The largest scale exhibition was held at 'Manoah' in 1971. This historic house had been restored by the third Marek brother, Eugene, who had migrated to Australia in 1949. Among the plush restored Victorian interiors, nearly 100 of Marek's surreal paintings loomed, punctuated by several sculptures by Voitre. It was during this time that the Art Gallery of South Australia finally acquired a work by Marek, *Equator* (1948), leading to Marek's dry comment:

You see how far I have progressed in the estimation of this country after living and painting here for a quarter of a century.<sup>30</sup>

Another important work from this period was the feature film *And the Word was Made Flesh* (1971), a surrealist drama made in collaboration with students from Flinders University.<sup>31</sup> The film operates in a dream, or stream of consciousness state, and explores similar autobiographical issues to those that had surfaced in *Cobweb*.

Marek's peripatetic existence continued with a move to Tasmania in 1973. He took up a position at the University of Hobart, at the invitation of Udo Sellbach, lecturing in painting and film. He made his home and created a studio in Margate, a rural area not far from Hobart where he continued to paint and draw. Marek's intense love of nature had begun to be increasingly reflected in his works of the 1960s and 1970s, and the incorporation of the Australian landscape becomes increasingly refined in his work. During the 1960s in Adelaide he had grown to love the Coorong, near Adelaide, where he often went to paint and draw and commune with nature, floating rather than swimming in the ocean. Floating in the ocean became a means to meditate upon floating in time and in space. He used to spend hours in the sea, listening to the rocks and waves, communicating with the voices of nature. The love of nature and his relatively isolated lifestyle went hand in hand with an exploration into philosophy and mysticism. In addition to the writings of Jung and Freud, the writings of P. D. Ouspensky and his concept of the fourth dimension began to preoccupy him, as did the works of the English metaphysical poets and the philosopher Spinoza, and scientific works about volcanos, which held a mysterious fascination for him.

By the time he was living in Tasmania, Marek's paintings had developed into a metaphysical enquiry into the nature of the universe, man's relation to nature, and to time, and the existence of unseen dimensions that can be sensed in everyday consciousness. His style continued to develop in the direction of abstraction, accompanied as ever by surrealist motifs, and references to the Australian landscape. In addition to paintings and drawings, Marek produced a number of three-dimensional works, returning to a form he had abandoned in the 1950s. Works such as *Four-Dimensional Drama without Words* and *Book 27, Chapter MCMLXXV* are fine examples of Marek's preoccupation with space and time, and his use of three-dimensional assemblages as a midpoint between painting and film.<sup>32</sup>



In 1977 Marek was awarded a Fellowship in Creative Arts at the Australian National University, Canberra, which led to an extended period spent in Canberra, a city he had little affection for. His works become increasingly symbolic and mystical, with some evidence of an interest in minimal and Pop art. Indulging in extremes, he completed a series of miniature paintings, *Fables*, alongside a number of works on a monumental scale, incorporating automatism and chance techniques. In response to Marek's Australian National University Exhibition, critic Sasha Grishin wrote an enthusiastic review, and looking back on the work of this period after Marek's death, Grishin wrote with similar interest:

In his later work there is a purity of style that seems to chart the course of the unconscious as related to ideas of psychic automatism as a path through which to explore and liberate the creative unconscious, an idea that was cherished by many of the early Surrealists. Dusan's drawings, assemblages of found objects and penetrating films like *Adam and Eve* of 1962, represented something of a lone voice in their celebration of the purity of automatism and while many of the Australian artists illustrated the surrealist experience, Dusan Marek lived it.<sup>33</sup>

In 1979 Marek made a study tour of Europe and America. He dared not visit his homeland, fearing arrest, or reprisals for fleeing the Communists in 1948. It was his first visit to Europe for 30 years.

While Marek was a devoted and inspiring teacher, his years in an academic environment were not without difficulty. His strong ideas about teaching, and his idealistic notions of responsibility did not always sit easily with the demands of a bureaucratic university situation. In addition Marek's health began to decline. He suffered three heart attacks during his years in Tasmania. In spite of considerable teaching responsibilities, the time in Hobart had been one of astonishing creativity and long-awaited recognition. Feeling at an impasse with teaching constrictions and the bureaucratic environment, Marek decided in 1981 to retire from teaching and return to Adelaide. He made his feelings clear in an interview:

I feel it is time to start all over again. I want to feel fresh for a while in a new place. Working in an institution for that length of time is like a slow suicide, like being in a concentration camp. One has to be stubborn not to be persuaded by anything sweet and anything that would make me stay, because it is so easy to fall for a pattern of life.<sup>34</sup>

En route to Adelaide, Marek made a further trip to Europe, visiting France, Spain and Italy. This was a painting tour, and Marek worked in St Cyr in France, where he stayed with artist Salvador Palle and also in Spello, in Italy, where he stayed with Orlando Tisato. Marek returned to Australia with a considerable folio of drawings and large paintings.

