When I first contacted the Melbourne-based painter Helen Johnson to discuss her forthcoming exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), she emailed me some images and a list of her source material. These included: an early map of Australia's capital city, Canberra; pictures of tools that were used to punish convicts; a portrait of a 19th-century colonial governor; a few vintage cartoons that mock both British and Australian politicians; and information about a chair. Partially constructed from oak taken both from the roof of London's Westminster Hall and the HMS Victory (Lord Nelson's flagship), the chair is a replica of a design by Augustus Pugin, the neo-gothic artist, designer and architect who was responsible for the British Houses of Parliament. The 'Report of the Proceedings on the occasion of the Presentation, at Canberra, of the Speaker's Chair, 11th October, 1926' clarifies that this deeply symbolic piece of furniture was presented to Australia 'on behalf of the United Kingdom branch of the Empire Parliamentary Association, by the Marquess of Salisbury, K.G.' In his effusive speech of acceptance, Sir Littleton Groom, Speaker of the House of Representatives, made clear the significance of the gift, declaring that: 'We are not forgetful of our historic past.' But, of course, the past to which Groom was referring was a very specific one: a British, colonial one.

An acknowledgement of Australia's 500 or so Indigenous nations – which have existed on the continent for over 40,000 years – played no part in this state-sanctioned idea of memory. In 1926, it would still be over 50 years before Indigenous Australians had equal rights to vote in all states and territories and, even today, their life expectancy is on average 17 years less – and their standard of living significantly lower – than for other Australians. I grew up partly in Canberra: at school in the 1970s, the original owners of the site of our city, the Ngunnawal people, were never mentioned. Now, children are taught about the history of the land and large signs greet visitors to the city: 'Welcome to Ngunnawal Country'.

Australia's colonial history, and its ongoing impact on the country's psyche, is as much a medium for Johnson's paintings as paint itself. But her work is in no way didactic or literal. Over the past year or so, in no particular order, she has included references to: emojis, hands, penises, arses, mazes, religious European painting, politicians, 19th-century Australian pictures, the gold rush, snakes, foxes, axes, Greek mythology, speech bubbles, fashion magazines, cubism, cartoons, banknotes and Australia's natural landscape. She pictures Australia as a country in flux, a place constantly interrupted in the midst of shaping itself. This results in a kind of visual delirium: time, in Johnson's world, is as potentially unstable as representation itself. Non sequiturs abound, which is apt: thinking is not a neat activity. History is created by humans: it's fallible. At times, her paintings remind me of a charming and very clever drunk trying to make sense of something very troubling. In *My Word* (2016), for instance, the figure of what appears to be a modern young woman (short hair, trousers), turns her back on a 19th-century man – a quotation from Julian Ashton's painting *The Prospector* (1889) – who holds a checked bowl that contains a pair of staring, disembodied eyes. Behind them, the white outline of a figure flies through the air like a mad demon – wild hair, big boots, crazed eyes – brandishing an axe in one hand and a British flag in the other. On the verso of the painting are cryptic, hand-painted notes referencing the Australian painter Norman Lindsay, Ajax and Cassandra, and snakes. Both history and art history here are reimagined as stories fuelled by confusion and conflict as much as they are by fact – which, given Australia's complicated, often contradictory and ongoing evolution, is fitting. (How else to represent a country transformed by migration that has become hyper-protective of its borders?)

In Johnson's hands, paint is scumbled, swept, smoothed, scratched and engraved in seemingly infinite variations – it's impossible to appreciate the complexity of these surfaces in reproduction. She is also an accomplished writer. In her book *Painting Is a Critical Form* (2015), she declares that 'an experience of formal beauty gives a viewer a sort of metacognitive stake in what they're looking at'. I know what she means. When I first saw them, her paintings seduced me with their technical and imaginative brilliance.

One of Johnson's main targets would seem to be self-importance – either of nations or of individuals – and she works hard to debunk the idea that a country's origin story is something solid or immovable. Like a latter-day George Grosz, though, laughter –

History Pictures

Colonialism and contemporary Australia in the paintings of **Helen Johnson** *by Jennifer Higgie*

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or, perhaps, mockery – is never far from anger: the artist has said that she 'repurposes and re-examines images of stuffy rituals used by colonists to legitimize, in their own eyes, their illegal occupation of Australia'. Pivoting on the idea of the Speaker's Chair, for example, Johnson explained that a new painting will be 'studded with bare bottoms, a reminder that this chair, though now such an over-burdened signifier, is ultimately for the purposes of resting the posterior'.[1]

Johnson employs her medium as a critical tool, despite the fact that painting is 'a space of slippage and ambiguity, a practice with its locus outside reason'[2]. She uses a lack of logic as a counterargument to the idea that history is carved in stone: in Johnson's world, it's more likely to dissolve into air. In *Condition Report* (2016), for example, an image of an art gallery has been so varnished that it's almost impossible to see the architectural details, yet seven white hands emerge from the painting's edges, cleaning – or whitewashing – seemingly random areas.

