

Friends of Hamilton Gallery Picnic

At Allan and Maria Myers' homestead, Blackwood

29 March 2025

Von Guérard at Blackwood

Ruth Pullin



FIG 1

Eugene von Guérard *The Grampians from the South* 1856

oil on canvas

33.0 x 56.0 cm

Private collection, Ritchie family, Victoria

In the account of his 1841 trek north from Port Fairy and through the area around Penshurst, James Ritchie described a landscape of:

*light forest, the trees blackwood, wattle etc., the herbage nourishing buttercups etc. ... and growing long and fresh as spring. There were several marshes we saw bearing strong aquatic grasses as if it was nourished with plenty of moisture. I would expect that water could be found in abundance a few feet deep; if so, there might be more splendid runs obtained in this neighbourhood.*¹

¹ James Ritchie, 'An Account of a Trip Taken into the Western District, Nov-Dec 1841.' Reference no 1974.0084, item 1/3/1, Ritchie Family Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. Cited in: Melinda Barrie and Sophie

By 1843 Ritchie had purchased the Deep Creek run, initially in partnership with his brother John Miller Ritchie and James Scales (Sceales).² They named the property 'Blackwood' for the stands of blackwood that, in 1841, James Ritchie had seen as 'proof of quality' of the land.³

Thirteen years later the landscape painter Eugene von Guérard (1811-1901) was equally captivated by the beauty and diversity of this landscape, its lightly forested terrain, its shallow seasonal lakes and the diversity of the aquatic grasses and bird life that flourished on them – all of it experienced against the awe-inspiring backdrop of the southern Grampians (Gariwerd). His sketchbook was already out as he approached Blackwood on Tuesday 27 May 1856: from Mount Rouse he sketched 'Durkarit' or 'Durkaritte' [sic] Hill, on which Blackwood homestead sits today, and which he described as 'near Mr Ritchie's property'.⁴ Later that day, on a large sheet of paper, he drew the view looking back in the opposite direction, towards Mount Rouse from Ritchie's property. Returning to his sketchbook he recorded the sweep of the Victoria Ranges, Mount Sturgeon (Mud Dadjug) and Mount Abrupt (Wurgarri) as seen from 'Ritchie's Forest Camp', followed by a double page sketch of Lake Ritchie (Fig 3). On the next day he produced two larger, more finished and detailed drawings: one depicts Muston's Creek winding its way over 'Mr Ritchie's run' with Mount Abrupt and Mount Sturgeon in the background, and the other is a detailed study of Lake Ritchie, again looking towards Mount Abrupt and Mount Sturgeon (Fig 4). This acutely observed, beautifully realized drawing became the study for *The Grampians from the South*, which von Guérard painted in his Melbourne studio for James Ritchie later that year.

In von Guérard's composition the lake takes centre stage: Mount Sturgeon, Mount Abrupt and the Serra Range rise behind it, their angular forms an imposing and dramatic backdrop for the pastoral activity depicted in the foreground (Fig 1). Blackwood was his first port of call on an almost 3-week trek along the eastern side of the Grampians (Gariwerd) to Mount Zero, the direction of his onward journey signified by the line of saw-toothed peaks (the Serra Range) that stretch northwards and into the distance in *The Grampians from the South*.

Von Guérard's Warrnambool to Mt Zero expedition

Garrett, 'A man, his dog and a diary: James Ritchie's journey in the Western District, 1841', *University of Melbourne Collections*, Issue 12, June 2013.

² According to Barrie and Garrett John Miller Ritchie was James's brother. Barrie and Garrett, 'A man, his dog and a diary', *University of Melbourne Collections*, Issue 12, 2013, p. 32. Other sources mention only Daniel and Simon as James's brothers.

³ Barrie and Garrett, p. 32.

⁴ He spelt 'Durkarit', as he noted in his sketchbook, as he heard it spoken.

Travel lay at the heart of von Guérard's artistic practice. In the 1830s he and his artist-father spent twelve years travelling and sketching in Italy, a pattern that continued in the 1840s on sketching expeditions with fellow landscape painters in Düsseldorf. In Australia his often intrepid expeditions were fuelled by his love of the adventure of travel, a deep interest in and curiosity about the world and a desire to portray landscapes as yet unknown to European art.