Marek returned to the Adelaide Hills, establishing a studio in Eden Hills. The domestic peace and tranquillity he found there was tempered by increasing health problems, leading to a long period of dialysis and an unsuccessful cataract operation. In 1984 he created a large series entitled 'Homage to the Sun' comprising over fifty works. These paintings were a response to the disastrous bushfires in the Adelaide Hills in that year. Another series



followed in 1990 – ‘Eye of the Heart,’ which was begun following a return home from hospital. Into the flat planes of colour which again show an influence of Pop art, Marek incorporates his immediate world, shrunken by ill health – trees, flowers and creatures he could see in the garden he had made, as well as references to the female form. Marek had a constant need to express himself through his art, and he remained prolific until the end of his life. In his final years we find works which are recapitulations of old themes – he looks back at his days in Papua and New Guinea, creating nostalgic memories of a place which had in the meantime been destroyed by volcanic activity. He also remained alert to events in the world around him, and the guns, canons and destruction depicted in several of the final works is a response to Marek’s horror and outrage at the wars in the Gulf, Somalia and Yugoslavia. He reworked themes of some of his early paintings, and he also charted with cold, almost surgical precision the degeneration of his body, and the attendant operations that he underwent in his final years. He retained his artistic powers to the very end, and was still at work on a canvas three days before his death. A self-proclaimed surrealist at the age of thirteen, Marek carried that talisman until his death at the age of 67 in 1993.

### Posthumous

Dusan Marek died on the eve of belated recognition. His works were included in the landmark exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, *Surrealism, Revolution by Night*, which opened in March 1993. There were two posters made for this exhibition – one was of *Le Viol* by René Magritte, a surrealist whom Marek admired greatly. The other poster depicted *Perpetuum Mobile* by Marek. Marek was to have been a guest at the opening of the exhibition, but he died the night before the official opening. His wife Helena called to inform the gallery that Marek would not be able to attend. The lady she spoke to tried to connect Helena with a recorded message. Helena responded that she did not wish to speak to a recorded message about the death of her husband.<sup>35</sup> The surrealist irony that pursued Dusan throughout his life was not quite extinguished. The catalogue for this exhibition brought Marek’s work under new scrutiny and included illustrations of five seminal works of the late 1940s. However it failed to comment upon Marek’s significance as a European trained artist active as a surrealist in the South Pacific region for over 40 years.

Another exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra in 1997 - *The Europeans* - marginalises Marek’s position, mentioning only his work as a jeweller, which is confirmed to a single paragraph.<sup>36</sup> The short entry asserts that Marek never exhibited his jewellery after 1950, when critics ignored his work in a Melbourne exhibition, though surviving catalogues indicate that he exhibited jewellery in exhibitions in 1953 and 1954. The National Gallery of Australia hold an important collection of sketches and drawings which date from 1948 to the mid 1950s, whose significance, chronology and relation to large scale paintings awaits full exploration.

After his death, Marek’s studio in Eden Hills remained undisturbed for several years. It contained a wealth of paintings from all periods of the artist’s life as well as sketches,



drawings, films and supporting material. When the artist's widow needed to move to other accommodation she was overwhelmed by the problem of how to deal with the enormous collection Marek had left behind. At this time James Agapitos and Ray Wilson were beginning to create their collection of Australian Surrealist Art, and had already purchased several seminal works from Helena. They agreed to purchase all of the paintings and drawings in the studio to disseminate them amongst Australian galleries both national and regional. Marek's films and supporting material (including story boards, puppets and cameras) were donated to the National Film and Screen Archive, Canberra. Much of his personal archive and collection of ephemera was donated to the library of the National Gallery of Victoria.

Several hundred paintings and drawings were donated by James Agapitos and James Wilson to a number of galleries throughout Australia. This has resulted in the preservation of these works, but has also dispersed Marek's works over many regional collections, making it difficult to assemble significant works for display and critical comment. Marek was active in such a wide range of disciplines that the notion of a fully comprehensive retrospective of his work remains beyond the scope and resources of most galleries. The last significant survey of Marek's oeuvre remains the Project 10 exhibition, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1975. Marek tended to sell works whenever there was demand or interest, resulting in a number of important gallery-quality works ending up in private hands. The present writer has located over 500 works by Marek in both private and public hands, and it is clear that in order to fully realise the breadth of Marek's work and its overall quality and significance, a catalogue raisonné is required.