One of the cartoons Johnson sent me is from Richard Doyle's *Manners and Customs of Ye Englyshe in 1849* (1849), depicting a scene in the House of Commons in which the honourable members are dozing, dreaming or generally not paying any attention to the power that they wield. Johnson explained that the location of the ICA – which is close to the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace – shaped her approach to the show. 'Some images,' she wrote, 'concerning Australia's fraught relationship to British culture and power, are freighted back to their point of origin.' In a sense, Johnson is bringing Canberra to London: the works will be displayed in the gallery on a steel structure that references the layout of Australia's capital. Like the Brazilian seat of power, Brasilia, Canberra is one of the few capital cities that was designed from scratch. In 1911, the Chicago-based architect Walter Burley Griffin – who had been employed by Frank Lloyd Wright – beat 130 other entrants to win the international competition to design the city. He worked closely with his wife, the world's first licensed female architect, Marion Mahony Griffin: it was she who created the drawings for her husband's submission. Yet, despite the couple's avant-garde credentials, and the radicalism of their design – it was influenced by, among other ideas, the Garden City movements that placed nature at the heart of good design – they ignored the original inhabitants of the land. A new painting for the ICA, *Bad debt* (2016), responds to all of this complexity with a composition that is as atmospheric as it is specific: it includes faint references to the layout of Canberra overlaid with outlines of newly introduced species such as foxes and rabbits, which have wreaked havoc on the environment. Across

Opening page
The Rape of Europa (Australian version), 2016, acrylic on canvas, 3 × 2 m; commissioned by Glasgow International

1
'Barron Field', installation view at Glasgow International, 2016

2
Bad debt, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 4 × 3 m

All images courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, and Pilar Corrias, London

2

Australia's history and its ongoing impact on the country's psyche, is as much a medium for Helen Johnson's paintings as paint itself.

and around these images, like so much space junk, float a clown, someone dressed as a horse and a bed that has been defecated on: a reference, no doubt, to a violated home. Fragments of white limbs drift in from the edges. Everything here is displaced, out of whack, unexpected: in Johnson's words, states that are the 'founding conditions of Australia's colonization'.

The point of departure for Johnson's remarkable show at Glasgow International last year, 'Barron Field', was the 1901 Glasgow International Exhibition, which opened in the same year that the Commonwealth of Australia came into being: the crumbling Kelvin Hall, where her work was displayed, had been the venue for the Great Empire Exhibition. Johnson hung a series of six enormous unstretched paintings from the ceiling, like unfurled banners. In *History Painting* (2016), a red, maze-like pattern on a chalky ground is faintly inscribed with indecipherable words and images (hands, perhaps?); over it hover fragments of a woman's body. (Johnson's layered images often evoke the ways in which we interact with open windows on a computer screen.) In *Social System* (2016), against a background of a vividly rendered tree, float outlines of hands, emojis of mouths and a faint rendering of young women, smiling and reclining. Each image is accompanied on its verso by a hand-painted text. In *The Rape of Europa (Australian Version)* (2016), a young white woman in a striped dress holds a snake as she rides downriver on the back of a bull; a boy on the river bank gazes at a postcard of the painting *Port Jackson from Dawes Battery* (1842) by John Skinner Prout, which depicts three relaxed colonial soldiers guarding the Sydney shore. According to the Greek myth, Zeus, the king of the Gods, fell in love with Europa, the daughter of the King of Tyre; in order to abduct her from the beach on which she was playing, he transformed himself into a docile bull and persuaded Europa to climb on his back. They swam to Crete, where she bore him three sons: Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon. Johnson's version of the story was inspired by Guido Reni's *The Rape of Europa* (1639), in which the young woman clings to the bull with a mix of love and fear. In her reworking, the scene is less violent than dreamy; delicate washes of blue and grey paint have been gradually built up to form a textured surface that seems faintly out of focus (an apt reflection, perhaps, of how we see history). Europa turns her back on her unknown destination, looking back to the shore and holding on tight, with both hands, to a brown snake – a native Australian reptile. It's possibly an oblique reference to a rainbow snake which, in many Aboriginal cultures, is a creator god and a giver of life through its association to water. (A rainbow only appears when it rains.) Johnson wrote to me: 'I was thinking of it [this scenario] as a sort of impasse, because the snake has bitten Zeus, so in a sense Europa gets her revenge, but it's a pyrrhic victory, as once he dies, she will drown.' On the reverse of the painting, the artist has reproduced the testimony of an early settler to Australia, who decries not only the damage that cattle – who were introduced to the country from Europe – have done to the land, but also the 'uselessness of new [European] names and the necessity of preserving the native names of rivers'.

In her paintings, Johnson complicates ideas of space and time, employing ambiguity and abstraction as reflections of the flawed certainties of the past. What her images might mean, in simple terms, is not clear-cut – which is, perhaps, the point. The most powerful art is never a lecture, but a proposal, a space for contemplation or reverie. In these dark days, when too many politicians are spouting their dreadful certainties, I can't think of anything more valuable than a language – a history – that embodies the idea that what we've been brought up with isn't necessarily *it*. After all, if it were, how would we ever grow up or move on?

The sack,
2016, acrylic on canvas,
4 × 2 m

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1 Unless otherwise mentioned, all quotes from Helen Johnson to the author via email, October and November 2016
2 Helen Johnson, *Painting Is a Critical Form*, 3-ply, Muckleford, and Minerva, Sydney, 2015, p. 9

Helen Johnson lives in Melbourne, Australia. Her solo show 'Warm Ties' – a collaboration with Artspace, Sydney, Australia – will run at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK, from 1 February to 2 April 2017, and at Chapter, Cardiff, UK, from 1 July to 24 September 2017.