Von Guérard's 1856 'Warrnambool to Mt Zero' expedition was one the most inspiring and productive of his career, generating much-needed early commissions and a wealth of subjects including *Mount William from Mount Dryden*, one of the works that secured his reputation as 'decidedly the landscape painter of Australia'.⁵ As he moved along the length of the Grampians (Gariwerd) range its dramatic forms unfolded before him, their profiles shifting with his shifting vantage points: on successive pages of his sketchbook and on thirty or so larger loose sheets of paper he recorded the distinctive forms of Mount Sturgeon and Mount Abrupt, the serrated profile of the Serra Range and the imposing form of Mt William – at close range and from great distances, and in morning, midday and late afternoon light. For von Guérard landscape painting was far more than simple 'view painting.' In line with the thinking of contemporary artists and theorists in Germany, he sought to go beyond a mere depiction of the external forms of mountains and rock formations and, through a process of penetratingly close and accurate observation, to intuit something of the inner geological character of his subject, the forces that shaped it and its geological history. In 1856 von Guérard could not have known about the processes of folding and tilting along faults in the sandstone, siltstone and mudstone bedding of the Grampians (Gariwerd) that today's geologists estimate occurred about 350 million years ago.⁶ But, through a close and analytical observation of the external forms of the range, he was able to communicate something of its character and its history – to the extent that the eminent visiting geologist, Ferdinand von Hochstetter, noted the value of the geological information contained in von Guérard's Western District drawings.⁷

Von Guérard was equally fascinated by the details and minutiae of the natural world which, as *The Grampians from the South* reveals, he was able to integrate into a unified composition. It was a way of seeing nature that reflected the ideas of the hugely influential German naturalist and traveller, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859). Humboldt had fired the imaginations of a generation

⁵ James Smith, 'Art in Victoria', *The Illustrated Journal of Australasia*, vol. IV, January–June 1858, p.35.

⁶ Ross Cayley, 'The Physiognomy of Mountains', in Pullin, Ruth, *Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2011, p. 122.

⁷ Hochstetter, cited in T.A. Darragh, 'Ferdinand Hochstetter's Notes of a Visit to Australia and a Tour of the Victorian Goldfields in 1859', *Historical Records of Australian Science*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2001, p. 411.

(including Charles Darwin) with his wonder at the diversity of nature and his ground-breaking recognition of the 'interconnectedness' of all natural and physical phenomena – the 'unity in diversity' of the natural world.

The 'Warrnambool to Mt Zero' expedition: setting out

On 9 May 1856 the recently-married von Guérard, his wife Louise and the pastoralist James Dawson boarded a coastal steamer for their voyage from Melbourne to Port Fairy. From there they made their way to Dawson's property, Kangatong where the von Guérards stayed, as guests of the Dawsons, for the next two weeks. Kangatong was the artist's base for two sketching expeditions, the three-week trek to the Grampians (Gariwerd) and a short visit to Charles Hamilton Macknight's property Dunmore and Mt Eccles (Budj Bim). Von Guérard and Dawson had met nine months earlier when the progressive pastoralist, pioneering ethnographer and conservationist commissioned a major work, *Tower Hill* 1855. This meeting marked the beginning of a life-long friendship, and one which von Guérard celebrated on his 1856 visit with the gift of a small painting, *Cutting out the Cattle at Kangatong*. It depicts the cattle muster that the von Guérards witnessed during their stay, the excitement of which was captured on the day by the artist in a lively pen-and-ink double-paged sketchbook drawing (Fig 2). The painting makes reference to the experience of the day, with a party of five spectators depicted in the lower left foreground – almost certainly the von Guérards, the Dawsons and their daughter Isabella. The standing figure (probably Dawson) offers wine to his guests.⁸ Three or four days after the cattle muster von Guérard was on his way to Blackwood, on a horse (almost certainly) on loan from his friend, James Dawson.

