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The paintings of Flight Officer Eric Thake, official war artist, R.A.A.F. Historical Records Section, 1944-1946

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THE PAINTINGS OF FLIGHT OFFICER ERIC THAKE, OFFICIAL WAR ARTIST, R.A.A.F. HISTORICAL RECORDS SECTION, 1944-1946

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ABSTRACT

Eric Thake (1904–1982) served as Official Artist, R.A.A.F. War History Section from late 1944 to April 1946. He was the second combatant artist appointed by the R.A.A.F. in World War II. He undertook two tours of duty, which exposed him to unfamiliar landforms, urban contexts and military installations in various locations: Port Moresby, Noemfoor Island, Morotai, Alice Springs, Darwin and Koepang, Timor.

Thake's period as Official War Artist marked a decisive turning point in his career. He was confronted with a new and specific objective: to act as a visual narrator in the field, depicting places and incidents of R.A.A.F. operations in wartime. To achieve this, he shifted from his cerebral, esoteric and abstracted Surrealism of the 1930s and fashioned a manner which still turned largely on Surrealist precepts, but which was more responsive to physical and visual stimuli. Thake was driven closer to nature, to objects, or the fusion of the two. His Surrealist demeanour was linked to visual reality, provoking a dialectic between poetry and appearance. The R.A.A.F. works achieved the most productive flowering of Thake's hallucinatory powers, an approach which paralleled Salvador Dali's paranoiac-critical method.

Thake's Official War Art reflects influences of contemporary British Official War Artists, especially John Piper, Graham Sutherland and Paul Nash. The work of the English circle of Maritime Surrealists, of whom Edward Wadsworth was the most important, also provided a potent range of models from which Thake's Official War Art drew obliquely.

Before the war had forced French Surrealists to take sanctuary in New York,
they had portrayed states of mind that were representative of wartime: despair, alienation and dislocation. These moods were evoked in varying degrees in Thake's portrayal of bombed buildings and plane dumps. His work also engaged a number of motifs – including the mirror, the portal and the simulacrum – which had been key motifs in European Surrealist painting and films, although Thake would not have been always aware of these precedents and examples.

Thake was one of a small number of war artists who presented a new insight into the nature of contemporary warfare. His work recognised that war had become, as Reichsminister Albert Speer would later say, "dominated by technical means". This was especially true of the war role of the R.A.A.F. Thake depicted matériel rather than man as being the primary protagonists in warfare, often lending mechanical forms anthropomorphic properties. Thake's Official War Art showed him to be as deserving as Wadsworth of Sir John Rothenstein's phrase "a true poet of the age of machines".
Eric Thake Drawing of Route of his first Tour of 1944-1945.
Eric Thake Drawing of Route of his Second Tour of 1945.
INTRODUCTION

At 8.20 in the morning of December 20th 1944, a United States C47 landed in Port Moresby. It disembarked Pilot Officer Eric Thake, a "combat" Artist of the History Records Section, R.A.A.F. Head-Quarters. Thake would complete one of the most significant bodies of official war art to be produced by an Australian in World War II.

Thake's departure had been announced in the Melbourne Herald the previous afternoon. The Herald advised that Thake, together with Flying Officer Harold Freedman, would be spending several months in the Islands and in Northern Australia recording R.A.A.F. activities. Their role was described as distinct from the official war artists whose work was directed by the Australian War Memorial Board, and which was to be lodged in the Memorial. The work of Thake and Freedman was intended to begin a collection of pictures interpreting the spirit of the R.A.A.F. This collection would be housed at R.A.A.F. Headquarters and lent to R.A.A.F. stations and other galleries after the war.¹

Thake had enlisted in the R.A.A.F. in 1943, at the suggestion of a friend, artist Les Annois who has been serving as a camouflageur attached to the R.A.A.F. He worked initially as a draughtsman, copying plane designs. Thake had nurtured a slightly romantic view of the military, a view coloured by a cousin, Ern Latchford, who had served in the Middle East in W.W.I. Latchford had lived with Thake's family for some years after his return to Australia, and would answer questions about military life from fourteen years old Eric with roseate and amusing embellishments.² As a child, the battles of W.W.I had furnished themes for his games. In 1922, the eighteen years old Thake completed a watercolour in a sketchbook of the entrance to a train tunnel, looking east along the cutting. He inscribed it:
it was on the steep banks of the Rosstow Railway cutting we refought the battles of Gallipoli.³

Nevertheless, his daughter described him as "not a military man by nature".⁴

Thake's appointment as Artist, R.A.A.F. Historical Records Section, was imaginative and astute. Yet Louis McCubbin's response suggests that not all observers would have seen him as an obvious choice. At the beginning of his second tour of duty, in July 1945, Thake lunched with McCubbin while passing though Adelaide. McCubbin, Director of the National Gallery of South Australia, was a member of the Art Committee of the Board of Management of the Australian War Memorial, which selected Australia's "official" war artists. He told Thake that his name was on the Art Committee's list of appointable artists, but McCubbin

... was surprised that I'd been appointed as a war artist.⁵

After all, Thake had no interest in painting figures, or any particular interest in planes. He had never even flown in a plane.

Still, he had displayed a continuing interest in the broad theme of flight though the previous decade. This probably stemmed, at least initially, from his interest in ornithology. He had collected the cigarette card set *The Birds of Australia* when about seven or eight years old, and later described the pleasure of amassing this material as "one of the great events of my early years".⁶ Some years later he saw a rare, huge flock of nesting wood swallows, and he counted this experience as "one of my life's highlights".⁷ This interest in birds, their behaviour, patterning and flight is reflected in his wartime letters home, which vividly detailed the bird life of the landscapes he was passing through.

Flight also represented a recurrent theme in his paintings. Indeed, Thake's painting which Basil Burdett used as an illustration to his survey essay
"Australian Art Today" in the British art journal The Studio of January 1938 was entitled *Flight*. Other paintings by Thake on the subject of flight were well known through exhibition and reproduction in *Art in Australia: Yellow Spinner* 1931 (III.93); *Happy Landing* 1939 (III.94); *Salvation from the Evils of Earthly Existence* 1940 (III.87); *Archaeopteryx* 1941 (III.11); and *Erroneous Aeroplane* 1943.

It is not known whether this thematic involvement with flight contributed towards Thake's appointment. At that time - 1944 - Thake was probably the most distinguished "graduate" from George Bell's school and circle. He may simply have had the strongest credentials of any serving R.A.A.F. personnel, and the R.A.A.F. was keen for its Historical Records Section artists to be drawn from its own ranks.

Louis McCubbin also confided in Thake that he would be a more "free agent" serving the R.A.A.F. than if he had been appointed by McCubbin's Art Committee. Although the Art Committee's appointees were generally not unduly restricted in the work they could produce, McCubbin was correct. Thake's brief to "record in the field the activities of the R.A.A.F." was absolutely open. Copies of an undated Department of Air Minute Paper from the Squadron Leader in Charge of the Historical Records Section were sent to Freedman and Thake advising them of the services to be made available to them, and indicating their responsibilities. They were to be attached to the Headquarters, First Tactical Air Force, and permission was granted for them to visit Northern Command, North-Eastern Area, North-Western Area, and units under their control.

The Historical Records Section had no wish to constrain Thake by the imposition of an itinerary. He was to be free to move around in relative
freedom, required only to plan a general programme in the light of the discussions he had in the field, and to notify the Section of this itinerary. Thake did not have to seek approval to modify his itinerary; he had only to advise of any considerable variation so that Headquarters of No.1 Tactical Air Force could contact him easily if necessary.

Thake was reminded that he had a responsibility to maintain the goodwill that narrators of the Historical Records Section enjoyed from field forces; for example, he should promptly report to each headquarters he visited, and seek permission there to visit units under its control.

Air Commodore F.M. Baldwin, on behalf of the Chief of the Air Staff, wrote to Northern Command Areas informing them of Thake's prospective arrival. This document noted that it was necessary for Thake and Freedman to keep abreast of current events, and it was therefore desirable that "every facility should be afforded them in order that they may discharge their duties with the utmost efficiency". 

Transport from place to place was to be provided, together with accommodation. Commanding Officers were asked to give Thake and Freedman the opportunity to visit units in all phases of operations. A concluding blanket request for assistance was made:

It is requested that Air and other Officers Commanding give as great a facility to these officers as is possible, to carry out their work.

At the beginning of his second tour of duty in July 1945, a similarly supportive letter of accreditation was provided for Thake by Air Vice Marshal G. Jones, Chief of the Air Staff, R.A.A.F. Headquarters, Melbourne.

He is to be given the fullest possible co-operation and assistance, including speedy air travel, to ensure that all activities of the R.A.A.F. receive adequate representation.
All information of historical significance is to be made available to him and wherever possible he is to be afforded the opportunity of participating in actual operations against the enemy.

Apart from addressing the broad theme of the phases and incidents of R.A.A.F. life, Thake was totally unencumbered by any stipulations regarding the subject, style or medium of the work he was to undertake. His commission was thus extraordinarily tolerant, accommodating and unintrusive.

Commanding Officers of the units he visited were often very helpful in introducing him to the most remarkable aspects of the area. For example, he arrived in Gorrie, in the Northern Territory, at lunchtime on August 24th 1945. That very afternoon the Commanding Officer drove him fifty miles to Elsey Station on the Roper River to see the making of the film *The Overlanders*. Two days later the C.O. took him to the Kathleen River where he sketched. He had received equally solicitous attention from the Movements Officer, Adelaide, and wrote "everyone is so obliging and can't do enough for me".

It may be that the Historical Records Section recognised that they were likely to get the best results by allowing their Artists free rein, portraying those incidents and aspects they opportunistically encountered, rather than imposing a list of subjects the artist may not naturally be responsive to or imaginative about. It could also be that as the Freedman-Thake project was a pilot scheme, the R.A.A.F. H.Q. simply had no experience in overseeing such programmes. Thake did express some misgivings about the R.A.A.F.‘s apparent lack of interest in the progress of his work. In 1947 he wrote to Colonel Treloar, then Director of the Australian War Memorial, who as Officer Commanding the Military History Section of the Army, had control over that section’s official war artists for most of the war. In this capacity, Treloar had followed the activities of these artists with a proprietorial interest, and had
corresponded with them. Thake regretted not having had a sympathetic overseer like Colonel Treloar:

> During my time with (the R.A.A.F.) they were completely indifferent to the quantity and quality of the work done and as far as I know, there was no-one sufficiently interested to take care of them.\(^{18}\)

Nevertheless, Thake appreciated the opportunity and independence his R.A.A.F. Artist role offered him. During the early war years he had barely time to paint at all: "I was too busy in the weekends having a family and house to look after".\(^{19}\) Now, for the first time in his life, he was able to work as a full time artist. And he was being presented with a richer array of evocative subject matter than he could have hoped to find in Melbourne. He wrote from Milne Bay in January 1945:

> I'm seeing so much every day that is new and strange. I am seeing in minutes and hours and days more than I ever expected to see in my life time.

Yet, in a letter of the same month, Thake touched on a matter which was ultimately significant in the nature of his work. As he wrote, in the background someone was playing *Tales from the Vienna Woods* (and playing it, Thake judged, rather well). Struck by the incongruity of his situation, Thake quipped in his letter

> How is the war going? Is it still on?

The question pointed to an important facet of Thake's service: he worked in war zones rather than battle areas. At the beginning of World War II, Sir Kenneth Clark, a promoter of official war art through his position as Chairman of Britain's War Artists' Advisory Committee, wrote that artists would probably want to experience, or at least witness, the fighting directly.

> (An artist will) want to go to the Front not simply out of curiosity or bravado, but because he may there discover some of that emotional stimulus on a grand scale which is inevitably lacking from his everyday work.\(^{20}\)

These sentiments were the subject of a poem written in 1940 by Herbert Read.
Read had endured the horrors of total immersion in warfare in the trenches in W.W.I. Ode Without Rhetoric, Written during the Battle of Dunkirk, May 1940 recounts the sense of war experienced at some distance:

Unreal war! No single friend links one with its immediacy. It is a voice out of a cabinet a printed sheet, and these faint reverberations selected in the silence by my attentive ear.

Read was separated from the conflict by the English Channel, over which the muted rumble of artillery floated intermittently. Thake was separated from the conflict for most of his tour not only by geography, but by time – the front had long moved on.

Keith Douglas, one of the key W.W.II war poets, believed that a war poet/artist needed the experience of battle.

Whatever changes in the nature of warfare, the battlefield is the simple stage of the war: it is there that the interesting things happen.

Douglas saw fronts in North Africa and in Europe, where he landed on D. Day. He was killed three days later.

Similarly, Alun Lewis, described by Herbert Read as "the Rupert Brooke of this war", wrote of "wanting to fuse finite and infinite in action":

I want to run the gamut; it isn't for the thrill of it nor the horror of it, though both these attract. It's for two reasons: to have authority in the long fight for peace, and to share in the comradeship of war, and of death.

Paul Nash, fifteen years older than Thake, had served at the Ypres Salient as a fighting soldier, and later at Passchendaele as a war artist. His profound dismay at the devastation and suffering of was vehemently expressed in paintings including We are Making a New World 1918 (Ill 59), and in correspondence to his wife.
I have seen (up the line) the most frightful nightmare of a country, more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature, unspeakable, utterly indescribable.... Evil and the incarnate fiend alone can be master of this war, and no glimmer of God's hand in anywhere. Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is fit atmosphere in such a land... It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on forever.24

Later, in W.W.II, Nash knew he would not be engaged in, or even witnessing, the fighting. He would be recording the war as a civilian, and using photographs as source material. He was apparently not concerned that working away from, or even at the distant edge of, the conflict would diminish his work. He recalled that, in W.W.I,

the trouble is that the chaps who painted away from the battle seem to have made much better pictures.25

Indeed, many W.W.II war artists were engaged to document the contributions of sectors other than the combatant soldier: munition workers, women's services, military hospital procedures, etc. Eric Ravilious was even invited by the War Artist's Advisory Committee to paint

the concealment of the white horse and other images cut in chalk, and also the fire engines spraying with the chalk railway and road cuttings.26

On one occasion at least Thake was present at a military event of some importance. On October 3rd 1945, while at Penfoei, he witnessed the formal surrender of the Timor region.

The square was lined up with Australian, British and Dutch flags, the band played and the three Jap. Generals were marched in between (Military) Police. The surrender terms were read to them by an Australian Officer and then by an interpreter. They signed the document and the actual ceremony was all over in about ten minutes.27

Thake sketched the ceremony diagrammatically but no painting eventuated. Thake was not a visual diarist in the sense of producing objective documents of events. He described himself as an "Image maker"28 and his importance lay in his extracting images of the aberrations he perceived in the form or
behaviour of things - in this period, of objects related to the military effort or the landscape of the war zone.

In 1944, the year of his commissioning as a war artist, Thake turned forty. He was one of the oldest Australian appointments of W.W.II. The only notable war artists who were older were Colin Colahan who was forty five at his appointment in 1942, Sali Herman who was forty seven when appointed in 1945 and Harold Herbert who was forty nine in 1941. Thake came to his service as a mature artist, of respected reputation, with an achieved style.

At his best, Thake was essentially a metaphysical painter. The warscape of battle-scarred sites and military matériel on the one hand, and of the unfamiliar desert landscapes and landforms of the Australian interior on the other, gave him subjects which were congenial to his poetic disposition and lent themselves to metaphysical speculation.


5. Eric Thake, letter to his family, July 25 1945.


7. Ibid.

8. Illustrated Art in Australia, Nov. 1938.


10. Exhibited C.A.S. 1940. Shared C.A.S. Prize with James Gleeson's We Inhabit the Corrosive Littoral of Habit 1940.

11. Illustrated Art in Australia, Dec.-Feb. 1941-1942.
12. Never reproduced. (Subsequently exhibited in Eric Thake Retrospective Exhibition, N.G.V., 1970.)


14. Minute Paper, Department of Air, Subject: RAAF Artists' Visit to Operational Areas, signed by Squadron Leader, Officer in Charge, Historical Records Section, n.d.

15. Air Commodore F.M. Bladin, Air Board, Air Force Head-Quarters, undated memorandum, 180/2/6, Subject: The Official History of the R.A.A.F.

16. Ibid.

17. Air Vice-Marshal G. Jones, Letter of Accreditation, July 11 1945, Thake Papers, La Trobe Library.


22. Ibid., p.130.

23. Ibid., p.129.


27. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Oct. 10 1945.

ERIC THAKE AND SURREALISM

While much of Thake's official war art functions within the tradition of conventional representational picturemaking, a significant body of this work reflects Surrealist tenets, and deals with themes which had been addressed by French and English Surrealist painters, dramaturges, filmmakers and writers. Specific correspondences in relation to individual paintings will be examined in later chapters, but it is useful to define at least broadly those areas of Thake's work which overlap with, and those that diverge from, mainstream Surrealist thought and practice.

Surrealism sought to liberate man and his surroundings from the dominance of logic and reason, convention, precedent and custom. It sought to liberate man from the imperatives of moral order. To achieve this, Surrealism aimed at awakening the individual to the play of the irrational thought of the unconscious. Surrealism set about discrediting traditional systems of thinking, and substituting a "super reality" grounded in the imagination and expressed through automatist technique and through irrational association.

In theory, the Surrealist is a conduit, an instrument for transmitting the activity of the unconscious mind, and doing so without editing or sanitising that communication.

Surrealism did not proceed as a program of fixed propositions. Individual artists seized upon or reflected different tenets, and many, perhaps most shifted emphasis over time. Even Breton's attitudes underwent revision between his First Manifesto 1924 and his Second Manifesto 1930. In the First Manifesto Breton portrayed Surrealism as essentially conceptual: the mind was pre-eminent over matter, and no material form was required to realise its
objectives. Inner reality was valued as far more significant than external appearances.

By 1927, Breton was beginning to see inner and outer reality as different, but not irreconcilable states. Both domains had manifest and concealed elements, and it was the function of the Surrealist to expose the concealed facets.

André Breton indicated two routes that Surrealism could follow.¹ The first was automatism. Automatism was initially conceived as a liberating technique for writing, especially for writing poetry, although its relevance for the visual arts was soon realised. It disencumbered writers from their conventional education which had allowed no place for pursuing the flow of unconscious thought.

Automatism, Breton believed, offered a structure or procedure which could produce texts which evaded premeditation and the control of the conscious mind. Thus dis-inhibited, the unconscious would be free to express its real desires, formerly repressed or unrecognised. The unconscious would be free to make associations of objects or ideas without exercising moral or cultural deliberations on their selection, meaning or interrelationships. Max Ernst declared such moral or aesthetic consideration to be "hostile to inspiration".² Although automatist images may not be entirely abstract, they typically appear to have been rendered in a hand intoxicated by its own involuntary gestures, and seem to be charged with all of the emotional intensity accumulated within the artist.

The second route for Surrealism to follow, in Breton's view, was the stabilizing of dream imagery, generally in a "trompe l'oeil" manner. Breton preferred the first route:

any form of expression in which automatism does not at least advance under cover runs a grave risk of moving out of the Surrealism orbit.
Freud has demonstrated that at (the) unfathomable depths (of the unconscious) there reigns absence of contradiction, the relaxation of emotional tensions due to repression, a lack of a sense of time, and the replacement of external reality by a psychic reality obeying the pleasure principle alone. Automatism leads us in a straight line to this region.³

For Breton, depicting dream imagery entailed "deception", and was therefore less reliable.

It was this second route that Eric Thake approximated. If his route to Surrealism was not Breton's preferred one, it was nevertheless the route followed by Salvador Dali, René Magritte and Paul Delvaux, as well as the key Australian Surrealist James Gleeson (at least in his war work), James Cant, Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock) and Ivor Francis.

An important Surrealist notion was the concatenation of opposites: natural-manufactured; benign-malign; peaceful-warlike; static-associated with speed or power; intimidation-consolidation. This notion held the imagination of leading English Surrealists. Paul Nash and Edward Wadsworth were particularly interested in the antithetic reconciliations of animate-inanimate and human-non-human. Writing of Paul Nash, Herbert Read (a champion of Surrealism) noted the importance of this theme for the Surrealists:

The world can no longer be comfortably divided into detached categories of animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, real and unreal. Mind and matter are interpenetrative. The rocks we encounter may be more "alive" than the people we met at a cocktail party".⁴

These themes of animation and personification underlie the celebrated simile of the 19th C. poet Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont: "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella".⁵

This simile is so often quoted, it has assumed a mantle of the central motto of Surrealism. However, it is invariably quoted in isolation as if it were a closed description. In its original setting in Les Chants de Maldoror, the phrase culminates a sequence of similes, describing the beauty of a serious young
person. In this context, Lautréamont's phrase is part of a broad paragraph whose total effect is the merging of characteristics of the adolescent with objects - that is, merging the animate with the inanimate. Thake's fusing of living and mechanical qualities in his war service Plane Dump Series or his interpenetration of human and inanimate characteristics in his Ant Hill works, thus parallel the theme of Lautréamont's key Surrealist passage.

The Surrealists were attracted to oneirological imagery. Opposed to the compartmentalisation of experience, and opposed to the separation of the dream from life, many Surrealists used dream imagery to subject reality to re-evaluation. The importance of the dream as a source for unexpected images was proclaimed in the first issue of the Surrealist organ *Le Révolution Surréaliste.* In the Editorial, J.-A. Boiffard, P. Eluard and R. Vitrac called for the insights of dreams to be insinuated into waking states:

We are all at the mercy of the dream and we owe it to ourselves to submit its power to the waking state.

Thake was not interested in dreams as such, but he utilized some of the mechanisms of dreams. Much of his war work, like dreams, has a centerpiece of free association - forms which, like those in dreams, are not constructed or related by reason.

The Surrealist idea of experimental activity did not pre-require any particular aesthetic style, or even learned or developed faculties. Breton was concerned with content and imagery rather than style. Any style which could serve to represent the desired content was adequate. Still, the Surrealists did widely employ a constellation of themes and compositional devices which reflected Surrealist theory. Many of these were shared by Thake including metamorphosis; the collage aesthetic; the reconciliation of two (or more) distant - even antithetic - entities on an unexpected plane; incongruity; black humour.
Like the Surrealists, Thake represented Nature as fundamentally unstable and amorphous. Like the Surrealists, he was excited by the absurd and the unexpected. And like the Surrealists his paintings raised questions about the nature of reality.

Notwithstanding these major spheres of commonality, there were areas in which Thake's work diverged from the Surrealist position as promulgated by Breton. The first was Thake's aversion to using art as a vehicle for political or revolutionary activity.

French Surrealism into the 1930s became increasingly concerned to exert an impact upon social life through its capacity to disrupt and overturn conventional values. It became explicitly associated with Marxism, communism, a critique of bourgeois culture and the struggle to dismantle the liberal free-enterprise system.

As early as 1925, in reviewing Trotsky's book of reminiscences about Lenin, Breton wrote of his conviction that communism represented the most decisive revolutionary system.

I believe that communism alone among organised systems permits the accomplishment of the greatest social transformation.

Breton considered the expressing and disseminating of ideas of political activism as central, as this remained a consistent thread through his writings. In *Surrealism Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* 1932 he stressed that in addition to Surrealism's commitment to automatism,

we shall also ... cling to our critical attitude with regard to the various intellectual and moral problems of contemporary interest.

In accepting the priority of social revolution, the Surrealists shared ground with the French Communist Party (P.C.F.). Indeed, by April 1927, at least four
of the most active Surrealists had joined the party: Aragon, Valery, Péret and Breton. The relationship between the Surrealists and the P.C.F. was never to be simple or particularly harmonious. The Surrealists insisted on the importance of the subconscious as a repository of imagery, and they held to their objective of overturning "common sense", received wisdom and surface reality. Consequently they rejected the iconography of social agitation. André Breton held that genuine revolutionary art was not merely a portrayal of propaganda subjects, but was an art that turned on fundamentally human drives, and did so with immoderation and innovation. Breton was expelled from the Party in 1933.10 Their system centred on the physical world, not the subconscious domain.

A theme that Breton returned to during the 1930s was the harmony of objectives between politics and surrealism. In a lecture What is Surrealism given to a public meeting organised by Belgian Surrealists in 1934, he averred that both politics and Surrealism have the express aim of "the liberation of man". This implies that we must struggle against our fetters with all the energy of despair; today more than ever the Surrealists rely entirely, for the bringing about of human liberation, on the proletarian revolution.11

Franklin Rosemont, writing from a Trotskyist perspective in André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism 1978 acknowledged that the Surrealist movement had not sought to be a political party, but that

On the political plane, Surrealism has defended consistently the perspectives of proletarian internationalism; it has combated every effort of capitalist recuperation, and it continues to propose and support the boldest revolutionary solutions to the problems caused by contemporary events.13

The centre of political gravity of the English Surrealist circle was also located on the firm left. As Michael Remy put it, the circle "meandered between
Trotskyism and anarchism. English Surrealist Julian Trevalyan, claimed that the English Surrealist groups formed in order to present a militant front to stop the spread of fascism.

Herbert Read’s *Surrealism* 1936 placed Surrealist activism against a background of the British economic structure. In his introduction, Read called for social reform and resistance in the face of three quarters of the expenditure of the country being made by a few thousand people. He looked forward to a "general revolt". Hugh Sykes Davies’ essay in the same volume described Surrealism as "rooted in opposition to the capitalist system on all fronts". Its weapons, he asserted, were "poesy and direct political action".

In the *International Surrealist Bulletin* of September 1936, Herbert Read sweepingly declared the political allegiance of Surrealist art: "the Surrealist is naturally a Marxist Socialist". The Number 6 issue of the English Surrealist journal *London Bulletin* reprinted Breton’s anti-Stalinist "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" 1938. Breton contended that "true art" – art which tries to give expression to the inner needs of contemporary man and humanity – cannot help but be revolutionary. True art, he claimed, cannot help but aspire to a complete and radical construction of society.

Thake had no comparable interest in disseminating socio-political ideas through his paintings. Thake would have had little patience for Breton’s notion of aesthetic experience representing above all a stimulus to action and to change, a call to arms in the service of the revolution. It is also most likely that the political tactics and nuances of the French Surrealist circle would have seemed remote and opaque to him. For example, the concern of French Surrealists in 1934 that the P.C.F., by aligning itself with the Socialist leaders of the Popular Front, was in effect participating in the bourgeois democratic
system and diluting the revolutionary struggle, would have seemed almost meaninglessly subtle.

The Surrealist to whose work he was closest, Edward Wadsworth, also had no confidence in art as a political tool. Mrs Wadsworth assessed his interest in politics as:

None whatsoever. And least of all in the politics of art.¹⁹

Thake shared Wadsworth's views on the potentially detrimental diversion that immersion in art politics could represent for artists. He had watched, with sadness, George Bell's participation in art controversies of the late 1930s and the 1940s, a foray that left Bell bitter and alienated from many of his longstanding friends. Thake wrote to June Helmer of Bell's involvement with Melbourne's feuding "contemporary" bodies and the fight with the "Vic's" to have the east wall of the North Gallery reserved for painting of the "Modern School".

Thake's sharp summing up of Bell's (art) political activities reveals his fundamental conviction that art and political activity were not easily compatible:

He'd have been much better painting, and leaving the scrapping to those who mistook strife for art.²⁰

This is not to say that Thake was unconscious of hardship and anti-social activity about him. His war service correspondence shows him to have been sensitive to a number of issues that were not popular causes at the time, including recreational shooting of kangaroos, despoliation of the environment and the living conditions of Aborigines. He wrote from Alice Springs:

(the aborigines) live in houses of cemented rock and others of plaited straw. The nippers all have filthy clothing and need their noses blowing, and the flies hunted out of their eyes. To me it's all terribly sad and whatever is done can never compensate for the life they had before the arrival of the Europeans.
André Breton had made a distinction between the social and poetical activities of Surrealism.

(The political activities) are temporary, temporal and realistic; the (poetical activities) are essential and surrealistic. While the Surrealists' involvement in revolutionary communism provides the possibility of liberating man and raising his culture, "the poet as seer", or visionary, is concerned with more real and unchanging realities. It is in this (latter) field that Surrealism is most active.21

It was in this latter field that Surrealism would be the more enduringly successful. And it was only in this latter field that Surrealism held its attraction for Thake.

A second area in which Thake diverged from Parisian Surrealism was Thake's lack of interest in Freud and psychoanalytic theory. Much of the significance of Surrealism lies in its revealing and making familiar the workings of the subconscious, and the discoveries of psychoanalysis. Freud had proposed that the unconscious dealt in a coded language which veiled deeper meanings. He also proposed that conscious actions may have their roots in unrecognised and terrifying motivations. This left the human personality as a thin and brittle superstructure concealing, but subject to, an irrational subconscious.

The Surrealists were also attracted to Freud for his reading forms in sexual terms. Much Surrealist imagery permitted sexual interpretation, the subject of sexual penetration being common. Surrealist symbols - like those of the unconscious - were often lightly disguised: Wadsworth, for instance, used sheets to represent vaginas.

André Breton had come upon Freud's writing, particularly his Interpretation of Dreams 1900, during the period of his conscription into a psychiatric unit of the French Army medical corps in W.W.I. He saw Freud as presenting a scientific and systematic recognition of the unconscious and the areas of human experience it harbored. Breton pursued an understanding of dreams,
their mechanics, and their function. He conceived of the conscious and the unconscious as being in a state of interpenetrative flux, in a state of dialectic resolution. He was spurred by the notion of dreams insinuating reality, often substituting objects that might be at hand for the unavailable and unattainable object of desire.

In 1943, Breton summed up his, and Surrealism's, debt to Freud:

One must grant to Freud that the exploration of unconscious life furnishes the only worthwhile basis for appreciation of the motives which make the human being act.22

This represents a difference between Thake and Surrealists such as Max Ernst and Salvador Dali. James Gleeson, too, was well aware of the importance Freud attached to dreams as windows to the unconscious. His work reflected his grasp of the theories of Freud, psychoanalysis and dream analysis.

Thake, on the other hand, was apparently not interested in Freud or in Freudian symbols. Nor was he interested in Jung. Nor in psychoanalysis. Nor in dreams.23 Thake also diverged from Breton in that Thake would not value conception to the exclusion of rendering, nor subject to the exclusion of form, nor inner to the exclusion of outer reality, nor desire at the total exclusion of actuality. His best war work maintained a delicate balance between the two. Thake's insistence on "pictorial" values and his method of constructing a totally conscious statement of "mystical" or subconscious phenomena further distinguished his work from the Surrealists.

On balance, can Thake's work be categorised as Surrealist? In 1945, the year in which most of his official war art was completed, Bernard Smith's Place, Taste and Tradition was published. Smith suggested that a large number of Australian painters had been wrongly considered Surrealist, and that in fact their work was only about Surrealism.24 Smith asserted that they did not
employ the Surrealist technique of subconscious painting as a method of art creation. They were, he asserted, consciously conceived painting, taking an aspect of Surrealist theory for their subject matter. Peter Purves-Smith was described as having some early work "close in spirit to Surrealist painting"\textsuperscript{25}, Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock) "was influenced by Surrealism"\textsuperscript{26}, Eric Thake had "Surrealist affiliations".\textsuperscript{27} Smith's point was unnecessarily fine, and within three decades he had relinquished this position. In Australian Painting 1971, he acknowledged Thake "had exhibited Surrealist works before (1940)".\textsuperscript{28}

Surrealism is a far-ranging and constantly renewing current of thinking and practice, whose emphasis has shifted depending on the time, the social or geographical climate, and the attitudes of key practitioners. Thake's work might not conform to the doctrinaire stance of Breton in his early essays on Surrealism, but it would fit with the less programmatic concept of Surrealism held in England by critics and practitioners including Herbert Read and Paul Nash. Read, in his introduction to the catalogue of the International Surrealist Exhibition 1936\textsuperscript{29} rooted English Surrealism within the British Romantic tradition. Paul Nash had taken up this theme in an article in News Chronicle the next year. Nash described Surrealism as a poetic movement and suggested that it began

\begin{center}
\textit{to rear its head in the world created by the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth, a world that had inherited the songs and visions of William Blake, the world which eclipsed the sun of the romantic age and revealed a twilight interspace before the darkness of Industrial night.}\textsuperscript{30}
\end{center}

Much of Thake's war work sits comfortably with the spirit, climate, mood and content of this English interpretation of Surrealism.

James Gleeson, the only Australian Surrealist who equalled Thake in stature and in continuing commitment to Surrealism, considered it appropriate to judge much of Thake's war art as Surrealist.
Gleeson here cut to the heart of Thake's achievement. Thake trained his imagination and subconscious, fuelled by Surrealism, on his physical surroundings. In doing so, he teased out the bizarre and the illogical in the visual reality and experience of wartime Australia.

THE SURREALIST MILIEU IN AUSTRALIA

In 1952, Breton spoke on French radio, recalling the Paris of three decades earlier, when he was in charge of the magazine Literature. He referred to his circle, which included Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard Max Ernst and Benjamin Péret, working in concert with a unity of conviction.

I think I can say that we put into practice the total collectivisation of our ideas. Nothing was kept back from the others. Everyone gave what he had to give and waited to see what could come of it. Everything was shared equally among us.

Man Ray confirmed the group strength of the Paris Surrealist Circle when explaining the cool reception given to his Surrealist film Emak Bakia 1926 by Paris Surrealists. Ray had already established Surrealist credentials by participating in the first Surrealist exhibition in 1925, and he held a one-man show at the Galérie Surréaliste in 1926. Ray's film sought to engage most of the principles of Surrealism: illogicality, automatism, psychological and dreamlike sequences without apparent logic, and a complete disregard for conventional story telling. Nevertheless, the Surrealist friends he invited to view the film were "not very enthusiastic".
Ray came to the view that these reservations were due to his not having presented the film in a sufficiently collegiate manner.

It was not sufficient to call a work Surrealist, as some outsiders had done to gain attention - one had to collaborate closely and obtain a stamp of approval - present the work inside the auspices of the movement to be recognised as Surrealist. I had neglected this, (and) been somewhat too individualistic.33

Breton called the Surrealist group "an aggregate of elective affinities", a set which had accreted through "spontaneous and free association".34 Yet a group discipline obtained, and individuals were liable for expulsion if they breached that discipline. Jean Cocteau, some of whose film work drew very heavily upon Surrealist attitudes, was dismissed as an author of infamous patriotic poems, of nauseating Catholic professions of faith, (and being an) ignominious profiteer of the regime, and arrant counter-revolutionary.35

Poet and theorist Louis Aragon had been a "foundation member" of the Surrealist group, but he was deemed to have repudiated his past by defecting to Stalinism, and was expelled in 1932. Salvador Dali had contributed the significant paranoiac-critical method to the movement, yet, he, too, was excluded for rightist tendencies and commercialism. He was condemned for holding racist views and for having supported Hitler and practised Roman Catholicism. Max Ernst's award of the Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale was deemed to demonstrate his rejection of the subversive and anti-establishment attitudes of his youth.36

Surrealist circles outside France tended not to be as doctrinaire, and were more loosely structured. Meetings of Belgian Surrealists have been described as social rather than doctrinal.37 Similarly, the English Surrealist group's core was mutual support. The International Surrealist Bulletin in 1936 drew attention to the lack of fraternity in English Surrealist painting. It suggested that this
was because the English were historically and rationally individualists. English
tolerance and individual liberty had been carried to such a point, the editorial
claimed, that all social and co-operative life was made impossible.38

Although Herbert Read was a signatory to this edition, he was more sanguine
about the absence of a communal ethic when writing *Surrealism* the same year.
Here he suggested that Surrealism was always a fraternal *organism* rather than
a collective *organisation*. He indicated that it would be contrary to the nature
of the movement to present a specifically English edition of Surrealism.

Ironically, in 1938, the year when Surrealism began to emerge as a force in
Australian art, the collegiality of Surrealism in France began to loosen. Exiled
in the United States, the group's initial cohesion began to dissipate. Ernst
attributed this to the lack of a café society which facilitates casual meetings.
Their scattered living quarters also made meetings less convenient.

The Australian Surrealists almost totally lacked the impetus of mutual support.
Where Paris had had Breton to galvanise a circle, Australia had no pivotal
theorist. There were no group manifestos. There were no specifically Surrealist
journals, and the magazines with some sympathy for Surrealism - *Angry
Penguins* and the concluding war-time issues of *Art in Australia* - did not
serve as rallying points. The tyranny of inter-city distance acted as an
impediment to any developing collective spirit: Sydney is roughly twice as far
from Melbourne as Paris is from Brussels. The level of theoretical debate in
art circles generally often betrayed an imperfect understanding of Surrealism.39

Surrealism in Australia was an individualistic, even a lonely, pursuit. Eric
Thake was never to meet or even have contact with James Gleesons, and
couldn't remember having heard his name until they shared the Contemporary
Art Society (C.A.S) Prize in 1940. Thake as late as 1978 was only vaguely aware of the name James Cant, but couldn’t visualise his work. *Broken Slumbers* by Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock) had been included in the 1940 C.A.S. Exhibition and was reproduced in *Art in Australia* in November 1940 and his work was reproduced in *Place, Taste and Tradition* 1945 but Ebert’s name was not recalled by Thake in 1978.

Bernard Smith suggested in *Place, Taste and Tradition* that wherever it was manifest as an artistic movement affecting a widespread group of artists, Surrealism had been associated with the psychological and intellectual atmosphere common to periods of war.

Smith saw Surrealism inheriting Dada’s despair and disgust with the established intellectual and moral values that Dada held responsible for contributing to W.W.I.

Surrealism explored the subconscious, where anxieties, obsessions and fears flourished, freed from the tempering and organising influence of reason. Such an approach was highly appropriate to represent a pessimistic view of a world at war, in which reasonableness, fairness and logic were early casualties. Consequently, during W.W.I. a number of Australian painters embraced Surrealism at least for a time, or appropriated aspects of its paraphernalia. Arthur Boyd fused human and animal characteristics and traits to produce fantastic urban beasts. Albert Tucker, Jeffrey Smart, Ronald Steuart, Carl Plate, Bernard Boles, Peter Purves-Smith, and James Cant adopted, at least in individual paintings, ominously empty landscape platforms for the often uncanny activities of their occupants. Sidney Nolan and Adrian Feint derived the consistent operation of gravity or perspective. Thake, Gleeson, Francis and Ebert all sought a synthesis between psychological distortion and objective reality. Many also realized the potency of the dream, a domain in which the "common sense" divisions between the feasible and the improbable, the real and
the hallucinatory, are broken down.

Surrealism was late in making an impression on the visual arts in Australia. Australian artists became aware of the movement initially through publications. Studio International had published illustrated essays on Paul Nash and Edward Wadsworth from the 1920s, and Continental Surrealism was reproduced in the 1930s (even if the accompanying comments were not always sympathetic or informative). Thake could not afford to subscribe, but viewed copies in Gino Nibbi's Leonardo Bookshop, and purchased copies in secondhand bookshops. Handsome French magazines, which reproduced Surrealist work, were reaching Australia: L'Oeil, Verve, Vingtième Siécle, Cahiers d'Art and Minotaure. These were intermittently available at Nibbi's bookshop, and Thake probably studied them there, as Nibbi would allow Thake to spend hours in the shop, reading.

Herbert Read's Art Now 1933, with a four page summary of Surrealism, was owned by Thake. Read’s Unit One 1934 which included the work of Paul Nash, Edward Wadsworth, John Armstrong and Tristram Hillier, was owned by George Bell who made his library available to those - like Thake - who were members of his circle. Read's Surrealism 1936 was also available in Australia before the war. Thus the (Melbourne) Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art 1939 sponsored by Sir Keith Murdoch, containing work by Surrealists Chagall, Ernst, de Chirico, Dali and Wadsworth served as a confirming ingredient in Australia's adoption of Surrealism; imported literature had already served as the ignition.

Thake considered 1932 as the period of his first Surrealist work.

I should say that the first "Surrealist" pictures I painted were dated 1932, many of which to my sorrow I later destroyed when we shifted in 1961, but fortunately one still survives: Blue Bells, Blue River, Upper Murray.

Certainly works of 1934 - Inside Looking Out (ill.89) and High and Drying -
lie within the Surrealist context, comfortably predating the period, around 1938, when Surrealism began to exert an influence on painting in Australia. Thus when Thake drew upon Surrealism to represent the R.A.A.F. at war, he was employing an approach in which he was the precursor in Australia.

3. André Breton, op. cit.
6. La Révolution Surréaliste, No.1 Dec. 1924.
7. The review, "Leon Trotsky's Lenin" 1925 was published in La Révolution Surréaliste, No.5 1925.
9. André Breton, ibid., p.86.
17. Hugh Sykes Davies, "Surrealism At This Time and Place", Herbert Read, op. cit., p.166.
19. Quoted in John Rothenstein, Modern English Painters: Lewis to Moore, Eyre


25. Ibid., p.226.

26. Ibid., p.234.

27. Ibid.


29. At the New Burlington Galleries London, June-July 1936. It contained 58 artists, including 18 English participants.


36. Franklin Rosemont has attempted to paper over these expulsions, describing them as self-inflicted rather than imperiously or bureaucratically imposed. "Those who have been excluded from Surrealist activity have not been the victims of Breton's or anyone else's arbitrary disfavour; in essence, by knowingly adopting conduct inconsistent with Surrealist principles, they have excluded themselves, whether by selling out to bourgeois journalism, pursuing literary or artistic 'success', compromising with the struggle against religion, or collaborating with fascists or Stalinists." Franklin Rosemont, op. cit., p.50.


39. In the early years of the Contemporary Art Society in Adelaide, during the war years, members would bring their paintings to fortnightly meetings for criticism. Comments were written on pieces of paper and handed to the Chairman of the exercise (often Max Harris) who drew them from the hat and read them out, often with amusing improvisations of his own, which he pretended were written down. Surrealist Ivor Francis's *Presiding Genius* was subjected to this process, and some of the comments indicated that incomprehension with which Surrealist work was met:

Technically clever but would like to have it explained. (Anon).

Good design. (Ruby Henty).

... It is the artist's business to present a single unified concept, not to work out his ideas as he goes ... (attributed by Francis to Max Harris).

A bad picture for the simple reason that it does not please. It gives the impression that the artist was showing off his modern idiom. (David Dallwitz).

Ivor Francis, letter to Peter Pinson, Nov. 2 1979.


41. Ibid.

42. Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, op. cit., p.216.


45. Jennifer Mann, op. cit.


47. Ibid., appendix 3.

48. James Gleeson owned a copy.

THAKE AND THE PARANOIAC-CRITICAL METHOD

In the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* 1930, André Breton - by implication - began to acknowledge the limitations of automatism. Breton counselled the use of "techniques of pure deception"\(^1\) which could reasonably be taken to mean the conscious and at least partly predetermined manipulation of the medium with the objective of provoking the kind of surprised or mystified response one might experience before a peculiarity in nature.

In the same year, Salvador Dali pointed a way out of the impasse. He defined an instrument which he would bestow on Surrealism, which would prove to be of cardinal importance to the movement through the following decade: the paranoiac critical method.

The extrapolating images the method encouraged is germane to the binary images Thake developed in his *Plane Dump* and *Ant Hill* paintings.

Dali defined the paranoic critical method as a spontaneous method of securing "irrational knowledge" based on the "critical, systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations".\(^2\) He saw it allowing pictorial Surrealism to escape the passivity of automatism and its incapacity to produce images capable of verification. In Dali’s view dream images were also unsatisfactory; they were insubstantial, chimerical and unsystematic.\(^3\) Dali advocated employing irrational images which were the product of an active process of thought. They were to be based in reality, and thus allowed scope for "tangible verification", while at the same time provoking irrational, hallucinatory associations. Paranoiac critical activity provoked a "systematic condition of accrediting objectively and on the plane of the real, the delirious,
unknown world of our rational experiences".4

The notion stemmed from Bleuler's writing on paranoiac delirium which, as Breton put it, "lends itself to the coherent development of certain errors for which the subject shows a passionate attachment".5 Paranoia affected the stability of one's reactions to external stimuli, and Dali saw the potential - as Rimbaud had before him - of practising a systematic derangement of the senses.

Dali believed that paranoiac sensitivity allowed the artist to tease out the covert, alternative and associated meanings possessed by the object viewed. Dali's method was to focus or concentrate on an object seen or imagined and develop that object into an array of elaboration. British Surrealist Conroy Maddox gave an example of how the paranoiac critical method might ignite a chain of associations:

for instance, one might see, in a stain in a wall, a face, a castle, or a galloping horse, a postcard of a group of negroes.6

The art of painting became a representation of this train of extrapolations (hence Dali's 1930 definition of painting as "handsome colour photography of concrete irrationality")7. Dali's theory was thus in harmony with the Surrealists' rejection of Platonic dualism, and their disinclination to separate the real and the imaginary as contradictory. Dali's objects - and to a limited degree Thake's - abandon their discreteness; their perceived world moves to a state of nondifferentiation and interchangeability.