While many of Marek's finest paintings remain all but inaccessible, the issues surrounding his films are even more critical. The original prints remain in the possession of the National Film and Screen Archive, in urgent need of restoration and publishing. The question of an appropriate resolution to the unfinished nature of *Cobweb without a Parachute*, and an appropriate proposal for its restoration and publication remains unresolved.

Compounding the problem of creating an accurate record of Marek's oeuvre is the fact that his own studio records are eccentric and often contradictory. Marek had a habit of giving one title to several paintings, often a number of years apart. There are conflicting records as to the dating of his works, and a number of works in public collections seem to have been given mandatory dates without reference to Marek's studio catalogue, giving rise to considerable chronological and stylistic confusion.

The question of Marek's ultimate significance as an Australian surrealist remains open. In view of the high quality of his work across a number of disciplines, he appears to have been undeservedly neglected and marginalised. It must be noted, however that Marek had no interest in the commercial art world, believing that his work would ultimately speak for itself. Self-promotion was not his way, and he had no interest in making concessions to public taste. Surviving colleagues and close friends speak of a mask that Marek operated



behind, possibly a ploy to enable him to create the space for him to concentrate on his creative concerns, protected and supported by his wife Helena.

Clues to Marek the man can be detected in his work, and a lingering nostalgia for his homeland permeates much of his output. After his death, his widow returned his ashes to Czechoslovakia and placed them in an area of the Bohemian Forest where Marek always spoke fondly of having played as a child, a gesture which provides a clue to Marek's tragic position as an émigré. In many ways it could be conjectured that Dusan Marek was a man lost between two worlds, who turned in upon himself to try and resolve the split which the events of the twentieth century had forced upon him. He remains however, an important, unique and colourful figure in Australian art, and it is hoped that an increasing interest in the influence of surrealism upon Australian artists may lead to a reassessment of Marek, who had imbibed the spirit of the early surrealists at its source and who went on to create his own unique concoction of surrealism within the Australian experience.

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<sup>1</sup> The only publication dedicated solely to the art of Dusan Marek is Bernice Murphy's monograph, *Dusan Marek*, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, 1979. This was published to coincide with an important and wide ranging survey of Marek's work at the Macquarie Galleries that year.

<sup>2</sup> Dusan Marek, *Birth of Love*, 1948, oil on wooden panel, 16.2 x 73.8 cm. *The Voyage*, 1948, oil on wooden panel, 12.0 x 72.8 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Both these works are illustrated in the catalogue for *Surrealism, Revolution by Night*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Email to the author, 12 May 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Thomas, *Dusan Marek, Seeing the World*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Dusan Marek, *Equator*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1948, on board SS Charleton Sovereign, the Equator, oil and enamel on discarded gaming table, 121.7 x 91.2 cm. *Perpetuum Mobile*, 1948, on board SS Charleton Sovereign, oil and enamel on discarded gaming table, 121.7 x 91.2 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. This work is illustrated in *Surrealism, Revolution by Night*.

<sup>6</sup> Voitre Marek, *My Gibraltar*, 1948, on board SS Charleton Sovereign, oil on wood panel, 29.0 x 20.5 cm. *Gibraltar IRO*, 1948, on board SS Charleton Sovereign, oil on wood panel, 29.0 x 20.5 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Dusan Marek, *Gibraltar*, 1948, on board SS Charleton Sovereign, oil and enamel on two-sided wooden panel, 28.5 x 51.5 cm. Agapitos/Wilson Collection of Surrealist Art, Sydney. This work is illustrated in Jane Hylton, *Adelaide Angries, South Australian painting of the 1940s*, Art Gallery Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1989. Dusan Marek, *Program*, 1948-49, oil and enamel on two-sided wooden panel, 28.5 x 20.5 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection of Surrealist Art, Sydney. This work is illustrated in the above-mentioned *Adelaide Angries, South Australian painting of the 1940s*. The Agapitos/Wilson Collection of Surrealist Art contains a number of seminal works by Dusan Marek painted during the early period of the artist's exile from Czechoslovakia. The collection of works executed between 1948 and 1953 has played an important part of a



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revival in interest in Marek's work. These works are illustrated in Bruce James, *Australian Surrealism, The Agapitos/Wilson Collection*, The Beagle Press, Sydney, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Dusan Marek, *Peuple stript of pritenions (sic)/First reaction to Gibraltar in New Environment of Australia*, Sydney, 1948, pen and ink, ink wash on paper mounted on card, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra [Ac. No. 95.369].

<sup>8</sup> *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1949.

<sup>9</sup> *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, September, 1949 (exact date unknown).