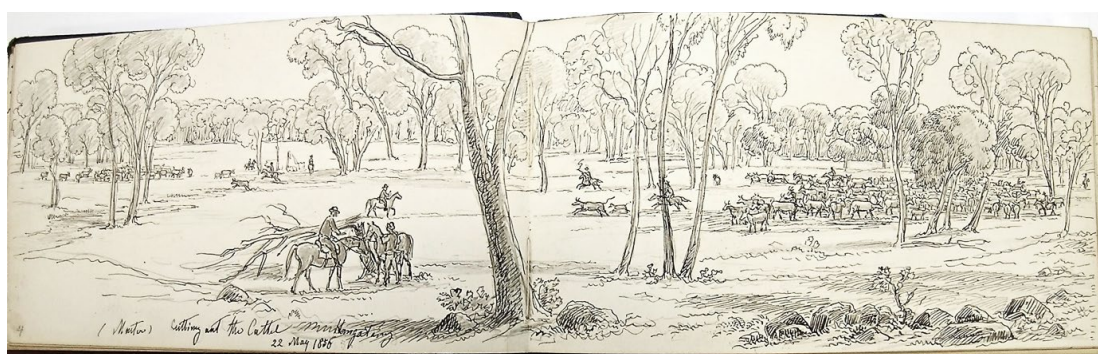


FIG 2

Eugene von Guérard *Muster Cutting out the cattle Kangatong* / 22 May 1856, 1856
Sketchbook XXV, N. 7 *Australien. Kangatong. Grampians*. May-June 1856, January 1857, Dixon
Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. DGB16, vol. 4, folio 4.

⁸ Eugene von Guérard, *Cutting out the Cattle at Kangatong* 1856, oil on canvas on composition board, 25.5 x 46.5 cm, Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria.



FIG 3

Eugene von Guérard *Lake Ritchie 27 Mai 1856, 1856*

Sketchbook XXV, N. 7 *Australien. Kangatong. Grampians*. May-June 1856, January 1857, Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. DGB16, vol. 4, folio 7.



Fig 4

Eugene von Guérard *Lake Ritchie 5½ miles from Mt Rouse 28 May 1856, 1856*

Album: 'Warrnambool to Mount Zero', folio 21

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand E-338-f-021.

The Grampians from the South

Detailed colour notes and descriptions of the light (late afternoon) on von Guérard's large drawing, *Lake Ritchie 5 ½ M. v. Mt. Rouse* (Fig 4), suggest that he and James Ritchie had already resolved that this would be the subject of the painting. The dimensions of the canvas are noted on the lower left of the drawing.⁹ Only minor departures from the drawing can be identified in the final painting: the forms and disposition of the trees (mainly blackwoods, swamp gums and acacias), the dead tree on

⁹ The painting's dimensions, 33 x 56 cm, correspond to the notes on von Guérard's drawing, 1'2" x 1'10". This note may have been added later, perhaps in the studio.

the right, the fallen log in the foreground, the islands of sedge in the lake and even the horseman at the water's edge appear in the painting exactly as they were observed on the day. As was typical of von Guérard's practice, the foreground was resolved in the studio. The sheep, the striding figure in the foreground (James?) and his dog were added later. The striking dash of red of his scarf enlivens and heightens the colour pitch of the composition.

At the time of von Guérard's visit, the lake was full. Trees near the edge of the lake stand in shallow water and, as a result of the recent rain, the lake is alive with natural activity and bird life. Lake Ritchie was the first of the many temporary lakes and swamps – part of the mosaic of temporary wetlands in the Wannon River catchment – that von Guérard saw as he travelled over the basalt plains below the Grampians (Gariwerd). In the painting a heron stands at the edge of the lake while communities of black duck, teal and snipe dive and feed in the water between the sedge islands (probably sharp club-rush *Schoenoplectus pungens*), positioned exactly as von Guérard saw them on the day he was there. His response to the minutiae and the vitality of this natural environment is present in every stroke of his brush: blades of grass are described with individual brushstrokes that follow the direction of growth, as are the red-tipped leaves of the eucalypts on the opposite bank. The fleeting and transitory activity of the lake plays out below the still, monumental and seemingly timeless peaks of the southern Grampians – the two worlds connected by the reflections of the mountains in the water.