In 1934, Breton gave a lecture which drew from both his first and second manifestoes. Later published as Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme? 1934 it summarised Dali's purposes in employing the paranoic critical method:

the ultra-confusing paranoiac activity (rises) out of the obsessing idea. This uninterrupted becoming allows the paranoiac who is their witness to consider the images of the external world as unstable and transitory,
even suspect; and what is so disturbing is that he is able to make other people believe in the reality of his impressions.

In the same year, Dali held his first one-man exhibition in Paris. In the catalogue introduction, Breton wrote of calling upon "our power of voluntary hallucination" on which "ultimately everything depends", to expose the meanings that are concealed beneath appearances.

While Dali may have been the first to systematise the concept of the paranoiac critical method, there was a rich field of precedent of Surrealist and Romantic painters and writers exploiting hallucinations, often to throw up double images. Max Ernst experienced visions which found reflection in his subject matter. He claimed that as a young man he sometimes saw, as he fell asleep, a transparent woman standing at the foot of his bed. He told Breton that he had seen hats and overcoats move, unaided, from one rack to another. Ernst cited Caspar David Friedrich: "close your physical eyes in order to see first your (subject) with the spiritual eye".

De Chirico told Breton he had seen the ghosts of Napoleon III and Cavour together. Rimbaud had drawn upon a "systematic derangement of the senses" to summon inspiration as required. Romantic writer Gérard de Neval also called upon hallucinations for subject matter; he called his visions "extraordinary exaltations" which engulfed him in the form of "swarms of new thoughts, unprecedented, incredible, crossing one's mind in whirlpools".

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a In an essay of 1939, Breton turned on the paranoiac critical method, claiming that Dali's refinement of the method had reduced him "to concocting entertainment on the level of crossword puzzles". In the light of his earlier support for the paranoiac critical method, this attack could be reasonably seen as directed at Dali, with whom Breton had fallen out, rather than at the method.
The double images that Thake was to portray did not seem to come from such
visions, apparitions, mirages. His experience seems closer to Magritte's; both
appear to catch their dual imagery through momentary flashes of revelatory
illumination. Magritte's source for the cathedral-sized turned wooden posts in
his *Annunciation* 1928 was the lathe-turned foot of a table which he had
glimpsed. Thake described his revelatory flash in equally prosaic terms to his
family when describing his realization of a parallel between Darwin ruins and
Greek temples:

> the pillars that (are) left standing after the bombing remind me of the
pillars of Greek temples.¹⁷

Whatever the nature of their respective shocks of recognition, both Thake and
Magritte were remarkable in their capacity to seize the jamais vu - the "never
before seen" - in the ordinary, the commonplace. Through paranoic projection
- or its equivalent - these bland forms could be made multilayered and
bristling with significance. An implied underlying theme is relativity. Paul
McGillick's words, writing of another context, hold true for the work of Thake
and of the Surrealists engaging the paranoiac critical method:

> illusionism (which implies a degree of certainty about depicted reality)
had been replaced by uncertainty.¹⁸

To what degree was Thake aware of the principles of the paranoiac critical
method? Thake did not cite Dali or the notion of paranoia as being influential
upon him. Still, Thake would have had access to Hugh Sykes Davies' substan-
tial essay "Surrealism at this Time and Place" in Herbert Read's *Surrealism*
1936. This essay observed the close connection between poetic
imagination and systematic delusion "under the new name paranoia", and Dali's
deep interest in this area. Davies saw this interest as a continuation of the
thinking of Coleridge, and quoted Coleridge's view that "imagination under
excitement generates and produces a form of its own". This would have struck a responsive chord with Thake, as would Davies' account of Wordsworth's "mythology":

It is a systematic animation of the inanimate, a mass of verbal formulae (metaphors etc) which attribute life and feeling to non-human nature.  

Wordsworth's animated objects paralleled Thake's investing wrecked planes and anthills with animate qualities.

Thake would also have come upon the term "paranoiac critical" in the title of Dali's Suburbs of the Paranoiac - Critical Town which was reproduced in The Studio of September 1936 (Ill.1). The painting employed a number of irrational double images. The shape of the running girl is mimicked in the tower's bell for example; and the archway with its circular window mimics the campanile behind. It is significant that the work was originally entitled Nostalgic Echo, "echo" alluding to the manner in which forms in the painting resemble, replicate or quote form other forms. Can Thake's dual imagery - his plane-monsters and his anthill-figures - be related to the paranoic-critical method?

Sydney Surrealist James Gleeson denied that he personally had embraced the method's principles or strategies:

I liked to create a sense of taking certain aspects of shapes and marrying them with each other - shapes you weren't able to identify to any particular thing. I was more interested in metamorphosis, flux, one form changing imperceptibly into another kind of form leaving you with a doubt as to what any form derived from.

When one of Gleeson's objects did metamorphose into another, within the spirit of the paranoiac critical method, it was accidental. On one occasion, Gleeson found a form in one painting taking on the appearance of the head of Evelyn Waugh. When this occurred, Gleeson would usually paint out the unsought transformation.

However, Gleeson considered that Thake's double images fell within the parameters of paranoiac-critical activity because Thake was "seeing other
Thake described an hallucinatory image he had experienced in Adelaide during his war service. He was strolling through the hills and the sun was sinking. Under these elusive light conditions, Thake found himself confronting what appeared to be three "strange beings, each (appearing) to have two bodies joined together by long spindly legs". He rounded a corner and found himself facing a double headed horse with three legs at the centre and two at each end.

I was very glad when the bus picked me up as goodness knows what I might have encountered.

Presumably, Thake's "monsters" derived from one animal standing in front of and partly obscuring others. This episode illustrates the difference between Thake's attitude to the subject and Dali's. Unlike Dali, Thake did not concentrate or ruminate upon an object, encouraging a succession of related images to emerge. Thake allowed circumstance to present his double images unbidden; he referred to his "snapshot view", which implies an instantaneous apprehension of the irrational, secret, silent lives of objects he saw. This "snapshot view" derived from

the first and perhaps the only glance at something unusual and unexpected .... This impression (is) noted on an envelope, a blank page in a library book.

Thake's conjoining of the two objects only - anthills and figures, planes and monsters - separates him, in a minor sense, from Dali's use of paranoic critical method. Dali linked objects in pairs in Suburbs of the Paranoic-Critical Town, but would generally exercise the principle to its logical conclusion and evoke a train of metamorphoses. Breton, like Dali, saw objects being multifaceted, with more than two characters. Indeed, Breton saw them endowed with an "uninterrupted sequence of latencies". These should be allowed to emerge, he believed, to transform the object, allowing its conventional identity to yield to
its alternative evocations.

Thake's position was supported, at least in part, by de Chirico, who wrote in 1919 of the notion of objects possessing dual identities.

By deduction, it is therefore possible to conclude that every object has two appearances: one, the current one, which we nearly always see and that is seen by people in general; the other spectral or metaphysical in appearance beheld only by some rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction. Thake may have been uncomfortable with speculative terms like "clairvoyance" and "metaphysical abstraction", but otherwise the passage represents the spirit of his Plane Dump and Ant Hill Series.

In large measure, Thake's restricting himself to dual imagery is due to his compositions being sparer than de Chirico's or Dali's. His background in advertising and his interest in the simplified schemas of poster design led him to committing only a limited cast of participating objects to each composition. Moreover, the reason Thake preferred to paint from drawings rather than from nature was that the drawing had already reduced the competing elements to the fundamental protagonists. Before nature, each object seemed to Thake to contend for attention and inclusion: "each blade of grass shouting to the painter 'paint me! Paint me!'" Such pared-down design precluded the extended elaboration of Dali's imagery and of de Chirico's red trousers.

Another area in which Thake may seem to be at variance with Dali relates to whether or not logic or consciousness should play a part in the formulation or interpretation of multiple imagery. Buñuel denied that he or Dali allowed

De Chirico's support was only partial in that he - like Dali - was also sensitive to the multiple personas - more than two - which an object may possess. De Chirico wrote of extending linkages: "I see a link between the dormer window and the red trousers of the French soldier, and the characteristics of the revolution, and a thousand other things I can't explain."
conscious consideration to influence paranoiac critical associations in their film *Un Chien andalou* 1928. He asserted that an image would be "immediately rejected" if it fell into place logically, coherently, or if it had a "conscious association with an earlier idea". Dali and Buñuel sought irrational associations, not rational ones; disjunctions, not sequence: "we would reject without pity anything that could signify something".²⁹

By comparison, Thake's plane/predatory insect association is capable of interpretation, of signification, as a reflection on the state of warfare, especially high technology aerial warfare. By 1932, however, Dali came to join Thake in allowing the conscious a role – albeit only an ancillary role – in image development.

Dali and Thake were on more common ground in their use of the phenomenal world as a springboard from which the paranoiac critical images derived. After summoning the irrational by self-induced paranoia, Dali sometimes concentrated on an imagined object, but more usually focused on an object seen. Thake's war images used as their starting point the structural logic of the ponderable world. Thake would have agreed with Dali's 1931 statement that

> the reality of the external world is used for illustration and proof, and so comes to serve the reality of our mind.³⁰

Neither Thake nor Dali wished to depend, in a passive manner, on the irregular stirrings of the unconscious. Dali interceded more actively in the conception process; Thake was more responsive to the genius loci of the referent. Breton's attitude to Dali's concept of paranoiac critical activity shifted in concert with his fluctuating attitude to Dali, but at least in 1931 he was in agreement with the images being based in reality. They then enjoyed more universal significance, were more persuasive and potentially more startling:

> without doubt ... objects of too particular, too personal a conception will
always lack the astonishing power of suggestion.  

Thake's similes were dependent on his environment to spur his apprehension of such resemblances, and he was particularly alert for and responsive to such images. Dali held that individuals varied in this capacity - he called it a paranoic faculty:

Theoretically, a man sufficiently endowed with this faculty may at will see the form of any real object change, exactly as in voluntary hallucination, but with this important difference, that the various forms assumed by the object in question are open to control and recognition by everyone as soon as the paranoic has simply indicated them.

Salvador Dali's vigorous advocacy of the paranoiac method, then, had a decisive influence on the rehabilitation of reality as a constituent in Surrealist imagery formulation. The early years of Surrealism had been dominated by automatism. In the 1930s there emerged what Dali called in 1932 a "desire to interfere" in exploring the irrational, to consciously participate in the conception and arrangement of imagery. In Les Vases communicants, published in the same year, Breton called for waking life to be annealed to the dream to provide irrational imagery.

I can hope for nothing better than that Surrealism will pass for having tried to throw a conducting thread between two dissociated worlds of waking and sleeping, of logic and love.

Henry Okun suggested that this reinstatement of reality provided a new trove of subject matter:

With reality accepted as a necessary source of material and inspiration, with the objectification of desire and the objectification of dreams established as articles of Surrealist faith, and with matter freshly consecrated for surrealist use, reality and tangible things became as indispensable for the Surrealists as the pure functioning of the mind.

Okun dates Surrealism's rehabilitation of reality as being in place by mid 1932. Remarkably, that was the year that Thake's work began to assume an authentic surreal character. That is to say, in 1932 Thake's object-centred Surrealism was not only unequalled in Australia, but was absolutely concurrent with
theoretical thinking of Dali, Breton and their Paris circle. If in the late 1930s, his work became progressively abstract (as had Wadsworth's between 1930 and 1933), his War Artist appointment instigated a return to an illusionistic style. The Surrealist R.A.A.F. paintings were linked, at least partially, with external reality, and in this they engaged a manner he would continue through the remainder of his career.

5. André Breton, op. cit. p.130.
7. Salvador Dali, La Femme visible, op. cit. p.137.
8. André Breton, Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme, R. Henriquez, Brussels, 1934, p.25.
17. Eric Thake, letter to his family, late 1945.
18. Paul McGillick (writing of a group of mid-career Australian painters), The


21. Ibid.


23. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

28. Mary Eagle and Jan Minchin, op. cit., p.22.


32. Salvador Dalí, op. cit.


PLANE DUMP SERIES

Eric Thake left Melbourne by rail on the initial leg of his first tour of duty as Official War Artist, in the early morning of December 6th 1944. He arrived in Sydney the next morning, and was able to stay in Sydney for a couple of days.

He lunched with William Dobell, and was shown the Subscription Portrait of the N.S.W. Governor on which Dobell was working. Dobell then took Thake to meet James Cook, who had just returned from New Guinea. Cook showed them some paintings of crashed planes he had done there. Thake thought them very well drawn (but) too tight for me - all the nuts and bolts in their correct positions.¹

It is not clear whether Thake subsequently sought out crashed planes because of Cook's example. Certainly Cook's precedent would have made him aware of the thematic possibilities of matériel dumps.

Thake arrived in Port Moresby on December 20th. Almost immediately he went to the American aircraft dump at Jackson Field. Faced with the misshaped forms, he wrote:

I hardly know where to start .... I'd like to have a studio out here for a few weeks.²

However, his first plane dump painting, *Moresby Totem 1944* (Ill.2), was not painted for another ten days, until December 31st. By then, Thake had presumably seen the Port Moresby plane dump paintings of Flying Officer Harold Freedman, who was in Port Moresby at the same time, and with whom Thake painted. Freedman's example was probably decisive in confirming Thake's interest in the theme which Cook had initially stimulated. Freedman's oil *Creatures of the Air* (Ill.3), painted in December 1944, and the related
watercolour *Airacobras* (Ill. 4) of the next month, depicted Bell Airacobras at a Port Moresby dump. The planes were probably from the 23rd, 24th or 82nd Squadrons, all of which operated Airacobras in New Guinea.

Freedman eliminated all other military detritus. The planes huddle together with open mouths, staring eyes and bared teeth. Outstretched wings suggest alertness and preparedness to attack. The plane-creatures' frontality enhances this sense of confrontation. Freedman sensed that these planes take on an atmosphere of strange bird-like creatures of another age.

Seeking subjects amid the torn metal of dumps is in keeping with Surrealist ideology. The Paris Surrealists had rummaged in the flea markets and junk shops of Paris for found objects. Louis Aragon cited a mechanical form (actually an electroscope) which he found in such a "dump" and which, detached from its functioning context, and perhaps discoloured and with parts missing, was difficult to identify. Consequently it assumed a degree of mystery and enigma.

André Breton also frequented such junk shops and country fairs looking for objects endowed with "poetic consciousness". In 1927, he wrote of going frequently to the Saint-Ouen flea market searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse ... like, for example, that kind of irregular, white, shellacked, half-cylinder covered with reliefs and depressions that are meaningless to me, streaked with horizontal and vertical reds and greens, precariously nested in a case under a legend in Italian, which I brought home and which after careful examination I have finally identified as some kind of statistical device, operating three dimensionally and recording the population of a city in such and such a year, though all this makes it no more comprehensible to me.

Thake, like Breton, was an assiduous collector of objects which appeared to him to be invested with meaning, symbolism or associations beyond their manifest identity. Thake's daughter, Jennifer Mann, recalled that "be it animal, vegetable or a man-made object, he would collect it if it appealed".
The mechanical objects which attracted Thake during his military tours resembled Breton’s objects in that they, too, "could be found nowhere else; old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse."8

Proto Surrealist Guillaume Apollinaire was enamoured of impairment – a condition related to the ruined aircraft. Apollinaire celebrated disequilibrium (which is balance that has been impaired) as later Surrealists would value the disequilibrium of the mentally impaired. Physical disequilibrium and the flawed were glorified by Apollinaire as "divine". He wrote of a character who had suffered an accident, losing one leg, an arm and an eye. For Apollinaire, this freed the character from such oppressive notions as time, and allowed him to glimpse eternity.9

Giorgio de Chirico’s still life objects often appear redundant, left behind or cast aside. Thake’s plane dump matériel was not only abandoned, but was also incapable of functioning. The Surrealists generally held a disdain for function, for objects having to serve a purpose. In a 1936 issue of Cahiers d’Art devoted to the concept of the Surrealist object, Salvador Dali wrote of this contempt:

The Surrealist object is impracticable; it serves no other purpose than to befuddle man, to extenuate him, to cretinise him.10

Thake’s dump planes and vehicles are either no longer operational due to conflict, damage or neglect, or they are distorted, metamorphosed so as to exist as something else. Thake frequently addressed this theme of machinery and constructions which have been exposed to the enervating and often disabling stress of war. Engines are under repair, sheltering beneath tents. Jeeps battle to operate under disabling rain and mud conditions. Domestic buildings are uninhabitable. Commercial buildings are inoperable. Parachutes, threatened by mildew, are taken apart to dry out.
Apart from Freedman, one War Artist had already produced significant paintings stemming from plane dumps or crashed fuselages: Paul Nash. Thake was well aware of Nash’s achievement with this theme. On arriving at the Port Moresby salvage dump, he wrote:

the place needs a Paul Nash, Piper, Sutherland or an Eric Thake to do it justice.¹¹

He would have seen Paul Nash’s Totes Meer: Dead Sea 1940–1941 (Ill.5) which was reproduced in The Studio January 1942 and Herbert Read’s Paul Nash 1944. Totes Meer depicts the vast Cowley aircraft dump where wrecked German plane airframes were stored awaiting transhipment for melting down. Nash established an eerie association between a vast graveyard of shattered plane cadavers, rigid in death, and a shimmering sea of frozen, lapping metallic breakers.

Nash was conscious of the propaganda potential of war art, and wrote to the Ministry of Information "wherever possible I should like to be used directly or indirectly as propaganda".¹² Perhaps for this reason, Nash — unlike Thake— includes identification insignia on plane panels. Apart from the titles, Thake’s wreckage could be of almost any plane and any theatre. The wreckage could record triumph, tragedy, or just neglect.

A moon overlooks Nash’s metal seascape, and illuminates it. Yet it casts no warmth; the green-grey sky is the colour of putrefaction. The plane dump represents Thake’s clearest reference to death in war, but even here it is oblique, allusive. Nash’s Totes Meer overlays a set of evocations of death: the dismembered plane anatomy; the womb of the earth; the winter sea; the moon experiencing an eclipse.

In 1940, four years before Totes Meer, Nash had painted a number of watercolours of crashed German planes, mainly bombers. Thake would most
likely have known at least some of those, as they were quite widely reproduced in a range of publications: *The Studio* October 1940 and January 1942; "The Personality of Planes", *Vogue* March 1942; *War Pictures by British Artists R.A.F.* 1942; Eric Newton, *War Through Artist's Eyes* 1945.

Nash's wrecks, unlike Thake's, lie at the point of impact although, like Thake's, that moment of destruction was some time past. There is no fire, no one sprints to the scene of the crash. The wreckage suggests a degree of pathos and helplessness. On receipt of the first consignment of these works, Sir Kenneth Clark, Chairman of the War Artists' Advisory Committee wrote to Nash

Your six beautiful watercolours of crashed German bombers were received with delight by the whole Committee.¹³

Nevertheless, Nash believed that senior R.A.F. personnel did not approve. In *Outline* 1944 he wrote:

I was made to feel that to make a picture of the wreck of an enemy machine on the ground was rather like shooting a sitting bird .... They took a poor view of it.

Thake's plane dump paintings seem to have been better received; *Moresby Totem* was reproduced – albeit in slightly misleading and limited colours – in the 1945 volume *Victory Roll, the R.A.A.F. at War*, published by the R.A.A.F. Directorate of Public Relations.

Another painter admired by Thake¹⁴ who painted planes was John Armstrong. Thake would have become initially acquainted with Armstrong's work through George Bell's copy of Herbert Read's *Unit One* 1934. Armstrong's *September 1940* (Ill. 6a), which resembles *Totes Meer* in that a mass of shattered planes are set in a sea context, was reproduced in *War Pictures of the National Gallery* 1944, which Thake may have seen. The wreckage of planes lies beached, like flotsam, at the high water mark. Armstrong's *Burnt Out Aeroplane* (Ill.6b), although presumably not known to Thake, invites comparison
with Thake’s dump paintings. The composition centres on a single plane rather than on a massed field of broken plane carcasses. However, Armstrong’s primary intent, as it was in A Farm in Wales 1940 (Ill. 6c), was the dualism between the skin of an object and the structural skeleton beneath, which warfare has exposed. With the exception of Salvage Dump Port Moresby (Ill.7) Thake ignored these underlying supportive frameworks.

In January 1942, The Studio published an article by Sir Kenneth Clark about the work of war artists being exhibited at the National Gallery* Clark wrote of the war subjects English artists were facing, including

mechanised monsters with the ferocious stupidity of dinosaurs ...

Painting in this view, Stanley Spencer and Paul Nash have dealt with quasi-animate machines.

Sir Kenneth’s description could be applied accurately to most of Thake’s plane dump paintings. Mechanical animism and mechanical personification were notions that had been in the air in English Surrealist circles for some time. The British Surrealist journal The London Bulletin had ventilated the matter in 1938. Humphrey Jennings’ essay "The Iron Horse" appeared in The London Bulletin No.3 of June 1938. He described machines as "animals created by man", and pointed to man’s having given a number of machines animal names: "throstle", "basilick". Jenning’s point is germane to Thake’s war subjects, many of which were machines with human, bird or animal names. Plane wrecks were titled "Kate and Oscar" and "Birds of Paradise"; a plane being repaired beneath a tarpaulin was called "Kittyhawke’s Wigwam"; a plane was named 'Roger-Fox-Dog"; a train was named "Lena".

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* Nash’s plane wreckage watercolour Bomber in Corn accompanied the essay.
Jennings continued that the idea of a machine going by itself has long obsessed man because then it could be considered to have a life of its own - to have become a complete pseudo-animal. And as man is related to real animals, so every machine has a latent human content.

The next issue of The London Bulletin No 4-5 of July 1938 coincided with an exhibition entitled "The Impact of Machines" at the Surrealist-aligned London Gallery. This issue reproduced Francis Picabia's Parade amoureuse 1917 (Ill.8), of imaginary machines holding hands. (This painting was an ironic reference to the proposition put in 291 September-October 1915 by Paul Haviland's article "We are living in the Age of the Machine" that the machine was man's natural partner in the modern world.) It also included an essay "The Gods Move House" by Arthur Elton in which Elton suggested that people project human characteristics onto things they fear, and do not understand. Even if the object or phenomena is bigger, stronger, more wilful, more passionate or more terrible than man, at least it is still human. Better that than it be ungovernable.

Elton suggests that contemporary artists were looking to machines of a dream world (such as Thake's ruined planes):

machines with a life of their own divorced from functionalism, self-animating, self-sufficient.

Indeed, the machine had been a dominating presence and motif in 20thC. painting and animated machines - like Thake's - represented a minor but important part of that presence. Picabia amalgamated fantasy machines with sexual drives. He even proposed as mechanomorphic portraits, paintings of engines and machines taken from technical journals such as The Scientific American. Marie Laurencin was portrayed as an engine casing, side on, together with a frontal fan and belt drive. Max Jacob was portrayed as a torchlight on an oval tombstone. Picabia saw the machine as the ideal vehicle
for symbolising man's predicaments.

The machine has become more than a mere adjunct of human life. It is really a part of human life - perhaps the very soul. In seeking forms through which to interpret ideas or by which to explore human characteristics, I have come at length upon the form (i.e. the machine) which appears most brilliantly plastic and fraught with symbolism.15

In the February 1917 issue of Picabia's magazine 391, Max Goth's essay "D'un certain esprit ..." referred to human-machine correspondences:

(The artist) perceives what there can be in common ... between a flower and a comb, the sea and a tramway.16

Marcel Duchamp's Large Glass symbolised a bachelor by a chocolate grinder, and the bride by a motor. The Vorticist's manifesto celebrated ports and machines. La Mettrie (1909-1951), a writer who apparently influenced Léger, equated the solids of the human body with systems of mechanical apparatus like pulleys and levers, while describing the bodily fluids as obeying the laws of hydraulics.17

In 1919, the 10 h.p. Citroen advertisement in Le Monde Illustré described the motor car in animalistic terms: the motor was "the heart and lungs", the "essential organ" of the car.

Léger related the classic nude to the machine or the manufactured object in its depersonalised, inhuman coldness, its lack of sexuality, its anonymity, its hint of austere metallurgy in its gun-metal colouration. He came to construct figures from cones, drums, ovoids and cylinders giving them a mechanical effect by depicting their surfaces as polished to a high sheen.

In a coincidental link with Thake, it was probably aeroplanes that were a key provocation in his adopting this machine-man image. He wrote of attending the Salon d'Automne (probably in 1912) in the Grand Palais, and then turning to
the adjacently exhibited Salon de l'Aviation, and being deeply impressed by the aeroplanes and engines. He referred to their "beautiful hand metal objects, complete and functional, treated in pure local colours, the steel playing against vermilions and blues with infinite variety and effect". He also cited the impact of a pervasive "geometric power".18 Duchamp, who with Brancusi, accompanied Léger to this exhibition of aero-engines and plane forms, was so impressed by the form of a wooden propeller that he exclaimed that "painting was finished".19

Nash's investment of life into machine and plane forms was part of wider interest in evoking life from inanimate forms generally. In 1937 he wrote an article entitled "The Life of Inanimate Objects" for Country Life, in which he suggested that such animation was traditionally English. He cited Wordsworth as someone who "was certainly afraid of inanimate objects". (Thake and Freedman extracted a similar fear from some of the Dump Series paintings.) Nash continued that primitive people were "deeply impressed" by the idea of the power of "inanimate things".20

In March 1942, Vogue published an important essay by Nash entitled "The Personality of Planes" about his attitude to matériel and especially war planes. He made two observations on the nature of these subjects. Firstly, he held that matériel had come to overshadow man as the conductor and executor of the war. Secondly, he saw planes, submarines, and other major items of equipment as quasi-animate creatures. He called them "object-personages", and proposed that they possessed an inner life, a personality.

Everywhere one looked, alarming and beautiful monsters appeared, the tank, the airplane, the submarine, the torpedo and the mine, all had individual beauty in terms of colour, form and line. But beyond, or was it behind, that actual appearance these things possessed a personality, difficult to define and yet undeniable. It was not wholly a matter of mechanistic character. There seemed to be involved some other animation - "a life of their own" is the nearest plain expression I can think of which often gave them the suggestion of human or animal features.
Nash conceived of planes as "aerial creatures". He ascribed individual characteristics, or what he called "resemblances", to various models of planes. The Sunderland, for example, he imagined as the most animal of all planes, charging along the coast with its nose thrust out, defiant and terrible. The Wellington he considered quite human:

It is quite jolly, it is on the plump side, (and it is a) baleful creature. Its big mammalian head and straight pointed wings, its proud fin and strong level flight, like that of an avenging angel, all make up a personality of great strength, a formidable machine, heroic and justly popular. It resembles a whale ... to watch the dark silhouette of Wellington riding the evening sky is to see almost the exact image of the great killer whale hunting in an unknown sea.

Nash insisted that these "resemblances" should not be taken literally: "they are indications merely of that other life which, to the imaginative sense, modern aeroplanes seem to possess".

Seven years later, in his autobiography Outline 1949 he recalled that he had tried to show his "creatures" in their various moods and activities. A bomber at play, for example, or, as in Wellington Bomber Watching the Skies (Ill.9), a bomber in its "lair". Nash's interest in "lairs" was related to the surrealist conception of "wild stones". Nash extrapolated from this motif.

Why not a nest of wild planes? The idea of a nest had become a feature of the war. There were constant references to machine gun "nests" which, of course, gave no suggestion of rest or smugness, but rather of a danger spot like an adder's nest or a hive of hornets. I began to consider the meaning of its application to the airplane.

This passage reveals how close were the Surrealist paths of Nash and Thake. Outline was not published until 1949, four years after Thake's animated plane paintings. Yet its proposal for a nest of wild planes had occurred to Thake, too, and was realized in a drawing The Nest of the Kittyhawks 1945. As usual, Thake arrived at the image through an imaginative interpretation of a witnessed incident on Morotai in February or early March 1945:

The Nest of Kittyhawks was a great fern growing high in the fork of a jungle tree and often when the planes were circling to land they appeared to be alighting on the "nest".
Another remarkable correspondence between Thake and Nash was their drawing attention to the poignant presence of bird life amid the repellant wreckage. Nash noted that the landscape surrounding his "predatory creatures", his "monsters in the field" was still. The only moving creature was a white owl "flying low over the (plane) bodies, raking the shadows for rats and voles".

In similar terms, Thake walked amongst the plane wreckage in Port Moresby in December 1944 and noted:

A few birds common about Melbourne – W. Wagtail, Grey Butcher Bird, B.F.C. Shrike, and the Grey Thrush whose call seems to end in a human whistle. Its call is a bit slower than those down south – the bird probably feels the heat and is a bit lazy.

Both were fascinated by the bird/wreckage dichotomy. Nash saw parallels between the two – the owl and the crashed bomber are both predators. Thake is perceptive of the bizarre juxtaposition – fantastic shattered planes accommodating commonplace East Kew birds.

When Thake cited Sutherland as one of the three artists, apart from himself, who could do justice to the subject of plane dumps, he presumably had in mind Sutherland's achievements in painting urban destruction. Sutherland, like Thake, had sensed animate form implicit in machinery. For example, he depicted the lift shaft – all that remained of a formerly tall building:

In the way it had fallen it was like a wounded animal. It wasn't that those forms looked like animals, but their movements were animal movements. One shaft in particular with a very strong lateral fall, suggested a wounded tiger in a painting by Delacroix.

Sutherland described in machine/animal metaphoric terms a ruin he saw that had once been a factory manufacturing women's coats:

There were machines, their entrails hanging through the floor.

A number of World War II soldier poets also referred to animal characteristics
in matériel. Major Frank Thompson, R.A. and Special Duties (who was executed in 1943 in South Serbia) portrayed artillery as possessing feelings and an independent capacity to act:

rumbled and boomed the gun's resentment impersonal, the protest of a Titan.28

Even closer to the spirit of Thake, Drummond Allison (killed in Italy 1943) constructed a metaphor linking a plane and a cetacean:

Recumbent Sutherlands all afternoon
As well fed manatees wait on the water
and a destroyer sprints from swoon to swoon.29

An aeroplane metaphor precisely parallel with Thake's Liberator's Face (Ill.10) occurs in Brian Allwood's Aircrew. Allwood (who was killed in Italy in 1944), like Thake, was a member of the Air Force. He described a bomber in Thake's animate terms:

The grasshopper Wellington comes in to land.30

Thake had dealt with the image of the plane/creature hybrid prior to his appointment. In 1941, his Archaeopteryx 1941 (Ill.11) had depicted the birth of a flying form. As it rose from the egg it moulted its scant plumage (which, together with its egg source, was evidence of its animate nature) and became a fragile flying machine.

This fell harmoniously within Surrealist tenets. The year after Thake painted Archaeopteryx, André Breton spoke at Yale to students studying French. He listed five propositions which Surrealism had developed, and which had come to represent its platform. One was a destruction of the old antinomies of life/death. Implicit in this dichotomy are other dualisms: animate/inanimate, organic/manufactured, and it was on a destruction of these antinomies that most of Thake's plane dump paintings pivoted.
For Dali, too, many common objects, including planes, were possessing of life, and he called them corps étranges—"strange bodies". As well as promoting objects to the standing of animate things, Dali metamorphosed people, diminishing them to the standing of objects, what he called étres-objets—Being Objects.

In placing objects in this indeterminate zone between animation and rigid mechanisation, Thake was dealing with the condition of unsettling equivocation which is fundamental to Surrealist sensibility.

Towards the end of his life, André Breton coined the useful term "secondary figuration" to refer to the alternative characteristics of an object which the artist should reveal. (This could be done by distending and usefully violating normal relationships of size, lighting, position and substance.) He had enunciated this notion when listing a set of seven "commandments" of Surrealism in 1942. Breton's first commandment stipulated:

Everything should be capable of being freed from its shell (from its distance, its comparative size, its physical and chemical properties, its outward appearance).

This attitude was reflected in Thake's plane dump paintings, in which Thake qualified and animated the objects, contradicting their "still life" appearance.

Thake completed six paintings based on dumped wreckage: Moresby Totem 1944 (Ill.2), Kate and Oscar 1945 (Ill.12), A.C.S. Dump 1945 (Ill.13), Salvage Dump, Port Moresby 1945 (Ill.7), another painting of the same title, (Ill.14) and Wrecked Lodestar 1945 (Ill.15).

All evoke a sense of apprehension, but some of the subjects are more sinister, more malign than others. James Gleeson saw these dismembered and distorted
forms as "labyrinths ... frighteningly inimical to life".\textsuperscript{35}

Most of these paintings engage animation and although Thake had previously depicted planes or things with bird-like characteristics, Freedman was probably responsible for Thake returning to this motif. Freedman's \textit{Winged Horse} (Ill.16) of December 1944 portrays a disemboweled Lightning from the Port Moresby dump in equine form.

Freedman's \textit{Creatures of the Air} (Ill.3), also painted in December 1944, and \textit{Airacobras} (Ill.4) of the next month portray Bell P-39 Airacobras. Wrecked Airacobras could have been expected in some numbers in Port Moresby; the first U.S. Airacobra squadron had arrived in New Guinea two and a half years before. The Airacobra had performed poorly as an interceptor in the European theatre, exposed by its poor manoeuvrability, poor climb rate and low performance ceiling. In New Guinea, where it was operational from 1941 to 1944\textsuperscript{36}, it was efficient as a bomber escort and a ground support aircraft. It had a rugged airframe, and was noted for its ability to sustain punishment and for its capacity to inflict damage through its firepower.\textsuperscript{37} This toughness and ferocity is captured by Freedman. The catalogue of the 1946 R.A.A.F. War Artists Exhibition suggested that these planes "(took) on an atmosphere of strange, bird-like creatures of another age". \textit{Moresby Totem}, \textit{Wrecked Lodestar} and \textit{Liberator's Face} also represent planes as bearing bird-like or insect-like qualities. An image combining bird and plane elements is predictable and trite. Cassandre had made such an association in \textit{Air Orient} 1932 (Ill.17) a decade earlier, through overlapping the two forms and indicating similarities of profile.\textsuperscript{38} Freedman and Thake transcend the cliche by overlaying the bird-monster metaphor with a mood of aggression; the bird is a towering bird of prey.
Moresby Totem was the first of Thake's plane dump paintings, executed on the last day of 1944. The subject was found at the Port Moresby salvage dump. Thake left no information about the painting, and it is probably only coincidence that the title – Moresby Totem – is a near-anagram of the title of Nash's great plane dump painting Totes Meer.

The painting was originally titled Spent Lightning, a word-play suggesting that the subject was a (Lockheed) Lightning, of which both the P-38 and F-5 models operated in the New Guinea theatre. The distinctive twin-engined, twin-boomed body configuration confirms the plane as a Lockheed P-38 Lightning. The P-38's massing of armament in the nose (designed to give a concentrated line of fire and to avoid malfunction due to centrifugal force) is missing, but presumably this was removed before the plane was dumped.

This single-seater interceptor or long range escort fighter had probably been serving with a U.S.A.F. Fighter Squadron. Although these planes had a kill ratio of 12:1 in the Pacific Theatre, they had poor manoeuvrability, and their preferred tactic was to attack the enemy formation at high speed from above in a single pass.

Thake gave no indication that he was intending to portray these dumps as symbolising a squandering of resources; he may not have known that in the year he painted these two wrecked planes, Lockheed P-38s cost $134,284 each.39

These planes' animal-like characteristics are less marked than in the first works in this series. Teeth are painted on the two engine cowlings, but this was common practice, and Anthony Gross had made play of that "decoration" in The Battle of Egypt 1942: Bombing Up (Ill.18). Thake's title underscores his
intention to extract the animal characteristics of the plane. A "totem" is a natural object especially an animal assumed among N. American Indians as an emblem of clan or individual. In its patterning, Moresby Totem relates to indigenous art. Thake extracts pattern from the planes by playing on the metal pressing marks, the indentations and holes, the pattern formed by the airframe struts, and the teeth boldly painted on the plane nose. The patterns are robust, even crude. Surrealism had a primitivising aspect in its search for a holistic and instinctive plane of existence that does not discriminate between reality and dream, between logic and imagination. This state of integration was seen by most of the key French Surrealists as being found especially in the domains of the child, the insane and primitive man.

The Paris Surrealists organised exhibitions of folk, tribal and ethnographical art in galleries, such as Charles Ratton's, with which they had links. They reproduced such work in Cahiers d'Art and Minotaure. Eluard and Breton collected primitive art.

Breton visited Martinique, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. He viewed tribal ceremonies of U.S. Indians of the South West. He wrote of the art of Oceania and Mexico. He wrote, too, of Australian Aboriginal bark paintings, in which he saw the alcheringa, the dreamtime, as the time of all metamorphosis. With his Paris Circle, he saw artifacts of technologically primitive cultures as reflecting attractive cultural constructs and cosmological systems which were not answerable to logic or expressed in terms of realism.

Given this championing of primitive art by Surrealism, it is surprising that Thake's paintings did not draw more substantially upon the visual culture surrounding him in New Guinea.
Kate and Oscar 1945 (Ill.12) was painted on January 26th at Kamiri Airstrip on Noemfoor Island. Noemfoor Island in Geelvink Bay had been retaken in July 1944 as a stage in the Allied island-hopping campaign, and Kamiri airfield had been one of the first important points seized. Thake arrived there on January 9th 1945.

Kate and Oscar depict "two Japanese planes shot down and pushed to the side of the strip by bulldozers". The title suggests that this work continues the anthropomorphic transformation of wreckage hinted at in the previous month's painting Moresby Totem. However, no allusion to figurative elements or contrasting male (Oscar) and female (Kate) characteristics is apparent. In fact, the anthropomorphism of the title derives from the Allied identification and nomenclature system. Early in the war, the Allies suffered from an inability to identify Japanese planes with precision; for example, almost all the low-winged, single-engined fighters were called "Zeros". To distinguish between types, a more specific vocabulary was devised with Christian names being allocated to the various models. "Oscar" referred to the Nakajima Ki-42-II Army Type 1 Fighter Hayabusa (Peregrine Falcon). "Kate" was the Nakajima BSN2 torpedo-bomber.

Thake was obviously amused at the names the military and individual crews gave planes, as if they were animals, pets or people. In Notebook 4 (N.G.V.) he wrote the names of American planes: "Cactus Jack", "Purple Cow", "The Deacon", "Japanese Sandman". Most names implied personification. The page was undated but was annotated "Noemfoor", so Thake was obviously attracted to the idea of human names and titles being bestowed upon planes about the time he painted Kate and Oscar.

The wreckage in this painting is damaged almost beyond recognition, the metal
is furled and jagged. The major plane lightly resembles a creature on its back, its mouth open as if gasping but frozen in rigor mortis. The landscape, as in the rest of the series, is essentially flat and unoccupied. However, *Kate and Oscar* incorporates an exceptional motif: a cluster of listing, decimated palm tree trunks, This motif may well represent the damage the landscape sustains from air attacks in warfare. Thake would presumably have been aware that Kate torpedo-bombers had participated in the Japanese raid on Darwin. (Japanese sources indicated that twenty seven had flown in that raid.) Thus the underlying subject seems to be the destroyer himself destroyed.

*A.C.S. Dump* 1945 (Ill.13), painted two weeks later, depicts another Noemfoor Island dump. Alone of this series, *A.C.S. Dump* is not of crashed planes but of wrecked vehicles. Like *Moresby Totem*, the large foreground object (plane or vehicle) is viewed at a startling, even mystifying, angle, while a smaller example in the middle ground indicates more clearly the identity of the object.

Ian McKenzie, who served on Noemfoor with the R.A.A.F., considered matériel dumps to be one of the most startling features of the local landscape. With the fluid front closing towards Japan, much matériel was too inconvenient to recover and transfer, and it was simply abandoned. It was easier to ship new equipment to the moving front from the United States. He recalled unwanted building materials and usable equipment being aggregated and abandoned and repairable planes being pushed off runways and left.

Thake uses the dump as a means of asserting the preeminence mechanisation has assumed in warfare. In this he was continuing a theme that had emerged in literature, especially, in W.W.I. Blaise Cendrars had reflected on the horror of mechanised warfare in the closing months of W.W.I:

*The torpedo, the gun, mines, fire, gas, machine guns,* all the anonymous, daemonic, systematic blind machines (of war).
In W.W.II, matériel dumps occasionally figured as subjects in literature. English war poet Keith Douglas wrote of:

> a new world
> the vegetation is of iron
> dead tank, gun backs split like celery.\(^46\)

However, it was the visual artists, especially Nash and Thake, who focused most keenly on the subject. Nash imagined the dump to sustain an eerie association with a graveyard.

Simply, with a devouring curiosity now tempered by something like awe in the presence of these unusual dead ... it seemed to me impossible to rid them of their human associations on the one hand, or on the other to regard them, even broken and lifeless, as so much mechanical junk .... Was it too fantastic to suppose them haunted? I did not care to think of them conventionally so, yet there was a persistent suggestion of a ghostly presence even at this hour of half past two in the afternoon in the August sunshine. I do not mean the wraiths of lost pilots or perished crews were hovering near, it was nothing so decidedly human, but a pervasive force baffled yet malign hung in the heavy air.\(^46\)

Such a mood prevails in \textit{A.C.S. Dump}, but even more so in \textit{Salvage Dump}, Port Moresby. Here a wing trails wiring, like severed arteries, and exposed engine tubing unwinds like entrails. The rearing plane in the middle ground seems to owe a substantial debt to Freedman's airacobra images.

Most Surrealists were attracted to found objects or subjects which were impregnated with a sense of the past, with an implied or explicit history of use, of suffering, of scarring or of nostalgia. This was so with Nash and with Tristram Hillier. Hillier, as in \textit{Le Havre de Grace} 1939 (Ill.19), employed abandoned and corroding forms. Thake would have seen Hillier's statement in Herbert Read's \textit{Unit One} 1934.

> The sense of desolation engendered by the sight of a neglected and rusty anchor lying upon some deserted shore may be more potent than its functional associations of mooring a ship, and it seems not unreasonable that, in depicting such an object, one should surround it with broken chairs, abandoned newspapers, and other things evoking the same sentiments.\(^47\)

Yet Thake does not dwell on his subjects' antecedents. Even when finding
material in the rusted, mutilated planes of Port Moresby and Darwin, the forms are generally presented as current or very recent protagonists.

Thake produced a second dump painting which was also titled *Salvage Dump, Port Moresby* 1945 (Ill.14) (hereafter titled *Salvage Dump*). Both were painted in May, two months after he had returned to Australia. *Salvage Dump* (and probably *Salvage Dump, Port Moresby*) was developed from sketches Thake had drawn in the American Salvage Dump near Jackson's Field in December 1944. This was about the time – perhaps a little before – Thake was painting *Moresby Totem*. Thake wrote of this site:

> This was a wonderful place for painting salvaged aircraft parked in the long avenues or pushed into heaps by bulldozers. Everything still and silent (in an Australian-like setting of gum scrub, dead grass and an occasional wallaby or two). Except for the call of a bird whose notes resembled the sound of a bottle filling up with water and the rattle of tinkling of loose metal when the wind blew. 48

*Salvage Dump, Port Moresby*, alone of the Dump paintings, dwells on the plane's underlying construction, its architecture.

Thake's final Dump painting was *Wrecked Lodestar* 1945 (Ill.15). For Paul Nash, nature was possessed of power unqualified by logic or compassion; for example, the night tide beating remorselessly against Dymchurch Wall. For Thake it is always man's mechanical creatures - forces of man's own construction - that represented the threat. The L-18 Lockheed Lodestar was a twin engined transport aircraft similar to the R.A.F.'s Hudson.

The painting seems to have derived from a sketch Thake compiled about August 17th 1945, having worked on it over two or three days.

> I have finished a sketch of the wrecked plane I'd started on Wednesday a.m. I did not disturb the Zebra Finches nesting in the wing butts. 49

Both Freedman's airacobra paintings and Thake's *Wrecked Lodestar* face the
viewer with "mouths" open. As well as suggesting predacity, there is the inference that they are, metaphorically at least, carnivorous. Carnivorousness or cannibalism had figured as a minor Surrealist theme, although in a less subtle manner, in the work of Salvador Dali and Antonin Artaud.

In 1832, in his essay "The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment"\textsuperscript{50}, Dali enumerated four stages he saw the Surrealist object passing through. The fourth phase was consumability or edibility; a table made of eggs, for example. Dali had long been obsessed with cannibalistic consumption. Identification with a desired object, the need to be at one with it, could be consummated by eating it. Conversely, Dali was fearful of being devoured himself, particularly during sexual intercourse, a threat from which onanism offered sanctuary. Dali conceived of people as edible: "we are ... good quality food".\textsuperscript{51} He saw space as edible\textsuperscript{52}, and art, especially Surrealist art - edible because it was an object that was especially desired. Dali wrote in 1933:

\begin{quote}
We have already seen the surrealist object, from its beginnings, acting and growing under the sign of eroticism, and just as in the case of the love object, after having wanted to actuate it, we have wanted to eat it.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Dali's paintings of the 1930s show cannibalism and comestibility directly and also obliquely. For example, Daybreak 1930 (ILL.20) which Thake would have seen reproduced in Herbert Read's Surrealism 1936 places an insect beneath an armless (defenceless) figure. The insect may be a locust, but could as easily be a praying mantis, the female of which species eats her mate after intercourse. Another example of Cannibalism in Surrealism of the 1930s occurs in the scenario of "La Révolte du Boucher" by Surrealist Antonin Artaud, published in La Nouvelle Revue Française 1930. In one sequence, a woman is laid out, and a master butcher prepares to cut her up like a carcass. As the butcher opens his mouth, it is announced "I've had enough of cutting meat without eating it".