<sup>10</sup> Bernice Murphy, article in *Project 10* broadsheet, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1976, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret King Boynes, Obituary of Dusan Marek, written for the *Adelaide Advertiser*, 1993, typescript held in the research library of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (exact publication details unknown).

<sup>12</sup> Dusan Marek, *On the Beach*, 1949, oil and pencil on wood, 38.5 x 50.0 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. This work is illustrated in *Surrealism, Revolution by Night*.

<sup>13</sup> *The Mercury* (Hobart), 25<sup>th</sup> September 1981, article entitled 'Moving on but Never Running.'

<sup>14</sup> Much of the information presented here comes from articles and papers by Arthur Cantrill, the principle commentator on Marek's films. See Arthur Cantrill, *A Surrealist Film Practice – the Animated Films of Dusan Marek*, 2007, unpublished manuscript. See also *Cantrills Filmnotes*, #81/82, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Dusan Marek, *Light of Darkness*, 1952, Sydney, colour, 5 mins. Original print with National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

<sup>16</sup> This quotation comes from Marek's unpublished 1948 Notebook, archives of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>17</sup> Dusan Marek, *Fisherman's Holiday*, 1952, Sydney, black and white, 2 mins 45 secs. Original print with National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

<sup>18</sup> 'The (Surrealist) Art of Nothing,' *The Sunday Telegraph*, May 10, 1953.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Haefliger, 'Dusan Marek,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1953.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Helena Marek, by the author, May 2006.

<sup>21</sup> There are a series of observational drawings made in New Guinea which show the disconcerting effects of the climate there. They are in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, and have the following accession numbers: NGA 95.360; NGA 95.374; NGA 95.373; NGA 95.359; NGA 95.361; NGA 95.362.

<sup>22</sup> Dusan Marek, *Ego*, 1951-52, oil on canvas, 39 x 41.5 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>23</sup> Dusan Marek, *Rabaul*, 1956, oil on board, 33.5 x 45.5 cm, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.

<sup>24</sup> Dusan Marek, *The Nightmare* (also known as *The Magician*), 1956, Rabaul, colour, 6 mins 38 secs. Original print with National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

<sup>25</sup> The Art Gallery of South Australia holds drawings by Voitre Marek – *Golden Hen*, 1951; *Atlas*, 1951; *Six figurative forms in classical environment*, 1952; *Poetry*, 1952; *Victim of the World*, 1952; *Mood*, 1952; *All Secrets Remain Hidden*, 1956. All works are pen and ink on photographic paper.

<sup>26</sup> The Bonython Gallery exhibition presented 42 paintings which Marek had painted since returning to Australia in 1959.

<sup>27</sup> Dusan Marek, *Spaceman Number One*, 1956, Adelaide, colour, 2 mins 22 secs. Original print with National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.



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<sup>28</sup> The animated films produced during this period are: *8 Nursery Rhymes*, 1959 – 60, Adelaide, colour, animated, 16 mins; *Adam and Eve*, 1962, Adelaide, colour, animated, 10 mins; *The Magic Trumpet*, 1962, Adelaide, colour, animated, 8 mins; *Windmills*, 1963, Adelaide, colour, animated, 7 mins. This film uses animated children's drawings and was made in collaboration with Adelaide school children. All the original prints for these works are with the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

<sup>29</sup> Notable examples include: *Absit Invidia*, Sydney, 1968, charcoal on calico, 102.4 x 127 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; *The Explorer*, Sydney 1968, charcoal and pencil on canvas, 90.3 x 104.3 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; *Noah*, Adelaide, 1969, charcoal on canvas, 95 x 95 cm, private collection (illustrated in Nancy Benko, *Art and Artists of South Australia*, Hyde Park Press, Adelaide, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> Marek cited in Ivor Francis, *Goodbye to the City of Dreams*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2004, 196.

<sup>31</sup> Dusan Marek, *And the Word was made Flesh*, 1971, Adelaide, black and white, 70 mins. Original print with National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

<sup>32</sup> Dusan Marek, *Four-Dimensional Drama Without Words*, Margate, Tasmania, 1975. Three-dimensional, two-sided painting, mixed media, overall dimensions: 18.4 x 42.9 x 8 cm, private collection. Illustrated in Murphy, *Dusan Marek. Book 27, Chapter MCMLXXV*, Margate, Tasmania, 1975. Oil and assemblage on two hinged panels, 114 x 94 cm overall, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.

<sup>33</sup> Sasha Grishin and Myra McIntyre (eds), *The Australian National University Art Collection, Selected Works*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1997.

<sup>34</sup> Dusan Marek, unpublished Notebook of 1948, archives of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Helena Marek by the author, November 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Butler (ed.), *The Europeans: Émigré Artists in Australia, 1930 – 1960*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1997.

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