A note on provenance:

An inscription on the stretcher frame reads: *Robt. Ritchie Esq. from his affectionate brother John Ritchie March 5th, 1860*. This inscription is something of a mystery: it suggests that the painting was gifted to Robert Ritchie by his brother John. However, the inscription pre-dates the birth of Robert Blackwood Ritchie (1861-1937), the son of James's brother, Daniel Ritchie who took over Blackwood after James's death in a tragic accident in 1857. In 1864 Daniel built the second homestead on the site, the bluestone, eight-roomed villa now used as shearers' quarters. Daniel died on a visit to Scotland in 1865, which may explain why the painting was gifted by John Ritchie to 'Robert'. But it does not explain the 1860 date of the inscription or the reference to John as Robert's 'brother' rather than his 'uncle'. Robert Blackwood Ritchie (1861-1937) built the present homestead designed by Butler and Ussher. On his 1856 visit, von Guérard probably stayed in, or camped near, the simple two-roomed bluestone cottage that James had built.

The painting remained in family hands until about 1900, when it went into the Tristan Buesst collection in London. In the 1950s Alan Ritchie was alerted to its forthcoming presentation on the London art market. He was able to purchase the painting and bring it back into the family fold.



FIG 5

Eugene von Guérard *View of Mt Sturgeon & Abrupt from the Crater of Bald Hill 29 May 1856*, 1856
Album: 'Warrnambool to Mount Zero' 1856
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. E-338-f-003.

The onward journey: a brief account outline

On the way from Blackwood to Dunkeld, on Mr Marr's property, von Guérard encountered a very different type of lake, a volcanic crater lake of the type he knew well from his 1843 sketching expedition in the German volcanic Eifel region. Two sketchbook studies and a large drawing were made on the day, 29 May 1856 (Fig 5), in response to his recognition of the geological and aesthetic significance of the subject. They were followed by a presentation drawing, which is one of a set commissioned by John Bakewell in 1857, and an important oil painting, *View of Mt Sturgeon and Mt Abrupt from the Crater of Bald Hill 1856*, in 1869.¹⁰

Later that day, as he passed through the township of Dunkeld, he was stopped in his tracks by the impact of Mount Abrupt rising so improbably from the flat plains, its face of sheer exposed rock seen

¹⁰ *View of Mt Sturgeon and Mt Abrupt from the Crater of Bald Hill, an extinct volcano c. 1858*, pen, ink, pencil and wash, 33.7 x 54.4 cm, NGV 628-5; *View of Mt Sturgeon and Mt Abrupt from the Crater of Bald Hill 1856*, 1869, oil on academy board, 29 x 45.5 cm. Private collection, Victoria.

here through a stand of gum trees. Von Guérard was already familiar with the form of the mountain: Mount Abrupt was the subject of one of the illustrations that he had copied (or traced) from Major Mitchell's *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia* (1838), and which he kept in an album he called *Australien Reminiszenzen*.¹¹ This sketchbook drawing later became the subject of a small painting and a lithograph (Fig 6).¹²



FIG 6

Eugene von Guérard *Mount Abrupt 29 Mai 1856*, 1856
 Sketchbook XXV, N. 7 *Australien. Kangatong. Grampians*. May-June 1856, January 1857
 Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. DGB16, vol. 4, folio 10.



FIG 7

¹¹ Von Guérard, 'Mount Abrupt from the South', drawing number 9c in: Eugene von Guérard, *Australien Reminiszenzen*, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.

¹² For the lithograph see: Eugene von Guérard (artist), Hanhart (lithographer), *Mt Abrupt, Near Dunkeld, Western District* [c.1857], lithograph and watercolour, 14 x 22.4 cm. The Russell and Mab Grimwade collection, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. The small oil painting is held in a private collection in Victoria.