\textsuperscript{4-21}
The motif of war as an ogre consuming mankind or armies had been used from time to time in the popular press. David Fitzpatrick, for example, had depicted Russia as a huge skull swallowing invading German troops in the St. Louis Post Despatch November 25th, 1942.

The metaphor of war's treating humans as comestible was even used in relation to war's consumption of the individual's intellect by Timothy Corsellis. Describing the anaesthetising drill training he had been subjected to in the R.A.F., which in his experience devoured his mind as surely as the battlefields devoured bodies (and indeed he was himself killed in 1941), Corsellis wrote:

Forward and backward to the desperate drum  
Of the increasing madness  
The wheel whirl roll unfurl,  
Encroaches in the dead mind in a dying body,  
Eats further into the interior.54

The cavernous mouth of the Lodestar parallels the yawning mouth of a shark/nazi bomber image in Nash's collage Follow the Fuhrer (above the Clouds) 1942 (Ill.21). However, Thake would not have been aware of this work; it was not reproduced before 1973. Yet Thake would presumably have read Herbert Read's Paul Nash 1944 which alludes to Nash's metaphoric representation of the plane in bird/animal/fish terms, and most significantly, alludes to the voracity of these images:

Soaring in the clouds the airplane is animated, becomes an immense sword-fish or vulture, alive with the electric voracity of animals that inhabit the extreme elements.45

The animation of Wrecked Lodestar and Liberator's Face is carried by depicting the fuselage as a massive countenance. Again, Nash was a precedent. Nash on various occasions drew an equation between the face and non-human forms:

In a black pine wood is a lake. And inscrutable, dark face staring up.56

Winter is life imprisoned. A face peering through an iron mask.57

In 1936 the Architectural Press published the Dorset Shell Guide. Nash's
introduction to this volume was titled "The Face of Power".

As I see it (in the county of Dorset) there appears a gigantic face composed of massive and unusual features; at once harsh and tender, alarming yet kind, seeming susceptible to moods, but, in secret overcast by a noble melancholy - or, simply the burden of its extraordinary inheritance. Andrew Causey suggests that the direct inspiration for the metaphor of a face as applied to Dorset was Thomas Hardy, whose Egdon Heath is described in the beginning of The Return of the Native as "a Face on which time makes but Little Impression". Egdon, Nash's Dorset, and Thake's Liberator were not portrayed merely as resembling a human face, but as an intimidating and threatening force, one more formidable adversary in man's struggle to survive. Hardy made the Heath more than a setting; rather it served as a symbol of the bleak and melancholy destiny which awaits people. Nash's face motif was used to illustrate the inexorable strength of nature over man's capacity and symbolised the frailty of man's achievements. Similarly, Thake used the potent image of the face or mask to illustrate the irresistibility of matériel, and the challenge it represented to it creator.

Liberator's Face was one of the last paintings of his second tour, being painted in his final week in Darwin before returning to Melbourne. The subject was a Consolidated B-24 Liberator bomber/reconnaissance aircraft.

In one sense, Thake was returning to his Darwin nocturne painting of August, in that the apparition is set at night:

The great bombers at night appear like huge crouching insects. Insects had been of interest to the Surrealists as subject matter, particularly insects whose life-cycles are metamorphic. Roland Penrose's Winged Domino or Portrait of Valentine, illustrated in London Bulletin No.17, 1939 is an example. Surrealists were also interested in predatory insects. The praying mantis particularly attracted them. Dawn Ades observed that many of these "insect"
subjects explicitly allude to insects which inspire awe – that is, where horror or fear is a component\textsuperscript{61} (as they are in *Liberator\textquotesingle s Face*).

Salvador Dali was contemptuous of the machine and of mass-production. "Machines," he wrote "are doomed to crumble and rust".\textsuperscript{62} The plane wrecks of Nash and Thake are placed to rust in a new setting, out of their element. Nash would write in *Outline 1949* of the planes being displaced from the clouds and stretched across the sand or beneath the cliffs:

> incongruous disasters (befell) the Luftwaffe aircraft day by day; crashing into the cornfields or tearing up the seashore, burning themselves away in the summer coverts, disturbing the pheasants and so on.\textsuperscript{63}

Thake's dumped planes may be out of their element, but unlike Nash's they are generally not stranded or becalmed. Indeed they are as formidable as ever in their unnatural locale. Nash, and to a lesser degree Thake, developed tension between the crashed plane and the landscape. Nash embeds the plane in the ground, where embracing plants and vines seek to repossess it, or in the English Channel, where waves lap over it. Thake's wreckage is alien to, but dominates its surroundings. *A.C.S. Dump* was described by Thake as "in the jungle", but vegetation does not overshadow the wreckage. Thake's planes are only reconciled with their austere surroundings to the extent of some encroaching grass blades.

In a 1934 lecture\textsuperscript{64}, André Breton traced the strongest thread which bound Surrealism to the movement's antecedents Lautréamont and Rimbaud. This thread was war-time defeatism. By the mid 1930s, Breton's pessimism was acute as a shadow has greatly advanced over Europe recently. Hitler, Dolfuss, Mussolini have either drowned in blood or subjected to corporal humiliation everything that forced the effort of generations straining towards a more tolerable and more worthy form of existence.\textsuperscript{65}

Thake's plane dumps may not be seen as war-time defeatism; after all, by
1944-1945 the war was being carried to the contracting frontiers of the Axis powers. Still, a fundamental pessimism seems to underpin the wreckage and the towering wreckage-monsters. This pessimism was rooted in the diminution of man in the face of his matériel, in the face of a military technology which was not beyond his control, but beyond his scale.

1. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Dec. 1944.


22. Book 2, N.G.V.


25. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Dec. 1944, Port Moresby.


27. Ibid.


32. Ibid, p.33.


34. André Breton, "Max Ernst", op. cit.


37. Its armaments included one 37 mm T9 cannon, two 12.7 mm machine guns and four 7.62 mm machine guns.

38. Cassandre also associated the common role of birds and planes as message carriers.


41. Catalogue of Paintings F/O E.Thake, A.W.M.


49. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 17, Alice Springs.

50. This Quarter, Vol. 5 No.1, Sept. 1932, pp.197-207.


53. Salvador Dali, "Objects psycho-atmosphériques-anamorphiques", Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution, No.5 May 1933, p.46.

54. Robert Hewison, op. cit., p.120.


57. Ibid.


60. Catalogue of paintings F/O E. Thake, A.W.M.


63. Paul Nash, op. cit., p.263.

64. Published by André Breton, What is Surrealism? Faber and Faber, London, 1936, pp.46-47.

Eric Thake had arrived in Port Moresby apprehensive about the work he was to do, but was quickly overwhelmed by the unexpected landscape and matériel subjects the country offered, together with the bird and insect life.

I used to lie awake at night before I came to N(ew) G(unea) sorting out what I would do, in the way of compositions etc. only to find that what I expected doesn’t exist but is replaced by something ever so much better.¹

Thake's first painting of his war service was *Flying Boat Base* 1944 (Ill.23), completed the day after he arrived in Port Moresby. It, and *Fuel Wharf* 1944 (Ill.24) painted two days later, depicted the Marine Section. Marine subjects had held only minor interest for Thake over the previous decade, which is perhaps surprising as water front themes were so prominent in the work of the English Surrealists he most respected. Both Nash and Wadsworth were thematically interested in travel, the vehicles of travel (trains and boats), and the berthing point for these (stations or ports).

The theme of landings and departures had arisen in Thake's work previously, including *Happy Landing* (Ill.94) and *Archaeopteryx* (Ill.11). Landing stage platforms were a recurrent subject in Surrealist painting. This "threshold" motif implied duality: it referred to movement from one plane or state to another. Giorgio de Chirico, for example, was drawn to the anxiety of seaports, and the nostalgia of railway station arrivals and departures, and titled one work *Melancholy of Departure* 1916 (Ill.28). Jean Cocteau, writing on de Chirico in 1932, described docks as a disturbing labyrinth of ingredients, possessing an alien personality.²

Wadsworth's dock painting *Pendant* 1942 (Ill.25), which Thake would probably
have seen reproduced in The Studio of June 1943, incorporated a number of ingredients common with Flying Boat Base: a man-made structure whose rigidity is enhanced by sharply defined floor-board edges, a glimpse of water, and curious buoys. In the background of each composition is the water-based vehicle: in Pendant sailing boats, in Flying Boat Base a Short Sunderland. In neither of his paintings does Thake address the subtheme of the English seaboard surrealists: the threat of living close to the advancing pressing sea.

Wadsworth (in the late 1920s) and Hillier (in the early 1930s) drew from this genre's store of "props": wharf posts, navigational equipment, boats under construction or decay, lanyards, anchors, rope. The crucial property in Flying Boat Base is a row of buoys. This was an image that had figured in his friend Douglas Annand's Flying Boat Base at Horn Island, Torres Straight 1943 (Ill.26). Thake would later tell Noel Flanagan, Director of the Australian War Memorial, that he regarded the painting as one of Annand's best. Annand's buoys represent discords in their green-brown setting due to their shape, tonality and coloration; Thake's bright yellow buoys are similarly disruptive and similarly enigmatic.

The spotted pattern on the shed also represents an enigma. (Thake identified it as a "plan of the flight path"). A painting by Eric Ravilious had also incorporated a military diagram into the composition, similarly exploiting its abstract or patterning qualities. Ravilious had much in common with Thake. He was primarily a watercolourist, he preferred objects and military equipment to figurative subjects, and he concentrated on the design possibilities of his subjects. In February 1942 Ravilious began a six months commission as a War Artist with the R.A.F., making him the British parallel of Thake. He was killed while a passenger of a reconnaissance flight over Iceland, the first Australian or British Official War Artist to die on duty. For these reasons, it
is likely that the reproduction of his *No. 1 Map Corridor* would have attracted Thake’s attention when it appeared in *War Pictures by British Artists: Air Raids 1943* (Ill.27).

This painting resulted from a commission from the Ministry of Home Security to record Home Security Control Rooms. It is dominated by a huge wall map in a corridor at the Headquarters of Civil Defence. The size of the diagram indicates its importance, and in wartime the diagram may be an instrument of momentous decisions. Yet its precise meaning is undisclosed and impenetrable. Thake’s flight chart would seem equally opaque to a general viewer.

The potency of charts once they were no longer comprehensible (perhaps by estrangement from their context, or having their purpose mislaid) had been touched on by André Breton in *Nadja* 1928. In this book Breton refers to an exploration of the Saint-Ouen flea market and his discovery there and purchase of a curious, three-dimensional chart (which he was subsequently advised was about population distribution). De Chirico had used charts and maps in his paintings, contradicting their diagrammatic representation of reality with the illusionistic depiction of form which occupied the rest of the composition. Sometimes, as in *Melancholy of Departure 1916* (Ill.28), these charts included dotted paths, like the flying path design in Thake’s *Flying Boat Base*.

In that the plane is enacting the flying path, the diagram could be seen as commenting upon the action the painting depicts. There is a notable precedent for this contrivance, in Surrealist film. In the Dali/Buñuel film *L’Age d’Or* 1930, the hero, being led through the streets under arrest, passes a billboard displaying beautiful women. The hero is mentally wandering into erotic reveries, in which the woman of his thoughts adopts the posture of the
The two portrayals - the billboard film star and the dreamed-of figure - exist in parallel.

The day after completing *Fuel Wharf* was Christmas day. Thake's interest in juxtapositions prompted him to recount the contents of the A.C.F Christmas hamper he received:

Last night we all got our Xmas hamper from A.C.F. and what a bag full we received - a Plum Pudding, Xmas Cake, tin of peaches, prepared chocolate (eat as is or make cocoa), talcum powder, cigarette tobacco, and papers, note paper and pencil, tooth paste, shaving soap, chewing gum, envelopes, face-washer and a khaki hanky also a calendar and Xmas Card. What a job old Father X had.

On January 6th 1945, his last evening in Port Moresby, Thake made several pencil drawings of a two-up school which had attracted patronage ranging from L.A.C.s to Squadron Leaders. He subsequently speculated on how welcome the subject would be to the Historical Section.

What the reaction of the Powers-that-be to anything like this is, I leave to you.

The drawings were not converted into paintings, and Thake retained the sketchbook in which they were executed. Thake arrived in Noemfoor Island in the late morning of February 9th 1945, six months after the Island had been recaptured. He would stay for forty two days. Later, he would recall the Island with affection. Elizabeth Summons, in her opening address at Thake's retrospective exhibition at the Robert Raynor Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria 1957 said:

He tells me that the three places in which he most enjoyed working were Mentone, Towong, and Noemfoor Island in West New Guinea in 1945. He would complete a sequence of at least ten paintings at Noemfoor, touching on a wide range of subjects. Virtually each painting was thematically independent from its predecessor, and ranged from the informational and documentary (*Jeep in Rain*) to those with emotional and poetic connotations (*Kate and Oscar*).
The richness of his surroundings was initially distracting. At the end of his second day he wrote:

I must say that I've not done much in the way of painting yet, but hope to get started shortly - there is just too much of everything to see.9

His interest in insects was fully catered for in his accommodation. He described his tent as

a real museum of Natural History: wild passion fruit with lizards and millipedes crawl across the floor, frogs hop over hermit crabs and mildew grows on my boots and bracelet, fungus on the tent poles. The ceiling is occupied by spiders, flies, mason wasps, moths, mosquitoes, beetles, grasshoppers, and crickets and two artists mingle with all those and ants crawl overall.10

His first painting on Noemfoor was undertaken on January 14th: Jeep in the Rain 1945. (Ill.29). Thake had drawn a full page R.A.A.F. Jeep while in Townsville a month before (differing only in that it sheltered under the fronds of a fig tree, had its roof up, and faced the other way). He may have been attracted to the subject on Noemfoor because of the absurd behaviour associated with riding a Jeep in Noemfoor's torrential rain:

When we are out in the Jeep and it rains as only it can up here, we pull our trousers up above the knee, pull our shirts off and then everything goes under our capes and tuck them tightly around our waists, and race on. The rain is warm.11

Jeep in the Rain is rare in Thake's output in its centring upon adverse weather conditions. Thake was interested in weather. His war service sketchbooks contain many drawings of clouds in different condition, and while in Darwin, in late 1945, he spent successive evenings sitting on the cliffs, watching the "absolutely magnificent displays" of lightning over the bay.12 The wet and heat of Noemfoor similarly captured his imagination. Perspiration was insidious.

I am often soaked with (perspiration), dripping from my brow onto my work and running down my sunglasses.13
The mud was pervasive. One evening he was obliged to go to a film screening because electricity was not available in his quarters.

When I sat down, I went to cross one leg over the other (only to find that) my foot was stuck in the drying mud.\(^{14}\)

Yet Thake's exteriors had formerly been unaffected by weather, even to the point of appearing, like Wadsworth's, airless.

This painting underscores the fact that much of war is static and attritional, and that a potentially decisive ingredient of warfare is the maintenance of equipment in adverse circumstances. Thake recognised that not all of his subject matter was inherently exceptionally interesting, and may have placed Jeep in the Rain in this category. He acknowledged:

one cannot come across something that has the making of a top-notch everyday.\(^ {15}\)

Loading for Biak 1945 (III.30) was painted the next day, January 15th. Thake depicted here the loading of equipment onto L.C.M.s. at Broe Bay, Noemfoor Island. From here it was taken over the surrounding reef to the Liberty ships. The painting was photographed two days later by Sergeant Jack Peier, and Thake inscribed the back of the photo Loading the L.S.T. That is, his initial interest was in the vehicle itself - interesting because of its unfamiliarity and oddity. The revised title, however, does deflect attention from the craft which had commanded Thake's attention.

The rearing tree which occupies the foreground resembles the sinister presence in Paul Nash's Monster Field 1939 which Thake presumably knew through reproduction (in The Studio of September 1939 in colour, and in Herbert Read's Paul Nash 1944). Here a monster-trunk dominates the valley floor beyond by being raised on a rocky shelf, which is above the plain. Thake's monster-trunk dominates the military convoy beyond by its rearing posture. Nash would later
write in Outline 1949 of an ancient beech with a commanding personality:

"Sometimes it was ... enchanted and could suggest a magical presence, not, however, by its personal configuration, but by some evocative spell which conjures up fantastic images in the mind."16

Like Nash, Thake perceived the trunk to be imbued with personality:

"The beach is like the littoral of some primeval shore, huge tree trunks, twisted logs, and the huge rooty butts of coconut palms. The butts look like huge "somethings"."17

The trunk on the centre left has been cut by man. This could represent a pictorial reference to Thake's broad misgivings about man's culling of nature (a subject he would raise later in the year, in Northern Australia), or the despoliation of nature during war.

Two other related interpretations are conceivable, turning on whether the leaves on the rearing trunk represent new shoots or parasitic growth. If the leaves represent shoots from the trunk itself, the paired trunks could represent death and regeneration. The resurgent shoots emerge, appropriately, from a form with dead limbs and a scarred body. John Armstrong contemporaneously addressed this theme of regeneration in Can Spring be Far Behind? (Ill.31).

On the other hand, if the leaves are a parasitic growth, their inclusion in so central a location could be interpreted as an ironic reference to the transportation of military vehicles through the lagoon. The vehicles, like a parasitic plant, are about to cling to their hosts, the L.C.M.s, to effect their passage to the waiting ship.

In this painting, as in Jeep in the Rain, the war machines are alien and inexplicable intruders into the tropical landscapes, and much of the mood of the painting turns on this contradiction. It is a dichotomy that Nash had played upon two years earlier, in an oil Oxford in Wartime 1943 (Ill.32), juxtaposing a tank with a landscape of English woodland and an ancient centre
of learning.

On Noemfoor, Thake worked from time to time in the company of fellow R.A.A.F. Artist Harold Freedman. In the afternoon of Thursday January 18th, the two of them were painting out of doors, together with Clem Searle, a camoufleur. They attracted a crowd who were ready with advice:

Harold and Clem were about 50 yards away. I had a huge audience, then after a while I'd see them watching the others paint, and so it went. The crowd just drifted from one artist to another most of the afternoon. "Why don't you put that in?" mentioning some piece of equipment.

Thake would have been bemused by the question. After all, his strength lay not in assimilation but in his capacity to eliminate, to pare down the sensory impressions of his locale, and focus on the key and cryptic essentials. On the same day he painted *Mobile Workshop 1945* (Ill.33).

His next painting, *Long Thoughts 1945* (Ill.34) was painted a week later. Although the title related to the figure, Thake described the subject in relation to the wall of pin-up photographs.

This pin up gallery was started at Nazdab, went to Hollandia, Noemfoor and later to Morotai.¹⁸

*Long Thoughts* had its current title by 1946, when it was exhibited in the R.A.A.F. War Paintings Exhibition. When exhibited in the Arts and Crafts exhibition two days after its completion, however, it was entitled *Nostalgia*.¹⁹ "Nostalgia", even more than "long thoughts", draws attention to the figure's caste of mind, to his emotional response to his dislocation from normality, and his alienation from family and lovers. *Long Thoughts* is Thake's most narrative war painting, and his most sentimental. *Long Thoughts* has two thematic companion pieces: *Spine Bash 1945* (Ill.35) painted in Morotai, and *Pin Up Gallery 1945* (Ill.36), both painted almost seven months later in Alice Springs. Thake's comments accompanying *Pin Up Gallery* referred to the photographs
surrounding the figure.

Some of these collections were very extensive and their owners very proud of them.

Here, as in *Long Thoughts*, the figure is full-length, and occupies a substantial role in the composition area. Only in these two paintings does Thake even arguably attempt to portray the psychological effects of the war on the temperament of man. In both, the figures are not types, but individuals. He even identified the subject of *Pin Up Gallery*:

L.A.C. Kelly who came from the Northern Rivers area of N.S.W. had never been on a train until he joined the R.A.A.F.²⁰

In *Long Thoughts* the book lies inverted on the floor, its spine uppermost; it appears to have been cast away in frustration. It is plausible that this signifies the incapacity of literature to serve as a sublimation for physical relationships. The three paintings portray a routine-governed outer life, and waiting. These aspects were major components of the Australian soldier in W.W.II: waiting for signals, waiting for the next advance or for transhipment. Donald Friend had depicted these interstices between the periods of combat: the yarning, scrounging and drinking. Even trench warfare had provided long periods of what C. Day Lewis called "humdrum activity". Thake clearly considered the depiction of these prosaic passages as an authentic aspect of military life. Sir John Rothenstein agreed. He believed that many of the best war paintings are of peaceful subjects, of lulls between battles.²¹

This interest in stillness and immobility continued in Thake's work after the war, in which figures generally stand (sometimes finding themselves likened to architecture) or sit relaxed and indolent.

Contemporaneous with *Long Thoughts*, Thake made drawings of accommodation quarters where again possessions (this time of a less erotic nature) were accumulated. These included *Tropic Home* 1945 (Ill.37), the Island home of two
Tactical Air Force Flying Officers, and Tent Interior, Airman’s Lines 1945 (Ill.38).

Thake’s own tent may have alerted him to the tendency of soldiers to surround themselves with “found objects” to stamp their personality on their “territory”. His tent’s former occupant had pasted crossword puzzles all over the table.22 Thake’s own accumulations were mainly of natural forms that had aroused his sense of wonder. He described his tent:

On the top of the highest box is a lime. They grow wild in the jungle but have practically no juice. Hanging on the right of the middle box is the start of my collection of coral flowers, and underneath with the books is a Jap helmet and a (collection of) thin clam shells. On the line next to the socks that want darning is the box I had to keep the butterflies in, away from the ants. The nuts whose names I don’t know were picked up on the beach.23

Following Long Thoughts, depicting a personal exhibition of an individual’s mementoes, Thake’s next painting was of a more public exhibition. This exhibition was of arts and crafts, organised by the R.A.A.F. Education Section, which Thake and Freedman helped to mount. It was displayed in the Tactical Air Force Airmen’s Recreation Room. The exhibition was an odd mixture of objects – paintings together with shell jewellery. Still, French Surrealists had from the first displayed a less-than-precious attitude about exhibition format, and were happy to jostle together work of different kinds, even of different cultures (assuming it all shared some common ground). Thake seems to have enjoyed the novelty of exhibiting war themes in the actual area of conflict. He saw a degree of accomplishment in some of the show’s amateur work: "There was a lot of good sketches there.”24

A Sergeant Jack Peier took at least eleven photographs of the exhibition, and these show that Thake exhibited eight or nine paintings – almost all the work he had completed at Port Moresby and Noemfoor. The exhibition gave him the
opportunity to reflect on the work his commission had produced, and he was highly satisfied. When sending Peier's photographs to his wife, he wrote:

   The pictures you can see are some of the best I've done. I had a good batch at Moresby and a good one here for about a fortnight.\textsuperscript{25}

Between eleven a.m. and midday on the second day of the exhibition, January 28th, Thake completed a watercolour sketch of the exhibition, and pinned it up with the other work in the exhibition.\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Arts and Crafts Show 1945} (Ill.39) is apparently that work.

Thake also contributed to the corporate life of the camp by joining with Harold Freedman to produce a painting to hang in the Mess. Titled \textit{View Across the Bay}, about 60 cms by 90 cms, it was a view through the palms to the sea, on which sea-planes floated. Thake did not seem to consider it a work of consequence, likening it to an enlarged post card. The painting took a couple of hours to complete, with Thake and Freedman working alternate half hour periods at it.

Corporate military life on Noemfoor produced one exasperating incident. Camp Commandant Woods called upon Thake and Freedman in their tent, expressing dissatisfaction that their clothes had not been fitted, and therefore did not uphold the standards of Air Force Officers. He said he would try to secure some suitable uniforms for them.

Within a couple of days he returned.

He said "I've got some bad news for you fellows. Several members of the mess object to your dirty clothes and if you don't improve you will have to leave". I told him that we were artists and could not keep as clean as the fellows that sit at tables all day and be came back with "while you are here you are Air Force Officers". We went to see Group Captain Pactin(?) who said he didn't care if we went in the nude with feathers in our hair, and came to light with two new pair(s) of trousers and three new shirts. These I kept strictly for tea time, changing again as soon as tea is over.\textsuperscript{27}
The Curtis P-40 Kittyhawk, used by both Australian and U.S. squadrons, proved not to be particularly successful in combat with Japanese fighters. They were sluggish at moderate altitudes, and they climbed slowly; consequently they tended to adopt dive and run tactics. Their repair in Noemfoor was a subject painted by both Harold Freedman and Thake, and at almost the same time. Freedman's oil, *Kittyhawk Inspection 1945* (Ill.40) was painted in January 1945, and Thake's *Kittyhawk Wigwam 1945* (Ill.41) was painted at the beginning of February. It is likely that Freedman's painting of a Kittyhawk being overhauled aroused Thake's interest in the subject.

In each painting the plane is being worked on by Repair and Salvage Units (No.11 Unit in Freedman's case, No.22 Unit in Thake's). In both paintings the planes are surmounted by fabric, although there was some confusion in Thake's mind as to its purpose; in one account he cited its role as a provider of shade in a tropical area where the sun would make the metal too hot to work on; his second explanation was that it was to keep the regular afternoon tropical storm from flooding the engines. In both paintings, remote, impersonal figures are shown at work, their inclusion serving to indicate the relative size of the plane.

Comparing the two works confirms Thake's finesse in omitting unnecessary pictorial clutter in the interests of strong design. Thake had originally envisaged the subject in colour terms: "dark canvas, grey day, brilliant colours on plane".28

Thake's use of fabric or wrapping draped over, and lending a sense of mystery to, the plane addresses a minor Surrealist theme. Covering forms to disguise or render indecipherable - and thus generate uncertainty - arguably dates from the shrouded form of Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse 1920*.29
Ducasse himself had dealt with the motif of the wrapped form. In *Les Chants de Maldoror*, he had Maldoror force a youth into a sack and beat him into silence. The form in the bag, by concealment and enforced silence, was no longer manifestly human. Its enigmatic nature paralleled the anthropomorphic character of Man Ray's hidden sewing machine. Thake hides the head of the plane. The very naming of the tent as a wigwam implies that its occupants are, if not human, at least animate.

In the untitled text in the December 1933 issue of *Minotaure*, Alberto Giacometti cited the way in which drapery or covering can become part of the object over which it lies, evoking apprehension in the viewer.

The long black dress that touched the ground disturbed one with its mystery; it seemed to be part of her body and this caused in me a feeling of fear and confusion.

René Margritte used the motif in a number of works including *L'histoire centrale* 1928 where it is suggestive of claustrophobia and suffocation.

*Kittyhawk's Wigwam* is lightly amusing on one level. The high pitched protective tarpaulin does resemble the shape and sheltering function of a North American tent. The including of three other tents in the rear-ground gives the wigwam the sense of being part of a teepee village. However, Thake's interest in word play suggests that he may have intended a complicated linguistic pun in addition to this surface visual pun. The Kittyhawk plane was probably named after the place, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, where the Wright brothers flew the first powered aircraft in 1903. Kitty Hawk was probably derived from an Indian (Algonkian) name recorded in 1729 as Chickahauk. By conjoining "Kittyhawk" with "wigwam", Thake wittily returns the noun to its American Indian context.
The emphasised, isolated subject matter of *Kittyhawk's Wigwam*, like Thake's Dumps and Anthill paintings, bears relationships with the Surrealist tradition of the "found object". The concept of the Surrealist object dates from 1923-1924, when André Breton proposed the notion of dream-objects – the making of objects that had been imagined in dreams. The term gained currency in 1926, when *La Révolution Surréaliste* gave notice of an exhibition of Surrealist objects (which, in the event, was never held). The most notable object-type taken up by Surrealism was the "found object" – an article come upon by chance, and appropriated by the discoverer. It is selected, in Breton's explanation, "because of the very doubt that may weigh on its earlier purpose, because of its totally or partially irrational condition". The object's irrationality would be enhanced by the blurring or ignorance of its identity, its purpose or its origins.

Breton was not drawn to particular objects on aesthetic, formal or functional grounds. He was attracted by their symbolic considerations, by their subjective or affective qualities. Like Thake, Breton would be attracted to objects by "their astonishing power of suggestion". He saw found objects as unexpected symbolic substitutes for some desired object; a wish fulfillment in material form. In his 1934 essay "Equation de l'objet trouvé" he presented the found object as a tangible analogue of a dream, possessing the same relationship to the person who unearthed or redeemed it as the dream has to its perpetrator. And, like the dream, the found object could be interpreted, exposing the subconscious motive for the discoverer choosing to select it over all other adjacent alternatives. Herbert Read wrote in *Surrealism* 1936 of the significance of this act of choosing:

> the act of identification (that is, of the finder with the object) makes the object as expressive of my personality as if I had actually carved the wood into that shape. Nothing is so expressive of the man as the fetishes he gathers around him."
There was also a reasonably broad interest in Surrealist circles, especially English circles, in collecting bizarre objects. Julian Trevalyan, writing in the English Surrealist organ *London Bulletin* March 1939 wrote of Surrealist painter John Tunnard's collecting habits:

> First Tunnard walks along the seashore 'till he spots an old ship's timber, a cast-off ironing board, a washed-up chart, an unfinished lavatory seat. To see him returning from one of these expeditions is to mistake him for a submarine junk shop.

Thake was an equally inveterate gatherer of queer and bizarre objects. His daughter recalled "be it animal, mineral, vegetable or a man-made object, he would collect it if it appealed". However, these were not converted into found object sculptures.

James Cant, moving in the English Surrealist circle, exhibited his found object *Scarecrow 1937* (Ill.42) – a complete scarecrow he had bought from an Essex farmer – in the Surreal Object Exhibition of that year, and it was reproduced in the *London Bulletin*.

Nash collected objects, exhibited them as found objects, photographed them, and used them as pictorial motifs. He exhibited objects side by side with his paintings at the Surrealism-oriented London Gallery in 1937. Herbert Read's *Surrealism*, with which Thake was familiar, reproduced Nash's *Found Object Interpreted (Animal Kingdom)* (Ill.43), and his *Encounter in the Afternoon* 1936, a painting of two found objects – flints collected in Sussex, but resembling a mated pair of creatures. This use of the found object as a motif for a painting – a device used both by Nash and Thake – has much in common with using a found object as a sculpture: both detach the object from its habitual setting, and endow it with a new and heightened significance, usually with an evocative title which draws the viewer's attention to particular resemblances or associations.
By and large, Nash's and Thake's painted found object motifs are not represented as part of an ensemble of subjects, but occupy a role of decisive centrality in the composition. I propose the term "pivotal object" for such motifs. They become a fulcrum, to which other subject elements (if there are any) relate or act in counterpoint, from which other subject elements quote or on which they elaborate.

The painted context allowed the found or pivotal object to function in a setting over which the artist had control. It allowed the artist to manipulate the lighting or weather condition in which the pivotal object realized itself. It allowed the artist to change the scale relationship of the object with its ambience. It allowed the artist to use pivotal objects that would not have been feasible as found objects, such as Nash's menhirs or Thake's planes and anthills.

Thake's pivotal objects are centred, dominating and often isolated. These characteristics may have derived from his interest in linocuts, a medium which lends itself to emphatic design. Thake owned the Special Spring Number of The Studio 1930, acquired because of its essay "The New Woodcut" by Malcolm C. Salaman. Still life woodcuts by Leon Underwood and Dorothy Hirst illustrating this article had strong centralised motifs. This commanding isolation of pivotal objects by Nash and especially Thake is in contrast to Wadsworth's schema of clustering a group of objects which were germane to their maritime surroundings. It is at stark variance with the dense array of images in the surrealist paintings of James Gleeson and Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock). In their work, to quote Keats, "images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading".

Thake's pivotal images are displaced - either linguistically (changing the name
of an object as Thake did with *Kittyhawk's Wigwam* or *Grecian Darwin*) or physically (moving a found object to a new location or a new network of juxtapositions). Thake's planes and ant hill paintings are not given a new set of surroundings, but they are at least divorced from their original setting, set in isolation without clues to suggest location or scale.

In 1936, an Exhibition of Surrealist Objects was held at the Galerie Charles Ratton (Paris). The catalogue listed the objects under eleven specific categories. A number of these categories parallel Thake's approach to his subjects.

**Peturbed Objects.** There are objects misshapen by some natural catastrophe, such as a spoon found after the 1902 eruption of the Mount Pelé volcano in Martinique. Thake's car and plane dumps of war wreckage twisted into grotesque, amusing, fearsome or tragic forms exemplify this category.

**Found Objects.** Although most of the categories were subsets of "found objects", this category was described as embracing strange man-made or natural objects, accidentally found. An example was a star-shaped pastry-cutter with a Raymond Roussel label, found by Dora Marr. Thake's Beaufighter engine in *Salvaged Engines* (Ill.44), detached from its housing, could fall into this category.

**Interpreted Found Objects.** These are man-made or natural objects given fresh meaning or ramifications by being placed in a novel context or given a new title, such as an armadillo's head titled *Portrait of Ubu*. Thake's painting of bombed R.A.A.F. buildings entitled *Grecian Darwin* (Ill.126) is a comparable example of what Breton called a "mutation of role".37
**Interpreted Natural Objects.** These are natural objects that looked like something else. They could be roots or seashells, although the Paris Surrealists were particularly fond of stones. Breton organised excursions looking for stones, sometimes along the edges of the Seine. Breton saw in such objects of the mineral kingdom a "domain of signs and indications". Thake's (mineral kingdom) ant hills, which resembled figures, broadly fit into this category.

Breton took the odd view that such found forms only possessed a divinatory nature when they had been discovered as the result of a special expedition. He justified this, rather thinly, by the proposition that an unusual form, say a stone, that had been found by chance is of less value than one which had been sought for and longed for for some time. Thake's war artist service was like such an expedition, seeking objects that were interpretable and divinatory.

On February 11th 1945, Thake painted *Loading Bombs for Morotai* (Ill.45). It was his first painting of his tour using strong artificial light to illuminate objects and define their form, and was the precursor of the nocturne paintings examined in the next Chapter. The painting portrays matériel being loaded onto L.C.M.s at Broe Bay, Noemfoor, to he taken over the reef to the Liberty Boats. There was no fighting at their indicated destination, Morotai, at this time, so this load was probably intended for further transshipment. *Loading Bombs for Morotai* invites comparison with a watercolour by R.V. Pitchforth A.R.A.: *Paravanes Under Construction* (Ill.46). Thake would probably have seen it reproduced in *War Pictures by British Artists: Production 1943*. Both compositions are dominated by diagonally placed forms, which are larger than man. Figures play a visible if subordinate role in each painting, and both compositions include a form being winched up. These marked similarities
strengthen the supposition that Thake had seen the reproduction of Pitchforth's work. Yet a comparison of the two confirms Thake’s as the more resolved composition. Pitchforth fails to integrate background and foreground; the former is cursorily executed, the rear figures play no useful formal or thematic role. Thake divides his composition into three registers. Matériel dominates the upper and lower registers, and figures occupy the central register. Their torsos are illuminated, but the light does not rise above shoulder-height of the tallest three, ensuring they do not intrude into the upper register.

Both artists managed to convey the sense of bulk of the cylindrical forms, but Thake’s use of dramatic tone makes them seem formidable. Pitchforth’s paravanes could as well be storm water pipes.

Pitchforth may have captured the clutter of the factory, but his patchwork aggregation of objects lacks focus. Thake may or may not have rearranged his subject elements, but he certainly assumed a low viewpoint, very close to the foreground paravanes. This adoption of a dramatic viewpoint probably derived from his interest in commercial art, especially European posters.

From about 1930 I saw reproductions of English and European single-sheet posters - McKnight Kauffer in England and Cassandre in Paris I particularly admired. Both E. McKnight Kauffer (Ill.47) and particularly Cassandre used vantage points calculated for maximum effect.

Cassandre's poster designs had much in common with Thake's paintings. Works like S.S. Cote d' Azur 1931 (Ill.48) share Thake's instinct for symmetry and centrality, his concentration on a small number of forms, and his dismissal of aberrant detail. Like much of Thake's war work, Cassandre's posters portrayed a fascination with the images of modern technology. Cassandre's motifs of
mechanisation included military tracks, switching systems, turbines, funnels, and (train) driving rods.

_Normandie-Transatlantique_ c.1935 (Ill.49) employs Cassandre's preferred ploy of adopting a close-to, very low sight point. His mechanical subjects consequently became dramatically angled, exaggeratedly foreshortened and distorted in scale. In _Kamiri Searchlight_ (Ill.66) and _Wrecked Lodestar_ (Ill.15) Thake adopted a similar viewpoint, allowing the pivotal object to dominate the composition. Cassandre less frequently adopted a high viewpoint, allowing, say trainlines to form patterns. Thake adopted a similarly high and theatrical viewpoint in _Koepang Bay_ (Ill.160).

On February 26th, six days after his arrival on the Island, Thake executed his first painting of Morotai: _Salvaged Engines_ 1945 (Ill.44). Thake's accompanying description was brief: "Beaufighter engines and airscrew blades". The Beaufighter had been used as a two seater home-defence night fighter in the English theatre, and was also used for long range fighter-escort and ground-attack roles, as well as anti-shipping strike duties. It also functioned as a bomber, a torpedo carrier and a rocket fighter. The location of Thake's subject was the 31st Squadron Salvage Store. Beaufighters were the main aircraft of 31 Squadron.

The Australian Beaufighter, the Mk. 21, was powered by two Hercules XVIII engines, and Thake's subject is presumably one of these. The removal of the engine for substantial maintenance was standard procedure, although the stand on which the engine would normally be placed does not seem to figure in Thake's painting. The "tent" would have been raised to allow engineering tasks to be effected out of doors, but protected from rain. There were no hangars for maintenance in Morotai at this time.
Again, Freedman and Thake were working in parallel. Freedman in the same month also painted an engine that was liable for (or beyond) salvage. Both touch lightly on the theme of animation and personification. Freedman's oil was titled *Fallen Comrade* (Ill.50), and his comments which accompanied its reproduction in the catalogue of the R.A.A.F. War Paintings Exhibition 1945 referred to the emotional bonding between mechanics and their planes:

The men who fly and service aircraft form a strong attachment to their planes and feel their loss as they would a friend.

Thake's implication of personification is more subtle, and derives from the engine's location, in a tent, rather than in a workshop.

Although the painting bears no formal resemblance to Edward Wadsworth's imagery, it mirrors his thematic interest in machinery. An early major essay on Wadsworth in the *Architectural Review* of September 1932, which probably would have been brought to Thake's attention given his well-known admiration for Wadsworth, drew particular focus on the machine as a potent contemporary subject.

In these days of scientific and technical progress, a force barely known a hundred years ago has emerged in the shape of THE MACHINE, and asserted itself as an all-powerful factor affecting the whole of the spiritual outlook and conditions of the civilized world ...

The author, Michael Servier, referred to the "new speedbound beauty thrust upon the world with the advent of the machine".

While Thake would continue to be drawn to mechanical subjects, he would not paint another engine. Thake probably depicted it out of desperation; he had endured a sequence of rainy days on Morotai, and seems to have been forced to find a subject under canvas.

Morotai became one of the largest air bases in the South West Pacific area. It
represented a valuable staging point towards the liberation of the Phillipines. Perhaps its most visually remarkable aspect was its airstrip of crushed coral, described by Ian McKenzie as "blindingly white, the brilliance of sun off snow". Thake wrote of Morotai 1945 (Ill.51) that it represented "the land of continual mud and rain".

Lloyd George had called the Battle of Passchendaele "the battle of the mud". Thake witnessed no action on Morotai, but the general implication of the painting - that rain and mud are foes as debilitating as enemy action - is a legitimate one, if not particularly original.

Morotai invites comparison with André Breton's Poem 16 of Poisson Soluble. Both dwell on rain as a theme, and both depict rain as an agent of transformation. Breton's poem uses rain as a metaphor for an array of objects and states of mind. Rain identifies the place where vitality and desire supersede death.

The underground cave at the entrance of which there is a gravestone engraved with my name is the cave where it rains the best. Rain is the shadow beneath the immense straw hat of the young girl of my dreams, the ribbon of which is a rill of rain.

Breton uses metaphors and similes to identify rain with sexual intercourse ("the rain ... like a crystal column ascending and descending between the sudden abhorences of my desires"), with procreation ("the rain, the white rain that women dress themselves in for their wedding ... swells these rivers"), and with masturbation ("these raindrops that I catch in the hollow of my hand"). Breton further used rain as a metaphor for clothes, anatomical parts and jewels.

Thake, whose work was being interrupted by the downpours, took a less sanguine view of rain. He seems to have acknowledged the rain's power to transform, with his reference to mud (soil transformed by water). Rain also
transformed the walking figures, shrouded in waterproofs, into ambulatory equivalents of the tents in the background. The awning over the jeep begins to transform it into the pitched form of the tents, also. Compared to Breton's building of images around the rain motif, Thake's depiction of rain is conventional. He records the effect of persistent rain on vehicular progress and on personnel, but his references to its role as a catalyst for transformation, beside Breton's, are comparatively commonplace.

In early March, Morotai appears to have enjoyed periods free from the relentless rain of February. On March 4th, Thake wrote

the sky, packed full of towering cumulus and bathed in a yellow glow, was being continually crossed and quartered by rafts of aeroplanes.

The previous day he had painted Unloading 06-12 at Morotai (III.52). The precedent of Nash, de Chirico, Wadsworth and Hillier all being drawn to images of travel, to a sense of journeying, and especially to the point of arrival and departure for these voyages - including docks - has been noted. Thake seems to have been attracted to the subject for two reasons. Firstly, it allowed him the scope for knitting together forms that were massive (the boat) and fine (the cable hanging from the hook), forms that were rigid (the masts) and fluid (the figures) into a coherent ensemble through his use of line. In his oils, and some gouaches, Thake's stress was on shape and profile, but in many of his watercolours, as in this one, he defined form by a loose and swiftly rendered line. James Gleeson's comment "(Thake) is a linear artist - that finds an echo in mechanical forms"42 is aposite of Unloading 06-12 at Morotai.

The second probable reason that Thake was drawn to this subject was the juxtapositions it presented. The use of gratuitous juxtapositions to produce disquieting entities had been a standard practice of Surrealists from de Chirico. In the poetry of proto-Surrealists Alfred Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire and Isidore Ducasse - le Comte de Lautréamont, banal objects were pressed into
associations with only the thinnest thematic or logical connection. Evicted from their traditional role and connections, these objects become poetically changed. In Thake’s pre-war Surreal paintings, these contradictory alliances and confederations of unalike forms represented the central content. They established a network of textural cross-reference (what Francis Bulhoff called "ein Netz der texturale Verweisungen"). The real structure and the real unity is to be seen as a patterning of motifs relative to one another.

Thake saw such juxtapositions in the cargo being unloaded:

a mixed cargo of crated corrugated iron, boot heels, cannon shell, and some equally incongruous cargo.

Nature also provided absurd juxtapositions. To the right was the soil sheathed coral island, while to the left was "an active volcano (which) smoked continuously".

Two days later, Thake boarded an R.A.A.F. Lodestar. After overnight stops at Morotai and Townsville he landed at Essendon at 2.35 p.m. on March 10th. Within an hour he was home. His first tour of duty was just over four months in length, and had yielded almost a painting per week. He would have a four-months break before embarking on his second tour.

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4. Eric Thake, notes accompanying paintings, Australian War Memorial.
5. André Breton, Nadja, Gallimard, Paris, 1928.
7. Eric Thake, letter to Mrs Thake, Jan. 8 1945.
8. Eric Thake papers, La Trobe Library.
11. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Jan. 9, 1945.
12. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Nov. 4 1945.
14. Ibid.
15. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Jan./Feb. 1945.
17. Thake papers, La Trobe Library.
18. Catalogue of Paintings F/O Eric Thake. A.W.M.
20. Eric Thake, comments accompanying painting, A.W.M.
22. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Mar. 3 1945.
23. Ibid.
24. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Jan. 3 1945.
27. Eric Thake, Odds and Ends (jotter), 1945, La Trobe Library.
29. This was a wrapped sewing machine alluding to Ducasse's simile "beautiful as the chance meeting of the umbrella and the sewing machine on a dissecting table".
32. Documents 34, June 1934.
33. Herbert Read, Surrealism, Faber and Faber, London, 1936, p.54.
34. Jennifer Mann, letter to Peter Pinson, October 1986.