Eugene von Guérard *Mount William and part of the Grampians in West Victoria* 1865
oil on cardboard
30.3 x 40.6 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Coller Bequest, 1955 (1562-5)

A few days later, on 2 June, von Guérard encountered another of the shallow, marshy lakes that dot this landscape. His large drawing, *Lagune nahe d. Mt William Station*, captures the energy of the scene, with black swans and other water birds busily diving for food, ducks wheeling in to join those already in a frenzy of feeding in the nutrient-rich waters of the lake and emus foraging in the grass.¹³ Nine years later von Guérard returned to the drawing for a work he painted for Mr. Denis Eisenstaedter, one of his most loyal urban patrons: *Mt William and part of the Grampians in West Victoria* 1865 (Fig 7).

From there von Guérard continued north, making drawings of, and finding accommodation at, Mr Muirhead's station Yarram Yarram, Mr Archibald Macarthur Campbell's stations Mokepilly and Lexington, Mr Calder's Station and Mr Carfrae's property Ledcourt. He also met and engaged with Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali people along the way and on the properties he visited. In his correspondence with the Berlin Ethnological Museum he recorded his purchase of a woomera and two spears from 'a camp of Aborigines at the foot of Mount Sturgeon', and a boomerang from 'a young Aborigine near the foot of Mt William.'¹⁴ At Ledcourt he sketched a young woman, who posed for him draped in a government-issue blanket and with a woven basket on her back.

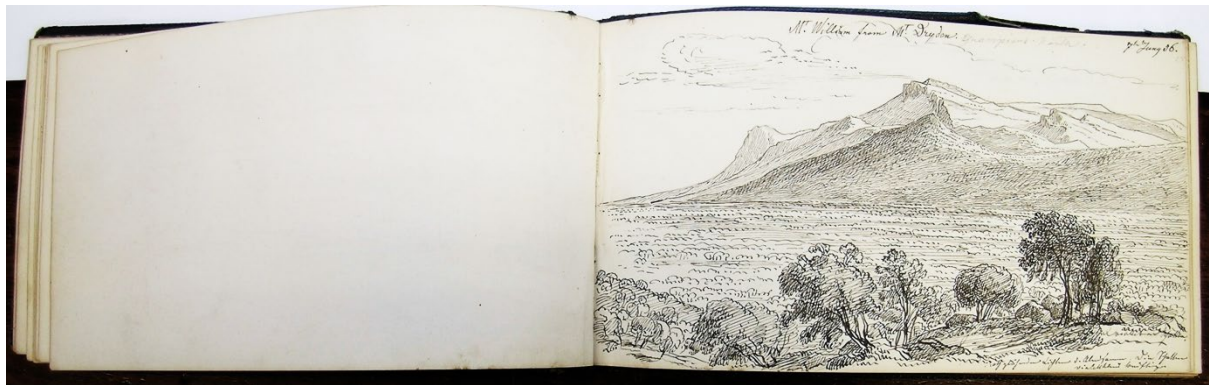


FIG 8

Eugene von Guérard *Mt William from Mt Dryden 7 Juni 1856*, 1856
Sketchbook XXV, No. 7 Australia, 1856
Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. DGB16, vol. 4, folio 26.

¹³ Eugene von Guérard, *Lagune nahe d. Mt William Station*, 2 June 1856, pencil. Album: 'Warrnambool to Mount Zero' 1856. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. E-338-f-019.

¹⁴ See: V. Ruth Pullin & Thomas A. Darragh (2023) 'The Artist-Collector: Eugene von Guérard and the Berlin Ethnological Museum', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 690-717.

On 7 June von Guérard saw and sketched the view that inspired one of the major works that secured his reputation, *Mount William from Mount Dryden* 1857 (Art Gallery of Western Australia) (Fig 8), before continuing on to Mount Zero. After a brief foray into the Wimmera he retraced his steps, revisiting some of the properties he had stayed at on the outward journey. By 15 June, he was back at the southern end of the Grampians (Gariwerd) where again he stopped to draw Mount Abrupt, this time as a large study.¹⁵ There is also evidence to suggest that he painted *Mt Abrupt, the Grampians, Victoria* 1856 (Fig 9) on the spot and directly from nature.