39. Ibid.


42. James Gleeson, conversation with Peter Pinson, April 1986.


44. Eric Thake, letter to Gavin Fry, June 6 1981, A.W.M.

45. Ibid.
When Eric Thake was studying under George Bell, Bell contended that light was inconsistent and manipulative. Light's product — shadow — should be ignored. Thake recalled:

(Bell) told me to look at the bold underlying shape without the accidental effects of light and shade.¹

Light and shade were shifting qualities, he argued, and should be disregarded because they compromised the clarity of the subject's form.² Bell's exhortation that one should "paint like a poster"³ also implied a simplification or elimination of elusive light effects.

Reflecting Bell's attitude, Thake's paintings until 1944 eschewed the portrayal of light effects. His thematic interest in the dramatic or poetic effects of artificial light at night was aroused during his war service, initiating seven paintings. This interest seems to have been initially triggered in the pre-dawn hours of December 20th, 1944, on a Townsville aerodrome, where he awaited the American C47 which would fly him to Port Moresby.

Thake was struck by the sight of moths swarming around a ground-based day lamp, and was so impressed he drew the episode in his sketchbook.⁴ The drawing set this artificial light effect of an incipient rising sun which caught and defined horizontal electric wires, and which turned planes and buildings into silhouettes. He noted the differing colour patterns of the two light sources: the lamp throwing red reflections and the sun projecting a greenish blue haze near the horizon rising to a black sky.

In a separate sketchbook⁵, Thake drew a diagram of another array of nocturnal light patterns. The black sky was disrupted by iridescent clouds, and
two contrasting forms of artificial light: a pale light emanating from personnel tents and vivid flares from an arc welder. The drawing is undated, but adjacent dated drawings indicate that it was probably done during the night of January 5th or 6th 1945, his final two evenings in Port Moresby. This experience plainly left him responsive to the compositional possibilities of artificial lighting.

On January 7th, Thake flew to Milne Bay, where he would stay for one day before commencing a sequence of flight legs to Noemfoor. That night he was driven to a film show in an open air "theatre". The event was a fiasco. Rain squalls shook the screen, distorting the actors into "spidery figures". Although the film was, as Thake put it, a "Who Dood it?", he was left totally mystified as to who or what was the culprit. He mused "what you'll put up with to get something for nothing." He would paint such a film screening six weeks later, on Noemfoor Island.

The most provocative aspect of the evening was the journey to and from the theatre. That evening he drew in a sketchbook, again in diagrammatic form, the extraordinary image of the light of his vehicle illuminating the ground, and the nearby tall palms which lined the narrow road. The vehemence of the headlight contrasted with the impenetrable darkness beyond its range.

The brilliant headlight shining against the trucks (ahead) and fronds of the palms and which appeared to be a solid wall of black about 100 yards ahead - two ferry green-tipped walls and a floor of light on the road and the star studded sky above.

He accompanied his account with a drawing (Ill.53a).

Coincidentally American Surrealist Man Ray had had a similar experience in 1929, when he was spending the summer in the south of France, near Biarritz. One night, while he was walking home, a car's headlights caught him from the rear, and threw his shadow far ahead, magnifying it. Ray was struck by the
bizarre proportions, and the contrast between the illuminated road and the deeply toned sky. Ray's resultant painting, *Une nuit à Saint-Jean-de-Luz* 1929 (Ill.53b) exaggerates and schematises the shadow, casting it along a narrowing road to the horizon.

Thake flew out of Milne Bay at 6.00 a.m. the next morning, arriving at Noemfoor a little more than a day later. He completed ten paintings while at Noemfoor, the final one, *Oasis Theatre* (Ill.54) being painted on February 18th. He described the subject cursorily:

there was a picture show at one of the half dozen theatres six nights a week.9

The film's projection cone is crossed by smoke, perhaps cigarette smoke. This represents, in different context, an image he had witnessed exactly a month before, also on Noemfoor. He had wandered out to the airstrip and had been startled to see "a light cloud of smoke (drift) across the (searchlight's) beam".10

Thake cited the theatre's name in the painting's title, suggesting he saw significance in that name. He may have considered an entertainment event in wartime as an "oasis" in the sense of a refuge, a respite. Alternatively he may have perceived "oasis" - with its desert connotations - as being ironic or wildly inappropriate to an island which sustained such heavy rainfall.

The projection's beam is related to the lighthouse beam motif which was recurrent in the work of the English maritime Surrealists. The lighthouse was employed by Wadsworth and Tristram Hillier to mark the mouth of a harbour and the portal to the sea beyond. The lighthouse beam provides secure passage, although lighthouses are located at sites of menace: shoals, rocks. The most relevant precedent to Thake's nocturnal light paintings was Wadsworth's *Happy Ending* 1927 (Ill.55) which Thake would have seen in *The Studio* July 1932. In
this work, the lighthouse in left middle ground projects a horizontal isosceles triangle of strong light across a twilight sky, directing attention to the foreground still life arrangement. Thake had employed a lighthouse beam in Signs and Signals; Bass Straight 1935 (Ill.56) but this light shaft was muted, and it did not dominate the composition as light beams would in Oasis Theatre and in his Alice Springs nocturnes.

Two days after painting Oasis Theatre, Thake flew from Noemfoor to Morotai where he stayed sixteen days. On March 8th, his return flight to Essendon stopped overnight at Noemfoor. The next morning, half an hour before his R.A.A.F. Lodestar's 6.00 a.m. departure, Thake recorded his "last sight of this lovely island" in his sketchbook.11 Again he was preoccupied with the brilliant searchlight and the coloured aerodrome lights, playing these against the nuances of the local colour of objects and figures which could barely be seen in the pre-dawn darkness.

The searchlight's beam was vertical, and Thake noted in his sketchbook the colour transitions within its shaft. At the base of the light cone, steam rose from the searchlight's glass surface, giving way to a pale purple beam. A cross sectional diagram analysed the beam's colouration midway up its shaft, where it graded from green to yellow to coppery red. A plane on the tarmac shone red and yellow lights from its wing tips. Red lights defined the tarmac edge, and aircraft overhead engaged yellow landing lights.

Thake wondered in an annotation whether the searchlight beam emanated from the searchlight he had used as the subject Kamiri Searchlight (Ill.66a).

The Surrealist movement had shown some thematic interest in night or in darkness traversed by light beams. Victor Hugo (a Romantic whose interest in
penetrating the barriers of the material world makes him a precursor of Surrealism), wrote of "the unknown face of night".\(^\text{12}\) Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont had used darkness as an emblem of visual elegance in the simile "beautiful as black air".\(^\text{13}\)

Giacometti, too, had associated night with the sensation of exaltation. In an untitled text published in the December 1933 issue of the Surrealist-aligned journal *Minotaure*, he described a six months period of his life spent with a woman who "transported my every movement with a state of enchantment". Giacometti characterised this period in terms of artificial light illuminating the night.

We constructed a phantastical palace in the night (days and nights had the same colour, as if everything had happened just before daybreak; I did not see the sunlight all this time), a very fragile palace (built from the light) of matches.\(^\text{14}\)

In the 1938 "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme" at the Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, strong light shafts in darkened interiors were conceived to play an important role, functioning like significant props in a Surrealist performance. The exhibition space was left in darkness and visitors were given a torch with which the exhibits would be found and illuminated.\(^\text{3}\)

On July 30th 1945, eight days after leaving Melbourne on his second tour of duty, Thake arrived in Alice Springs. It would be a prolific location for him; he completed eleven paintings in twenty days. Thake established a working regimen of painting in the morning and undertaking inspection tours after lunch. The Commanding Officer provided transport and accompanied Thake on some of these trips. On August 13th, Thake wrote modestly that he had done

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\(^\text{3}\) Unfortunately many visitors did not surrender their torches on leaving, and eventually the exhibition had to be conventionally lit.
"a few passable pictures" and he "didn't want to leave". Alice Springs was so richly furnished with subject matter that he had to give up the idea of painting some flowers around the aerodrome which had fascinated him because "there is just not enough hours in the day for me".\textsuperscript{15}

Thake's correspondence from Alice Springs makes reference to various night lighting spectacles.

The skies here (are) very brilliant all night; deep blue black sky, brilliant stars ... on the horizon. (The lights are the more vivid because there were) no city lights to dim them.\textsuperscript{16}

Some of his exploratory jeep trips continued into the night and provided visual experiences that related to his Milne Bay evening ride to the theatre.

When we put the head lights on and before it was dark there were some wonderful colour effects, yellow oranges, on the mulgas and drooping lance-woods against the blue-green sky.\textsuperscript{17}

Five of Alice Spring's eleven paintings revolved around such lighting effects.

\textit{Water Tower, Alice Springs} 1945 (III.57) uses corridors of light to establish a dynamic pattern in the lower half of the picture. Minor paths of light project from sheds, recalling his sketchbook notation of light effects at a Port Moresby base: "wan lights from tents".\textsuperscript{18}

The light beam illuminates a figure in motion. This parallels an incident Thake witnessed at about the time he painted this work. Thake was being driven about, near Alice Springs, in the early hours after nightfall:

racing across the (vehicle's) headlight beams were rabbits by the score, the hundred or the thousand.\textsuperscript{19}

Thake's instinct for simplicity reduced the hundreds of rabbits to two figures in this painting, but like the rabbits the figure is caught, held and targeted in the path of light. The structure of monumental light shafts is contrasted with
the fragile structure of the water tower.

A closely related painting is *Revolving Beacon, Alice Springs* 1945 (III.58). Thake had been aware of the searchlight as an imposing image since the evening of January 18th, when he was on Noemfoor Island. He interrupted his writing for a spot of exercise, and, on stepping outside, "was amazed at the sight before me".\(^{20}\) The adjacent searchlight was casting a blue beam horizontally across the landscape and out to sea.

The colour of the light effects was wonderful. The breakers on the reef were the green flames on a black sea. The pale tree trunks were white, violet and rose red, and the leaves vivid green.\(^{21}\)

This visual experience was reinforced in early August, when he went to see a couple of planes land at Alice Springs. Night landings, he wrote, were "something worth seeing".\(^{22}\) He was so impressed by the "black sky, brilliant lights and especially the revolving beacon" that he resolved to return to the aerodrome to see the spectacle again. Almost certainly, this was the homing beacon of *Revolving Beacon, Alice Springs*.

Paul Nash had portrayed light beams on battlefields as early as W.W.I., and it is reasonable to assume that Thake was familiar with two of the most important examples: *We are Making a New World* 1918 (III.59) (reproduced in Bertram's *Paul Nash* 1923) and *The Menin Road* 1918–1919 (III.60) reproduced in Read's *Paul Nash* 1944). *We are Making a New World* portrayed rays of a pale sun – the organ of regeneration – cutting through the blood red sky. The light beams in *The Menin Road* offer less grounds for optimism. They feel their way over the battlefield surface, like inquisitors, searching out targets for artillery. These searchlight paintings, however, do not share Thake's realization of the dazzling, engulfing light of military equipment, and the effects that light produces as it plays on the immediate environment.
Roger-Fox-Dog 1945 (Ill.61) depicts figures engaged in a specific military activity - refuelling a transportation plane on its way to Darwin. The light in this work is more diffuse; it fails to delineate all edges and lends the plane an impression of imposing scale.

Three works, Meteorological Balloon Alice Springs 1945 (ill.62), Airstrip at Night 1945 (Ill.63) and Night Time, Alice Springs (Ill.64) may be set out of doors, but the light patterns derive from interiors and cast rectangular shadows through doors and windows. The representation of indefinite acts being played out in a dark atmosphere lit or viewed through architectural portals recalls de Chirico’s reference to Giotto:

in Giotto, too, the architectonic sense creates great metaphysical spaces. All the openings (doors, arcades, windows) that accompany his figures portend a cosmic mystery.24

Meteorological Balloon, Alice Springs illustrates a balloon which does not burst until it has ascended to about 50,000 feet. A small radio set is parachuted down, and Thake noted "it is sometimes recovered". Thake juggles the ovoid of this balloon, about to be released, with the rectangular pattern of the architecture. Night Time, Alice Springs and Airstrip at Night use light and umbra and, in the case of the latter painting, reflections, to make it difficult to determine what is material and what is shadow.

Night Time, Alice Springs was prefigured by an incident in the Dali/Buñuel film Un Chien andalou 1928 and by a watercolour which Nash completed in 1930, but which would have been unknown to Thake. The film opened with a prologue which acutely described the scene of Thake's painting:

Once upon a time ...
a balcony at night ... A man
looks at the sky through
window panes and sees ... a
light cloud advancing towards
a full moon.25
Nash's Night Window 1930 (Ill.65) uses the doorways as a pivot for an harmonious suite of shapes that alternate between being shadow and substance. Thake, too, treats the deep shadows as being as tangible as the figures and chairs that cast them.

Each painting has a balcony as an ornamental freeze which catches light and stands forward of the blackness behind, or alternatively stands starkly in a deep tone against a fall of light behind. Both Thake and Nash, then, are using substance and shadow as comparative indices of reality.

The phenomenon of soldiers going about their silent duties at night, transformed by light into shadowy, two dimensional apparitions had been touched on by W.W.I war poet Rupert Brooke. In his very last poem Fragment 1915, written on the ship transporting him to the Aegean, he wrote of military life being played out under artificial night lights:

I could but see them - against
the lamp light - pass
Like coloured shadows, thinner
than filmy glass.26

Probably no war artist portrayed the effects of military lights at night as incisively as Thake. In wartime, the darkness of night assumed a fresh and troubling significance, in its cloaking of enemy attacks. English soldier poet Isaac Rosenberg had written of soldiers being apprehensive of night

Returning, we hear the larks
Sombre the night is
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lurks there.

Before his war service, Thake had never employed pictorial darkness either as a subject or as a means of signifying the sombre or the sinister. Nor would he

b Nash's painting would not be reproduced until 1980.
do so again.


2. Interviews with Yvonne Atkinson, Lady Drysdale, Margaret Francis and others, quoted in ibid., p.21.

3. Sybil Craig, quoted in ibid., p.18.

4. Sketchbook IV, N.G.V.

5. Sketchbook III, N.G.V.


7. Sketchbook V, N.G.V.


9. Catalogue of Paintings. F/O Thake, A.W.M.


11. Sketchbook I, N.G.V.


15. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 9 or 10, 1945.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Sketchbook III, N.G.V.


20. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 4 or 5, 1945.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.


KAMIRI SEARCHLIGHT, SELF PORTRAIT IN A BROKEN SHAVING MIRROR
AND THE PLACE OF THE CATOPTRIC MOTIF IN SURREALISM

In 1945, Eric Thake undertook three paintings (or rather two paintings and one copy) which are, in part, self-portraits. In each work, the self-image is depicted as a reflection, as if it were an incidental inclusion, or glimpsed by chance.

The ostensible subject of Kamiri Searchlight is a searchlight Thake came upon beside the Kamiri airstrip at Noemfoor Island. Thake believed it belonged to the U.S. 16th Anti Aircraft battery, who were camped on the opposite side of the other end of the strip. Thake was on Noemfoor Island on two occasions during his first tour of duty: for forty two days from January 9th to February 20th 1945, and overnight on March 8th 1945, breaking his return flight from Morotai to Essendon.¹

Thake painted two versions of Kamiri Searchlight one of which is in the Australian War Memorial, the other in the Australian National Gallery. Mary Eagle and Jan Minchin have claimed that the A.N.G. version (ill.66[a]) was "painted on the spot".² This was presumably during his initial stay on the island, as there were at most three hours of sunlight available during his second stay. Stylistic and documentary evidence, although not conclusive, seems to support this version being the original.

The issue of which Kamiri Searchlight version is the original is clouded by Thake's note that the A.W.M. version (ill.66[b]) was developed in June 1945 "from a sketch drawn on Kamiri Strip, Noemfoor Island, Western P.N.G."³ The A.N.G. version is compositionally resolved, a significant painting, and plainly
more than a sketch. However, it is possible that Thake used this diminutive term to describe the A.N.G. version to avoid disputation about ownership of the earlier painting. Thake's terms of service as Artist of the Historical Records Section, R.A.A.F. Head-Quarters did not specify matters of production quotas, ownership and copyright, and no doubt he felt justified in keeping the original version after submitting the copy which he completed three months after his return to Melbourne.

The compositions of the two versions are identical. The only distinctions lie in the subtle differences of brush marking and paint quality. Paint character in Illustration 66a is more fluid, more translucent. In rendering the jungle and the wheels, the A.N.G. version's strokes are more improvisational. In this version, the spots on the sand on the left of the searchlight are more randomly placed, less aligned, apparently more spontaneously executed. The diagonal edge running from behind the searchlight's right wheel is visible beneath the rectangular box which should obscure it; although the work is not a sketch, there is a degree of bravura and of sketchiness about these passages which are omitted from the A.W.M. version. The more decisive, more fastidious and methodical treatment of these elements in the A.W.M. version tends to confirm its being the copy.

In a correspondence with the writer in 1978, Eric Thake listed nine paintings which he considered the highlights of the 1939–1946 period. Of these, five were done during his service as Official War Artist. Both Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror and Kamiri Searchlight figured in that group of five. Moreover, the fact that Thake undertook a copy of Kamiri Searchlight reinforces the assumption that he regarded it as a work of considerable importance in his oeuvre.
Thake submitted a brief description of Kamiri Searchlight's locale and circumstances to the R.A.A.F. History Records Section:

On the airstrip set between the jungle and the sea. The remains of a Jap foxhole can be seen on the beach.4

On one level, Kamiri Searchlight falls within the English Surrealist maritime painting tradition, with its placement of unmanned, even abandoned, mechanical forms of considerable presence adjacent to expanses of harbour or blue water, with all the land/sea, natural/man-made contradictions that that implies. Thake was probably familiar with the sea-edge paintings of Paul Nash, reproduced in Herbert Read's Paul Nash, published the previous year. In these works, the sea either slices into defenseless sand (Winter Sea 1925-1937); towers above the shore in jagged-edged metal waves (Totes Mere, Dead Sea 1940-1941); or has its advance upon the shore stemmed by east-west erosion barriers (Dymchurch Steps 1923). Edward Wadsworth's harbours are never turbulent, but their potential for aggression is held in check by stone walls and comprehensive breakwater systems. The sea in Kamiri Searchlight carries no similar threat. It simply adds to the paradisean torpor of the tropical occasion, which makes the searchlight the more incongruous - like a transplanted exotic whose presence portends conflict.

Thake acknowledged Kamiri Searchlight to be the culmination of the influences upon him of Edward Wadsworth's Wings of the Morning 1928-1929:

I suppose the influence of Wings of the Morning reached its highest in my painting Kamiri Searchlight. I immediately knew when I saw the searchlight that it was a brother to Wadsworth's painting.5

Kamiri Searchlight's inheritance from Wings of the Morning is in terms of broad thematic and compositional strategies. Both place "found objects" centrally, close to the picture plane. Both incorporate high precision tooled found objects that have such specialist functions that they are unfamiliar to most people. Removed from their normal, mundane setting and "recontexted",
these mechanical objects take on a sense of the remarkable, even the marvellous. Both employ perspective and foreshortening to lend these foreground forms greater monumentality. Both incorporate objects whose function is illumination and identification (the searchlight; the lighthouse), yet they also include an aspect of mortal threat (the shell wrenched from its habitat and the hooks to impale fish; the searchlight's role in targeting enemy planes).

Both paintings establish a rapport between foreground forms and the background. Wadsworth's napkins resemble the shell which, like the other elements of fishing tackle and propeller shaft, functions in the sea beyond. Thake's rapport is more complex. He permits the foreground form to appropriate - through the reflection - the surrounding landscape. Indeed this appropriated area included the most important aspects of the landscape: the Japanese foxhole, the artist, the refracted mechanical forms and the plane.

For all this common ground, Kamiri Searchlight did not plagiarise Wings in the Morning. Thake maintained a distinctive stylistic touch, motif, and most significantly his own thematic attitude to mechanical forms. Although Wadsworth's sea-side landscapes are occupied by mechanical forms and devoid of people, there is no overwhelming sense of the mechanical domain dominating man. This theme, which ran through much of Thake's war work, underlies Kamiri Searchlight. Thake places himself within the searchlight, as if dominated by it. Thake's figure is elongated, supple, languid, likening him with and allying him to the natural forms of the landscape, in acute contrast to the severe geometry of the searchlight.

Thake had witnessed a peculiar phenomenon in New Guinea in December 1944, the month before he reached Noemfoor. Thake was quartering in a bedroom he
shared with blue/pink lizards four inches long. These creatures initially attracted his attention because they could run as readily on the ceiling as on the floor. The most remarkable thing about them was the transparency of their bodies, which virtually allowed Thake to watch the passage of moths and flies down the lizard’s throats as they were consumed. He drew one of these lizards in the act of swallowing a moth in one of his sketchbooks. One may speculate whether this subject of the penetration of one form into another, the subsuming of one form by another, provoked his interest in the inclusion of the self portrait within the searchlight’s face.

Like the first version of *Kamiri Searchlight*, Thake’s *Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror* 1945 was retained by him, and not presented to the R.A.A.F. Historical Records Section. He may have retained it because it did not materially relate to the circumstances of warfare or even the landscape through which Australian troops passed. For this reason, no statement of subject description and location was prepared by Thake for the Historical Records Section. The painting’s background flora suggests a tropical location. Eagle and Minchin quote Thake as indicating that he had been shaving before the mirror for a couple of weeks before he realised that "it was a bit more than just a broken shaving mirror". It is inconceivable that he would have travelled with a badly broken mirror. This points to the location of the painting as either Penfoei, where he worked for eighteen days on his second tour, or Morotai, where he went after leaving Noemfoor on February 20th, and where he stayed for eighteen days. These were the only two tropical locations where Thake remained for a period of two weeks on either tour.

A fragment of circumstantial evidence persuasively points to Morotai as the more likely of these two possible locations. To the right of the mirror, a grasshopper climbs a tree, and a centipede or millipede is attached to the
horizontal post. On March 3rd Thake wrote a letter to his family describing material in the second sketchbook of his first tour, which he was sending to them. The letter was headed "Morotai". In it, Thake wrote of his accommodation. He informed that he could see bomb blasted coconut palms by looking from the back door across a tangle of wild passionfruit that housed the fire flies, the big green grasshoppers and the little black millepeeds (sic) with red legs.8

These were insects in Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror, decisively pointing to Morotai as the source of the painting.

Both Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror and the initial version of Kamiri Searchlight, then, seem to have been painted in the month from January 9th 1945, when Thake arrived in Noemfoor, to March 8th 1945 when he left Morotai.

The central device in both these paintings is the reflective mirroring surface, which reflects Thake's image, and some aspects of his physical surroundings. The use of this motif is remarkably rare in French Surrealist painting and, with the exception of Paul Nash, in English Surrealist painting too. Yet the mirror is a motif employed frequently in Surrealist film and to a lesser degree in literature. To what extent does Nash's use of the motif of the mirror parallel French Surrealists' exploitation of the catoptric motif?

In 1945, the year in which Kamiri Searchlight and Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror were painted, André Breton wrote in a brief essay on Arshile Gorky:

For I can affirm that the eye is not open so long as it limits itself to the passive role of the mirror, even if the water of this mirror shows some interesting and unusual quality ... whether it is reflecting the object from one or several angles, in repose or in movement.9

Breton's contemptuous reference to the mirror expressed an attitude he had
long held, that the mirror - like the realm of vision - merely accepted at face value whatever it was confronted with, and in this it was "tyrannical and decadent".\textsuperscript{10}

This passive accommodation by the mirror, this ingenuous absorbing of the procession of life which passed before it, made no allowance for the filtering of experience by the subconscious. Breton compared the mirror unfavorably with the photographic plate. The mirror, in his comparison, lacked emotive value and the power of suggestion. Unlike the photographic plate, the mirror did not shape figures to telling attitudes or (better still) catch subjects in their unguarded and most furtive moments.

Breton quoted Ramón Lulle's view that "the real mirror is a diaphanous body disposed to receive all the figures that are presented to it".\textsuperscript{11} In 	extit{Surrealism and Painting} 1928, Breton related an incident which ridiculed the mirror as a purveyor of substance (while simultaneously ridiculing de Chirico, whose work had turned away from Surrealist principles). He narrated that he and Louis Aragon were dining at a cafe on the Place Pigalle with de Chirico when a child began moving from table to table selling flowers.

Chirico had his back to the door and did not see him come in, but Aragon had been struck by the new arrival's strange appearance and wondered aloud if it was not perhaps a ghost. Instead of turning around, Chirico brought out a little pocket mirror and after studying the young boy intently in it for some minutes replied that it was in fact a ghost.\textsuperscript{11}

Breton's disdain for mirrors even had a character in his play 	extit{Barrières} propose a mass destruction of mirrors: "With a stone I can break all the mirrors in the city where I live".\textsuperscript{13}

Yet Breton made one reference to a mirror context in which the mirror did offer access to a stage of heightened, illogical activity: Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass in 	extit{Through a Looking Glass, and what Alice Found There} 1872. This was
in a 1941 essay *Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism*. In denouncing the art of imitation, Breton likened its trivial ambition of fixing the appearances of the external world to the characteristic function of the mirror:

> The mission of art is not to copy nature but to express it. At the end of this road (of imitating surface appearance), strewn with ambushes that may or may not be real, there is Alice passing through the looking glass.¹⁴

Here, Breton is presenting Alice and her fantastic Looking Glass Domain as actuality, and the imitative domain of the mirror as deceptive and erroneous. In stepping through her Looking Glass, Alice abandoned the world of predictability, of expectations, of behavioural rules, and passes into an enchanted precinct where, in Alice’s words, "things go the other way".¹⁵ This transmuting of elements so that they "go the other way" is central to the content of *Kamiri Searchlight*. Because the searchlight’s reflective surface is concave, the reflected forms are inverted. Thake appears to be working with his left hand when he was actually right handed. Thake’s anatomy becomes elongated and exaggerated, which is the more striking in that forms in the non-reflected domain are portrayed in naturalistic proportions. The black mechanical forms are distorted beyond ready identification. The ocean and the clouds reverse the side of the spectator on which they appear. And finally, forms behind the spectator appear in front of him. *Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror* does not invert forms, but secures a similar disorientation through the tilting mirror shards which deconstruct the face and misalign the fragments.

This misalignment parallels Alice’s description of appearances in her Looking Glass house:

> The books are something like our books only the words go the wrong way; I know that, because I’ve held one of our books to the glass, and then they held one up in the other room.¹⁶

Thake’s notion of the distorting mirror casting an elusive or fragmentary self
portrait would be paralleled thirty six years later on the first page of Patrick White's autobiography - a book described in pictorial terms by White as a "self portrait" - and would give the book its title: Flaws in the Glass.

There was a Long Room, at the end of the garden, at the other the great gilded mirror, all blotches and dimples and ripples. I fluctuated in the watery glass; according to the light I retreated into the depths of the aquarium, or trembled in the foreground like a thread of pale-green sapphire. Those who thought they knew me were ignorant of the creature I scarcely knew myself.

The evasive and indeterminate self-image that White found in the dimpled, rippling Long Room mirror represents the same ambiguous, shifting self-portrait that Thake found in his image-manipulating reflective surfaces.

To what purpose was the catoptric motif put in Surrealism prior to 1944? To what extent was Thake's particular use of reflective surfaces foreshadowed?

Notwithstanding André Breton's rejection of the mirror motif, the catoptric image was employed sporadically in French literature, theatre, architecture and painting. It was an especially persistent motif in the Surrealist films of Luis Buñuel. It was also a recurrent motif in the paintings of Paul Nash. But, with the exception of Nash's work, it is likely that most of these precedents were unknown to Thake. Nevertheless it is relevant to overview these precedents to assess the individuality of Thake's catoptric images, and the degree to which they conform to Surrealist precepts.

A mirror motif which is congruent to Alice's Looking Glass is the "mirror sans tain" to which the important Surrealist poet Paul Eluard referred. In Dessous d'une vie ou la pyramid humaine he described a set of three steps leading to the poet experiencing a new vision, with new eyes "which are at one with his indestructibility". The final of these three steps was "the loss of one's personality in a (silverless) mirror that will absorb the already known
Eluard's phrase "mirror sans tain" - silverless mirror - is itself paradoxical, a contradiction in terms. It probably derives from a sub-title used six years earlier by André Breton and Philippe Soupault in one of the earliest manifestations of Surrealist writing, *Les champs magnetique* 1920. Their phrase "la glace sans tain" is synonymous with Eluard's. A "mirror" which has not been silvered is not a dutiful (and impotent) reflector; as a plate of glass it possesses capacities for reflection, refraction, transparency, translucency and distortion depending on the prevailing circumstances of lighting, angles of incidence, etc. It can process and distort appearances, and it is this capriciousness that makes it admirable to Breton.

Two important Surrealist dramaturges, Roger Vitrac and Louis Aragon used the mirror motif. Roger Vitrac was one of the most prolific of the Dada/Surrealist playwrights. In his theatre piece *La peintre* (published in 1921) he combined, like Thake, the prop of the mirror with the process of portraiture. The central character Auguste Flannelle paints a portrait of Madam Parchemin on a mirror. There is a similar element of parody in Thake's treatment of the mirror in *Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror*. The mirror's function, as declared in the painting's title, is to present an image of the face that will allow an efficient and safe shave to be performed. Yet such a large glass shard is missing that half the area to be shaved is alienated from that image. For its stated purpose of furnishing a self portrait, Thake's mirror is ludicrous ("ludicrous" being an adjective of praise in the Surrealist lexicon).

Vitrac similarly ridicules the mirror and its innocuous lifelessness that Breton had criticised. Instead of faithfully reflecting whatever chanced in front of it, Vitrac's mirror is now destined to bear for ever the one painted image.
A mirror also figures in Vitrac's play *Les mystères de l'amour* in the form published by Gallimand in 1924. (The mirror was omitted from the 1927 production.) The mirror, like Thake's, is smashed. In the fifth scene, Léa, in a fit of pique, sets about causing considerable damage to a heterogeneous assortment of chattels. A dressing table is demolished, curtains are incinerated, a goldfish is choked, and a mirror is broken. The mirror was part of a mirrored wardrobe; that is, it was a mirror behind which storage compartments were located in which secrets may be cached, indiscretions may be concealed, infidelities may be buried.

A mirrored wardrobe - an armoire à glace - was also a climactic stage element in a 1920s play by Louis Aragon (whose role as a participant in the de Chirico mirror episode has been noted). The pivotal standing of this piece of mirrored furniture is acknowledged by the title of the play: *L'armoire à glace un beau soir*. The mirrored wardrobe is located on the stage, in front of the curtain. Tension develops about its contents - about what is behind the mirror. Lénore tries to coerce Jules to open the wardrobe door. It seems that whatever lies behind the mirror holds the key to Jule's and Lénore's behaviour, anxieties and limitation. In conclusion, the characters who had participated in the play's prologue emerge from within the mirrored wardrobe, clasp each other's hands and dance a jig.

Aragon's mirrored armoire, even more than Vitrac's, assumes the properties of Alice's Looking Glass. It is the enigma behind or beyond the mirror that is important rather than the mirror's standard reflective properties. Aragon would have been well aware of Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice Found There*, as he had translated Carroll's mock-heroic poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) in 1929.
Mirror motifs played a more significant part in Surrealist films, especially in the work of pioneering Surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Buñuel's *L'age d'or* (1930) includes a major sequence enacted before a mirror. Buñuel's highly detailed shooting script charts his use of the mirror as an active transformer of nature:

Shot 92. Close up of the dressing table taken at an angle so one does not see the image reflected in the mirror .... (The young woman) looks absent-mindedly at the mirror, almost automatically she takes the buff in her hand.

Shot 93. ... She looks at her fingers without seeing them; then she turns her eyes to the mirror ....

Shot 96. Insert of the young woman in the (unsettled) state described, looking at herself absent-mindedly in the mirror.

Shot 97. Her hair and her clothes begin to ripple under the gust of wind coming from the mirror. Close up of the mirror that reflects neither woman nor the room, but a beautiful sky with oval clouds, lazily drifting by in the sunset.

Shot 98. C-V side-face of the young woman and the mirror, but in such a way that one sees what the latter reflects. The woman with her hair tossed by the wind resting her face on her hands lays her forehead against the mirror.19

This mirror does not reflect the woman before it. Nor does it reflect the prosaic, everyday reality of the room in which the woman and the mirror stand. Rather the mirror serves as a vehicle for the projection of the woman's unconscious condition. Her reveries, her fantasies, her cravings are so consuming that they displace the environmental factors one would expect to see reflected.

In Shot 97, the woman's hair and clothes begin to undulate. The wind which is dislodging them is audible. Eventually the camera discloses that the wind emanates from the mirror itself. Assuming the mirror had been used to portray the ramblings of a dream or the subconscious, the wind emerging from the mirror could be seen as the symbol of the influence and manipulation that the subconscious can bring to bear on everyday reality. Buñuel's mirror sequence,
then, calls into question the reliability of superficial appearances, and reaffirms the potency of meaning at a subconscious level.

While Buñuel's exploitation of mirror reflection was more complex and radical than Thake's - Thake's were based on material actually seen - there is common ground. Both have the mirror functioning as a shaping agent in the tableau, changing the physical ambience in which the figure is operating.

Man Ray conceived of two mirror episodes in two of his Surrealist films of the 1920s. Emak bakia 1927 used mirrors, like Thake's reflective searchlight, which are shaped to deform the reflections. In his autobiography Self Portrait 1963 Ray explained this as a method of dovetailing realistic images with "sparkling crystals and abstract forms". In a comparatively extended, climactic sequence in Emak bakia, these deforming mirrors are pivoted, bringing to life a set of stiff white shirt collars. Because of their concavity or shattered surface, Thake's mirrors similarly destroy, deform and animate the subject, and disconcert the viewer.

In his film of the next year, L'étoile de mer 1928, Man Ray uses a face reflected in a mirror as a climactic episode. The film's key moment is the appearance of the central female character, alone, before the mirror. It cracks. On it appears the word "beautiful", part of a phrase "she is beautiful" which had been repeated a number of times through the film.

That is, cracked mirrors which transform the objects before them and cast them out of register appeared in the work of Man Ray, Roger Vitrac and André Breton, proceeding Thake's Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror.
The Betty Boop animated films of the 1930s (created by Max and Dave Fleischer) drew heavily on the prime Surrealist properties of distortion and metamorphosis. The cartoon medium's nature as an inherently non-naturalistic art form made the incorporation of fantasy and illogicality more readily acceptable by the wider public. The most fantastic, the most starkly surreal of the Betty Boop cartoon series was *Snow White*. In this piece the motif of the mirror functions as a far more potent (and surreal) component than it does in the conventional tale. The mirror has the power to bring about metamorphosis, modifying one form into another. The evil witch has only to gesture at the mirror to transform Koco the Clown into a white spectre. By turning the mirror onto herself, the witch was able to metamorphose into a fish with bat-like characteristics.

Another sequence has the witch projecting her head from, or through, the mirror to confront Betty Boop. The head metamorphoses into a frying pan; the witch's long nose turns into a handle to rise and swell. While metamorphosis is equally employed as a theme by Thake, especially in his ant hill and plane wreckage paintings, he uses the mirror as an instrument of metamorphosis only to the extent that its concavity or its fractures cause torsion or obliquity of the reflected form.

In poetry, a notable use of the mirror motif was the group of poems first published in 1925 by Jules Supervielle, a French poet whose work was associated with Dada and Surrealism. The set of poems carried the overall title *La miroir des mortes*. The poems referred to the relationship, even the transition, between life and death. Jean Cocteau wrote of the mirror with the same associations. His *Orphée*, written in 1925, uses the mirror as a symbol of a portal to death. To Cocteau, as to Lewis Carroll's Alice, it was as if there was an existence behind the mirror, which one could not normally penetrate.
Cocteau wrote of mirrors:

Mirrors are the doors by which Death comes and goes. Watch yourself all your life in a mirror and you will see Death working like bees in a glass hive. 21

Thake's reflections, like Cocteau's and Supervielle's also relate to death. Kamiri Searchlight, like Supervielle's theme, juxtaposes the material - the idyllic beachscape and tropical forest - with death. Death is alluded to in the reflection of the Japanese fox hole - whose occupant was very possibly killed. The horizontal tree reflected in the searchlight is dead, possibly a casualty or the pre-invasion bombardment. Even Thake himself appears to be targeted by, "in the sight of", this ordnance. Supervielle counterpoises material objects with the mystique of death. Similarly, Thake's Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror combines the everyday act of the toilet, of personal adornment, with decay and destruction, expressed by the irreparably shattered glass, and also by the way the glass mirror shards tear Thake's face apart. In this context, the insects may also be seen as memento mori, as insects were included in Dutch 17th C. still life paintings as reminders of transitoriness and mortality.

As I have postulated, it was perhaps André Breton's contempt of the mirror as impotent and passive that repressed interest in catoptric imagery in French pictorial Surrealism. There remain, however, two notable French Surrealist works with reflective motifs with which Thake would have been acquainted.

The first is a painting/bas relief by French-domiciled American Man Ray. The piece, The Orator, 1935 (Ill.69) was reproduced in Herbert Read's Surrealism 1936. The surface incorporates an actual convex mirror. This mirror reflects

1 An anecdote from Peggy Guggenheim's biography Out of this Century confirms Cocteau's obsession with mirrors as expressed in this passage. Mrs Guggenheim had been invited to dinner by Cocteau in the 1920s. He sat opposite a mirror (which was behind Mrs Guggenheim) and gazed, "fascinated", at his reflection in the mirror throughout the evening.
the room in which the work hangs in a bulging, distorted form. There is comparability of this work with *Kamiri Searchlight*. Both use misrepresenting mirrors—either convex or concave—to establish separate spatial domains within the overall composition. These separate domains have vanishing points and canons of proportion that are distinct from, and antithetic to, those operating in the rest of the composition. Both Thake and Man Ray use a variation of the concept of a "picture within a picture", which will be examined later.

The second catoptric work which Thake would have known was Paul Delvaux’s *The Break of Day* 1937 (Ill.70). Thake may not have seen the copy of the English Surrealist journal *London Bulletin* in which it was reproduced, but he would have seen its reproduction in *The Studio*, August 1938.

The mirror depicted in Delvaux’s painting is gold framed. It is an intimate, boudoir mirror, in contrast to Thake’s searchlight, with its awesome character and its austere functionality. It is surrounded by female figures. Its face is totally filled with a reflection of a female torso, and it may be that Delvaux was aware of the tradition of the mirror as a feminine symbol. (In his *Symbols, Signs and their Meaning and Uses in Design*, Arnold Whittich pointed to the mirror as a common item of equipment for Venus, and hence a symbol of femininity.)

Delvaux uses the mirror to draw the spectator into the composition. His mirror is faced at the viewer and it is by implication the spectator’s body which is reflected in it. The reflected nude, female body resembles the other figures in the group. Thus the reflected spectator seems to complete the circle of figures, like the final participant in an unspecified but arcane ritual. Thake uses a similar device, in that the spectator views the mirror from much the
same frontal position. To a degree, the spectator thereby identifies with the artist whose reflection is depicted. In this manner, the spectator of Kamiri Searchlight and Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror is, like Delvaux's spectator, appropriated into the picture.

Such conscription of the spectator may not be common, but it is precedented in Surrealist art. Man Ray's actual convex mirror in The Orator not only incorporated the image of the spectator, but also his companions and the ambient architecture. (Intimate inspection of the reflection of the reproduction of The Orator in Herbert Read's Surrealism indicates that the work was hanging in a large, empty room, probably a gallery, whose walls were hung with paintings.)

This notion of the incorporation of the spectator into the Surrealist work in drama was equivocal. To an extent, Surrealist dramaturges were disdainful of the audience. Where the Dadaists sought an audience to use as a target to confront and challenge, ridicule and aggravate, pioneer Surrealist playwright André Breton wrote of distancing the spectator. "We absolutely must stop the spectator entering if we are to avoid confusion", he wrote in 1929 in the second Surrealist manifesto.

Paul Eluard expressed the same sentiment in a letter to Breton two years later:

We always have in reality done without a public, we have done everything to discourage the public.

On the other hand, the Surrealists sought to bypass or subvert theatrical conventions including the convention of the proscenium arch, behind which a detached and stylised performance was staged. One method of achieving this blurring of the boundaries between the spectator and the work of art was to make the spectator sense himself to be a participant rather than an audience
S'il vous plaît 1919, a four act drama and arguably the first Surrealist play, is an example of this secondment of the spectator and his emplacement into the course of the play. S'il vous plaît was written by André Breton and Phillipe Soupault and first performed in 1920.

In this work, two insignificant characters engage in apparently pointless activity on a darkened stage. They are verbally confronted by actors insinuated into the audience, who are indistinguishable from the members of the audience. A stooge/actor, sited in the audience, calls "that's all!" Another stooge/actor exclaims "I don't understand anything. It's stupid." Another calls "if only it were amusing". An actor stands on a chair and denounces the play and, by extension, Surrealism. Yet another concealed actor calls for the interjector to be ejected and the play to proceed.

With the resumption of the play, one of the "interjectors" leaves with his wife, gesticulating at the stage and crying "it's shameful!" As the couple leaves, calls of "vivre la France!" and "continue" are to be heard. In this manner, Breton and Soupault had established (by formally scripting the "spontaneous" interjections) a web of tense and combative relationships with the audience. Seated amid apparent contention and unaware of its scripted, contrived nature, the spectator would seem to be drawn into the content of the play resembling the way Man Ray, Delvaux and Thake used a mirror to the same end. Man Ray allowed the spectator to see his own body, movements and surroundings in the work, Delvaux and Thake used frontal mirrors to encourage spectator identification with the reflected image.

Although Break of Day bears no further direct similarity to Thake's two mirror paintings, it does display strong comparability to a 1938 Surrealist painting by Western Australian painter Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock). This painting in
turn relates to Thake's two mirror paintings in that it is self portraiture. The painting, *Approximate Self Portrait in a Drawing Room* 1938 (III.71) places in the foreground a mirror whose surface is almost entirely occupied, like Delvaux's, by a reflection of a female torso. Unlike Thake's two reflections, the mirror is angled, as if the figure (McClintock's wife) is off to one side, and is therefore other than the viewer. The artist's face gazes to the left, where the woman being reflected would be standing.

David McNeill plausibly suggests that the source of much of the work's imagery is Tristan Tzara's poem *The Approximate Man* which was published in David Gascoyne's *A Short History of Surrealism* 1935. This poem referred to "the languages of nudes' brief apparitions" and "the godless promenades of water courses". Still, the work is described in its title as a self portrait, and the content of the reflection could well be intended to portray carnal factors which underlay behaviour (carnality being reflected in the obvious symbol of the snake poised to strike). Thus the work addresses self portraiture on two levels: facial appearances and (as indicated through the mirror) subconscious motivation. Thake would not have seen the painting itself when it was shown in Perth (1939, 1940) or in Sydney (1940). However, it is quite possible that he saw it reproduced in *Pix*, September 20th 1940, where the accompanying article's title "Dreams inspire Australian art" was calculated to attract his interest. The work would have been too cluttered with forms and trite symbols to have impressed Thake, but the painting's concept of using a self portrait format as a basic subject around which to weave more elusive Surrealist subtexts could have predisposed Thake to recognise the layers of possibilities he would later find in the reflections of a searchlight and a cracked shaving mirror.

One painting which certainly would have been known to Thake, at least
through reproduction, prefigured his searchlight reflection in concept it not in detail. The work, *Charters Towers* (Ill.72), was reproduced in *Douglas Annand* 1944. Thake can be presumed to have looked closely at this book, as Annand was a friend whom he saw quite regularly. The painting paralleled *Kamiri Searchlight* in that the image-reflecting surface was the curved lens/glass of a lighting instrument (although Annand’s was convex while Thake’s was concave). It resembled Thake’s, too, in the curvilinear elongation of the reflected forms.

Thake’s painting was more complex, as he opposed reflected imagery with directly viewed forms, and juggled abstract and representational imagery. Annand’s composition, the elongation aside, was very conventional.

The significance of Annand’s painting lies in its drawing Thake’s attention to imagery reflected in distorting surfaces. The novelty of Annand’s subject of distortion through reflection was emphasised by Sydney Ure Smith in his introduction to the book. He wrote: "Who but Annand would have thought of painting the reflection of boys and landscape in a motor headlamp?"

The notion of a mirroring object which reflected a self portrait had also been floated by Salvador Dali. The idea was described in *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali* in "a list of the most varied inventions, which I considered infallible". The concept involved "artificial fingernails made of little reducing mirrors in which one could see oneself". Dali’s reducing mirrors paralleled the concave mirror of Thake’s searchlight, which also diminished the reflection’s size. Dali’s book was published in 1942, so it is possible that Thake was aware of Dali’s concept. It was, however, a project Dali never realized.

The anti-aircraft searchlight, its reflective surface and its role in the "capture" of alien planes have a tenuous link with Max Ernst. In 1934, Ernst
produced a major painting entitled Garden Aeroplane Trap (Ill.73), which Thake would have seen reproduced in Herbert Read's Surrealism. Like Thake, Ernst was preoccupied with birds and flight and, like Thake, he had conceived of the plane as a huge, ungainly derivative of a bird. In Max Ernst's library was the 1820 volume of C.J. Krez's Aviceptologie Francaise, ou traité générale de toutes les ruses dont on peut se servir pour prendre les oiseaux which gave an extremely comprehensive account of strategies for capturing birds. In addition to such predictable methods as cages and nets, Krez described two objects which figure centrally in Thake's painting: bright light and mirrors. Brilliant and disorienting light, he advised, was efficacious for night captures, and subtly placed mirrors for daylight captures of birds (and by Ernst's and Thake's extrapolations, of planes).

If catoptric motifs were uncommon in French Surrealism, they were to be found in the work of English Surrealist Paul Nash. Thake was familiar with Nash's work and, as he indicated to the writer, he "liked" much of it. Mirrors and reflections were subject elements to which Nash cyclically returned. Some of his important works with this motif - although not all - would have been known to Thake through reproduction:

**Chestnut Waters** 1923-1938 (reproduced Arts, New York, October 1928);
**Mirror and Wardrobe** 1924 (not reproduced before 1946);
**Mantel Piece** 1928 (reproduced Architects Journal Nov. 1928, as Study);
**Oxenbridge Pond** 1928 (reproduced Apollo, Nov. 1928);
**Souvenir of Florence** 1929 (not reproduced before 1946);
**Harbour and Room** 1932-1936 (reproduced Herbert Read, Surrealism, 1936);
**Landscape from a Dream** 1936-1938 (reproduced London Bulletin, June 1938; Apollo, June 1939; Herbert Read, Paul Nash, 1944)
**The Different Skies** c.1939 (not reproduced before 1946);
**Forest and Room** 1930 (not reproduced before 1946);
**Metamorphosis** 1934-1938 (not reproduced before 1946);
Nash's first major work to attempt a theme involving reflection was *Chestnut Waters* 1923-1938, derived from a complex watercolour of 1922. The reflection is as forcefully painted as the material forms, perhaps more so. There is an abbreviation of detail in the lake surface, and a tendency to reduce the degree of colour in the reflections. Nevertheless, the lake surface is a decisively designed area, which inverts the trajectory of the lakeside trees. *Oxenbridge Pond* 1928 (Ill.74) heightens the dialectic of substance being played off against reflection, without reflection assuming a subordinate of significance. In this, Nash's pond and lake reflections parallel the treatment of reflection in *Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror* and *Kamiri Searchlight*. They also parallel *Kamiri Searchlight* in the tension that is contrived by inverting one section of the painting and opposing it by a more dominant area of landscape with is "correctly oriented".

*Mirror and Window* 1924 (Ill.75) was painted by Nash the year after *Chestnut Waters* was commenced, and was the precursor of what were to be a series of compositions of interiors featuring mirrors. The major part of the composition is occupied by the window aperture, through which looms the bird garden at Iver Heath. Inside the room the closest element to the viewer is a mirrored dressing table, whose mirror overlaps and partly conceals the landscape beyond.

This work has many significant similarities with Thake's two paintings. Both juggle with the antithetic components of organic nature and the geometry of the built environment. By placing the mirror inside the window (although cut by the frame) Nash seems to have been presenting the viewed, tangible world and the two dimensional reflected world as two adjacent, alternative realities.
If they differ, it is in that Thake presents the mirror image as the transitory element of the balance, whilst Nash portrays it as the enduring element.

Nash's bird garden is dense and voluptuous, but its mortality is underscored by the cut flowers in the vase, already doomed. The flowers may be seen as symbolising restless change, in contrast to the permanence and inflexibility of geometry. On the other hand, the reflection is of severe and uncompromising architectural components: skirting boards, wall junctions. The mirror is tilted forward, which forces the reflected architectural forms into oblique direction, lending an additional element of domineering force.

Thake's reflection, by contrast, is composed of subjects whose presence is temporary: himself; a departing plane; Japanese fortifications whose inhabitants have already fled (or died). Compared to these objects, the forms surrounding the mirror - the forest and the sea - are enduring.

Similarly in *Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror* the reflected image - the face of Thake himself - was already being fragmented. Nor will the damaged mirror long continue to be used. In contrast to the terminal presence of the mirror, the tree on which the mirror hung and the insect life which crawls upon it were the continuing inhabitants, the inheritors, of the island. If Nash's mirror is used in pursuing his thematic interest in the life/death cycle of nature, Thake was more interested during his war service in the life/death cycle of machinery and matériel.

Nash's *Mantel Piece* 1928 (III.76) places the mirror in an enclosed architectural setting, from which references to nature are excluded. At first the mantel piece and adjacent forms seem frontal in relation to the viewer, but it slowly emerges that almost all forms are slightly angled against each other. Even the
mirror, which is vertical and therefore presumably parallel to the wall, casts an oblique shadow. The viewer, or the artist, is not reflected in the mirror, although the mirror is facing directly at oneself. Nash may have seen the artist's presence as being indicated not in reflection, as in Thake's paintings, but through the prominent placement of the artist's equipment - a roll of paper and a tee square. Nash made a virtue of his lack of facility in painting the figure by exploring ways to introduce the human presence into his paintings without actually depicting figures. Thake, too, was more interested in implying human involvement than describing it. His paintings of bombed buildings referred to man's achievement, his folly, his loss and his suffering without portraying the figure itself. Even in his catoptric paintings, Thake was more concerned with the peculiar reflective qualities of the man-made objects than in the degree to which the reflections represented penetrating portraiture.

A cluster of Nash's works deal with the infinity of mutual reflection produced by counterfacing mirrors. In these compositions, the images become increasingly small, and establish an almost hallucinatory, hypnotic spatial recession. These included *Metamorphosis* 1930-1938 (Ill.77) (which would be acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia, but not until thirteen years after Thake's 1945 visit to that gallery during his second Official War Artist tour), *Forest and Room* 1930 and group of three closely related paintings: *Voyages of the Moon* 1934-1937, *Glass Forest* 1930 and *Formal Dream* 1934. These works imply the presence of a mirror behind the viewer which is reflecting in the mirror in front of the viewer an illusion of endlessly reflecting perspectives.

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b Nash would write to Percy Withers the next year "my next move will be the study of the human figure for which I am very ill-equipped at present".
Voyages of the Moon was exhibited in the Unit 1 Exhibition of 1934, the catalogue of which George Bell had shown to Thake. It followed a six week visit Nash made to the south of France at the end of 1928. On this tour, he began a series of café drawings in Paris, and the ubiquitous mirrors of French cafés aroused Nash's interest in the mirrored image. The mirror permitted him to play with the customary mirror double images— a form seen from the front combined with its view from the rear (a format too commonplace to interest Thake). More than this, however, the mirror motif provided a plausible device upon which to hang irrational conjunctions. The mirror allowed the insinuation of landscape or seascape elements into conventional interiors, and these conjunctions were unexpected and unnerving.

Voyages of the Moon stemmed from the dining room of the Hôtel du Port et des Négociants where, in February 1930, Nash found that the globe lights and tall mirrors on facing walls gave the impression of endless repetition and diminution. Margaret Nash wrote of the painting:

it was based on the long, high-walled restaurant of the Toulon hotel with its entire covering of mirrors that reflected, in a strange astronomical manner, the repeated reflection of large, white electric globes that were placed along the ceiling and looked like moons receding into the distance.

Thus aligned, the mirrors constructed a bewildering panorama of recessive space, that was also to be found in the landscapes of Dalí, Tanguy and Nash. And Thake.

This concept of appositional mirrors could not be considered remarkable, and indeed Francis Picabia, who was connected with the French Surrealist circle as well as Dadaist circles, proposed a similar arrangement. In an essay "Pensées et Souvenirs" he suggested placing identical mirrors face to face, producing an endless succession of mutual reflection as a means of representing the infinite.
Surrealist painter Matta wrote of the architectural possibilities of mirrors, but his ideas had been preempted by Nash (and by French café designers, for that matter). In a 1938 essay in *Minotaure*, Matta proposed a plan for an apartment which used a range of architectural elements to produce psychological effects, and frequently disturbing effects. Mirrors were used in this plan to create spatial plays by their arrangement.

*Harbour and Room* 1932-1936 (and a nearly identical watercolour of the same title of 1930-1931) was also triggered by Nash's 1930 stay in Toulon, with his wife and the painter Edward Burra. They stayed at the Hôtel du Port which overlooked the harbour, and in the distance, on the other side of the harbour, lay the French fleet. A very large mirror hung in front of the Nash's bed, and the reflection of one of the ships in this mirror gave a momentary impression of a French man o' war sailing into the bedroom. The mirror itself does not play a major role in this painting, although it does reverse the cornice angle and narrow the stripe width, setting up an abrasive relationship between the wallpaper reflecting and the actual wallpaper on which the mirror hangs. However, the mirror did precipitate the incongruous conjoining of marine and boudoir images. Andrey Causey suggests that if Nash saw the harbour scene as a metaphor for death (and the ship was a war ship), then the painting is an allegory of the legendary night sea voyage in search of consciousness. This linkage between the mirror and death is coincidental in the light of the circumstances that Toulon was Burra's choice of destination because he had been there previously with Jean Cocteau, and as had been noted, Cocteau used the mirror in *Orphée* as the symbol of the threshold between life and death.

Eight sketchbook pages survive as a group from Nash’s Toulon trip. Two of these include mirrors, again probably deriving from the Hotel du Port’s mirror-
walled bar-restaurant. The first (Ill.79) is a composition of ovals, of which the central oval mirror is the largest. The wall on which it hangs is apparently at a slightly oblique angle, as the viewer/artist is not reflected. The reflecting mirror contributes a sense of heightened space to the composition; all other forms are close to the picture plane, while the mirror reflects forms on the distant wall behind and to one side of the viewer. The incorporating into the composition of forms behind the spectator parallels a similar ploy in *Kamiri Searchlight*.

The second sketchbook page is of a room with a mirrored wall and ornate mouldings on the ceiling. These are reflected in the mirrored wall, as are such architectural accoutrements as coat hooks, giving the composition a most complicated decorative patterning, but a pattern which is fractured as planes shift in relation to each other at cornices and wall junctions. Thake's use of the mirror as a pretext to fracture the image in *Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror* has been noted.

Again, these drawings represent coincidental antecedents for Thake's mirrors; neither drawing was published or even exhibited in Thake's lifetime. Thake may have known of Nash's *Voyages of the Moon*, but its excessively contrived and repetitious geometry was unlikely to have commended the work to him. He would have seen *Harbour and Room* in Herbert Read's *Surrealism*, but it too was likely to have appeared too forced for Thake's taste. More germane to Thake's work, especially to *Kamiri Searchlight*, are three paintings: *Souvenir of Florence* 1929 (Ill.81), *The Different Skies* 1939 (Ill.82) and *Landscape from a Dream* 1937 (Ill.83).

Nash had visited the continent in 1924-1925, and had come upon a vessel in a restaurant at Florence Railway Station that would be the pivotal object in
Souvenir of Florence. Like Kamiri Searchlight, a single object dominates its environment. In both paintings, the central form is cut by the painting’s baseline, reaches almost to the top, and occupies the centre of the composition as well as half its area. In both, the object projects a formidable presence, and possesses an uneasy and elusive "personality". Both use the object to evoke the "spirit of place" in which it is found. Thake contrasts war technology with a tropical demi-Eden, while Nash removes the urn from a railway restaurant, where it would look ridiculous, to an outdoor setting above the River Arno where antique, faux antique and contemporary images can reverberate against each other.

Like Kamiri Searchlight, Nash’s Souvenir of Florence exploits reflection to deal with aspects of self portraiture. It is a male figure whose direct gaze is reflected in the amphora, and although the facial characteristics are effaced, the head shape and hair resemble Nash. Nash and Thake both use the reflections as a vehicle to introduce Surrealist overtones.

Nash’s reflections are of the railway restaurant: comfortless but efficient chairs and tables and a too-vivid checkerboard design on the floor. The artist’s companion has a fashionable head-gripping felt hat. Apart from the incongruity of this bleak contemporary ensemble in a romantic and patinated city, there is the Surrealist illogic of a vessel out of doors bearing a reflection of an enclosed room. Thake’s Surrealism came from the searchlight’s reflection juxtaposing naturalism with abstracted mechanisation, and with the reflection’s turning nature on its head. An even more striking similarity is the distortion of the reflection, in Nash’s painting because of the convexity of the amphora’s surface, in Thake’s because of the concavity of the searchlight’s face. For Surrealists, who mistrust conventional surface appearance, such distortions and refractions represent a naturally attractive subject.
For all these similarities, *Kamiri Searchlight* is arguably the better painting. Nash renders the buildings on the Ponte Vecchio in crude, stereotyped schemas; the relationship between urn and background is uneasy; Nash's drawing of the urn suggests someone straining in the upper registers of his draughtsmanship. Thake's three components - object, reflection, ambience - stylistically knit together seamlessly. Thake's touch was characteristically light and dextrous; Nash's brushstrokes in *Souvenir of Florence* tend to be pedestrian and heavy, and threaten to dominate the subject matter.

*Souvenir of Florence* would not be reproduced until 1975, and can not be cited as an influence upon *Kamiri Searchlight*. Yet its content makes it a precursor of Thake's painting.

The second of these three works, *The Different Skies* 1939 resembles *Kamiri Searchlight* in that a major object located in front of a large expanse of sky reflects an unseen passage of the landscape and upwardly displaces it into the sky register.

This watercolour stems from a commission Nash received to depict the view of the summer landscape through the loft window. The lightly treed Severn Valley is visible beneath the hinged window, but the pane reflects a different view, different in pattern, different in scale. Whether or not the composition satisfied the terms of the commission, its real content was the tension between the vista viewed directly, and the vista transmitted by chance through the angled, distorting reflection.

Both Nash's skylight window and Thake's searchlight are strongly profiled shapes (a Romanesque arch and a circle respectively). Their surfaces are
emphasised by some dark outlining. Their surfaces are chameleon-like, taking on the appearance of part of their milieu. Thake uses much the same scale, colouration and touch in the reflected area as in the "real" landscape, the only difference being the radiation lines on the reflection which lightly cut it into segments, and the enigmatic reflection of a mechanical form. Nash's reflection adopts a style of representation different from the rest of the landscape. He employs strong tonal contrasts, broad brush strokes and an emphasis on abstracted, flattened pattern rather than the representational detail of the rest of the painting. *The Different Skies* was exhibited in London in 1939 and 1940, but it was not reproduced until 1973, so it is improbable that Thake was aware that Nash had, in some respects, foreshadowed *Kamiri Searchlight*.

The third catoptric painting by Nash which bears comparison with Thake's work is *Landscape from a Dream*.

*Kamiri Searchlight*, *Landscape from a Dream* and *The Different Skies* all employ the mirror in a manner that recalls a device that de Chirico had employed in 1917 - the "picture within a picture". This involved the siting within the overall composition of a sizeable, demarked area which stood decisively apart from the remainder of the painting by virtue of its different subject, style, scale or pictorial structure.

Like *Kamiri Searchlight*, *Landscape from a Dream* places the mirroring surface, the "picture-within-a-picture", centrally and allows it to reflect both objects that are in the picture (eagle, ball) and also objects ostensibly located beyond the picture frame (flying bird, sun). *Kamiri Searchlight* physically inverts the surroundings in the sense that the mirror reflects forms and conditions that are the antithesis of the mirror's setting. The reflected image relates to the Surrealist belief in a counter-reality, harboured in the recesses of the
unconscious mind. The actual landscape is the Devon Coast; the reflected landscape with its floating balls derived from a film Nash had seen of grass, blown into balls, being swept by the wind over the South American savannah. The blue daylight sky of the actual landscape hosts a ponderous, rain-laden cloud; the reflected sky has the russet colour of sunset, and its thin dry clouds fall into formal alignment. The foreground ball rests its heavily modelled bulk on the ground; the reflected balls float over the plain's surface, harmonising with the soaring flight of the reflected hawk. The shadows in the physical world fall away towards the horizon; in the reflection the shadows are cast towards the spectator. This uniting of contradictory entities was a fundamental objective of Surrealism.

Roland Penrose, writing of this painting, referred to this interchangeability of naturalistic and Surrealistic realities:

A landscape contains a mirror - the eye. The painted canvas is again a mirror. A bird watches itself in a glass, waiting for the image to move, so as to know which is alive, itself or the image .... One reality leads to another with the assurance that both exist simultaneously and in the same place.36

Nash and Thake both use the reflection to include an autobiographical component. Thake used the reflection to record his Official War Artist role. George Digby suggests that Nash used the reflection to portray his aspirations. In Meaning and Symbol, Digby suggests that the flying bird signifies spiritual flight, and the reflected landscape signifies the imaginative research of the artist:

The relationship between the inner and outer picture is the key to its understanding. For the inner picture reveals the true orientation of man's inner life which alone gives meaning to his outer life. Only then is the bird of the spirit free to take wing in true liberation.37

Both paintings, then, use the reflective panel to address the theme of self identity, although in an oblique manner. Both play on the incongruity of
manufactured structures in settings that are inappropriate for them, either because the sector is uninhabited or because it is an area of primitive technology. Both set the event at an harmonious conjunction of sky, sea and earth. Both incorporate the themes of flight (and indeed Thake’s distant banking plane resembles Nash’s wheeling hawk). It can be presumed that Thake had seen this work reproduced in Herbert Read’s Paul Nash, and although Kamiri Searchlight sprang from life not art, Nash’s precedent may have made Thake more receptive to the subject when he came upon it.

Thake did not return to the motif of the mirror either during his second tour of duty or, with one minor exception, after the war. This tends to confirm that Thake was not inclined to adopt leit-motifs (as Dali adopted the crutch or the malleable form) because of their Surreal connotations, but rather he responded to sighted subjects (in this instance, mirrors) in which he could discern peculiarities and incongruities.

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1. Eric Thake, Sketchbook 2, Thake Papers, La Trobe Library.


4. Ibid.

5. Eagle, Bell School, p.28.

6. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Thake Papers, La Trobe Library.

7. Eagle, Bell School, p.28.

8. Thake Papers, La Trobe Library.


10. André Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism" (1941), Surrealism and Painting, p.59.

11. André Breton, "Surrealism and painting" (1928), Surrealism and Painting, p.32.
12. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


34. Margaret Nash, op.cit.

35. Causey, Paul Nash, p.201.

36. Quoted in David Gascoyne, A Short History of Surrealism, pp.74-75.


38. The Banner with the Strange Device, 1966, Ill. Art and Australia, Sept. 1977. This painting, like Kamiri Searchlight, incorporates the top of Thake's head reflected in a glass case containing a banner.
PARACHUTE STORE

Parachute Store (Ill.84) was painted in April 1945, after Thake had returned to Australia. It was developed from a sketch Thake had made on a characteristically rainy night during the first week of March. The location was the 31st Squadron's camp, Morotai. Thake supplied no details about the content beyond the work's title.

The painting centres on five parachutes, of which three are inordinately small, and two are so large as to be identifiable as parachutes only by the work's title. The disjunctive scales are Surrealist in effect; to non-R.A.A.F. personnel, the size differentials would appear perplexing or enigmatic. However Thake would have found these scale dissonances actually present in the tableau, and he merely recorded them, being sensitive to their poetic resonances. The smaller parachutes are no doubt trigger parachutes, which pull out the larger, load-bearing parachutes. The white (silken) parachutes were for personnel; the orange parachute, made of a coarser fabric, was for dropping equipment. The personnel parachutes would have been stored beneath the two man crew of Beaufighters, which was the 31st Squadron's operational aircraft.

As Thake had recorded in Jeep in the Rain, Morotai sustained heavy rainfall. It was also humid. Consequently extraordinary precautions had to be taken to combat fabric rot and mildew. Parachutes were serviced in rotation, and it is presumably this airing process within an enclosed room which Thake is depicting.

The confining, claustrophobic room was a major theme in Surrealism; the room is frequently portrayed as a limiting, oppressive space. It is only through a
window or a doorway that any prospect of escape or change is offered. Thake employed such a portal motif himself in his aeroplane window drawings in December 1944, which will be examined in relation to Koepang Bay. Parachute Store offers no such portal and no such promise of escape. With the exception of Parachute Store, Pin Up Gallery and Long Thoughts, Thake’s war works are set out of doors, or at least the observer’s vantage point is in the open air. Almost all of Max Ebert’s work of this period, and James Gleeson’s, was also sited in landscape settings.

The subjects of most of Thake’s non-figurative war work either bear human characteristics, imply a human presence, or suggest recent human departure or imminent arrival. The parachutes are depicted in one of war’s many interstices, between recent use and approaching redeployment. This involved detaching the subject from its natural environment — a characteristically Surrealist ploy. The parachutes, whose functioning ambience is the sky, constrained only by the natural element of wind and the natural force of gravity, are here crowded and immobilized into an oppressively geometric interior.

A significant constituent of Parachute Store is Thake’s reengagement of the device of emphatic and exaggerated perspectival lines. A common Surrealist method of structuring space was through the inscribing of linear perspective onto the surface on which objects or figures stood. It was a device that had been employed in Metaphysical and Surrealist painting for three decades, and its variations were sufficiently reproduced to be familiar to Thake. Giorgio de Chirico’s The Oracle 1914 (Ill. 85) reproduced in Read’s Surrealism 1936 uses recessive floorboards, steeply angled as if viewed from above, to establish a vast, stage-like space, poetically empty, and evocative of silence and isolation. Thake also may have seen de Chirico’s The Disquieting Muses C.1922 reproduced in Barr’s Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism 1936 which also uses
centrally vanishing perspective lines, this time marked on a plaza surface, to the same end. Edward Wadsworth made repetitive use of foreshortened ground lines as a means not only of enhancing recession, but of unifying the diverse objects which were confronting each other upon it. Such converging lines came to act as the equivalent of the dissecting table in Lautréamont's influential simile. Wadsworth's *Meeting*, in which pier floorboard lines link shells with sea, may have been seen by Thake in the two page essay on Wadsworth in *Architectural Review* September 1932. Certainly Thake would have seen *Happy Landing* 1927 reproduced in *The Studio* July 1932, and a replica of *Arrival* 1936 (Ill.86) reproduced in *The Studio* August 1936.

In these works the converging ground lines provide a stable, plausible setting for disconcerting juxtapositions. Magritte, too, used floorboards in *The Menaced Assassin* 1936 to link in intimacy and in common conspiracy figures and objects in separate rooms.

Thake had used converging ground lines before his appointment, most notably in *Salvation from the Evils of Earthly Existence* 1940 (Ill.87). Here the lines gradually fade, to give the illusion of an endlessly extending plain. This sensation is reinforced by the shadows also being oriented towards the vanishing point. Even Thake's signature is inscribed parallel to a receding ground line.

Floorboard perspective lines are used in *Wrecked House, Darwin* 1945 (Ill.125) but in an understated manner. They subtly suggest recession as a foil to the flattening influence of the pattern of vertical planes. *Parachute Store* uses perspective in an intentionally inconsistent and disorienting scheme. Again, de Chirico was an antecedent. His *Joys of a Prince* 1914, reproduced in Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* 1936 uses irrational multiple or
irreconcilable vanishing points to create spatial tension. The spatial
disequilibrium and disorientation that this provokes makes the relationship
between forms more precarious and cryptic.

In a more clumsy and obvious manner, Herbert McClintock (Max Ebert) used
incommensurable perspectives in *Strange Interlude* 1940 (Ill.88) painted five
years earlier. The foreshortening of the planks on the right of the bust is
incompatible with those on the left. The work was exhibited in Perth and at
the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney in 1940, but was not reproduced, and would
not have been seen by Thake.

*Parachute Store* inverts this use of converging ground lines and places them on
the ceiling where they can also read as beams or drying lines. They establish a
central vanishing point in the upper half of the composition. However, other
edges which should also converge at this point (the floor wall junction line,
for example), when projected, do not. The table's foreshortening is also
contradictory with the ceiling lines.

In what probably represents a parody of the conventional convergence of lines
associated with one-point perspective, Thake has the parachute cords converge
towards the foot of the composition. This inverts, and seems to ridicule, the
direction of convergence of the ceiling lines.

As noted, the small trigger parachutes are depicted that size for reasons of
technical accuracy. However, the location of small parachutes in front of large
parachutes which are in turn in front of small parachutes conflicts with the
viewer's pictorial expectation that similar objects will diminish in size as they
recede from the picture plane. Thus the arrangement of parachutes seems to
represent a second parody on conventional representation of spatial recession.
Probably the only significant treatment of the subject of the parachute in Surrealism to predate *Parachute Store* was Paul Nash's *Rose of Death* 1939, although Thake would not have known this collage, which was first reproduced in 1947. Nash wrote of the work:

> Ever since the Spanish Civil War the idea of the Rose of Death, the name the Spaniards gave to the parachute, had haunted the mind, so that when the war overtook us, I strained my eyes always to see that dreadful miracle of the sky blossoming with these floating flowers.¹

Nash places the parachute above a nativity scene, apparently contrasting life and death, good and evil. Thake's *Parachute Store* places the vehicle of freedom from the tyranny of gravity inside a severely geometric and claustrophobic interior.

*Parachute Store* is the only example of Thake's war art which incorporates the theme of hanging objects. Suspended objects (as distinct from floating, self-sustaining forms) represented a subject he periodically returned to. Examples are: *Inside Looking Out* 1934 (Ill.89) in which a blind-pull ring hangs on a cord; *Salvation from the Evils of Earthly Existence* 1940 (Ill.87) in which paper furled into cylinders is inexplicably suspended from the sky.

Suspended forms were not commonplace in Surrealist painting, although Edward Wadsworth made considerable play of forms suspended by lanyards. Maxwell Armfield's essay "An Appreciation of Edward Wadsworth's Paintings" in The Studio April 1938 was accompanied by four illustrations of which three contained central elements which are suspended. The year before Thake's appointment, in June 1943, The Studio published another article on Wadsworth, "Recent Tempera Paintings by Edward Wadsworth" reproducing the painting *Pendant* whose central form is hanging. French Surrealist Pierre Roy also used suspended forms as compositional pivots. *Daylight Saving* 1930, for example, has a delicately hanging egg as the central compositional hinge. Thake may
have seen the painting reproduced in *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* 1936. Probably unknown to Thake, a suspended form occupied a dominating position in Paris's Surrealist "headquarters": the Bureau de Recherches Surréalists hung a cast of a woman from the ceiling.

Thake no doubt saw parachutes as part of his interest in flight, and the collapsed parachute in the foreground suggests he was conscious of the precariousness of placing the burden of one's defiance of gravity upon a sheet of silk. Many of Thake's war themes—personified planes, ruins, night light effects—were treated in multiple examples if not quite series. *Parachute Store* 's subject of parachutes, its setting in an arbitrarily lit, enclosed and airless room, and its use of inconsistencies of perspective, mark the painting as exceptional in Thake's wartime corpus.

SOME DRAWINGS NOT CONVERTED INTO PAINTINGS

A number of surreal images Thake depicted or devised were not consummated into paintings, but were left as drawings in sketchbooks or letters. An example is Clock Tower 1944 (Ill.90), included in a letter written from Townsville on December 17th 1944.

Thake had come upon the tower in the Anzac Memorial Gardens:

... there stands a strange clock in a square tower about 15 ft high. There (are) four dials all brilliantly lit and not a hand on any of the four faces. Such non-functioning clocks, and the undermining notions of time which they provoke, were attractive to Surrealists. The three prime literary precursors of Surrealism, Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Mallarmé and the more distant precursor Baudelaire frequently divested scenes they wrote about from fixed concepts of time. Baudelaire viewed time as one of the crushing and domineering constraints upon man. He wrote:

at each minute we are weighted down by the sensation of time.¹

In L'Horage, a prose poem, Baudelaire conceives of an "absolute hour":

a motionless hour, which
is not indicated on
clocks, and which is
as light as a sigh, as
rapid as the blinking of
an eye.
Yes, I see the hour, it
is eternity.²

Baudelaire's La Chambre double, also a prose poem, describes a room from which the concept of time had been extracted.

No! There are no more
minutes, there are no
more seconds! Time
is banished;
it is eternity that rules.³
In 1918, Surrealist filmmaker Philippe Soupault published a "Cinematographic Poem" in the form of a scenario or script suitable for translation into film. Anticipating an attitude which would become fundamental to Surrealism through the next decade, Soupault's script rejected the conventional regimens of gravity and time. The dominance of time is ridiculed by parodying the clock's movement.

I am on the roof facing a clock which grows and grows while its hands revolve faster and faster.

Another first generation Surrealist, Antonin Artaud wrote a film scenario which similarly refused to submit to the structure of time established by clocks. The script commences with a close-up of a man's watch, ticking, marking off the passage of time. The viewer is informed that the film will be of eighteen second's duration, but this is eighteen seconds of the inner, subjective time of the contemplating man:

This is not normal time. Normal time is the eighteen seconds that are real. The events you are going to see unfold on the screen will be made up of the man's inner images. The whole interest of the scenario resides in the fact that the time during which the events described take place is really eighteen seconds, whereas the description of these events will take up an hour or two to project on the screen.

The most obvious symbol of this attitude to the passage to time is the clock which is inoperative or misleading. Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, arguably the most productive dramatist of the Dada and Surrealist groups, had his play Le Bourreau du Pétrou first performed in 1926. One of the play's important images is the motif of the clock which can no longer indicate the time. The pendulum hangs static and impotent. The characters act outside the pressures and constraints of time. Or rather outside the domination of the clock. In Act II, Scene 2, the question is put "if this clock indicated the time progressively, who could say if it is not fast or slow?" The clock as a determining, authoritarian device is further discredited at the end of the scene, when
someone indicates that the time is two quite separate moments – twelve twenty and three minutes past nine.

André Breton and Paul Eluard used a comparable image in 1930, portraying a clock’s hands as if they were acting, participating in a theatrical ritual, and oblivious to their role as sober timekeepers.

And they are the clock’s hands that open, that stretch out, that set light to themselves and mark the hour of the smile.7

The clock was one of the mechanical motifs which Dali frequently returned to (others including the car and the telephone). These objects were subjected to changes including: anthropomorphisation; the drawing out of erotic undercurrents; presenting the object as comestible; modifying its function with, or substituting for its function, a symbolic role. Dali’s most common distortion of clocks and their precise mechanical function was his depiction of them as malleable and flaccid. However, his L’Homme Fleur (Ill.91), exhibited in the (Melbourne) Herald Exhibition 1939 and reproduced in Art in Australia in November 1939, subverts clocks in a different manner. Here Dali depicted a cabinet full of fob watches, whose function is doubly frustrated.

Firstly, the ornate watch case lids are closed, totally obscuring the watch faces. Secondly, the cabinet is closed, denying any opportunity of access to the watches. Far from being able to structure people’s lives, the watches are reduced to an ornamental role.

Perhaps the only reasonably significant Australian Surrealist painting in which a clock figures is Max Ebert’s Dawnbreakers 1939, and it is useful to contrast Ebert’s use of the clock with Thake’s. Dawnbreakers is about the passing of time, particularly at that segment of the day when one is also passing between unconscious and conscious states as one awakens. Unlike Thake’s clock, the
hands are clear, and indicate five o'clock.

Thake's clock is the more surreal device as it is quite useless. Ebert's clock may have a superficially surreal aspect in its location, floating near rousing heads. But ultimately, it is a narrative device which, together with the breakfast tray, locates the event in the early morning. Fundamentally, it is no more surreal than the long clock in David's *Napoleon in his Study* which stands at thirteen minutes past four, and which provoked Napoleon's comment "you are right, David, all night I work for the happiness of my subjects and the day of their glory".8

Thake was clearly attracted to the Townsville clock because of its incapacity to discharge its sole duty. Oscar Wilde had referred to the attraction of the inoperable:

> We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he doesn't admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.9

Thake's clock is not simply a Wildean useless object; it is a functional object incapable of function. It was in this paradox that its surreality lay. Thake's sense of irony would have been further aroused by the clock's prominent public setting and its futile illumination, these factors rendering the clock's ineptitude the more ludicrous.

Another drawing which was not developed into a painting was a sketch included in a letter from New Guinea in January 1945 (Ill.92) The drawing played on the similarities between a fungus and propellers. Propellers, or forms resembling propellers, had recurred in Thake's paintings since 1936. *Yellow Spinner* (Ill.93) of that year, attached an apparently spinning form to geometric shapes, which were placed in the sky. Although this form derived from the curling coloured petal inside glass marbles10, its shape and its aerial context
imply a propeller function.

Happy Landing 1939 (Ill.94) used hybrid "propellers": partly the flower-like motif of Yellow Spinner, although fleshed out; partly organism. The circumstance that the forms are "landing" in an architectonic setting relates them to aerodromes, planes and hence propellers. Salvation from the Evils of Earthly Existence 1940 (Ill.87) employs similar forms, but places two of them within circular or cylindrical tunnels, implying a function of effecting propulsion through rotation - the principle of a propeller.

Francis Picabia had featured a propeller on the cover of the Dada journal 391 of June 1917 (Ill.96), but the propeller really emerged as a subject through the repertoire of the English maritime Surrealists, and this was presumably the source of Thake's interest in the motif. Paintings by Wadsworth in which propellers figured had been frequently reproduced in the international art press: Lowenstoft Scores 1928 in Architectural Review September 1939, North Sea and Wings of the Morning in The Studio June 1929, Bronze Ballet (Ill.95) in The Studio of January 1943. Two paintings linked with war by Tristram Hillier and Eric Ravilious used propellers prominently, but Thake was probably not aware of these works. Ravilious's Screw on Truck 1940 (Ill.97) had as its central element a cast propeller somewhat surrealistically detached from its functioning location and placed on a flattop railway bogie. Hillier's Le Havre de Grace 1939 (Ill.19) uses giant anchors and propellers to establish a tone of foreboding in an otherwise calm and benign harbourscape. Hillier's sea edge ensemble represented an allegory for Europe's descent into war. In his autobiography Leda and the Goose 1954, Hillier described the mood the painting was intended to represent:

It was indeed the end of a season of folly, indulgence and false values, but I knew it to be the end, too, for better or for worse, of an epoch for myself, my generation, my youth.
Propellers figured in Thake's first painting to have a direct relationship with the war: *Airscrews* (Ill.98). The work was reproduced in *R.A.A.F. Saga*, prepared by the R.A.A.F Directorate of Public Relations and published by the Australian War Memorial in 1944. It is not mentioned in the Memorial's *Catalogue of Paintings* for Eric Thake, and it is unclear whether it predated his commission in August 1944. It certainly would have preceded his first tour of duty, which commenced on December 6th, 1944.

*Airscrews* is little more than a prologue for the matériel paintings to come over the next eighteen months. The painting's mood is frivolous, and lacking the undercurrent of unease or disquiet which deepened the wit of later war paintings. The work bears distant but distinct parallels with two works of Edward Wadsworth illustrated in *The Studio* of the previous year, June 1943, which Thake would presumably have seen. These works, *Signals* (Ill.99) and *Satellite* (Ill.100) place in the foreground odd buoy-like forms, supported by tripods. The tripods' legs bend, like knee-joints, giving the objects the appearance of being able to stride about. In each painting, one larger variant looms above the cluster of smaller specimens, apparently dominating them. Thake's propellers are similarly supported by tripods standing on wheels, giving them a comparable appearance of mobility. Thake's propeller/tripods also dominate their smaller three-legged stool companions.

*Airscrews* bears some congruency to another Wadsworth painting reproduced in this edition of *The Studio*: *Bronze Ballet* (Ill.95). Wadsworth's title acknowledges the ironic simile he is tracing between the rhythmic patterns of his ponderous bronze maritime propellers and dancers. Thake's sleek aerial propellers also appear to be engaged in a dance, in some spinning balletic ritual. With the background of thematic interest in propellers, it is not
surprising that he should have been attracted to the image of more than twenty bronze propellers that be found at Broe Bay in New Guinea in January 1945. They were large, Thake estimated twenty nine inches wide. They were bent and twisted and covered with verdigris. They ignited Thake's surrealist interest in metamorphosis and simile, and his sense of wonder at the way perceptions and circumstance can make one object resemble another.

They were laying in the green grass and reminded one at once of the "Rafflesia", a stalkless "earth star" type of fungi which grows parasitically on the roots of certain trees in this part of the world. It was discovered by Sir Stamford in 1818 and was later named after him. I of course have never seen one, only illustrations, and I think that they grow to nearly three feet across and after a few days rot as any other fungoids do but could not help linking the flower which I fancy is purplish, yellow brown with the bronze propellers.12

As so frequently in his similes, Thake drew attention to the likeness (in this instance, colour, shape and size) of forms which were absolutely divergent in other respects (animate-inanimate; product of a temperate technologically sophisticated society - product of a tropical wilderness; hand-soft; functional-parasitic).

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Eric Thake's frequent use of analogues and simulates in his war paintings did not represent a contrived-picture making strategem. Indeed, his letters demonstrate that he genuinely perceived forms in analogic terms.

The correspondences, or similes, he drew between objects in his letters were usually expressed as \( x \) being "like" \( y \), although other forms of conjunction included "as does", "a kind of" and "resembling".

Some of his written similes are conventional, even commonplace. For example, in January 1945 he wrote of a sunrise in an unruffled blue sky: The water (was) like a sheet of glass with the hills reflected in it.\(^1\) Where this simile involved a comparison of visual properties, Thake also used similes to draw aural and olfactory likenesses.

I heard another strange bird call yesterday exactly like an empty bottle held underwater and the bubbles rising to the surface.\(^2\)

The smell of these (female paw-paw) flowers seemed to me like sweet crayfish.\(^3\)

Most similes are more vivid than the above. In September 1945 he wrote from Penfoei describing the plant life.

There is a bush covered in seeds each one and a half inches long with two needle sharp curved spines on the bottom when held upside down. They look like devil heads.\(^4\)

Thake also used similes to link the functions, behaviours or movements of forms. Stationed at Gorrie in September 1945, he watched birds play around his feet, and noted:
The brownish feathers open vertically as does a book.\(^5\)

Snakes figures in a number of similes, as both the signifying and the signified object. While making his one-day Darwin-Koepang return flight in September 1945, he saw huge sea-snakes from the air. His simile links the poisonous with the benign.

The sea snakes (were) pale yellow and like big earth worms wriggling along the surface.\(^6\)

The Sepik River, viewed from a plane in January 1945, provided another snake simile, in which he described the water course as "winding and writhing about like a python."\(^7\) In Koepang, Thake told of soldiers finding a snake which he described with both simile and metaphor. It was twenty feet long and "as green as a neon tube and (had) an arrow point for a head".\(^8\) Describing native life in Morotai, Thake even used two similes in one sentence:

The girls breaking the nut reminded me of an emu as she crouched on the ground with her skirt swishing about like long feathers.\(^9\)

Thake's similes often likened natural forms to manufactured forms. The waves breaking over coral, when viewed from the air, were "looking like torn white lace curtains". The Koepang countryside "is like dusty toffee that has cooled off".\(^11\) In the Chinese Cemetery in Koepang, "overhead the frigate birds hang like kites attached to an invisible string".\(^12\) He noticed hundreds of spider webs along a track through the spinifex near Alice Springs. They caught the light of the setting sun and split it into rainbow hues.

These webs are horizontal, round and shaped like the top of a merry-go-round, (and) the spider sits in the little seats.\(^13\)

A few similes and metaphors likened natural forms to military matériel. In an Adelaide zoo, the seal's high diving platform was "a wired-in tower resembling a Radar screen".\(^14\) Near Darwin he came upon a creeper in whose pods were green seeds "each on a silken parachute".\(^15\)
In one instance the simile was accompanied by a drawing to clarify the
description. (Ill.101) In the scrub near Darwin

I saw a dusty circular piece of ground – a kind of Kangaroo sand pit,
(with) their foot and tail marks all over.16

The drawing of associations and congruences between one form and an
unrelated one is a common Surrealist device. In the Dali/Luis Buñuel film Un
Chien andalou the exposed white teeth of a decaying donkey were
likened – through cutting from one shot to another – to the white keys of a
piano. The same film used over-fade and superimposition to liken the oblique
stripes on a box with diagonal shafts of falling rain.

Buñuel used the juxtaposition of sequences in film to surrealistically compare
realities or identities that have no logical associations. For example, one
montage-like sequence of images which faded into each other included:
1. a shot of the male hand, which fills the frame; ants crawl from a hole in
   the palm;
2. the armpit of a woman;
3. a spikey marine creature;
4. a aerial shot of a hermaphrodite.

The linkages in these apparently unconnected images – like the linkages in
many of Thake’s similes – stem from shared formal characteristics. All four
forms are curvilinear: the first two are recessively curved, the latter two are
convex.

Jacques B. Brunius concluded that film is an especially amenable medium for
presenting similes and metaphors.

In the cinema, a single splice can replace the word "like", the words "just
as ... so", the word "a".17

André Breton’s position on the Surrealist authenticicity of similes and
metaphors shifted ground between the *First Surrealist Manifesto* 1924 and the period of Thake’s war service. In the *Manifesto* Breton quoted Pierre Reverdy who wrote in the journal *Nord-Sud* in 1918:

the image is the pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison, but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.

Three years later, in a 1929 preface to a catalogue of a Surrealist exhibition, Breton drew a distinction between metaphors and similes, and denounced the latter. He acknowledged the historical importance of Baudelaire’s notion of "correspondences" between objects, but he concluded that such similes were now obviously "commonplace".

The artist’s play with "correspondences" was a timid and transitional affair, he contended. Surrealism had "suppressed the word ‘like’". Breton then demonstrated that the Surrealist now worked in metaphoric terms.

the horse is preparing to be a cloud; the sky is an admirable bowl of faded stars.18

Breton’s point is an important one: Surrealism was to progress beyond contending that \( x \) is like \( y \) to proposing that \( x \) interpenetrates with, identifies with, or is indistinguishable from \( y \).

Curiously, Breton himself had recourse to simile in his volume of poems *La Revolver à cheveux blancs* published only three years later. His poem *Vigilante* refers to the bell tower of the Church of Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie in Paris. This was the only part of this Gothic church still standing in the 1930s and it was continuously shrouded in scaffolding. Breton commenced the poem with a simile which, like Thake’s plane paintings, linked man-made and natural forms:

In Paris the Tour Saint-Jacques
Like a sunflower.19

In 1940, Breton reiterated his 1924 dissatisfaction with "correspondences" and called for a realization of "accords" – that is, metaphors – which flowed from
an application of a generalised principle of mutation and metamorphosis. The
Surrealists should be

No longer restricted to the celebration of "correspondences" as great but
unfortunately intermittent gleams ... one moves only by an uninterrupted
realization of *passional accords*.20

By 1947 Breton's attitude to similes had been inverted. In *Rising Sign* 1947 he
wrote that the first duty of poets and artists was to "reestablish analogy and
its prerogatives". As an example of an analogy he quoted not a metaphor but a
simile: "your teeth are like a flock of sheep leaving the washpen". Breton even
set about celebrating the word "like", the pivotal word in a simile.

The word *like* is the most exalting at our command when it is pronounced
familiarly. Through it human imagination fulfills itself and the highest
destiny of the mind comes into play.

Setting aside Breton's inconsistency and vacillation regarding the Surrealist
preference for metaphors over similes, it is possible that the distinction
between these two devices is overstated. Arthur Schopenhauer has maintained
that simile, metaphor, fable and allegory are distinct from one another "only in
the length and completeness of their expression".21 What is meant by a given
metaphor is at least partly what is meant by its corresponding simile.
Moreover, both express an intuitive perception of similarity in dissimilars.

While Thake's interest in associating the common or resemblant properties
between objects took the structure of similes in his writing, it took the form
of metaphors in his painting (in the absence of such qualifying terms as
"like").

Thake's insect/plane, figure/ant hill images are examples of epiphoric
metaphors, and in this they diverge from Dali's paranoic-critical metaphors.
The insects or the figures are in various respects imitative or mimetic of
Thake's ostensible subject. Paul Allscamp holds that epiphoric metaphors reflect a certain set of conditions. The metaphoric modifier must refer to properties that are possibly resemblant. The normal (or literal) meaning should remain constant on some level of analysis throughout the metaphor. Finally given that the metaphor involves a comparison which is an assertion or resemblance, the metaphor is either largely true or false.

Salvador Dali's multiple paranoic-critical imagery, as employed in Endless Enigma could be considered primarily diaphoric metaphors. Diaphoric metaphors create new meanings by juxtaposition. The overlaid figure, the hill, the dog the head are presented as diverse particulars in an unprecedented arrangement; diaphoric metaphors elicit new meanings from such previously ungrouped assemblages of components.