Fig 9

Eugene von Guérard *Mt Abrupt, the Grampians, Victoria* 1856
oil on paper on canvas, 25.8 x 34.0 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1968 (OA12.1968)

Von Guérard returned to Melbourne with a large roll of drawings and, with the exception of two pages, a completely filled sketchbook. Meticulously documented and dated, the sketches and drawings are effectively a visual diary of the expedition. For the artist they were also a precious and indispensable record of a landscape that continued to inspire him. In Hamilton Gallery's *Mount Arapiles towards the Grampians* (Fig 10) the artist's gaze is seemingly drawn, irresistibly, towards the distinctive and deeply familiar forms of the Grampians (Gariwerd) on the horizon. And his thoughts were still with this landscape when, as an eighty-one year-old artist living in London, he painted *Mount William as seen from Mount Dryden in The Grampians* 1892 – a small version of his famous 1857 composition. It was one of the last works he painted.¹⁶

¹⁵ Eugene von Guérard *Mt Abrupt 15 Juny 1856*, 1856, pencil, Album: Warrnambool to Mount Zero, Alexander Turnbull Library, E- 338- f-013.

¹⁶ Eugene von Guérard *Mount William as seen from Mount Dryden in The Grampians* 1892, oil on board, 26.0 x 33.5 cm. Private collection.



FIG 10

Eugene von Guérard *Mount Arapiles towards the Grampians* 1870

oil on academy board

18.5 x 30.5

Hamilton Gallery

Appendix:

The following is a summary of von Guérard's movements after leaving, and before returning to, James Dawson's property Kangatong:

- 27 May 1856: Mt Rouse (Collorrrer)
- 27, 28 May: at Blackwood (James Ritchie)
- 29 May: Mr Maar's Station near Bald Hill
- 29 May: Dunkeld (and Mount Sturgeon)
- 30 May: Mt Abrupt (east view); Mt William and Mt Sugarloaf
- 31 May and 1 June: Yarram Yarram (Mr Muirhead)
- 2 June: The Gap (near Muirhead's station); also notes proximity of Mt William Station
- 3 June: climbs Mt William; Mr Calder's station
- 4 & 5 & 6 June: Mokepilly and Lexington stations (Mr Archibald Macarthur Campbell)
- 7 June: Mt William from Mt Dryden
- 8 & 9 June: Mt Zero and Wimmera

11 June Carfrae's Station, Ledcourt
12 June: Mokepilly (Mr Archibald Macarthur Campbell)
14 June: Yarram Yarram (Mr Muirhead)
15 June: Mt Abrupt
16 June: the Wannon at Mt Abrupt; sets out for return to Kangatong

Drawings of and from Blackwood

Sketchbook drawings:

1. *Durkaritte[sic] Hill bei Mr R. Ritchie 27 Mai 56 1856*
2. *Forest Camp of Mr Ritchie 1856*
3. *Lake Ritchie 27 Mai 1856 1856*

Sketchbook XXV, N. 7 *Australien. Kangatong. Grampians*. May-June 1856, January 1857, Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, DGB16, vol. 4, folios 5, 6, and 7.

<https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/nmQdmAon>

Large 'album' drawings:

1. *View of Mount Rouse from Durkarite hill (near Mr Ritchies Station) 27 May 1856, 1856*
2. *Mostans [sic] Creek on Mr J. Ritchie's Run / 9-10 m. f. M. Rouse / 28 May 1856, 1856*
3. *Lake Ritchie 5½ miles from Mt Rouse 28 May 1856, 1856*

Album: 'Warrnambool to Mount Zero'

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, E-338-f-008 ; E-338-f 020 and E-338-f-021.

<https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22773275?search%5Bpage%5D=5&search%5Bpath%5D=items&search%5Btext%5D=Eugen+von+Guerard>

Dr Ruth Pullin is an Honorary Fellow of the University of Melbourne, and the Ross Steele AM Fellow, State Library of New South Wales for 2025. She was the co-curator of the National Gallery of Victoria's 2011 major touring exhibition, *Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed*, curator of the Art Gallery of Ballarat's *Eugene von Guérard: Artist-Traveller* in 2018, and the author / editor of their accompanying publications. Her most recent research, on von Guérard and his exchanges with people of the Eastern Maar Nation in Victoria's Western District, is published in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 54, no. 4, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol. 135 and in Marcia Langton & Judith Ryan (eds), *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Thames & Hudson, 2024.