Thake's epiphoric metaphors are what Christine Brook-Rose called "simple replacement metaphors", in which the literal term is replaced altogether by the metaphor. These metaphors focus primarily on three areas of resemblance. Firstly, association is based on appearance. The ant hills look like figures in their form and stance. Secondly, association is based on both appearance and also a further circumstantial parallel. Darwin in ruins looks like the ruins of an ancient city, but there are also cultural, political and emotional parallels between the collapse of an ancient city-state and the collapse of a modern tactically significant city. Thirdly, association is based on function and character. Birds of paradise and planes both circle and land in a prepared "nest".

* * *

C. Day Lewis has pointed out that establishing tensions of opposites, the fruitful mating of apparent incompatible, (which was often achieved through metaphor in the paintings of Nash and Thake), works in the same way as the
"conceit" in metaphysical poetry.\textsuperscript{25}

The metaphysical tradition of the conceit, and the related romantic tradition which John Ruskin called the Pathetic Fallacy, have much in common with Thake's use of metaphor. Nash had rejected the use of the term conceit in relation to his own work. Where someone sought to compliment his earlier drawings with the comment "a very pretty conceit", he snapped "Conceit! It is a vision!"\textsuperscript{26}

Nash may have considered the term "conceit" to be disparaging. He may have thought the speaker was suggesting his imagery reflected fanciful notions or strained affectations of thought. He probably considered the term implied an excessive manipulation of imagery, and that it failed to take into account the visionary dimension of his world. He had stressed this visionary aspect in his 1938 \textit{Country Life} article:

\begin{quote}
The landscapes I have in mind are not part of the unseen world in a psychic sense, nor are they part of the unconscious. They belong to the world that lies visibly about us. They are unseen merely because they are unperceived.
\end{quote}

Thake's predilection for similies in his letters, describing $x$ as being like $y$, indicates that - with minor exceptions - he saw his metaphors as being equivalents, not visions as did Nash.

A conceit is a comparison whose cleverness, even far-fetchedness, is more dazzling than its appropriateness. Or at least it seems so on initial impact.

In her study of the Metaphysical Poets, Helen Gardner distinguished the conceit from the mere comparison:

\begin{quote}
All comparisons discover likenesses in things unalike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while strongly conscious of unalikeness. A brief comparison can be a conceit if two things patently unalike, or which we would never think of together, are shown to be alike in a single point, or in such a context, that we feel
Much of the work of the key metaphysical poet John Donne could be seen as parallel to Thake and the Surrealists. Like Thake, Donne was preoccupied with change, with forms becoming other forms. His line "oh to vex me, contraryes meet in one" illustrates his instinct to seek conjunction. Donne's universe, like Thake's, is fluid; form exists only as a mobile sequence of temporary states. Metamorphosis, that central Surrealist theme, knitted together the various domains of reality which Donne's poetry addressed. Donne even saw human nature as being in a state of continual flux, ebb and alteration.

Like Thake's plane and ant hill motifs, Donne presented shifting states of matter, sliding between the organic and the inorganic:

The sweat of the faithless mistress gleams
Like metal in the candlelight
And, the poor Aspen wretch, neglected thou
Bath'd in cold quicksilver lwet wilt lye.

As in Thake's plane dumps, the collision between inanimation and life is used to allure, startle or threaten the reader or viewer.

Conceits have been dismissed as numbingly ratiocinatory, or as arid formal ploys. Samuel Beckett approvingly quoted Arthur Schopenhauer as describing conceits (together with other fabular or figurative constructions) as "vacuous intellectual hieroglyphs". Beckett added that they condemned art to the tertiary activity of "pictorial transmission of a notion".

André Breton, too, was savagely scornful of artists whose work was contrived and artificial, and described such work as "applied phantasmagoria".

It is, of course, always possible to tease out some way of relating things, to propose a concept of "similarity" between distant objects. The question is, is it a potent or a telling way? Successful metaphoric phrases and images are those
that, in the context of their use, are both recognisably metaphorical (as opposed to being purely representational or absurd) and are broadly good rather than poor (that is, appropriate rather than inappropriate, true rather than false, apt in a given context rather than irrelevant). Thake's metaphors are of the kind that can be assessed for aptness. Aptness is not the only ground for rejecting a metaphor, but it surely is one. For example, had Thake's bomber been depicted as a canary instead of a predatory insect/bird, it would have been subject to rejection on the grounds that the characteristics the metaphor impuned to the bomber were neither logically or emotionally appropriate (or "true"). Thake's plane/bird metaphor may not be startlingly original, but it is appropriate on a number of grounds. Planes and birds both fly; both have "wings"; both have "tails"; aeronautically, one speaks of "feathering" propellers (making the blades rotate in such a way as to lessen air resistance). "A flight" can mean "a migratory flock of birds" or "an R.A.A.F. unit consisting of some machines". And, most significantly, both prey from the sky.

Thake's equivalences resemble conceits, in that, in many respects, the entity and its metaphoric modifier are strikingly different, and in Helen Gardner's phrase, "we feel the incongruity". This incongruity of the conceit is harmonious with Surrealist theory. In his First Manifesto, André Breton declared that the beauty of the Surrealist poetic image is directly proportional to its novelty. Its originality lies in departing from banality, not in fidelity to the accustomed, familiar features of our world.

Thake's choice of dissimilars (ant hill - figures, etc) is both incongruous yet adroit. The comparison comes as a shock. But, as Philip Wheelwright has written of the apt metaphor, it is a shock "which is yet a shock of recognition". At first encounter, a conceit makes its impression through
ingenuity rather than justice. Yet the best metaphysical conceits — and Thake’s Conceit-like metaphors — make the audience concede justice while admiring ingenuity.

* * *

Allied to the conceit is the notion of the Pathetic Fallacy. This expression was used by John Ruskin in *Modern Painters* 1888 to describe metaphors used in "an excited state of feeling (which had made the artist momentarily) more or less irrational". Ruskin particularly applied the term to refer to the attribution of human feelings to "the lifeless object".

This reflected an empathetic attitude expressed by many 19th C. Romantic and Northern Romantic painters to nature in general and to trees in particular. Inert matter became human analogues, paraphrasing human emotions. Caspar David Friedrich used trees as substitutes for human beings. His landscapes are about death, transience and the grave. Trees depicted in a Silesian mountain setting stand for stalwart survivors in an altitude and climate inimical to living things. An oak tree in *Oak Tree in the Snow* 1829 represents a pagan-heroic attitude to life, to be subject ultimately to death.

Phillip Otto Runge (1770-1810) depicted the dream of the human condition in the least imposing botanical specimens. He viewed flowers and trees as "very understandable creatures". The landscape, too, was similarly perceived by Runge as the repository of human sentiment and presence: "people ... see themselves and their properties and passion in all flowers and plants and in all natural phenomena."

The Symbolists portrayed the physical world as the mirror of the states of the soul and of human ideas. Nash’s representation of W.W.II planes as animate creatures has been noted. He had also approached trees with the same view to
personification; he wrote of "painting trees as through they were human beings".36

The pathetic fallacy, then, represented a minor but resilient thread running from 19th C. Romantic painting to Surrealism and Thake.

Thake found human qualities in non-human life forms. In one of his first letters from Port Moresby he wrote of an insect which established a rapport with him that resembled an interpersonal relationship.

in my wardrobe there is a maison wasp at work. She gives me an old fashioned look every time I get my books out. I almost feel like apologising to her.37

Thake equally extracted human characteristic from inanimate forms such as ant hills. He discussed this engagement of the pathetic fallacy a decade after the war, when he spoke to students at the National Gallery School, Melbourne, about drawing. He referred to the stimulus of inanimate specimens in the Melbourne Museum and their human characteristics:

This series of preserved specimens needed very few additions to show that even dead lizards cultivate human failings.

Like the conceit, the pathetic fallacy had figured in the poetry of Donne. Like Thake, Donne pointed to human tendencies in machines. For example, in Obsequies to the Lord Harrington he introduces a clock which feels "mismotion and distemper" in its wheels, gets "shaking palsies" in its hands, and seizes up amid a variety of other human ailments.39

Donne also likened common objects to aspects of human appearance: coins and candles, for example. Through the variation of their flame and size, candles assume distinct expressions and demeanours. A candle may become a responsive participant in the scene, as in Recusancy:

the taper's beanie eye
Amorously twinkes, beckens the giddie flie,  
Yet burns his wings.40

It was Pope, however, whose conceits and pathetic fallacy drew Ruskin's trenchant criticism. His conceit "outfly the nimble sail and leave the lagging wind" was condemned as "discordant" by Ruskin.41 Another example of Pope's personification provoked even more severe reproval:

Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade;  
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade;  
Your praise the birds shall chant in every grove  
And winds shall waft it to the flowers above.

Ruskin considered this "simple falsehood, uttered by hypocrisy; definite absurdity, rooted in affectation, and coldly asserted in the teeth of nature and fact".42 There was a baseness, Ruskin contended, in the habit of using such fanciful metaphorical expressions in cool blood. They were too studied and too overcharged and were finally insincere. Modern painters (and poets) should follow the example of the Classical and Medieval painters, who were content with expressing the imaginary and actual quantities of the object itself.43

Ruskin called for lines and imagery that were "descriptive of reality, with a degree of accuracy", which should be "limited to the expression of pure fact".44

For the Surrealists, and for Thake, such literalism restricts art to what Breton, writing in 1945, called a mental prison of scientific classification.45 Thake's exploitation of conceit-like metaphors and his working within the tradition of the pathetic fallacy in his ant hill, plane and plane dump paintings provided him with the liberating key to this "prison"; in Breton's words, that key "is to be found in the free and limitless play of analogies".46

1. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Jan. 1 1945.
2. Ibid., Jan. 2 1945.
3. Ibid., Morotai, March 3 1945.
4. Ibid., Penfoei, Sept. 30 1945.
5. Ibid, Gorrie, Sept. 5 1945.
8. Ibid., Koepang, Sept. 22 1945.
10. Ibid., Jan. 7 1945.
11. Ibid., Koepang, Sept. 28 1945.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., Alice Springs, Aug. 9 or 10 1945.
15. Ibid., Aug. 4 or 5 1945.
16. Ibid., Aug. 4 or 5 1945.


23. Thake would have seen this work reproduced in *The Studio*, Sept. 1939.


26. Ibid.


34. Ibid, p.172.


37. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Dec. 12 1944.

38. Eric Thake, notes for Lecture of May and July 1953, La Trobe University.


41. John Ruskin, op. cit, p.162.

42. Ibid., pp.170.

43. Ibid., pp.165

44. Ibid.


46. Ibid.
THE SECOND TOUR: ALICE SPRINGS, GORRIE, DARWIN, KOEPANG

Thake's second tour commenced in the early morning of July 22nd 1945. Germany had capitulated two and a half months previously. The war in the East continued, but Okinawa had surrendered a month earlier, and Hiroshima would be bombed in fifteen days time. Thake went by train to Adelaide, where his freedom of manoeuvre allowed him to visit friends and acquaintances.

He dined with Harry Muir, of the Beck Bookshop, who advised him to travel north by road if possible, as that would allow him to inspect interesting territory more closely. Thake decided to discuss this possibility with the Movements Officer. In the event, he travelled by train to Alice Springs, and then by road north to Gorrie. He also lunched with Louis McCubbin, Director of the National Gallery of South Australia, who greeted Thake "Of course, you've aged." Thake reflected "what? at forty one?"

Thake inspected the Collections of the Gallery and the Museum. He took a bus to Glenelg and walked out along The Pier. Thake greatly admired Adelaide: "plenty of open space, (and) no rush and tear like Melbourne and Sydney".1

On July 25th he visited the Movements Officer to arrange his travel schedule. Thake wryly alluded to the lack of urgency in Adelaide:

If I don't make a move soon (I) will probably forget what I've come here for, and catch the Melbourne train home.2

Thake did some drawings in Adelaide and during travels into the Adelaide hills, but no painting. He left Adelaide on July 28th, and arrived in Alice Springs in the evening of July 30th. His initial response to Alice Springs revealed his preferred method of "absorbing" a location before beginning to paint it.
I arrived here yesterday and it is just the same as any other place. For the first day or so one wonders why you've come. I can't see anything that looks like a picture. Today I'll have a good roam around.

In fact, the area proved to be a fertile source of subjects and Thake completed at least eleven paintings in nineteen days including: Water Tower, Alice Springs, Radio Transmitter (Ill.102), Meteorological Balloon, Alice Springs; Airmen's Recreation Room, Alice Springs (Ill.108); Wrecked Lodestar; Roger-Fox-Dog; Revolving Beacon Alice Springs; Airstrip at Night; Military Goal, Alice Springs (Ill.110); Pin Up Gallery and Spine Bash. The latter two works resumed a theme initiated in Noemfoor in January, but the remainder of the subjects are generally new, and different from each other. This finding of a variety of compelling themes amongst unlikely sources is in sympathy with André Breton's "Second Commandment":

Wander, and the wings of augury will come and attach themselves to your shoulder.

Thake summarised the content of Radio Transmitter 1945 (Ill.102) as:

Mulga, willie-willie, red sand and vast distances.

Almost all of his work avoids depiction of actual conflict. Rather it suggests a sense of imminence, an air of expectancy. In Radio Transmitter, the two forces - rigid technology and ungovernable nature - confront each other. The foreground's truncated tree trunks suggests that nature had been the initial casualty of the installation of the R.A.A.F. Radio Station, but the outcome of the expected encounter between pylons and willie-willie is uncertain.

Thake had remarked on the incongruities in the area:

Ghost gums ... look altogether out of place in a world of grey-green trees and ochres; they are chalk-white with fresh green foliage.

The cluster of electrical structures in an apparently unoccupied plain was such an incongruity.
Electricity pylons and related structures appeared intermittently in the work of English Surrealists and of French Surrealists Pierre Roy and Jean Lurçat. Pierre Roy's *Daylight Savings* 1930 (Ill.103) employs a line of anthropomorphic electricity pylons. It was reproduced in Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* 1936, and may have been known to Thake. Edward Wadsworth, who owned at least two paintings by Roy, employed pylon motifs himself, such as the signalling structures in *Arrival* 1936 (Ill.86). Thake's *Radio Transmitter* also reflects Wadsworth's underlying theme of nature versus technology.

Telegraph poles had figured in Paul Nash's *Nostalgic Landscape* 1923-1938 (Ill.104), which Thake would have seen illustrated in *Art in Australia* March 1942, and again in Herbert Read's *Paul Nash* 1944.

Jean Lurçat painted sea-side fantasies and enigmatic scaffolding, including *Composition* 1930 (Ill.105). A similar work, *New York* 1930 would have been seen by Thake in his copy of Read's *Art Now* 1933. Tristram Hillier regularly visited Lurçat's studio while living in Paris in the late 1920s. Hillier's *Pylons* 1933, exhibited in the *Unit One* Exhibition 1934, closely resembles Thake's *Radio Transmitter* in that both place towers of electrical power lines with generating boxes in the midst of vast empty landscapes. A remarkable coincidence between these two paintings is that, apart from the pylons, the main element in Thake's painting is a savage wind storm; the only object in Hillier's painting, apart from the pylons, is a wind sock (whose direction—nearly horizontal—forebodes approaching wind).

Pylons as motif even emerged in literature in the 1930s. In 1933, the date of Hillier's *Pylons*, Stephen Spender wrote a poem of the same title, charged with reference to progress and industrial modernity.
Radio Transmitter again allows Thake to approach the subject of technology as a key participant in war. Technologies such as radio transmissions and electromagnetic waves (in radar) brought an essentially new facet to W.W.II.: the capacity to kill at a substantial remove. English poet-serviceman Alan Ross had also written this theme:

Control is remote; feelings, like hands,
Gloved by space. Responsibility is shared, too.
And destroying the enemy by radar
We never see what we do.\textsuperscript{9}

This remoteness from the act of killing lent the soldier an aspect of detachment; it was as if it was the matériel that was the protagonist rather than the service personnel operating it.

The final important element in Radio Transmitter is the sparse, extending landscape. This represented a common Surrealist device. In de Chirico’s early Piazza paintings, they conveyed an unalleviated loneliness, and were unconducive to any kind of fulfillment. Contact, or the possibility of contact, with other objects is dramatic, being unrelieved by other presences. Even abstract Surrealists frequently set their forms in vacant landscapes: John Tunnard’s Fulcrum 1939, for example. André Breton would later write of the potency of such emptiness in painting:

(emptiness secures) transparency which gives access to the unrevealed words and establishes objective chance.\textsuperscript{10}

He went on to quote D.T. Suzuki’s reference to emptiness as a constituent aspect of Zen.

Everything is empty, the whip, the cord, the man and the cow.\textsuperscript{11}

Airmen’s Recreation Room, Alice Springs 1945 (Ill.108) is one of the minority of Thake’s works which include figures. Paul Nash best evoked the "genius loci" of places when people were absent. When rituals are enacted in these places, they are conducted by figure-substitutes: toadstools, for example, or
Thake's best war work was also unpeopled. Objects anticipate human activity, relate to prior human intervention, or project human qualities. Figures are represented by artifacts, graffiti, or their industrial products. With the exception of his self portraits, portrait drawings, and his Pin Up Gallery set of three paintings, the figure in Thake is cypher, a type. One is indistinguishable from another. In Airmen's Recreation Room, Alice Springs they are rendered in a semi-schematic, abstracted manner, resembling the treatment of the figure by Henry Moore in Reclining Figure 1933 (Ill.109), which Thake would have seen reproduced in Herbert Read's Surrealism 1936.

These identity-less figures rarely even define themselves by action. To a degree, this dehumanization is the reciprocal of the anthropomorphisation he brought to bear on planes and ant hills; here he creates object-beings. This approach was at variance with Surrealist attitudes. André Breton was not attracted to the principle of generalisation, and approvingly quotes Lautréamont's view that "types are not men".

Thake was as little concerned with the uniforms of his figures as he was with his own. His figurative pictures are often only identifiable as being of military relevance by their titles. Generally the figures are integrative; they are rarely alone, and are engaged in tasks that are communally significant. Here, they rehearse for a camp concert.

His figures do not strike memorable poses, although sketchbook drawings captured the distinctive gaits of individual Japanese P.O.W.s (Ill.149). His war paintings show little evidence of the method he devised for drawing the figure or animal in motion:
I find it is very often a good plan to watch its movements for sometime and then shut your eyes tightly and concentrate on the last action or stance that you saw. This in some way seems to crystallise the image in your mind and give you a starting point to draw from.13

Wrecked Lodestar 1945 (Ill.15) was also painted in August. The plane had originally belonged to the Dutch, and later the Americans, and finally the R.A.A.F. Thake was struck by the incongruity of zebra finches nesting in the plane's carcass. This juxtaposition of the normality of nature and the grotesquerie of war had been remarked on by Paul Nash, who had observed the spring flowers blooming amid the trenches of W.W.I.

Flowers bloom everywhere, and we have just come up to the trenches for a time and where I sit now in the reserve line this place is just joyous, the dandelions are bright gold over the parapet and nearby a lilac bush is breaking into bloom. In a wood passed through on our way up, a place with an evil name, pitted and pocked with shell holes, the trees torn in shreds, often reeking with poison gas - a most desolate and ruinous place, two months ago, today a vivid green, the most broken trees even have sprouted somewhere and in the midst, from the depth of the wood's bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale. Ridiculous incongruity. One can't think which is more absurd, the war or nature.14

Thake may also have been drawn to the subject of the wreckage because of the realization that this was the type of plane he had been a passenger in during his return flight to Australia from Morotai in March.

Military Goal, Alice Springs 1945 (Ill.110) was accompanied by the comment "mulga posts, barbed wire and red sand".15 The barbed wire loops in languid arabesques, blurring the spatial relationship between the cage interior and the surrounding plane. The landscape seems to stretch endlessly, while the looping line makes the cage constricting, claustrophobic. Cage and prison motifs had been occasionally used by Surrealist painters and sculptors. Roland Penrose's Captain Cook's Last Voyage 1936 (Ill.111) which had been reproduced in Read's Surrealism 1936, encloses a classical Venus within an encircling armillary sphere. Penrose's cage, like Thake's, is transparent. Max Ernst was also
interested in cages, perhaps through the affection for birds he shared with Thake. Ernst employed the cage as a metaphor for individual suppression. He explained in the 1960s:

the cage has always fascinated me, because life as we lead it is led half in a cage and fundamentally we always long to get out of it.\textsuperscript{16}

The theme of being bound, tethered, chained is a returning one for Ernst. On a more subtle plane, escape from constriction by flight had been a favoured subject of Thake through the 1930s.

Thake noted on the back of a photograph of this painting that "only one inhabitant was on view", and the preposterousness of this situation probably attracted him to the subject. A little more than six weeks later, in Darwin, Thake again encountered P.O.W.s. This time they were Allied P.O.W.s being shipped back to the Southern States.

They didn't look too bad, but very thin and I guess the worst cases were confined to their bunks.

We were as happy to see them as they us, and spontaneous cheering broke out from both ship and wharf.\textsuperscript{17}

Alice Springs had been a productive location for Thake: at least ten paintings completed in twenty days. He was reluctant to leave.

I am reluctantly pulling up my posts and leaving next Wednesday. If I don't go then I'll just become a tourist - What did you say? I am one now?

Thake left Alice Springs on July 30th and travelled north by road. On August 24th he arrived in Gorrie, south of Kathleen in the Northern Territory. He stayed in the area for fifteen days, and completed Camouflaged Work Shop, Black Mitchell, Staging Camp, Larrimah and Lena.

On August 27th he was driven to Birdum, the southern terminus of the Darwin line. There were a few overgrown cottages there, a private house doubling as a
Post Office and a business which appealed to his appetite for the absurd: a pub which was completely devoid of anything to drink. Thake did some drawings which he described as "indifferent".\textsuperscript{18} Two impediments bore upon his work. Firstly, he found little subject matter that interested him in the area. The landscape was a continuing expanse of dry bush, and any possible subjects were widely scattered. The second problem was the heat, which Thake found debilitating. He had difficulty remaining alert during the day, and in sleeping deeply at night. Although he had only been in Gorrie three days, he was considering travelling North to Darwin, where it might be cooler. Yet such difficulties did not now worry him unduly, as they had on his first tour.

I have been through all these phases before and no doubt will in the future, so am not worried.\textsuperscript{19}

His optimism was justified. Exactly a week later he found the tall rounded ant hills that were

among the best things I've ever come across. It's all too good.\textsuperscript{20}

On that day, too, he painted Camouflaged Work Shop (Ill.112).

It was, perhaps, predictable that Thake would be drawn to camouflage as a theme. Firstly, his interest in bird watching would have made him conscious of the visual relationships between forms and their habitat or environment. (Just as it had been a zoologist with an interest in animal concealment, colouration and vision - Professor W.J. Deakin D.Sc., F.Z.S. - who had been appointed to head the Central Defence Camouflage Committee from May 1941.)

Secondly, camouflage turns on principles that are also central to picturemaking. Frank Hinder (who had joined Professor Deakin's camouflage group soon after its formation) cited four principles of camouflage technique: colouration, texture, the elimination of shadows, and disruptive patterning. Thake's interest in colour and texture are obvious, but he was also sensitive to
the role of shadow in perception, as a letter of 1945 revealed. Here he observed that the huge ant hills of Central Australia "can only be discovered from the air by their shadows". He was also highly conscious of the fourth principle, pattern in nature. In Townsville, he was attracted to the patterns of the mud flats. Flying from Archerfield to Townsville he thought "the pattern of trees, clouds and rivers all wonderful". Flying from Port Moresby to Tadgi he saw the Sepik landscape in similar terms:

saw several lake villages — lakes of violet — black with small greenish islands of weed and the same green in lacy patterns around the edges.

He was also responsive to the pattern of insects, animals and fish, sometimes sketching the subject to accompany the written description of the pattern (Ill.113).

The Surrealists' belief in the interpenetration of identity and in transmutation was reflected in their fascination for the powers of mimicry (i.e. camouflage) possessed by insects: stick insects and insects with wings resembling leaves, for example. Mimicry also represented the primary theme of Man Ray's film Emak bakia 1926. The film plays on the concept of there being a similarity between all visually perceived material. This notion underpins the film's alternation from abstract images to concrete, recognisable forms. An example of this oscillation is the change from a sequence in which collars figure, to a sequence of light and shadow patterns, reflection and refractions which mimic the shape of the collars. Juxtapositions such as this not only point to visual resemblances, but also propose a reciprocal exchange of meanings. Familiar objects and structures which have been admitted into the social system of perception and recognition are shown as possessing formidable abstract qualities. Conversely, arrangements that are apparently quite abstract and non-objective (such as the patterns of light) are linked with and accorded the status of solid objects.
André Breton had affirmed his circle's interest in the theme of one object purporting to be another as early as 1917. In a tribute to Apollinaire, Breton wrote that his tastes and those of his friends were more or less those of Clarisse (the) mysterious and beautiful heroine. The short story "Clarisse ou l'Amitié" had been published shortly before in Mercure de France May 1917. In this story, visual deception (which is the essence of camouflage) is presented as one of Clarisse's affections. She is described as having a "taste for the spurious". She prefers the imitation to the original. She enjoys her own deception and others. When she sees the looks that the woman cast on her pearls, she is amused at being able to provoke so many sordid sentiments at such small cost. She loves this paraphrase of truth, the modern religion of shams and illusions, nature turned to ridicule ...

Clarisse's infatuation with objects with covert identities, for the cheaply fraudulent, for contrived mystification, all related to the practice of camouflage. Camouflage - the passing off of one object as another - in effect functions by subverting the distinct boundaries between objects, calling identities into question, and discrediting the trustworthiness of external appearance. These are central Surrealist themes.

Thake was drawn to aspects of the landscape which resembled other forms (that is, instances of camouflage-like mimicry). A month before painting Camouflaged Work Shop, he observed a distant car raising a cloud of pink dust. It appeared to Thake as a steamer crossing a "mulga sea". Isolated mountain peaks in the distance resembled islands rising from the sea. The day before arriving at Gorrie, he saw a range of low, pale blue hills. These seemed to him to resemble low clouds rather than solid earth.

Breton, too, professed his enthusiasm for mimicry in nature. He had admired a finch he had been shown by André Masson in the countryside around New York in the early years of W.W.II. The characteristic of this bird - the scarlet
tanager - that had excited Breton's admiration was its plumage, which had the coloration of "all shades of leafage". Plumage, that is, which acted as camouflage.27

In Camouflaged Work Shop, Thake appears to parody the camoufleur's technique of patterning the architecture with shapes that integrate it with its surroundings. Thake does this by linking the patterns of the dead trunks and the shapes of the ant hills with the patterns devised by the camoufleur. Even the sky has been broken into patterns, as if by a camoufleur. This ironic intention seems to be acknowledged in the note accompanying the painting.

...camouflaged black and red hangar-workshop (and) camouflaged blue and white sky.28

The tonal pattern on the ground was probably authentic. To eliminate cast shadows, which made a building readily identifiable from the air, it was customary to drape buildings with a net. Where this was not feasible, the adjacent ground surface could be stained with dark colours.

This camouflaged workshop appears again in the background of the other painting Thake completed at Gorrie in August: Black Mitchell. (Ill.114) The plane was a B-25 Mitchell, a comparatively fast U.S. medium bomber. Thake summarised the pictorial ingredients: "blue plane, blue sky, red earth. Camouflage workshop and mulga".29 The plane, in the process of being dismantled, recalls the aggressive zoomorphic images of Thake's Plane Dump Series. Here Thake returns to the theme of war as a "contest of resources", wherein combatants often played a less decisive role than such resources as technology.

Staging Camp, Larrimah (Ill.115) depicted the quarters of troops who had travelled by convoy from Alice Springs and awaited trains for Darwin. The work is atypical in that Thake's interest in reportage, in describing the
rudimentary construction, predominated over his customary strength of design. Lena (Ill.116) painted about the same time, portrays the train that would transport the troops north.

The Surreal dimension of trains had been cited in an article on mechanisation in the English Surrealist organ *London Bulletin* July 1938. The author, Arthur Elton, quoted from an early writer on the train:

> these belchings or explosions more nearly resemble the pantings of a lion or tiger ... the automation actually labours like an animal out of breath.

The article referred to the manner in which trains were portrayed in cartoons after the railway scandals of 1845 which ruined shareholders.

> their head lamps become eyes, their smoke boxes grew a mouth which tore human beings limb from limb.90

These zoomorphic portrayals of trains as self-animating and self-sufficient forms paralleled Thake’s portrayal of planes. However, *Lena* is represented in conventional, literal terms. The train only provided a context for a painting about the despoliation of the environment in wartime. Thake had been distressed by the recreational killing of fauna two months earlier when based in Alice Springs.

> "Sport" in these parts means shooting a few ‘roos, and returning in a few days and shooting the eagles that have come down for a feed. In my short walk this morning I found shot kangaroos, galahs, and hawks. Thake described "Lena" with similar acerbity.

> She carries her thirsty passengers north through the ant hills, broken bottles and bully beef tins.31

Thake’s conclusion to his account of the kangaroo shoot is equally relevant to *Lena*:

> It will be a good thing for the wild-life of this country when all the troops go home again.42

Thake left for Larrimah on September 8th and travelled by rail and road to
Darwin where he arrived on Monday 10th September 1945. He camped on the cliff crest at Doctor's Gully, with R.A.A.F. Group 854. In the gully below, the Group's catalinas were stationed. The next afternoon he was driven around Darwin and its surrounding areas in a truck. The thematic possibilities of the region were immediately clear. Thake wrote that he "saw some good stuff here - enough to keep me busy for a long time".

The bombed houses were "patterns of concrete, metal capped (for white ants) posts". The damage was less severe than he had anticipated, but he was immediately struck by the town's spirit of place, its genius loci. This instinctive apprehension of genius loci was a capacity Thake shared with Paul Nash. Alexander Postan described Nash's ability to identify himself with the scene on which he looked, and thereby to draw from it a profounder meaning than would be apparent to the ordinary observer.

In his autobiography *Outline 1949*, Nash wrote of the genius loci possessed by, amongst other forms, demolished houses:

> these share their trivial feature, as it were, their blind side; but they also have another character, and this is neither moral nor sentimental nor literary, but rather something strange and - for want of a better word which may not exist - poetical.

Thake described battered Darwin in terms of mood and emotion rather than in visual terms: Darwin was "forlorn and tired".

Thake registered this interest in the bombed streetscape on September 11th, the day after his arrival. The next day he flew to Koepang on a fleeting, one day return trip. He was again moved by the destruction of buildings - this time buildings of quality and character:

"Koepang must have been an attractive place at one time with a large Chinese population. There are two Chinese temples wrecked with everything else in the town. The entrance to one - fortunately undamaged - is guarded by two porcelain or 'China' lions four feet high at least, and standing on a plinth. The scales of their bellies consist of the edges of..."
dinner plates 18" diameter. The fierce eyes are about four layers of cups inside one another and the right forefeet of the one on the right and the left of the other one supported on round balls set with a pattern of chipped 'china'. The tails, squat and bunchy, are pieces of willow pattern." 37

The Surrealist incongruity of imposing religious statuary made from tea cups and broken crockery held obvious appeal to Thake. He would later develop the painting Timor Lions from drawings in his sketchbook. The day after returning to Darwin, he completed Koepang Bay (Ill.117), and then turned to devastated buildings as subjects. Bank of New South Wales, Darwin 1945 (Ill.118), painted during September, was the first of these.

The next group of paintings on the theme of ruins stems from his second tour of Koepang in September-October: Chinese House, Koepang (Ill.119), Street in Koepang (Ill.120), and Bombed House, Darwin. Bombed Bank, Darwin and Wrecked House, Darwin (Ill.125) together with its replica, may derive from either Thake's earlier or later period in Darwin. It is conceivable that the replica for Wrecked House, Darwin was painted after he returned home to Melbourne in November, so it too could have been painted either in Darwin, or developed later from drawings.

*  *  *  *

When faced with the architectural ruins of Darwin and Koepang, Thake probably would have recalled that when his former mentor, George Bell, had arrived in France as Official War Artist during the closing weeks of W.W.II, much of his work recorded the damage the war had done to buildings. Bell’s Interior of Church, La Haie, Meneresse and Interior of Le Cateau Church, Organ Destroyed, Pipes Removed depicted the pointlessness and devastation of war, without figural references.
However, the most influential precedent for Thake's ruin paintings was the work of British war artists. Reproductions of this work had been available in Australia since 1939. *Art in Australia* published two essays on British war art illustrated by images of urban destruction. "The British Artist at War" September 1st 1941 reproduced two full page reproductions of Pipers - *Christ Church, Newgate* and *Coventry Cathedral* 1940 – and R.V. Pitchforth's *Gravy Salt Factory* (Ill.127). R. Wilenski's "London Letter No. 2", June-August 1944 reproduced Graham Sutherland's *Devastation 1940 – Solicitor's Office* 1940. Two series of booklets entitled *War Pictures by British Artists* were published during the war. They reproduced work commissioned or published by the British Ministry of Information Artists' Advisory Committee.

These slim but profusely illustrated volumes were available in Australia during the war. Frank Hodgkinson, as an Official War Artist, had been shown copies by Lieut-Colonel Treloar, the Officer Commanding the Military History Section of the Army. James Gleeson, as a civilian, had also seen copies. Eric Thake seems to have owned at last some of the eight titles published.

Two volumes contained considerable material related to Thake's ruin paintings: *Blitz* 1942 and *Air Raids* 1943. *Blitz* contained paintings by John Armstrong of bomb damage: *A Farm in Wales* 1940 (Ill.6c) and *Church Tower, Coggeshall Essex*. It included five Sutherland paintings including *Devastation 1940, City: Ruined Buildings* (2). *Air Raids* reproduced six Pitchforth ruins, five Pipers including *Council Chamber, House of Commons* 1941, and four Sutherlands including *Devastation 1941 City: Twisted Girders* (1) (Ill.128) and *Devastation 1941, An East End Street* (Ill.130).

In 1941, The Trustees of the National Gallery, London published a volume of paintings which were the product of the War Artists' Scheme. Pitchforth's *City
Temple Church was again reproduced, together with ruins by Sutherland and Piper. In 1944 the Penguin Modern Painter's books on Sutherland and Piper were published, and Thake may have possessed these before he commenced his second tour of duty. The books were in the possession of George Bell, who generously made his library available to his circle, although the date Bell acquired them is uncertain.

The Piper volume gave prominence to three of his ruin paintings by reproducing them in colour: Somerset Place, Bath 1942 (Ill.129), Council Chambers, House of Commons 1941 (Ill.132), and All Saints Chapel, Bath 1942 (Ill.131). The Sutherland volume reproduced four ruin subjects: Devastation—City—Twisted Girders 1941, Devastation—East End Street (Ill.133) and Devastation, House in Wales, in colour, and Devastation—City—Burnt Out Interior 1941 in black and white.

Thake can also be assumed to have been aware of John Armstrong's paintings of buildings torn by bomb and artillery. Armstrong's Pro Patria 1939 (Ill.134) was reproduced in colour on the cover of the January 1940 issue of The Studio and again, full page in colour, in The Studio of January 1944. An essay on his work in The Studio of April 1939 reproduced Phoenix (Ill.135) and Windowed Raggedness (Ill.136).

On October 9th 1945, Clive Turnbull wrote to Thake on paper which bore the letterhead of The Herald, of which Turnbull was art critic. Thake was soon to leave Koepang, and may not have received the letter before he reached Darwin. He would have completed about half his ruin paintings by that time. The letter indicates that Turnbull himself was familiar with the work of Piper, Pitchforth and Sutherland, and also the Penguin Modern Painters Series. Turnbull's letter assumed (or knew) that Thake was familiar with this work.
Les Annois has a current show at Georges. Some very good stuff in it but very derivative – Piper, etc, black lowering skies and so on. Might all be English .... In one way all these Penguin Painters and their reproductions are a misfortune. No sooner does one come out than you see the wall covered with them – Pipers, Pitchforths, Sutherlands and so on; as well, of course, as all the local imitators of Donald Friend.

Unfortunately it seems very difficult for many people to find a middle course between a sort of hill billy isolationism and a slavish following of modern fashions. That is where you score, of course, because your type is peculiarly your own.42

A key difference between Thake’s ruins and those of Sutherland and Piper lies in their relative immediacy. Japanese planes had bombed Darwin on February 15, 1942. The subsequent passage of time – two years and seven months – had to some extent mollified the starkness of the destruction. English war poet Robert Graves had written of W.W.I in Recalling War, ”war was return of earth to ugly earth”.43 In a congruent spirit, Thake’s buildings suggest that time can not only etch its own scars, but can also efface the scars of man. Thake’s ruins do not represent a bitter protest against the squalor and horror of war. Nor do they convey a real sense of tragedy. Time has ameliorated this hardness of edge. Rather the buildings have mellowed into a haunting melancholy.

By contrast, Sutherland – who was living in Kent at this time – was issued with a pass to admit him into the bombed areas of London, including Dockland and the East End. He was awed by the silence, but it was a brittle silence, randomly shattered by the sounds of collapsing buildings.

(there was) absolute dead silence, except every now and again a tinkle of falling glass .... Sometimes fires were still burning. Everywhere there was a terrible stench – perhaps of burnt dirt, and always the silence. There is nobody about, just a few police ... Very occasionally there would be the crash of a building collapsing by its own volition.44

Chance images resembled or symbolised the macabre, and the pathos of war. Sutherland saw a mattress blasted into the roadway in a shape recalling a corpse; the contents of a butcher’s shop had been blown onto the street,
suggesting carnage.

In works like *Devastation 1940 – Solicitor's Office* and *Devastation 1940–Collapsed Roof* (Ill.138), which Thake would have seen reproduced in *Art in Australia* June–August 1942, Sutherland's flames still burn, or the roof tilts at a precarious angle portending further collapse. Bodies probably still lie, perhaps still live, beneath the rubble. When Sutherland followed the invasion forces into France, he witnessed a "panoramic pile of destruction". Germans had been killed inside fortified caves, and Sutherland described the air as hanging heavily with "a terrible sweet smell of death". Thake's ruins have become more settled, have consolidated themselves. At least a degree of normalcy has returned, to the extent of robust grasses encroaching upon and even covering the ruined sites.

Piper, too, was instructed to record bomb damage as soon as possible after an air raid. Coventry Cathedral was bombed on November 14th 1940. Piper arrived there before cleaning up had commenced, and indeed before the flaming warehouses had been extinguished. The air was still acrid, pungent. The Cathedral walls had not cooled and water was underfoot; "walls were flaked and pitted, as if they had been underwater for a hundred years".

Piper drew St. Michael's Cathedral Church and St. Mary's Hill while they were still smoking. He arrived at some bombing sites while bodies were still being dug out. Piper saw the suffering-permeated rubble as an authentic and profound war subject.

It is not camouflage nor uniforms nor the clean lines of a gun nor even heroic people that make good subjects for war pictures, it is death and destruction, and the agony that stays about the rubbish pile and the grave.

Paul Nash, as a war artist in W.W.I, had witnessed the desolation and
mutilation of the Somme, with mud stripped of vegetation, yet impregnated with shrapnel, bone and rotting flesh. He was interested in the theme of mortal transience, especially since the traumatic death of his father. For Piper and Sutherland, death was a part of civilian daily life. Death, sometimes associated with the erotic, is a recurrent subject in Surrealism— for example, Penrose's *Captain Cook's Last Voyage* 1936 (Ill.111). Thake was neither interested in human death as a phenomenon or as a theme. He had not witnessed the incident of destruction, nor even its immediate aftermath. This absence of death or fire, this sweeping away of rubble lends Thake's ruins a calm, even a serenity.

Sutherland's bombed houses are irreparable. Nothing seems to have— even could have— survived. Forms are warped beyond serviceability, twisted out of recognisable shape, cauterised beyond identifiable colour. Sutherland's ruins are deserted, as are Thake's with the exception of *Grecian Darwin* and *Street in Koepang*. This enhanced the eeriness of the streetscape, but it also simply reflected actuality: "there was nobody about— just a few police". Similarly, Thake observed that even undamaged houses in Darwin were unoccupied. In that the whole purpose of towns is to sustain population accretions, the absence of figures is the more poignant. The passage of thirty one months since the Japanese raid lent a sense of detachment to Thake's Darwin ruins. There is no furniture, no pathetic personal possessions suggesting the violation of personal lives. There is no suggestion of death.

As Thake was aware, Piper painted the destruction of pinnacles of British culture. The destruction depicted in *Council Chamber, House of Commons* 1941 could reasonably be read as a threat to British parliamentary democracy. *All Saints Chapel, Bath* 1942, half demolished by bombs, could be interpreted as the war's threat to religious and spiritual values. The damage to the gracious
Georgian stone streetscape in *Somerset Place, Bath* 1942 records the tragic destruction of Britain's cultural stock. All these themes register a threat to an ordered, traditional pursuit of life.

Graham Sutherland had been commissioned, in 1940, to undertake for the Ministry of Information "pictures of damage which may be caused by enemy action". His first works in Swansea were preoccupied with reportage, like the first two Port Moresby paintings of Thake's service. Gradually Sutherland began to sense "the hidden aspects of nature", and as Thake imagined the characteristics of creatures or insects in wrecked planes, so Sutherland saw the damaged buildings as "great animals who had been hurt".

John Piper was engaged in 1940 to work in two main areas: the "Recording Britain" project, intended to record great buildings which may be destroyed by the war; and to portray bomb damage. Piper painted bombed churches in Coventry (November 1940) and in Bristol and London (December 1940). He also painted bombed interiors of the House of Commons (May 1941) and of Bath Churches (April 1942).

Both Sutherland and Piper used theatrical lighting effects. Although Sutherland rarely stayed in London overnight, his destruction scenes are nocturnes. The ruins are illuminated by flashes of explosives or flames. Piper also favoured dark skies "to emphasise the colour of the stones", John Betjeman suggested. Against this darkness, the lighting is stagey (Piper had already worked in the theatre as a designer). A wall, or a section of it, will typically be flooded with light, whilst an adjacent wall will be plunged into gloom. The illumination is arbitrary - it is inconceivable that the ruins could be lit from the deep, oppressive sky. Thake's ruins are viewed in the untroubled light of day. The buildings themselves must convey any overtones of pathos, as Thake's weather
is indifferent to the circumstances below.

As noted, it is doubtful if anything sheltering in Sutherland’s buildings—effects or people—could have survived. This implicit pessimism may have been coloured by Sutherland being told by Kenneth Clark—who worked at the Ministry of Information—just how desperate Britain’s military position was. On the other hand, many (although not all) of Piper’s ruins maintain a romantic, picturesque quality. *All Saints Chapel, Bath* 1942 already appears to have wisteria climbing up and flowering on the severely damaged walls. Its yellow internal walls are reassuring, if anything. Like a contemporary Tintern Abbey, the damaged state was as beguiling as it was distressing. Piper saw the ruin as a Romantic motif. Richard Ingrams defined this linkage:

The spectacle of ruin and decay appeals to the true Romantic partly because such things are inevitable. They are a necessary reminder of the transience of all human endeavors and therefore not a subject particularly for indignation nor sentimentality.66

S. John Woods suggested that Piper "painted in a consciously Romantic manner, believing that the only way for a painter to tolerate war is for him to see the accidental romance in and beyond the horror".57 Certainly some of Piper’s churches, unlike Sutherland’s buildings, imply a prospect of regeneration.

Piper was interested in buildings which bear the decay and abrasions of time, weather and pollution, and also the lesions of man’s neglect. War was just one more adversary, like age and wood worm, to which his beloved architecture fell victim.

Piper preferred ruins that had not been fastidiously tidied up. He admired the Valle Crucis Abbey, near Llangollen, North Wales because decay of the Abbey had been

"sensibly unarrested .... Ash trees sprout from stone work. Rain dribbles from broken 14th C. tracery .... Decaying stairs, broken roofs, iron gates in rooms .... In its present condition (it is) one of the best of ruins".58
This attitude was recognised by critics, and reflected in the titles given to reviews in the Architectural Review of June 1940 and September 1947: "Decrepit Glory" and "Pleasing Decay".

Thake generally omitted all rubble from his buildings. This allowed the remaining walls, blown into distorted and even grotesque shapes, to appear as if they had been carved in that form originally. They become examples of fantastic folly-architecture. Piper admired the insinuation of wild plants into ruins.

I would rather paint a ruined (abbey) half covered with ivy and standing among long grass than I would paint it after it has been taken over by the Office of Works, when they have taken all the ivy off and mown all the grass with an Acto.69

Paul Nash, writing to his wife from the European Front in the Spring of 1917 was also struck by the juxtaposition of flora and war damage. Nash described the enigmatic unreality of the trench landscapes, with flowers blooming on the trench parapets. Burgeoning plant life was concealing the scars that war inflicted on the landscape. If Piper considered the flora-ruins relationship picturesque, Nash considered it incongruous.

Thake's attitude resembled Nash's. Chinese House, Koepang 1945 (Ill.119) is uninhabited and beyond restoration. Yet flora and wildlife had returned.

Red oleanders and birdlife amid the white ruins of the town, and frigate birds still sail in the brilliant blue skies.60

Bombed House, Darwin is accompanied by a similar observation: "some of the ruined buildings are now almost lost in the long grass and pandanus scrub". There may be no sign of a resumption of social normalcy, but nature was regenerating around the destruction, and Thake perceived the irony.

The third key British war artist of architectural ruins was John Armstrong. Thake would have been aware of Armstrong's work, which was reproduced in
Blitz 1942 and The Studio.

In an essay "War Artists at the National Gallery" in The Studio January 1942, Kenneth Clark wrote that a

swing to (an) imaginative approach has been perceptible for some years, but the war has encouraged and developed it by providing subjects stranger than any dream. Houses torn open revealing pitiful intimacies ....

Although no work by Armstrong was reproduced, Clark's phrase "houses torn open revealing pitiful intimacies" precisely describes works by Armstrong, including The Farm in Wales 1940 (Ill.6c) reproduced in Blitz. Armstrong, like Thake, dwelled on the textures and patterns of ruins. He extracted patterns from the building's constructional skeleton revealed when the cladding of stones or slates was dislodged, exposing laths and joists.

The thematically focal element of The Farm in Wales is the bed. Its pivotal role is underscored by at least sixteen beams or joists being aligned so that they pointed at it. The brass bed end is twisted; the mattress is grotesquely bent. A bed is arguably the most intimate object of furniture in a house; its occupant is at his most vulnerable. The collapse of the house onto the bed suggests war's violation of the innocent and the innocuous. That the building had only been a farmhouse reinforces the ruin as an image indicating war's misdirected destruction.

Like Armstrong, Donald Friend's work touched on the tragedy of war's destruction of the fragile harmony of small lives. In 1945, Friend undertook a number of oils and pen and wash paintings which portrayed the bombing and artillery barrages in Lauban and Balikpapan. The town of Victoria, Lauban, which he depicted in The Tour 1945 (Ill.140) was a paradigm of the futility of destruction. In a pre-invasion bombardment of June 11th, all the buildings in the town except for two were so severely damaged that they had to be
demolished by bulldozers. The rubble was used for repairing roads and airstrips. The irony was that, at the time of the bombardment, the Japanese had already evacuated the town.

As Armstrong's paintings had recorded the torn houses "revealing pitiful intimacies", Friend recorded the poignant objects surviving bombardment. In the notes accompanying the painting *Souvenir Hunters in the Buried Mosque 1945*, Friend notes the personal possessions littered around the mosque's collapsed shell.

The roof of the main part of the building had collapsed, the floor was a mass of bricks, rubble, timber and books - among the latter one found such strange neighbours as commercial letters in Malay dated pre-war, children's exercise books scrawled in naive juvenile script with English lessons, essays, drawings and simple sums, and strangest and most unlikely of all, a stained and battered copy of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World.*

This was a subject also reflected in Leonard Woolf's description of his and Virginia Woolf's former Tavistock Square house after it had been hit by a bomb.

It was a curious and ironic sight, for on the vast conical heap of dust and bricks precisely and meticulously perched upright upon the summit was a wicker chair which had been forgotten in one of the upper rooms. Nothing beside remained except a broken mantlepiece against the bare wall of the next door house and above it intact one of Duncan Grant's decorations.

In Woolf's account, it is the surviving remnants of domestic life amid the chaos - the wicker chair and the broken mantlepiece, the equivalents of Armstrong's shattered bed and Friend's stained novel - that elicit pathos.

Thake's ruins are swept clean of rubble, swept clear of the intimate detritus of domestic life, and consequently they resist a sense of pathos.

*John Armstrong's Church Tower, Coggeshall Essex,* also reproduced in *Blitz,* again makes considerable play of the building's interior supporting timber structure. This scaffolding is painted in a major tonal key, while the rest of
the composition is in a minor key. The church's walls and roof are moderately severely damaged. Yet the structure is flawless and unmarked. This is so improbable, it is plausible to interpret it as suggesting that the structural foundations of English institutions will survive such superficial damage as they may sustain during the war. This optimism was repeated in two Armstrong works which Thake would have seen reproduced in *The Studio* of April 1939; *Windowed Raggedness* (Ill.136) which depicts the return of nature to a ruined site, and *Phoenix* (Ill.135) where confident, new architecture rises from the ashes of a bombed building. To the extent that Thake's *Street in Koepang* and *Grecian Darwin* address the theme of societal regeneration, that regeneration is more subtle and certainly more equivocal. Compositionally, *Street in Koepang* recalls Sutherland's *Devastation - East End Street* 1941 (Ill.130) which Thake would presumably have seen in reproduction. Both employ the simple perspective device of a centralised vanishing point. Both place the viewer beyond the street entrance, allowing the side walls of the corner houses to be viewed. In both the houses seem to have been reduced almost to shells, to facades, like film sets.

Sutherland typically sets his scene at night, theatrically and eerily defined by a yellow light in the foreground, and lit by white flares in the rearground. Thake's streetscape of ruins is set in a "heavy, dull day".

Already the Dutch flag flies. Thake apparently considered its presence as significant, as his explanatory paragraph noted "Dutch flag in centre". It is possible that Thake's inclusion of the flag was ironic; the flag pathetically proclaimed Dutch sovereignty over ruins. A related interpretation is that the rubble represented the ruins, the deathknell of European and Japanese colonialism. It is more likely, however, that the apolitical Thake was attracted to the incongruity of the vivid, heraldic banner in a wasteland.
Three curiously patterned stumps occupy the right foreground and overlap the building behind. Their purpose is unclear, but formally they may derive from comparably patterned stumps in *Camouflaged Work Shop*, painted at Gorrie earlier in the month.

*Street in Koepang* stems from a sketch (noted as a "two minute sketch"), about 13.75 x 9 cms, in Sketchbook 5 (N.G.V.). A tracing of the compositional development from sketch to gouache gives insight into Thake’s working method. The sketch includes a flat form passing before the vertical totem on the right. This is omitted from the painting. The tall totem in the centre has been shifted to the left, where it establishes an uneasy relationship with an archway.

The buildings on the right are abutted, becoming a single terrace rather than the original two detached buildings. Thake also eliminated street edges and rubble that figured in the drawing.

This process of consolidation and simplification was foreshadowed in a letter he wrote on September 30th, the day after completing *Chinese House, Koepang*.

> Started work a couple of days ago, but am not satisfied with the results; it seems that everything is so broken up that I’ll have to simplify things a lot more.43

Thake may have drawn a further compositional element from Sutherland’s *Devastation*. On the left side of *Devastation*, Sutherland depicted a frontal expanse of freestanding wall from which all adjacent construction has been shorn. Thake uses an almost identical form in *Bombed House, Koepang*. Compositionally, the shape sits oddly in *Devastation*; it does not relate to the prevailing perspective, nor to the scale and detail of the other standing
architectural elements. Thake, like Sutherland, conceives of it as a flat, two-dimensional streetscape. However, Thake's feeling for dramatic design places it in the absolute centre of the composition, where it acts as a domineering pivot and foil for the surrounding buildings.

Unlike Sutherland's ruins, which were animated by the residual crackle of flames and the intermittent reverberations of collapsing walls, Thake's ruins are absolutely silent. Silence was a state he referred to (although not in relation to buildings) a week after arriving in Darwin.

At a quarter past three this morning we pulled up at the Adelaide River. Then dead silence except for steam hissing from the engine, then an outburst of swearing from one of the trucks about a wheel with (indecipherable) on it. Only sound is the intruder.64

*Bombed House, Darwin*, painted about this time, and the ruin paintings which followed, possessed the same absolute quietude, with undertones of loneliness and abandonment.

After almost three weeks working in and near Koepang, Thake left Timor on October 14th 1945, and returned to Darwin where he would work for a further three and a half weeks before returning to Melbourne. Although linked in mood, compositional differences separate the Koepang and the Darwin ruin paintings. Partly this derives from the more clustered architecture in Koepang, of which Thake wrote:

The houses in the town are all mostly two-storeyed. Some (are made of) stone and plaster, others with hand sawn coral blocks about 4" x 6" x 10".65

Thake depicted the Koepang buildings as attached, part of a total streetscape. The Darwin ruin paintings, on the other hand, tend to be of single buildings, viewed close up. Three are vertical paintings, while all the Koepang ruins are horizontal. The Darwin ruins have the facades cut away, revealing the empty inner rooms. These exposed interiors are either complicated (with a maze of doorways and corridors as in *Bombed House, Darwin* (Ill.122)), or suggest that
the building was once imposing (with impressive steps now ironically leading nowhere, as in *Bombed House, Darwin* (Ill.123)).

*Wrecked House, Darwin* (Ill.125) stands a little apart from the Darwin ruin paintings. Like the rest, it has been stripped of personal effects. However, its fibro walls were used as supports for erotic graffiti, perhaps by the servicemen who remained behind in Darwin. Thake wrote of this work soon after completing it.

I've done a watercolour of a looted house interior. The walls of fibro (are) smashed and what's left (is) covered with crude drawings.66

Two pages of Sketchbook 5, National Gallery of Victoria, bear sketches from which the painting was taken. One page carries the studies of the graffiti: the pipe-smoking profile and the voluptuous nude. Beneath these, Thake recorded a conversation with a bystander which reveals his contempt for the erotic themes of the graffiti.

A. "You don't do any other sketchin's do you?"
B. "What kind?" says I, knowing full well what he meant.
A. "Drawns of blokes and sheilas dancing."

On the opposite page a cartoon has the forms – including the graffiti – laid out in almost exactly the way in which they would appear in the painting. At the base of the page he recorded the wording of a sign outside the ruined house.

Notice.
This building is out of bounds to all troops and civilians.
Trespassers will be severely dealt with.

The graffiti could be interpreted as affirming that life with all its carnal vitality continues, notwithstanding the devastation.

Excluding the graffiti, the work is the most abstract of his ruin paintings. The
fibro, with its torn edges, is frontal, parallel to the picture plane, while the rest of the forms are aligned to a central vanishing point. On the left, the fibro wall is punctured, and the continuation of the room is visible through this hole. The broken window plane admits glimpses of sky and ground through holes. This device of a large frontal form punctured with apertures through which vistas can be seen was commonly employed by Dali, an example of which, *L'Homme Fleur* (Ill.91), Thake would have seen in the Melbourne *Herald* Exhibition of French and British Modern Art 1939, and subsequently reproduced in *Art in Australia* November 1939.

As with *Kamiri Searchlight*, Thake made a copy, a replica of *Wrecked House, Darwin*. The illustrated version, which is probably the original, closely resembles the Art Gallery of New South Wales version. A graffiti drawing of an embracing woman is smiling in the illustration, while she is expressionless in the Sydney version. However, there are no meaningful differences between the original and the replica.

*Grecian Darwin* 1945 (Ill.126) is exceptional in Thake's ruin series in two respects: it is figurative and it is sharply allegorical.

*Grecian Darwin* was painted in November 1945, and is probably the concluding ruin painting. Thake wrote of its context:

The concrete piles of the bombed buildings of R.A.A.F. Darwin, the blue skies and the sun-tanned men playing volley-ball remind me of Greece. Yet the genesis of this painting seems to have occurred two months earlier, on Tuesday September 11th - Thake's first full day in Darwin. In a letter dated that day Thake wrote of seeing, amongst other architectural wreckage, a Greek shop or ice works nearly buried in the tall dead grass and the brilliant cerise bouganvillea. He drew the sign of this Greek shop, and immediately underneath he sketched an arrangement of columns titled *Dead Greece* (Ill.141).
Four days later he elaborated on this image in a sketchbook drawing. In this sketch, a second set of columns have been included in the rearground (and these would be retained in Grecian Darwin). Like Dead Greece, the columns do not stand on a platform base, but rubble is dispersed around the column’s feet.

Two weeks further on, he would note in a journal:

All the houses in Darwin are built on concrete piles about eight feet above the ground for coolness, and the piles that are left standing after the bombing remind me of Greek temples set against a background of deep blue sea and light flowering trees.

Subtle but significant differences of approach separate the initial sketch from the painting. The sketch caps all columns with doric capitals; the painting omits capitals, although the robust, unfluted columns remain doric in character. The drawing’s columns could be taken for marble but for the marginal note identifying them as "cement pillars", and the base of the foreground column shaft from which unfold, like the leaves of a tropical flower, reinforcing rods. These represent the sketch’s only acknowledgement of the column’s being modern in construction. The painting dispenses with the truncated column, but allows reinforcing rods to project from five columns, and permits rib-like reinforcement rods to be exposed in the lower body of a central column.

The truncated column was a common funerary symbol for life’s untimely end. It also mimics the motif of the sawn-off tree stump, a familiar Romantic symbol of death, and one that had been used in that symbolic sense by Paul Nash in Empty Room 1935 (reproduced in Architect’s Journal May 13 1937). A similar stump appears in Nash’s Monster Shore 1939 (reproduced in Eric Newton’s The 1943 Saturday Book 1943).

Nash often employed the device of placing in the foreground a truncated example of a form standing in the middle ground. Thake’s column stump engages that strategy.
In the sketch *Dead Greece*, the bouganvillea grows in profusion near the sea, but the grass near the columns shares their melancholy fate; Thake's marginal note is "dead grass". In *Grecian Athens*, life has returned to the architecture in the form of athletes.

The use of figures, although small, as a significant part of the picture content separates *Grecian Darwin* from the other ruin paintings. However, figures sometimes appeared in his sketchbook drawings. In Sketchbook 3, La Trobe Library, a drawing of Koepang made on October 7th shows figures diving, swimming, and sunbaking, with the severely damaged town in the rear. The figures continue to lead their lives, seeking amusement where possible. This figurative theme was not transposed to the ruin paintings, with the exception of *Grecian Darwin*. This theme of life regathering its momentum in the shadow of recent horror, had been touched on in the early years of the war by British war poet Keith Douglas.

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone, returning over the nightmare ground we found the place again, and found the soldier sprawling in the sun.69

To what extent does *Grecian Darwin* relate to themes and motifs in Surrealist painting and literature? The juxtaposing of the "ancient" columns and the athletes parallels the combination of new and old images particularly evident in the work of Paul Delvaux and de Chirico, who juxtaposed different time periods and contrasted the permanent with the ephemeral. Thake's fusing of doric columns and reinforcing rods, and his linking of Greece and Darwin locates the incident outside specific time and place coordinates.

De Chirico had also been conscious of a poetic character inherent in columns, a character he represented in his plaza paintings of 1910–1915. De Chirico told
of an experience in Versailles early in the decade in which columns figured:

One bright winter afternoon, I found myself in the courtyard of the palace of Versailles. Everything looked at me with a strange and questioning glance. I saw that ... every column ... had a soul that was an enigma.  

The theme of decay and decayed architecture was an important Surrealist topic. Disintegrating buildings, with their suggestions of melancholy and foreboding, had been exploited in Metaphysical painting, by Lurçat and by Dali. Dali's *Suburb of the Paranoic - Critical Town* 1935 (Ill.1), known to Thake through Read's *Surrealism* 1936 had a major, foreground archway whose render was detaching, and whose eroding wall was supported by a crutch. James Gleeson's *We Inhabit the Corrosive Littoral of Habit* 1940 (Ill.142) and his *Structural Emblems of a Friend* (Ill.143) (which Thake would have seen reproduced in *Art in Australia* December-January 1941-1942) both strip render from architectural forms and expose bricks underneath. For Gleeson, the "war-torn brick (is) depicting the chaos of our time". This represented metamorphosis (that key Surrealist subject) through violence; war's destructive forces undermining and transforming the appearance and identity of objects.

Since the early 1920s, André Breton and Louis Aragon had been drawn to the de Chiricoesque sense of mystery produced by the decaying districts of Paris, and this became a thematic thread in Aragon's *Le Peasant de Paris* 1924-1925 and of Breton's *Nadja* 1928. Breton's pamphlet *Introduction to the Discourse on the Paupacy of Reality* written in 1924, just prior to the appearance of his *Surrealist Manifesto*, portrayed a state of destruction which, in its hopelessness, is congruent to Thake's. Breton described a landscape as an "accumulation of ruins so great that we may never get loose".

Three years later, Breton (together with Paul Eluard) returned to the subject of buildings whose occupants had fled. In *L'Immaculée Conception* 1930, a sequence of exhortations were cast, many of which were either nonsensical or
paradoxical. One exhortation called for the reader to "Live in abandoned houses. They have been lived in only by you". This apparent paradox may be applicable to most of Thake's abandoned ruins, as they are damaged to the extent that the signs of previous occupants have been effaced. The exhortation does not hold for Wrecked House, Darwin, where the violating wall inscriptions were persistent testimony to prior occupation.

One recurring characteristic of Surrealist architecture is that it is open and vulnerable to its surroundings. Paul Nash's *Harbour and Room* 1936, known to Thake through reproduction in Read's *Surrealism*, removes from a bedroom an end wall and part of the floor. This allows an interpenetration of the public domain, the harbour, with the hotel room.

The final issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* 1933 published a survey "Sur certaines possibilités d'embellissement irrationel d'une ville" which presented the ideas of various Surrealists to rearrange and alter Parisian monuments, and to turn Paris into a Surrealist city. Paul Eluard predicted that "one day houses will be turned inside out, like gloves". He also considered that "mutilation is indispensable". Thake's buildings are turned inside out to the extent that the interiors are revealed, and rooms normally used for private purposes become theatrical sets which would expose intimate behaviours.

Although there is no documentary evidence to confirm this proposition, it is possible to read Thake's ruined buildings as fantastic constructions - Surrealist architecture. Rendered in Thake's calm and unrhetorical palette, his buildings appear settled, resolved. It is as if they could have been planned or built in their current form, their mutilation either intended or at least accepted as "indispensable".
A painting which closely parallels Grecian Darwin in its addressing the subject of contemporary warfare in terms of ruins and classical references is John Armstrong's Pro Patria 1939 (Ill.134). It was a work Thake could be assumed to have seen through reproduction, as previously noted, in The Studio.

Armstrong had been anguished by the Spanish Civil War**, and Pro Patria may refer to the destruction by shell and bomb in Spain as well as England. The references to Classical civilization are clear. The patriotic title is Latin. The strong shadows, small windows and the infertile soil point to a Mediterranean location. The massive fragment of Classical statuary is indicative of high culture but, like Ozymandias, nothing else remains. The figure, like Thake's, is small, almost impotently so. Wallpaper, like the propaganda posters, peels from the walls, almost certainly influenced by Korda's sets for the film Things to Come. Pro Patria, then, painted in the pessimistic year of 1939, refers not simply to the damage sustained in wartime, but to the tragic toppling of noble cultures through warfare.

Max Ernst was another thematic antecedent. In 1935–1936 he painted a series of ossified cities, including La ville entière 1935/1936. Like most of Thake's ruined towns, Ernst's city is long since abandoned. Wilderness encroaches. The city yields itself up to decay and corruption. Its rituals are now forgotten, its motives misunderstood. Grecian Darwin appears to reflect on the incapacity of man to defend himself (or his culture) against machines. Linking a bombed R.A.A.F. base with (ancient) Greece could be seen as an allusion to a cultural decline initiated not through a waning of creative or intellectual vigour, but through the debilitating exhaustion of the Peloponesian War. Post-devastation life may have returned to "Grecian" Darwin, but it is not life of Periclean grandeur, but the mean and barbaric life of ball games.
Thake stayed in Darwin for sixteen days on his first visit. On September 26th he flew to Koepang, Timor. He would spend eighteen days on Timor. The island provided the subject matter for four paintings of ruins, a plane wreckage-and-figure composition *Japanese Wreckage, Penfoei Airstrip, Timor 1945* (Ill. 144), and a body of drawings. Some drawings were of the Timorese natives, but these were not developed into paintings.

The day before I left Koepang to return to Darwin I spent the day at Baumata village and made a lot of drawings of the natives. Some were dressed in red and white sarongs with a kind of (similar) turban. Thake also undertook a number of drawings of Japanese military and naval prisoners of war who were employed reconditioning the roads and the airstrip at Penfoei, a few miles from Koepang. Thake wrote, describing their arrival each day from their own camp:

before and after work they double around the building (shades of Shepparton) carrying picks, shovels, and one bloke with a box of tools on his shoulder and another with a big bundle of mess tins. These blokes are far from looking starved - in fact they could not look healthier.

Thake's working conditions were demanding; the glare was intense off the white ruins, and he would try to work in the diminishing shade. Here Thake produced a set of eleven crisp, economical line portraits, titled *The Face of Japan* (Ills. 145–147), which portrayed a range of Japanese types. The subjects were "other ranks" and the sitters were not identified. A stylistically related profile drawing depicted a significant military figure: Lieutenant General K. Yamada (Ill.148).

Thake undertook pages of sketchbook studies of Japanese P.O.W. labourers which capture the posture and gait of the subjects with frugal outlines. These provided material from which the free Japanese labourers were extracted for *Japanese Wreckage, Penfoei Airstrip Timor*. 
Thake adopted from George Bell this approach of constructing his paintings from sketches. Bell warned students that when one painted out of doors, everything clamoured for attention and seemed to insist on being included in the composition. Thake saw himself as a "decorator and composer" rather than a direct painter from nature, and he agreed with Bell that working from drawing assisted the process of simplification.

During his war service, Thake filled sketchbooks with a range of subjects. After the war, Thake emphasised the importance of sketches and sketchbooks, not just to the working process, but to allow fleeting events, images or ideas to be grasped. In 1958 he gave a lecture at the Geelong Art Gallery. The theme was his painting *The Wide Boys* 1952, but his views are relevant to his war period.

Ideas and subjects cannot be sought – but are often found in the most unlikely places. By this I mean one can't go out determined to find an idea. Some of my favourite pictures have been the outcome of something seen with what might be termed a "snapshot view". The first, and perhaps the only glance of something strange and unexpected.

It is very often the unlikely or accidental combination ... that acts as a strong spur to the imagination.

Thake's discovery of distorted reflections in a searchlight and in a broken shaving mirror exemplify this inadvertant uncovering of an unsought subject.

Thake expanded on these views a few years later, in a lecture at the Medical Art Society Exhibition at the Victorian Artist's Society.

You should always carry a small sketchbook or at least something in your pocket to draw on, as you can never tell when an idea will present itself and very often ideas turn up in the most unlikely places and you should always be ready for them.

After the (initial) impression has been noted on an envelope, a blank page in a library book, the back of a cigarette packet or whatever's handy, lots of hard work entailing perhaps dozens of sketches and roughs (is) often necessary to bring this first fleeting impression back to life in the form of a picture.
On Timor, Thake's paintings were a continuation of the theme of ruined buildings he had developed in Darwin, with one exception: Japanese Wreckage, Penfoei Airstrip, Timor. Thake described the subject as Japanese P.O.W.s clearing the wreckage of the planes at the airstrip. On October 12th, presumably before executing the painting, Thake undertook line drawings of the P.O.W.s at work (Ill.149). These figures achieve a marked individuality of stance which relates both to the labour being undertaken and to the character of the worker. The poses in Thake's paintings lack this expressiveness. The painting stems from two drawings in Sketchbook V. The initial drawing was very close in design to the painting. The process revealed in the drawings is one of refining the placement of elements. In the painting three main adjustments are made: the plane's wings are raised to the height of the background palms; the figures are surrounded by metal; palm fronds are added.

Beside the second sketch, Thake drew two palm fronds, one narrow and one fan-like (it was the latter he would use in the painting). He sketched a couple of figures in the manner of Illustration 149. He also completed careful studies of the plane's wings. The painting's viewing the subject through an inverted proscenium arch of wreckage recalls the device of looking through a window/threshold employed in Koepang Bay a month earlier.

On October 14th Thake left Timor and returned to Darwin. On November 8th he flew from Darwin by Catalina to Rose Bay Sydney. The next evening he caught the overnight train to Melbourne.

1. Eric Thake, letter to his family, July 24 1945.
2. Eric Thake, letter to his family, July 25 1945.
3. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 1 1945.
4. Ibid.

6. Catalogue of Pictures of Eric Thake, A.W.M.

7. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 9 or 10 1945.

8. At Roy's Bremmer Gallery exhibition in 1930; Wadsworth is listed as owning two works.


13. Eric Thake, lecture to students, National Gallery School Melbourne, May 1959. La Trobe Library.


15. Catalogue of Pictures of Eric Thake, A.W.M.


17. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 13 1945.

18. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 27 1945.

19. Ibid.

20. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 3 1945.


22. Ibid.


26. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 4 or 5 1945.

27. Interview with André Breton by Charles-Henri Ford, *View*, Nos. 7-8, Oct.-Nov. 1941.

28. Catalogue of Pictures, Eric Thake, A.W.M.
29. Ibid.


31. Catalogue of Pictures of Eric Thake, A.W.M.

32. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 1 1945.

33. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 11th, 1945.

34. Ibid.


38. Interview with Peter Pinson, 1986.


40. Jennifer Mann indicated that he owned books on Sutherland and Piper, op. cit.


42. Thake Papers, La Trobe Library.


45. Ibid., p.148.

46. As Thake noted in Catalogue of Pictures of Eric Thake, A.W.M.


51. Graham Sutherland, op. cit.

52. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 11 1945.

53. Julain Andrews, "Graham Sutherland and the War Artists Advisory
Committee", Roberto Tassi, op. cit., p.165.

54. Graham Sutherland, op. cit., p.20.


60. Eric Thake, Catalogue of Pictures, A.W.M.

61. Quoted in Gavin and Colleen Fry, Donald Friend, Currey O'Neil, Melbourne, 1982, p.35.


63. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 30 1945.

64. Sept. 19 1945.

65. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 28 1945.


67. Eric Thake, Catalogue of Pictures, A.W.M.

68. Sketchbook 3 out of 3, Box 5, MS 9826, Thake Papers, La Trobe Library.

69. Quoted in Robert Hewison, op. cit.


71. Quoted in Daily Telegraph, April 27, 1945.

72. André Breton and Paul Euard, L'Immaculée Conception, Editions Surréalistes, 1930.


75. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 28 1945.


77. The five sketchbooks in the National Gallery of Victoria illustrate the span of subjects he ranged over. Sketchbook II 1944 (P/1974) contains mainly figure drawing of R.A.A.F. personnel. Many are of amusing subjects.
the raffle of a pig; S.P. gambling. Other drawings show patients in the R.A.A.F. hospital. Sketchbook IV 1944 (P8/1974) is of various New Guinea subjects, including natives. Sketchbook V (P5/1974) illustrates flights over New Guinea, including air crews at their posts. Other drawings include war-damaged buildings. Sketchbook III (P9/1974) includes botanical drawings and drawings of clouds, the Owen Stanley Range and air ports at night. Sketchbook I 1945 (P10/1974) includes drawings of Central Australia.

78. Eric Thake, text of lecture "The Wide Boys" 1958, La Trobe Library.

79. Eric Thake, text of lecture, early 1960s, La Trobe Library.
ANT HILLS, NORTHERN TERRITORY

Eric Thake arrived at Gorrie, near Larrimah, in the Northern Territory, by road around midday on September 24th 1945. He would stay in Gorrie for fifteen days. It was here, and more particularly at Birdum two kilometres south of Larrimah, that he found the ant hills that would be the subject of Ant Hills, Northern Territory 1945 (Ill.150). In this painting, and in the drawings of ant hills he undertook in sketchbooks and correspondence through August and September, Thake continued his interest in the animation of the inanimate, and in the personification of objects.

This evoking of human form from natural phenomena had been foreshadowed obliquely in two sketchbook drawings of a year before. In July 1944 Thake drew a cluster of tree fern butts he found in Warburton, Victoria. They were tall, triffid-like, standing as if in a community. On the next page a drawing undertaken on the same day gives one tree fern butt a head, body and an arm-like limb.¹

Thake came upon the giant Northern ant hills by chance. On Saturday August 4th 1945, while staying in Alice Springs, Thake was invited on a drive into the surrounding plains. Leaving immediately after lunch, the party drove for about twenty kilometres north of Alice Springs and then turned into the dusty, red earth plain. The area was spotted with grey-green bush and yellow grass. It was rich in kangaroos, which at times surrounded the utility, bounding in their hundreds. Thake's companions chased them, to his disgust. He referred to them with contemptuous irony as "heroes".

They passed many red ant hills, almost as high as a person. Thake noted their
"resembling groups of figures". In narrating the episode to his family, he accompanied the account with a rough sketch showing the ant hills' figurative form. Thake was equally struck by the entrances to the ant nests, which were surrounded by mulga leaf-covered mud ramparts twelve centimetres high designed to keep rain from flooding the ants' tunnels. Notwithstanding this initial interest in ant hills, it seems unlikely that a painting of the subject would have eventuated had Thake not been confronted with an even more evocative array of nests a month later, near Larrimah.

Here, Thake's capacity to categorise forms by shape (no doubt assisted by his interest in spotting and categorising birds, which occupied some of his time over this period) equipped him to divide the ant hills into three subsets:

the pointed (red); the cathedral at Elsey (mostly black); and the rounded (reddish or putty white).

He illustrated these, indicating the characteristic height of each category (Ill.152).

Some of the rounded ones are among the best things I've ever come across. They resemble some extremely good primitive sculpture worn by time, or some very modern stuff that the sculptor has left while he has gone to lunch. They stand amidst the tall dead grass that sighs in the wind. The only other sounds are strange bird calls and a rustle in the dry grass when I disturb a frilled lizard. It's all too good.³

A month after writing this, on Saturday September 4th, Thake drew figurative redish ant hills at Gorrie (Ill.153). The underlying format of this drawing — two single figures and an embracing couple — would be the compositional format of Ant Hills, Northern Territory.

The drawing on the left, discretely titled The Little Queen of the Anthills depicted an ant hill Thake thought resembled a toby jug version of Queen Victoria. Others he saw resembled fat old men with beards. One, three metres high, Thake likened to a tower of whispering children. In a number of groups he imagined he saw his daughter Jennifer — "a still and silent Jenny".⁴
The next morning Thake was driven in a jeep to the "putty coloured" ant hills which dominated the Larrimah area. Thake praised their "lovely impasto surface" and tried to imagine what the ant hills would look like relocated, installed like sculptures in his own garden against a background of trees.

Speaking of these ant hills in 1976 - three decades later - Thake again raised their resemblance to semi-figurative sculpture:

These putty-coloured shapes four or five feet high amongst the waves of dead grass resembled either very simplified ancient sculpture, that had been left and forgotten for centuries, or on the other hand, carvings by Zadkine or Henry Moore - one almost expected to find their chisels and mallets lying about - even though those hills were built up with clay they had more the feeling of carved sculpture.

_Ant Hills, Northern Territory_ was probably painted during this last week in Gorrie. Certainly it is inscribed "Birdum", although it is conceivable that this indicated only the location of the subject and not the place of execution.

If Thake's drawings _The Little Queen of the Anthills_ and _The Lady who Turned her Back_ are amusing but slight, _Ant Hills, Northern Territory_ is genuinely poetic. The central figures interwrap limbs in a manner protective as well as erotic. A child figure appears to be watching the embracing couple, and a female figure strides away. The absence of facial features on these latter players leaves their motives and state of mind opaque, and their relationships with the central figures undefined and ambiguous.

Unlike the drawings, these ant hill/figures are placed within a topographical context - a grassed plain. Thake contrasts the monumentality of the ant hill figures with the grass whose curling blades appear swept about by winds. The grass serves to diminish the disrupting incongruousness which, in Surrealist painting and sculpture, generally accompanies juxtaposition of forms on a
The plane. The grass softens the plane, and permits Thake to evade the problem of contriving feet for the ant hill figures. The figures rise from the ground like Easter Island carvings, and like those carvings they seem engaged on profound but unstated tasks.

Ant Hills, Northern Territory bears congruency to particular imagery in the work of Paris Surrealists, and also to a small set of watercolours by Douglas Annand. These congruencies will now be outlined.

Thake's seeing figures in ant hills entails some characteristics of hallucination. A week before his first recorded encounter with ant hills, he recounted a visual experience of a hallucinatory nature in Central Australia:

On the western side of the road during my walk I encountered some strange "beings" on a steep hillside very dark in colour and with the sun setting behind them. Their upper half appeared to be cows side-on and the lower part looked more like upside down giraffes. A little further down the road was a "creature" with two heads, two bodies and seven legs and a generally horse-like appearance. I don't know what they were; there was no one I could ask.6

In his book Le Paysan de Paris 1926 Louis Aragon wrote of similar hallucinatory perceptions he had experienced when looking both at individual forms and at broad settings. His account kept returning to the theme of the evocativeness of objects and locations in Paris, and their capacity to slip into other identities:

I was staggered beneath the impact of certain places and spectacles, without understanding why. Ordinary objects, no doubt steeped in mystery, could transport me beyond the everyday world .... Objects metamorphosed before my very eyes.

Aragon proceeded to describe a mass of wax which assumed female form. This represents a very close parallel to Thake's depiction of the metamorphosis of the ant hill into female figures.

I recall a shivering lump of wax in the barbershop, arms crossed on its breast, and hair undone, trailing its permanent wave in the water of a crystal goblet.7
In the same book, Aragon described another set of non-human objects assuming human form: a window display of canes mutate into a glowing underwater scene occupied by a singing mermaid.\(^8\)

Thake's finding figures in ant hills also paralleled Ernst's having found figural forms in stones. In 1934, Ernst went on a holiday with Giacometti at the sculptor's house in Maloja. They found stones in the bed of a mountain river that had been polished by natural abrasion. Ernst wrote of these stones:

(\textit{Giacometti and I}) work on granite blocks, large and small, from the moraine of the Forno Glacier. Wonderfully polished by time, frost and weather, they are in themselves fantastically beautiful. No human hand can achieve such results. Why not, therefore, leave the spade work to the elements and confine ourselves to scratching on them the runes of our own mystery.\(^9\)

Ernst carved birds, flora, abstracted figures and biomorphic shapes in very low relief on some of these stones, while retaining and exploiting their shapes, protuberances, textures and veins.

Those stones possessed characteristics which might have been expected to appeal to Surrealists, characteristics shared with ant hills. Firstly, they are inanimate forms shaped over time, suggestive of the potential mutability of all things. Secondly, they assume biomorphic overtones. Like Ernst's minor reshaping of his stones, his "scratching of the runes of our own mystery" was only sufficient to evoke the biomorphic potential. Ernst and Thake were interpreters; the content was latent in and suggested by the material. Thake would have concurred that his attitude to the ant hills equated with Ernst's account of his attitude to the stones: "I was only completing what nature had already made".\(^10\)

\textit{Ant Hills, Northern Territory} had a remote predecessor in Paul Delvaux's \textit{The Break of Day} 1937 (Ill.70) which Thake would have seen reproduced in \textit{The
Studio of August 1938. Delvaux's figures combine animal/vegetable attributes (woman/tree) while Thake's combine animal/mineral attributes (woman/ant hill). But differences remain. Delvaux joins the two almost unrelated components abruptly, in the middle; the female figure suddenly becomes a tree trunk just as a mermaid suddenly becomes a fish at the waist. Thake more subtly fuses the two attributes into a single ambiguous form which reflects characteristics of both human anatomy and ant structures without remaining either.

By 1945, the year of Thake's painting, the "living statue" had become a common Surrealist theme. For example, René Magritte depicted calcified figures, and his La Mémorie 1942 portrays the head of a statue with a wounded and bleeding temple. Ant Hills, Northern Territory could be categorised as an original variant of this Surrealist genre.

Thake's figural interpretation of ant hills was also preceded by Paul Nash's figural treatment of stones and menhirs. Nash had visited the site of the megalithic circle of Avebury in 1933 (although flints had intrigued him since childhood). He called these stones "object-personage" and sought to exalt them to the standing of "principals of imaginary happenings".

Nash similarly animated flints, which he scaled up into megaliths. They became protagonists on a stage where they were at least equal in significance to their environment, or even dominated it (as Thake's ant hills commanded their surroundings). Neither Nash nor Thake would routinely elevate any object, indiscriminately found, to this central role. Nash wrote in The Life of the Inanimate Object 1937 of the qualities found objects had to project:

To attain personal distinction an object must show in its lineaments a veritable personality of its own ... it must be a thing which is an embodiment and must surely possess power.

A Nash landscape which similarly converts natural forms (trees in this
instance) into figurative elements was *Wood on the Hill* 1939 (Ill.154) which Thake would have seen reproduced in the March 1942 issue of *Art in Australia*.

Thake would also have been familiar with James Gleeson's Surrealist *Attitude of Lightning Towards a Lady Mountain* C.1939 (Ill.155) which was reproduced in *Art in Australia* in August 1939. It related to *Ant Hills, Northern Territory* in that the forms standing on a vacant plane are sculpturesque, and are an amalgam of the simplified female figure with a "mountain" made, like ant hills, of earth.

However, the most immediate and direct foreshadowing of Thake's ant hill painting was a small group of works by Douglas Annand. Just as works reproduced in *Douglas Annand* 1944 had anticipated Thake's subsequent paintings of reflections in distorting mirrors and his images of the landscape viewed through the aircraft window, so Annand had found the subject of termite hills before him.

Five of Annand's watercolours and drawings of ant hills of the Cape York Peninsula and Cooktown were reproduced in this book. Two were in colour, which further drew attention to the subject. Annand's descriptions of the ant hills were fundamentally naturalistic. If the middle distance ant hills in *Ant Hills on the Telegraph Line, Cape York Peninsula* recall prehistoric menhirs, there is no evidence that such metaphors were intended by Annand. If the foreground ant hills in *Cooktown* bear the curved forms of figures, Annand did not indicate that such a resemblance was intentional. Indeed it is probable that the curvilinear edges were stylized only to echo the background's curved, vertical mountain.

Ant hills as such did not represent a subject dealt with by European
Surrealists. However massing ants were portrayed in a number of important Surrealist works. As associates of decay and hence metamorphosis they recurred in the work of Dali. They swarm over, and consume, the human bust in Dali's *L'Homme Fleur* with which, as noted, Thake was familiar.

Ants also appear in a novel by Dali's British patron Edward James: *The Gardener who Saw God* 1937. Here, James described the garden of an English lord which had been designed in a Surrealist and Daliesque manner. The garden was to be decorated with artificial ants.

On one occasion (a new foreman) frankly admitted to the head-gardner that he would be intrigued to get an explanation of why two thousand imitation ants ... neatly made of porcelain and realistically painted, had been spread everywhere under the beeches. "I think it's a pretty notion ... that's to say very whimsical – especially when there are plenty of real ants ... already in the garden."¹⁵

In the film *Un Chien andalou* 1928 by Dali and Buñuel, a man stares at his right hand, to find it overrun with ants. Breton, too, used the image of ants.

In *Soluble Fish* 1924:

In a shop window the hull of a superb white ocean liner whose seriously damaged prow is a prey to ants of an unknown species.¹⁶

Although Thake's ant hill-as-figure was an innovative image in Surrealism, the inanimate form purporting to be a figure – the human simulacrum – had been a persistent subject in Surrealist painting and sculpture. The most common image of the inanimate figure was the mannequin. The mannequin had been a recurrent motif in de Chirico's metaphysical interiors. One of these, *The Oracle* 1914 was reproduced in Herbert Read's *Surrealism* 1936, and another *Troubador* 1917 (Ill.157) was reproduced in Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada & Surrealism* of the same year. The mannequin also figured prominently in the official organ of the Paris Surrealist Movement *La Révolution Surréaliste*. The first issue of this journal, December 1924, contained a series of variations on
the theme of the mannequin. A mannequin seated at a desk, writing (titled L'écriture automatique) illustrated the cover of issue number 9-10, October 1927. Headless dummies decorated the interior of the Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes, which was the Parisian Surrealists official "office" in 1924-1925.

The 1938 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme at the Galerie Beaux Arts in Paris showed a wide expression of this Surrealist interest in quasi-humans (mannequins, automatons and other human simulacra). For example, George Hugnet's The Table is Set was a table draped in black velvet out of which emerged the upper portion of a female figure, made in wax. Breton exhibited a cabinet which rested on four striding legs. In 1939, Dali decorated two windows of the New York shop Bonwit Teller with mannequins and an astrakhan fur-lined bath.

The theme of the mannequin and human simulacra was also touched on in Surrealist writing. Benjamin Péret had a fictional character say of automatons:

These mobile sphinxes have not ceased posing enigmas to mankind.17

A year later, in 1934, René Creval described the mannequin as a liberated, mythical, symbolic, erotic, oneiric figure:

Her dreams will lead her to the very secret of man.18

In Un Chien andalou 1928, Luis Buñuel addressed the ambiguity of the human/non human nature of a figure-like form. A barebacked woman was sited in the park. She was so still, so immobile, that the question of whether she is a woman or a statue is left unresolved.

Thake's conjuring with the contradiction of being simultaneously humanoid and ant hill, then, was in harmony with the Surrealist motif of the human simulacrum. However, Thake's ant hill figures conjured with another contradiction too: the dichotomies of stability and immobility. This represented
a minor Surrealist theme that can be traced back to Surrealist precursor
Guillaume Apollinaire. Apollinaire based much of his imagery upon
contradictions of the laws of nature and of grammar and vocabulary. In his
*L'Enchanteur pourrissant* 1909 he wrote of the flight of the immovable:

Béhémoth went away without ceasing to be still.19

Other proto Surrealist writers also explored the theme of mobile forms or
people who are rendered motionless. Pierre Reverdy, in *Les Epaves du ciel*
1924, offers objects and beings the prospect of flight through open doors and
windows, but immobilised them.20 Jules Superville wrote of objects whose very
essence and function requires motion, but which are stilled: a lamp that will
not be lit; a bell that will not sound.

While *Ant Hills, Northern Territory* was the most striking example of
personification imagery in Thake's war period, there were other instances,
especially in his correspondence. Some were literary. In January 1945, he wrote
of a sun-bird on Morotai curiously surveying his tent: "a yellow-breasted sun-
bird, a mite of about four and one half inches came in and inspected the tent
yesterday".21

The description of mechanical forms was also enhanced through personification.
Recounting his rail journey north from Adelaide, Thake wrote:

After the old train stops it seems to go to sleep.22

More often the personification imagery was visual. In an amusing sketch sent
to his family from Alice Springs, the pun centred on portraying a butcher bird
as a meat vendor (Ill.158).23

On January 9th 1945, the day he arrived in Noemfoor, Thake was amazed at
the seething field of hermit crabs on the beach (Ill.159). He noticed that they
grouped with others of approximately the same size and colour. Transposing these circumstances into human perspective, Thake imagined them as principals in the conferences between Churchill, FDR and Joe in such places as Yalta. But these must be known as "Kamiri Conference".

Ant Hills, Northern Territory, then, is one of the most obviously Surreal works of his war period. Its underlying subject is the interpenetration of the conscious and subconscious worlds, the intermingling of the domains of the seen and the imagined. Thake deconstructs the codes that dominate the processes of perception and that determine the manner in which the world is looked at.

1. Drawings of July 12 1944, Sketchbook II.
2. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 1945.
3. Ibid., Sept. 3 1945.
5. Notes from recorded talk with James Mellon, Dec. 17 1976, La Trobe Library.
8. Ibid., pp.15-18.


22. Eric Thake, letter to his family, July 1945.

23. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Aug. 1 1945.
Although airborne motifs and the theme of flight were recurrent subjects of Thake prior to his appointment, only one painting during his service deals directly with the subject of flight: Koepang Bay 1945 (Ill.160).

Thake had driven into Darwin in the early evening of September 10th 1945. He slept fitfully during the next two nights, troubled about the direction his next works should take, mulling over possibilities.1 This unease, and the concomitant sleeplessness, were resolved on September 12th when he flew to Koepang, Indonesia.

The flight was a long one. It left 43 Squadron, Doctors Gully, Darwin at 8.00 a.m., and arrived at Koepang Bay at 11.45 a.m. Thake was only on the ground for seventy five minutes, but he used this time to complete some drawings of Koepang port. Here, he recalled, Captain Bligh had landed after his harrowing open boat trip from Tahiti. The precinct was now a shambles of roofless, crumbling walls. This, however, was a subject he would pursue later, when he returned to Koepang at the end of the month. Thake flew back to Darwin that same afternoon, with some rough pencil notes he had made as the Catalina banked and circled the bay above the invasion fleet. These he developed the next day into the painting Koepang Bay – his only painting about the nature of flying as experienced from the plane itself.

Thake had been attracted to the image of the view from an aeroplane window as far back as December 13th, 1944 – nine months earlier. He was then flying from Brisbane to Townsville on what was the first flight of his first tour. It
was also, probably, his first flight ever. Thake's notebook drawing of the flight, *Trip to Townsville 1944* (III.161), has the wing of the R.A.A.F. C.47 occupying a large part of the window view, surrounded by fragments of cloud and island. A week later, on his next (i.e. second) flight, he drew *First Sight of New Guinea 1944* (Ill.162). Other drawings of views from plane windows figure in Sketchbook 1, *Charterville, Air Drawings, Central Australia* in the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.

A common compositional thread running through these drawings is the positioning of the plane's wing in the foreground. Thake explored a variety of locations for the wing, *First Sight of New Guinea* being one of the most dramatic prior to *Koepang Bay*. The wing is set at an angle which converges with the line of the landforms, in contradiction to the foreshortened angles of the window. The engine cowling of this U.S.A.F. C.47 rises like a metallic figure peering in the window. As in all Thake's drawings, the wing is viewed from above.

In *Koepang Bay*, by contrast, the wing is viewed from below, and it cuts diagonally into the view of the bay and shore. This theatrical placement of the wing was actually realistic; the Consolidated Catalina, a large, slow, long-distance search and reconnaissance plane, did have a high wing configuration.

A study for this wing survives, in Sketchbook 5. It was obviously the model for *Koepang Bay*, being ruled up into a nineteen by eight square grid for transfer to a larger format. Three changes were made in the course of the transference. Three wires stretched from the wing were omitted from the painting. Secondly, one of two stanchions supporting the wing was omitted. Both of these omissions lend the wing a more solid, monolithic character.
Finally, and most surprisingly the painting is an enantiomorph of the study—the wing is mirror-reversed; in the drawing it descends from the upper left hand corner. This transfer may have been to allow the land mass and wing to collide and interact, rather than allowing the landforms to be overlapped and concealed by the wing.

The wing's colour is indicated in the sketchbook as "blue black". This is modified to ochre-black in the painting to better distinguish the wing from the blue sea mass.

The wing in Koepang Bay exploits the patterning of the landing flaps, and this interest in the geometric patterns of the wings is reflected in the various plane-window drawings, too. In these drawings, Thake crisply indicates rondels, camouflage designs, metal sheet edges and lines of rivets.

Images depicting the sensation of flight were rare in Australian art and uncommon in European art. Nevinson was perhaps the first major painter to address the theme of war in the sky and to site the viewpoint of the conflict within the plane itself. From a Paris Plane (Ill.163) uses the composition format that Thake would use in his drawings: a landscape viewed over part of the plane's fuselage and/or wing. Thake would almost certainly have seen this work reproduced in the October 1930 issue of *The Studio,* and it was reproduced again in December 1942, prior to Thake's enlistment. Nevinson's composition, as would Thake's, combines landscape and seascape, but places the viewer above the sea, underlining that this is a view which could only be secured from a plane (and not from a mountain). While Thake plays up the serpentine wakes of manoeuvring ships, Nevinson, too, makes play of the rhythms of the sea, setting them against the angularity of the architecture.
If there is a material difference, it lies in Nevinson’s futurist use of lines and light and shadow slivers to break the plane frame into a dynamic pattern suggestive of force and energy. The cityscape is also depicted in the splintered, misaligned planes of the futurists. This conveys the sense of movement of both plane and landscape. Such an impression of movement did not interest Thake; he treated flight imagery, like most of his imagery, as fixed, poised and frozen.

Richard Carline, a British O.W.A. in W.W.I (Ill.177) and John Goodchild, whose O.W.A. postings included the South Pacific area in 1945 (Ill.164), both employed Thake’s device of viewing the landscape over the plane’s architecture. A prime difference between their work and his lay in Thake’s contrasting the rigid, mechanical form of the plane with nature beyond, while their semi-impressionist styles tended to knit the two elements together. In Koepang Bay, Thake also used atmospheric perspective – muting the definition of the distant landscape – to distinguish the near- and rear-grounds. This coincides with the Romantic tradition which often depicts the palpability of what is near (the plane wing, in Thake’s instance) against the remoteness, the intangibility and sublimity of the weather or landscape in the distance.

Curiously, some of the best depictions of aerial combat in World War II were done by an artist who had never flown: Paul Nash. Nash had suffered from a debilitating respiratory condition, and was informed by the Air Ministry in 1940 he was "temporarily unfit for flying as a passenger". In 1941, bad weather forced an unofficial attempt at passenger flight to be abandoned. Nash’s health deteriorated further, and he had to settle for referring to illustrations in the journals *Flight* and *Aeroplane* and material from the Photographic Division of the Ministry of Information supplemented by his own photographs and sketches made at aerodromes.
Target Area: Whitley Bombers over Berlin 1941 (I11.165) is representative of the watercolours he developed from supplied documentary material. Nash portrayed the disorienting visual cacophony of the air raid: light shafts, explosions, forms fragmented by light and shadow, landforms transformed to confusing patterns. Nash’s work remains as imaginative construction of what wartime flight might resemble; Thake once again taking actuality as a pivot, depicts how visually extraordinary the experience of flight really is.

Nash’s painting was reproduced in the War Artist’s Advisory Committee’s War Pictures at the National Gallery 1941 and in colour in Vogue March 1942, but if Thake saw it he was uninfluenced by it. However he was almost certainly influenced, at least in his drawings, by a pencil drawing by his friend Douglas Annand, reproduced in Douglas Annand: Drawings and Paintings published in 1944. Annand’s service between 1941 and 1944 as a camouflage officer accredited to the R.A.A.F. took him to New Guinea, and on a duty flight he sketched Travelling Steerage on a Fortress 1942 (I11.166). It combines the ingredients that Thake would sharpen, refine and accent in his drawings two and a half years later: the adjacent plane body; the distant landscape and cloud. Annand’s drawing is unnecessarily muted and hesitant, it lacks Thake’s acute design sense, his biting line and his clarity. Yet Annand’s drawing seems to have offered Thake a schema on which he would elaborate.

Thake did not particularly like flying but, as his daughter Jennifer Mann put it, "it gave him an opportunity to observe the world from another angle, which he found exciting". His use of the plane as an elevated viewing platform had been preceded by the commercial art poster. Cassandre’s adoption of extreme viewpoints has been noted, but posters of the 1930s commonly used exaggeratedly high viewpoints, yielding panoramic views of seascapes and
The assumption of spectacular viewpoints was not a common Surrealist ploy; it would have been considered too contrived, too "artistic". Luis Buñuel, for example, detested unusual angles. As he told François Truffaut:

I sometimes work out a superb and clever shot with my cameraman; we polish everything up, we are finicky, and when it comes to shooting we guffaw and destroy everything so as to shoot simply, with no camera effects.\(^7\)

Still, the aerial view gave Thake a new stock of images. As he wrote on the evening of his return flight to Koepang:

The Catalina is a great plane for sight seeing - slow, graceful and doesn't fly over about 2000 feet and came home at about 600 feet. All this to give me a chance to see the wildlife.\(^8\)

Thake made frequent references in his correspondence to the forms, patterns and colours the aerial viewpoint made available to him. Often the descriptions were accompanied by drawings.

As we flew low over the reef I could see schools of silvery fish. The reefs look wonderful from the air - pale brown with huge lacy scallops of yellowish coral just under the water and waves slowly breaking over them looking like torn white lace curtains.\(^9\) (Ill.167).

In the same letter Thake described a visual paradox, an ambiguity, visible from the air as he flew over Bathurst Island.

The patterns and colours of the mud flats gave the appearance of very high cliffs and yet it is probably only 2 or 3 feet in height from the water. (Ill.168).

Thake was also interested in the sea's wave patterns viewed from the air:

We left Townsville in the dark and day was just breaking as we crossed the Barrier Reef. It must have been full tide as there was not much movement of water, only a few waves breaking in a lazy, sort of way.\(^10\)

He was fascinated by the patterns that were formed on the sea surface by birds and huge sea snakes. On the flight returning from Koepang, he saw the surface trails of both:

There were two greenish birds that left a long 'take off' wake but at 600 feet they were still a long way beneath us. The most interesting things
to my mind were the sea snakes; even at this height they must have been very big - pale yellow and like earthworms wriggling along the surface. It is highly possible that these bird and snake wakes contributed to his inclusion of the curling ship wakes in the painting of the next day.

Groups of sharks were also commonly spotted from the Catalina, and on this return flight from Koepang the crew fired on them.

After seeing some schools of sharks they had a go at them with the two machine guns. Whether any were hit I don’t know, but the shooting and the ricocheting of the tracer bullets was worth seeing. Some would hit the water and bounce leaving a thin blue smoke trail.\textsuperscript{11}

Thake witnessed a similar spectacle on his subsequent returning flight from Koepang, six weeks later. He was again visually impressed by the tracer shells.

It was a lovely sight, with the bullets sending up great plumes of white foam, the ruby red of the tracer bullets as they ricochet from the waves and the greenish white of the great sharks as they rolled about on the surface.\textsuperscript{12}

Thake, then, was clearly excited by the formal properties of the landscape viewed from the air, and the visual spectacle of aeroplane armaments being engaged. It remains inexplicable that only one painting was developed from the drawings these promising themes initiated.

\textbf{THE MOTIF OF THE WINDOW IN THAKE’S AERIAL DRAWINGS AND ITS PLACE IN SURREALISM.}

In one important respect, Thake’s aerial drawings differed from Koepang Bay. The drawings almost invariably incorporated, even emphasised, a porthole/window frame.

The device of depicting an interior scene and an exterior scene (usually a landscape), frequently used in Western Art from the Renaissance, was bestowed with particular meaning in the Romantic movement. Lorenz Eitner’s study "The
Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism" 1955 assessed the motif of the meditative figure at the window in the visual arts since 1810. The "meditative figure" in Thake’s drawings is implied rather than depicted, but Eitner’s account is still germane.

Through (the window), nature, the world, the active life beckons, but the artist remains imprisoned, not unpleasantly, in domestic smugness. The window thus illustrates perfectly the themes of frustrated longing, of lust for travel or escape which ran through romantic literature .... This juxtaposition of the very close and the far away adds a peculiar tension to the sense of distance.¹⁴

Just as conventional formats were parodied by the Surrealists, so there are aspects of Thake’s drawings and painting that are at variance with Eitner’s analysis. While Thake may have been excited by the new visual perspectives that flight opened up to him, his porthole drawings refer to the military circumstances of the flight (through roundels, etc.). This denies any sense of viewing the panorama from a position of "domestic smugness". At the time of this work, Thake had no "frustrated ... lust for travel", indeed he had never previously travelled so extensively, nor would he again. However, Thake did extract tension through "the juxtaposition of the very close and the far away" in these drawings and painting as he had in works of a decade earlier.

An important, early window painting by Thake was Signs and Signals, Bass Straight 1935 (Ill.56). A tarpaulin, resembling a curtain, is pulled back to reveal an exterior seascape. The view includes a lighthouse, which projects its warning over the deceptively calm "leaden sea".¹⁵ Inside and outside are linked in that both are dominated by communication instruments: the outside by the lighthouse beam, the inside by the signalling flags, speaking tubes and brass telegraph. The stillness inside is reflected in the becalmed sea, although clouds congregate over the lighthouse and blackness encroaches upon the island, heightening the undercurrent of danger and apprehension.
Inside Looking Out 1934 (Ill.89) presents a window surrounded on three sides by curtains. These curtains, serving as a frame, are patterned with a spot motif, paralleling the line of spots of the rivets/screws surrounding the window of Trip to Townsville. The wings of the butterfly immediately outside the window of Inside Looking Out are decorated with rondures, paralleling the roundel on the wing immediately outside the window in Trip to Townsville.

Flight 1934 (Ill.176) depicts forms passing through the window, unlike the wartime drawings where the window planes are not breached. This painting views the window from a sharply oblique angle, which imposes upon it the exaggerated foreshortening of First Sight of New Guinea.

The window, then, plays the role of a threshold, of a portal. The motif of the window had been used in such a sense by the Symbolists of the 19th C. Stéphane Mallarmé, for example, used the window as potent metaphor in Les Fenêtres. In this work, a dying man imagines the window to represent a release from the oppression and claustrophobia of his enclosed space. The window's access to sun, cloud and sky would offer him, he erroneously imagined, the possibility of metamorphosis or release.16 The views of the sublime in Thake's window drawings were also undermined, in his case by the symbols of warfare: the roundel on the wing or the manoeuvring of distant warships.

The Surrealists used closed, open, and ajar doors as recurrent motifs, but the window was seen as an even more potent image, yielding more meanings and paradoxes. The window was used as a Surrealist motif allowing glimpses onto the fantastic, and through which the bizarre can penetrate the space of the viewer. It was transparent, and thus admitting of visual access, but still, being glass, represented a barrier. It admitted interchangeability of reality between
its two sides. The protagonist in de Chirico’s novel *Hebdomeros*, for example, viewed the reality outside the window only to mourn that it, too, "was still only a dream".¹⁷

A related Surrealist window motif in both painting and literature has a figure witnessing an event though a window, then penetrating that window and emerging into a changed domain. For example, the protagonist in Herbert Read’s *The Green Child* 1938 passes through a window into a room of fantasy to rescue a woman who was being tortured. This incident, which combines the absurd and the terrible and reconciles them into a plausible if fantastic sequence, is inherently Surreal.

A window image congruent to Read’s was described in André Breton’s *Manifesto of Surrealism*. Breton related that one evening, with sleep approaching, a phrase impressed itself on him: "there is a man cut in two by the window". The phrase was accompanied "by the faint visual image of a man walking cut half way up by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body".¹⁸

A major Surrealist theme related to windows serving as a linkage, as a reconciling junction between images that were disjunctive in nature or disruptive in scale. The window implies the two diametrically opposed domains are related or connected. For instance, Magritte’s *La reconnaissance infinie* 1933 (Ill.169), which Thake would have seen reproduced in Read’s *Surrealism* 1936, posits forms outside the window/portal being of vast scale. The window reconciles the disjunctive image sizes, implying both are plausible. Thake’s plane window drawings also make play of the juxtaposition of large forms viewed close to, and forms viewed from a high angle and at a vast distance. The size differences may not be exaggerated (as they are in Magritte), but they are so considerable as to become disjunctive.
An alternative function of the window in Surrealism was to permit introspective discovery. The window in these works is not for outward viewing, but for gazing into the room. At the window is the face of a witness/spectator/voyeur who views the fantastic or macabre event being played out inside the room. The spectacle of this tableau could be interpreted as examining the images/longings/fears of his own subconscious mind. Far from using the window as the symbol for introspection, Thake's war time window drawings and pre-war window paintings could be interpreted as metaphors for Thake's detachment; the window pane allowed visual access to the view's peculiarities without being touched by or subsumed into them. This quarantining of the viewer from the view is emphasised in the plane-window drawing on page 3, Sketchbook 1 (N.G.V.) where rivulets of water or condensation track horizontally across the face of the window, reasserting the barrier between inner space and the "out there".

Breton used window imagery comparable to Thake's, an example figuring in Les Champs magnétiques 1919:

A window opens over the heart to reveal an immense lake. Here reddish brown dragonflies, sweet smelling like peonies, settle at noon.19

Both Breton and Thake present the window opening onto and revealing one of nature's incomprehensible faces, at variance with the mundane circumstances on the artist's side of the window.

A fundamental premise of Surrealism was that it proposed a reconciliation between the ostensibly antithetic aspects of experience. Surrealism also held that "the interior world and the depths of the unconscious" and "the external world, the conscious surface" were inherently unified. Breton reiterated in the American Surrealist journal VVV (1942-1944) that Surrealism worked towards a synthesis, a resolution of the apparent contradiction between internal and
external reality. This resolution could only be realized when dream and reality, or the fantastic and the unremarkable, were recognised as one continuity. Witnessing an event/action/panorama through a window frame was a motif the Surrealists - and to a degree Thake in Koepang Bay - employed to suggest this moment of fusion or continuity between the two domains.

THE MOTIF OF THE CLOUD IN THAKE'S AERIAL DRAWINGS AND ITS PLACE IN SURREALISM

A curious facet of Koepang Bay is that it largely dispenses with one of the prime thematic components of Thake's aerial drawings: clouds. Clouds played an important role in the drawing First Sight of New Guinea. In the sketchbook in which he drew the work, he wrote of the coastline of New Guinea as he approached it at 7.20 a.m. on December 20th 1944. Thake made particular reference to the clouds.

The sea in the foreground was a very deep blue gradually getting lighter towards the sky and melting into the mountains. A big pink anvil cloud stood up on the mountains and cheeky pink ones on the right. In the foreground were little white ones like a crazy pavement leading to Port Moresby.

In a letter written shortly after arriving in New Guinea, Thake told of an impressive sunrise in which clouds played a central role.

When the sun had risen, I saw one of the most magnificent sunrises that I ever hope to see; great columns of cumulus piled on cumulus in a pearly golden light, and the sea could only be recognised by the tiny golden lights far below.

The illustration which accompanied the account (Ill. 170) showed that it was the clouds, their massing, and their catching and filtering of the sunlight that formed the spectacle.

Clouds continued to figure in Thake's account of his activities. On occasions, they were associated with astonishing visual phenomena:

Sometimes flying through the clouds a small rainbow would encircle the
shadow of the plane.

Thake also described them in lyrical or dramatic terms

The whole sky packed full of towering cumulus and bathed in a yellow glaze.\footnote{23}

Clouds contributed to make his departure from New Guinea as stirring as they had made his arrival.

We escaped from New Guinea through a cloud valley and looking back saw a beach hung with wave curtains and white clouds sweeping up onto the hills, which were capped with a long thin line of tight creamy cumulus.\footnote{24}

For all this appreciation of the form and theatricality of clouds, they play little part in his official war paintings. Koepang Bay places a single, uncomplicated white cloud behind the wing, but most paintings ignore the sky and clouds as participants in the subject. Thake's skies were usually so uneventful that the weather is not identifiable. The skies serve as emotionally neutral backgrounds against which the objects acted out their scenarios.

Surrealists were equivocal about the significance of clouds. The management of clouds as indicators of weather would have been considered trivial; weather was transient and superficial. De Chirico and Wadsworth painted skies free of turbulence; they did not wish to distract from or compromise the objects, and the mood they would establish.

Paul Nash, conversely, did employ clouds which reflected the mood of the rest of the painting, or which entered into an interplay with the objects beneath. Clouds were dominant in at least four paintings in Herbert Read's Paul Nash 1944 which Thake would have seen.

In The Menin Road 1918 (III.60), solid clouds emit two shafts of light which cut through the floating smoke. Landscape from a Dream 1938 (III.83) uses clouds to differentiate the mirrored (imaginary) space from the actual
landscape. The reflected clouds are crisp, horizontal, aligned; the material clouds are soft, diffuse, diaphanous. *Chilterns Under Snow* 1923 uses two main elliptical clouds, tilting against each other, to echo the forces, mounds, and fields that are pressing against each other in the landscape.

During W.W.II, Nash undertook a large number of cloud studies (Ill.171) and portrayed clouds metamorphosing into flowers and heads, as in *Cumulus Head* 1944 (Ill.172).

Nash also became conscious of clouds as sanctuaries for aeroplanes, or as lairs or safe houses from which they could emerge and strike. He used heavy storm clouds to register a sense of threat, and cloud-banded skies to carry an inference of freedom.

Dali and James Gleeson also used clouds to suggest turbulence, forces beyond the control of man and beyond his comprehension. Dali's *Suburbs of the Paranoic-Critical Town* 1935 (Ill.1), with which Thake was familiar, depicted a mass of shredding cloud in an otherwise clear sky. This cloud mass contributed to the ominous sense of the impending arrival of some condition or catastrophe which would shatter forever the eerie stillness of the town. Dali's *Melancholia* or *Portrait of Clare* 1942 (Ill.173) uses clouds in a similarly theatrical sense.

James Gleeson painted skies of strong tonal gradations, and his clouds were correspondingly dramatic. They tended to be very thin, almost two dimensional - resembling smoke or vapours blown into agitated eddies. Bernard Smith wrote of a characteristic 1943 painting:

> the sky has been portrayed with the same pathetic turbulence with which El Greco invested his view of Toledo.25

Thake's drawings of clouds were rendered in a linear manner, in terms of clear profiles. This factor, buttressed by Thake's preoccupation with design, resulted...
in a concentration upon the weight and shapes of the clouds, their edge characteristics, their relationship to landscape shapes and their resemblance to other objects.

In contradistinction to the fantastic cloud massings of Dali and Gleeson, Magritte used commonplace cloud formations to heighten the ambiguity of other, solid forms. In *L'avenir des statues* 1935 (Ill.174) he overpainted a plaster bust of Napoleon with clouds and blue sky. This calls the solidity of the bust into question, as it assumes some of the weightlessness of the clouds. Similarly in *Les marches de l'été* 1938 (Ill.175) Magritte passes clouds before and through massive stone blocks in the sky, making the sky more oppressive and more remote from habitual appearance.

Clouds also figured in Surrealist literature, although they could not be considered a major motif. In *The Immaculate Conception* 1930 André Breton and Paul Eluard describe clouds and horizon lines as functioning in a condition of tension: "the horizon tries to avoid the clouds".²⁶ Breton and Eluard proceed to refer to clouds in metaphoric terms, as Thake had in *First Sight of New Guinea*:

> before I fall asleep, I have counted clouds and clouds of chariots full of beets for the sun."²⁷

The cloud motif recurs in Breton's writings, often in the conventional sense of an impediment, an intimidation or an ill omen, as in "(Man) is still his own master, despite the old clouds which pass and his blind powers which encounter obstacles".²⁸ In a similar vein, Breton uses clouds as agents of obscurity:

> we are carrying on an arduous exploration into dark continents. Our aim is to break through the clouds that envelop it."²⁹
The image of unusual cloud formations was employed in Luis Buñuel's scenario for his surrealist film *L'Age d'Or* 1930. Sequence 97 commences:

Close up of a mirror that reflects neither the woman nor the room, but a beautiful sky with oval clouds, largely drifting by in the sunset. In the foreground, the dry silhouette of a tree in the wind.30

The mirror images desire, it presents the mental meanderings of the woman seated before it, whose lover has been arrested. The drifting clouds contribute to the mood of a daydream, but they are not significant symbols.

Clouds, then, represent a motif which is exploited intermittently in Surrealism.

Where Thake portrayed clouds in his pre-war work, as in *Happy Landing* 1939, they were stylized or cursorily depicted. His wartime involvement with clouds as a subject, at least in drawings, was due to the new experience of plane flights throwing him into close contact and confrontation with them. Moreover, the tropical weather patterns presented cloud conditions more theatrical than Thake was accustomed to in Melbourne. He wrote from Port Moresby in December 1944 that "the wonderful skies" were part of an "absolutely paradoxical inspiration".31 A year later, near the end of his service, Thake was still excited by the spectacle of clouds, describing the "magnificent displays" of lightning and rain clouds massing as subjects "I must have a go at when I return home".32 However, *Koepang Bay* remained his only aerial view and cloud painting.

It is understandable that Thake would have been thematically attracted to the war-damaged buildings of Koepang and Darwin with which he was confronted after completing *Koepang Bay*. After all, these ruins offered bizarre subjects richly annealed with emotional depth. But his failure to return to the subjects of clouds, promisingly explored in the drawings, or aerial views, treated with accomplishment in *Koepang Bay*, is perplexing.
1. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Sept. 1945.

2. Jennifer Mann, letter to Peter Pinson, October 1986. Mrs Mann was "not aware" of Thake having flown before.

3. On page 3, Sketchbook 1, the rear of the wing is placed vertically on the left side of the window; on page 19, Sketchbook 1 the front of the wing is placed vertically on the right side of the window.


10. Ibid., Dec. 1944.

11. Ibid., Sept. 12, 1945.

12. Ibid.


23. Eric Thake, Sketchbook letter op.cit.

24. Ibid.


27. Ibid. p.55.


32. Eric Thake, letter to his family, Nov. 11 1945.
THAKE AS DISTANCED OBSERVER

Was Thake's war art reflective of, or shaped by, his character? A common theme running through descriptions of Thake's personality was his quietness and his shyness. This had blighted his time as a student at the National Gallery School when he was about eighteen. His classes were miserable for him:

I hardly knew a soul and was mostly too shy to speak to many of the other boys.¹

He had avoided the School's "Waddy Club" room,

shyness rather than the sixpenny joining fee keeping me away. I hardly ever spoke to anyone unless they spoke to me first.²

Graham E. King, who had also been a student of Bell, had maintained contact with Thake in part through the Australian Print Council of which King had been a Founding Member and Honorary Secretary. He described Thake as "shy, withdrawn".³

Pollie Pike, a close friend, alluded to this sense of Thake being removed from life's cut and thrust in a catalogue introduction she wrote for his exhibition "Eric Thake's Animals" 1977-1978.⁴ A typed manuscript of the essay was in Thake's possession. Presumably he had been given it prior to publication, and had not disputed its content. Pike wrote:

Although like many of his generation, modelled in the cradle of conformity, he has emerged as a rare "animal", difficult to catch sight of (except at feeding time) as he roams the Zoo fields, Pastures and Docks with his sharp eyed Penetrating Pencil ....⁵

Thake greatly valued quiet and tranquil surroundings, too; this is perhaps an unexpected quality in an Official War Artist. In late July 1945, on his second tour of duty, Thake spent six days in Adelaide before continuing north. The
qualities of Adelaide that he found admirable give insight into his reserved character:

I like Adelaide very much - plenty of open space and a nice quiet city-orderly queues waiting for the buses.6

French Surrealism, emerging as it had from Dada, was possessed of an involvement in social as well as aesthetic provocation. It is inconceivable that key French Surrealists would have found a place likeable because it was a "nice quiet city" with "orderly queues".

Di Crellin, who worked at Paton Advertising contemporaneously with Thake in the 1940s, described him as not mixing to any extent within the firm. Yet, just as he revelled in the opportunity his war artist appointment gave him to encounter novel visual phenomena, so he seems to have cultivated at least superficial acquaintances during his tours of duty with people from backgrounds vastly alien to his. For example, in the afternoon of July 29th, the train carrying him north to Alice Springs paused in the middle of a red spinifex plain. Nearby was a drovers' camp of camels, horses, and young aborigines packing up to leave. Before reboarding the train, Thake sought out and spoke with the head drover, and his brief account of the conversation suggests a genuine interest in assessing the broad essentials of people's character:

The boss told me they's come in from Henbury 180 miles away; he was a great big Aussie of the Black Country - huge shoulders and seemed a good chap in absolute control of everything.7

Thake also enjoyed being swept up in the comradeship and bonhomie of total strangers in wartime. He wrote of an encounter on this trip to Alice Springs:

The three chaps I share the carriage with have brought enough food to last them for days and when I offered to make a contribution they would not hear of it at all. They opened one kit-bag last night and it poured forth like a vast cornucopia - 4 long salami sausages, one half doz. small pink ones, 2 doz. oranges and mandarines, one half doz. bottles of beer, pine apples, 1 bottle of whisky and a bag of nuts, a large bag of lollies, 1lb. butter, 3 loaves of bread.8
Nevertheless, the figures who appeared in his paintings were not these "characters"; it was the eccentricities of the inanimate world that Thake used as subject matter. Thake's daughter Jennifer Mann denied that he stood aloof from circumstances: "he was certainly not detached". Still, Thake confessed to art critic Clive Turnbull "I'm a bit of a hermit, you know". And Graham King considered Thake to be fundamentally an onlooker:

He was an observer. You see that in his work - an observer not a participant.

In the light of these assessments of Thake's character, it is interesting to note that one of his two war service period "self portraits" - Kamiri Searchlight 1945 (Ill.66) - portrayed his reflection on a concave surface. Thake was probably unaware that traditionally, concavity stands allegorically for involution and introversion.

Facing subjects as an observer rather than as a participant gave Thake the distance and perspective to watch the follies of his fellow man, and the peculiarities of objects and nature, with a sense of wryness or wonder. Or both. Bitterness, revulsion, anger, empathy - the emotions of the involved - are foreign to his work.

2. Ibid.
5. Pollie Pike manuscript, La Trobe Library.
7. Eric Thake, letter to his family, July 29 1945.
8. Eric Thake, letter to his family, July 1945.


CONCLUSION

In 1946, an exhibition of the work of the three R.A.A.F. Artists - Harold Freedman, Max Newton and Eric Thake - toured the State Galleries. Thake exhibited thirty nine paintings and five of his The Face of Japan drawing series. The art critic of The Argus drew attention to these three artists' remoteness from the war's cutting edge:

their material was an empty husk - they worked in areas from which the tide of war had receded. (Their Service was) bereft of the stimulus of action.¹

George Bell, in The Sun News Pictorial, strongly praised Thake's work.

Especially impressive are the works of Eric Thake. Intensely personal, exquisite in refined colour and powerful in suggestion of grim reality. These pictures show him as the best of the war artists Australia has commissioned.²

Bell's relationship with Thake, whom he had already championed in an essay in Art in Australia August 1933, might invite questions as to the critic's impartiality. However, reviews in the (Melbourne) Herald and The Sydney Morning Herald were equally enthusiastic. The Herald praised his capacity to seize on the innate structure of some apparently ordinary scene and turn it into something rich and strange ... mysterious and remarkable ... often with colour and extreme beauty.³

The art critic of The Sydney Morning Herald correctly noted Thake's concentration on the shapes produced by the machinery of war, and on the general impact of destruction. The critic concluded that Thake was "the best Australian war artist seen to date".⁴

The best of Thake's war paintings rank with his finest achievements. His central contribution is twofold. Firstly, he addressed the theme of the role
which matériel and mechanization had come to assume in warfare. In an essay in *World Review* 1943, Paul Nash described this theme as one of increasing importance since the first gas attack in World War I. From that point the human element in war pictures began to decline ... machines, pictorially speaking, took the place of men.\(^5\)

World War II enhanced the dominance of matériel and technology, as Albert Speer, Reichsminister of Armaments and Munitions 1942–1945, affirmed when speaking in his defence at his Nuremberg trial in June 1946.

> The nightmare of many a man that one day nations could be dominated by technical means was all but realised (in this war). Today the danger of being terrorised by technology threatens every country in the world. (In any further large-scale war) nothing can prevent unconfined engineering and science from completing the work of destroying human beings, which it has begun in so dreadful a way in this war.\(^6\)

If, by 1944, the mechanization of war was widely recognised, it remained a subject that artists - with the exception of Nash - had yet to rigorously explore. Thake undertook that exploration.

Thake's second contribution as a War Artist was to bring his Surrealist demeanour, with its capacity for bringing imaginative, often poetic, interpretations, and its perception of ambivalence and paradox, to bear on the commonplace objects of the military landscape. This capacity to find the remarkable concealed in the banal was in keeping with the Surrealist tradition deriving from Apollinaire. Apollinaire had written in *L'Espirit Nouveau* 1917

> We don't need to start from accredited "sublimity". We can start from some everyday incident; a dropped handkerchief can provide the poet with the lever that he needs to turn a whole universe upside down.\(^7\)

For Thake, even the most innocuous occasions can present incongruities and absurdities to an alert and conscious eye. This instinct to discern marvelous conjunctions had produced his early Surrealist paintings - the clothes line of dancing stockings, for example. But from the middle 1930s to the early 1940s, Thake's Surrealist works were studio conceptions, studio contrivances.
His Official War Art role required him to find his subjects in the circumstances surrounding him. His imagery became less elaborate, but (at its best) not less potent. This reorientation was decisive, and was of lasting significance. It was witnessed incidents or objects, like Apollinaire's "dropped handkerchief", which would continue to provide his subject matter for the next thirty six years, until his death in 1982.

* * *

Among Eric Thake's papers was an undated draft of his application for discharge. (It was apparently only retained because the schedule of his tour of duty had been written on the other side of these two sheets of paper.) Thake described his work as finished.

I am not qualified for administrative work or any similar occupation. I would be glad to be released as soon as possible.

My position with the Paton Advertising Coy. has been held for me since my enlistment; I have therefore a job to go to immediately upon my discharge.

The conditions under which I work are most unsympathetic to do any creative art work.

Flight Officer Eric Thake was demobilised on April 10th 1946. He returned, as foreshadowed, to Paton's.

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1. The Argus, May 7 1946.


ILLUSTRATED WAR SERVICE AND WAR SERVICE-RELATED
PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS BY ERIC THAKE

All paintings completed during Eric Thake's term of service as Artist, History Records Section, R.A.A.F. are in watercolour or gouache – media in which water is the soluble agent for the pigment.

Dimensions are indicated as height X width, and expressed in centimetres. The prime references for catalogue details are: Catalogue of Paintings, F/O E. Thake, List No. 1 – Paintings; Catalogue of Pictures, F/O Thake, List No. 2 – Paintings; and Catalogue of Pictures, F/O E. Thake, List No. 2 Drawings, prepared by the Australian War Memorial. Abbreviations used:

A.W.M. Australian War Memorial (Museum), Canberra.
A.G.N.S.W. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
A.N.G. Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
N.G.V. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
A.G.S.A. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
Q.A.G. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Moresby Totem</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>32.5 x 43.7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Liberator's Face</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>47.5 x 32.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Kate and Oscar</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>48.7 x 36.3</td>
<td>A.G.S.A.</td>
</tr>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>A.C.S. Dump</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>32.2 x 46.5</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Salvage Dump, Port Moresby</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>31.8 x 46.5</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>Wrecked Lodestar</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>35.5 x 45.7</td>
<td>A.W.M.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Flying Boat Base</td>
<td>1944</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>Fuel Wharf</td>
<td>1944</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>Jeep in the Rain</td>
<td>1945</td>
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<td>30.</td>
<td>Loading for Biac</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>32.2 x 48.7</td>
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<td>33.</td>
<td>Mobile Workshop</td>
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<td>34.</td>
<td>Long Thoughts</td>
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<td>36.</td>
<td>Pin Up Gallery</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>34.2 x 41.8</td>
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<td>37.</td>
<td>Tropic Home</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>34.6 x 36.9</td>
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<td>38.</td>
<td>Tent Interior, Airmen's Lines</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>29.2 x 29.2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Arts and Crafts Show</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>33.7 x 43.7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Kittyhawk's Wigwam</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>33.7 x 43.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Salvaged Engines</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>36.2 x 47.5</td>
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<td>45.</td>
<td>Loading Bombs for Morotai</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>36.2 x 47.5</td>
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<td>51.</td>
<td>Morotai</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>35.6 x 47.5</td>
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<td>52.</td>
<td>Unloading 06-12 at Morotai</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>36.2 x 47.5</td>
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<td>54.</td>
<td>Oasis Theatre</td>
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<td>32.5 x 45</td>
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<td>57.</td>
<td>Water Tower, Alice Springs</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>36.8 x 46.8</td>
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<td>58.</td>
<td>Revolving Beacon, Alice Springs</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>37.5 x 47.5</td>
<td>A.G.S.A.</td>
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<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td>Roger-Fox-Dog</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>35 x 47.5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td>Meteorological Balloon, Alice Springs</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>75 x 40</td>
<td>Q.A.G.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
63. Airstrip at Night 1945 38 x 47.5
64. Night Time, Alice Springs 1945 37.5 x 45
66(a). Kamiri Searchlight 1945 A.N.G.
66(b)(c) Kamiri Searchlight 1945 53.3 x 68.3 A.W.M.
68. Self Portrait in a Broken Shaving Mirror 1945 35.6 x 29.3
84. Parachute Store 1945 65 x 33.5 A.W.M.
98. Airscrews 1944
102. Radio Transmitter 1945 48.7 x 36.8
108. Airmen's Recreation Room, Alice Springs 1945 27.5 x 38.1
110. Military Goal, Alice Springs 1945 47 x 53 A.W.M.
112. Camouflaged Work Shop 1945 36.8 x 47.5
114. Black Mitchell 1945 36.2 x 46.8
115. Staging Camp, Larrimah 1945 37.4 x 48.1
116. Lena 1945 35 x 48.1
117. Koepang Bay 1945 38.1 x 47.6 A.W.M.
118. Bank of N.S.W., Darwin 1945 48.3 x 34.9 A.G.V.
119. Chinese House, Koepang 1945 45 x 37.5
120. Street in Koepang 1945 33.1 x 45.6
121. Bombed House, Koepang 1945 37.5 x 45 N.G.V.
122. Bombed House, Darwin 1945 75 x 32.5
123. Bombed House, Darwin 1945 75 x 32.5
125. Wrecked House, Darwin 1945 N.G.V.
126. Grecian Darwin 1945 40.5 x 50
144. Japanese Wreckage, Penfoei Airstrip, Timor 1945 47.6 x 37.4 A.W.M.
145. The Face of Japan (pencil) 1945 60.3 x 53.3 A.W.M.
147. The Face of Japan (pencil) 1945 60.3 x 53.3 A.W.M.
148. Lieutenant General K. Yamada (pencil) 1945 30.3 x 30.3 A.W.M.
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<td>150. Ant Hills, Northern Territory</td>
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<td>160. Koepang Bay</td>
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<td>161. Trip to Townsville</td>
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<td>162. First Sight of New Guinea</td>
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1. Salvador Dali *Suburbs of the Paranoiac-Critical Town* (detail)
1935 Oil.
2. Eric Thake Moresby Totem 1945.
3. Harold Freedman Creatures of the Air 1944 Oil.
5. Paul Nash *Totes Meer: Dead Sea* 1940–1941 Oil.
6(a). John Armstrong September 1940 C.1940.
6(b). John Armstrong Burnt Out Aeroplane Tempera C.1940.
6(c). John Armstrong *The Farm in Wales* Tempera.
7. Eric Thake Salvage Dump, Port Moresby 1945.
8. Francis Picabia *Parade amoureux* 1917 Oil.
11. Eric Thake *Archaeopteryx* 1941 Oil.
12. Eric Thake *Kate and Oscar* 1945.
17. Cassandre *Air Orient* 1932.
19. Tristram Hillier *Le Havre de Grace* 1939 Oil.
Salvador Dali  
*Daybreak*  
1930 Oil.
21. Paul Nash *Follow the Fuhrer Above the Clouds* 1942
Watercolour and collage.
22. Eric Thake Drawing of Route of his first Tour of 1944-1945.
23. Eric Thake Flying Boat Base 1944.

27. Eric Ravilious *No.1 Map Corridor.*
34. Eric Thake Long Thoughts 1945.
37. Eric Thake *Tropic Home* 1945 Pen and ink.
40. Harold Freedman *Kittyhawk Inspection* 1945 Oil.
42. James Cant Scarecrow 1937 Pound object.
43. Paul Nash Found Object Interpreted (Vegetable Kingdom).
44. Eric Thake Salvaged Engines 1945.
46. R.V. Pitchforth Paravanes Under Construction.
47. E. McNight Kauffer *Summertime in the Country* 1925 Lithograph.
48. A.M. Cassandre S.S. Côte d'Azur 1931 Lithograph.
50. Harold Freedman *Fallen Comrade* 1945 Oil.
52. Eric Thake Unloading 06-12 at Morotai 1945.
The brilliant headlight shone against the jungle. The tracks of the Delahaye, which appeared to be a solid wall of black about 100 yards ahead, turned into a long green channel on the road and the sky was a dull black sky alone.

53b. Man Ray Une nuit à Saint-Jean-de-Luz 1929.
54. Eric Thake *Oasis Theatre* 1945.
57. Eric Thake Water Tower, Alice Springs 1945.
58. Eric Thake *Beacon* 1945.
59. Paul Nash *We are Making a New World* 1918 Oil.

60. Paul Nash *The Menin Road* 1918-1919 Oil.
61. Eric Thake Roger-Fox-Dog 1945.
63. Eric Thake *Airstrip at Night* 1945.
64. Eric Thake Night Time, Alice Springs.
69. Man Ray *Orator* 1935.
70. Paul Delvaux *The Break of Day* 1937 Oil.
71. Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock) *Approximate Self Portrait in a Drawing Room* 1938 Oil.
72. Douglas Annand *Charters Towers; Reflections in a Motor Head-Lamp* 1944 Watercolour.
73. Max Ernst. Garden Aeroplane Trap 1934.
74. Paul Nash Oxenbridge Pond 1928 Oil.
75. Paul Nash *Window and Mirror* 1924 Oil.
76. Paul Nash Mantle-Piece 1928 Oil.
77. Paul Nash *Metamorphosis* 1930-1938 Oil.
78. Paul Nash *Forest and Room* 1930 Watercolour.
80. Paul Nash Sketchbook drawing 1930 pencil.
81. Paul Nash *Souvenir of Florence* 1929 Oil.
82. Paul Nash The Different Skies 1939 Chalk and watercolour.
83. Paul Nash Landscape from a Dream 1939 Oil.
84. Eric Thake Parachute Store 1945.
85. Giorgio de Chirico The Oracle 1914 Oil.
86. Edward Wadsworth *Arrival* 1936 Tempera.
87. Eric Thake Salvation from the Evils of Earthly Existence 1940 Oil.
88. Max Ebert (Herbert McClintock) Strange Interlude 1940 Oil.
89. Eric Thake *Inside Looking Out* 1934 Oil.
90. Eric Thake Drawing in correspondence 1944.
91. Salvador Dali L'Homme Fleur Oil.
92. Eric Thake, Drawing in correspondence 1945.
93. Eric Thake Yellow Spinner 1936.
94. Eric Thake *Happy Landing* 1939.
95. Edward Wadsworth Bronze Ballet.
96. Francis Picabia *Ane* (Cover of 391) 1917
97. Eric Ravilious Screw on Truck C.1940 Watercolour.
98. Eric Thake Airscrews 1944.
100. Edward Wadsworth *Satellitium* Tempera.
Yesterday out in the scrub

I saw a dusty circular piece of ground

a kind of Happieros sand lot.

Nest foot and tail marks all over.
103. Pierre Roy Daylight Saving 1930 Oil
105 Jean Lurçat Composition 1930 Oil.
106. Tristram Hillier Pylons 1933.
107. John Tunnard *Fulcrum* 1939 Oil.
Airmen's Recreation Room, Alice Springs 1945.
109. Henry Moore Reclining Figure 1935 Concrete
111. Roland Penrose Captain Cook’s Last Voyage 1936.
After a look, it disappeared into a hole in the rock. I tried to pick it up, but it was something like this—brown, red, and bluish—across the body with darker bands, with blue, black "eyes" on each "jaw"—like the Calico Fish "eyes."
117. Eric Thake Koepang Bay 1945.
119. Eric Thake
Chinese House, Koepang 1945.
120. Eric Thake Street in Koepang 1945.
124. Donald Friend *Ruins* (Labuan 24 June 1945) 1945 Pen and coloured ink and wash.
125. Eric Thake *Wrecked House*, Darwin 1945 (N.G.V. version)
126. Eric Thake Grecian Darwin.
127. R.V. Pitchforth *Gravy Salt Factory* C.1940 Watercolour.
128. Graham Sutherland *Devastation: City, Twisted Girders* 1941.
129. John Piper *Somerset Place* 1942 Watercolour.
130. Graham Sutherland *Devastation 1941: A West End Street* Gouache
131. John Piper *All Saints Chapel, Bath* 1942.
132. John Piper *Council Chambers, House of Commons* 1941.
133. Graham Sutherland *Devastation* 1943: *An East End Street.*
136. John Armstrong *Phoenix.*
137. Graham Sutherland *Devastation 1940* - Solicitor’s Office.
138. Graham Sutherland *Devastation 1940* - Collapsed Roof.
139. Graham Sutherland *Devastation: Fallen Lift Shaft III* 1941
140. Donald Friend *The Town (Victoria, Labuan)* 1945 Wash.
nearby existed in the tall dead
greys brilliant cerise bougainvillea
named
Koyria Koss
ZERO IN THE TROPICS

Eric Thake
Dead Greece
Drawing in correspondence 1945.

There was also in the course of the
tour the wrecked office of the
local newspaper, there is some
very good stuff up here now
after all the rest of the lift
and afternoon in the rain toward

141. Eric Thake Dead Greece Drawing in correspondence 1945.
142. James Gleeson We Inhabit the Corrosive Littoral of Habit
1940 Oil.
143. James Gleeson *Structural Emblems of a Friend* Oil.
146. Eric Thake *The Face of Japan* 1945 Pencil.
147. Eric Thake The Face of Japan 1945 Pencil.
150. Eric Thake Ant Hills, Northern Territory 1945.
red antbatter is about 15 high resembling forests of jatrees. 4th bicycle wheel opening covered with mud / leaves about 16-18 meter a about 5' high the high wall to keep the rain from flooding them

151. Eric Thake, Drawing in correspondence 1945.
152. Eric Thake, Drawing in correspondence 1945.
152. Eric Thake Red Ant Hills, Gorrie 1945 Drawings in sketchbook.

- THE LITTLE QUEEN OF THE ANTHILLS
- THE LADY WHO TURNED HER BACK
- MOTHER CHILD

RED ANT HILLS
GORRIE 4.9.45
155. James Gleeson Attitude of Lightning Towards a Lady Mountain Oil.
156. Douglas Annand Termite Hills near Cape York, N.Q. Watercolour.
159. Eric Thake *Kamiri Conference* 1945 Drawing in correspondence.
161. Eric Thake *Trip to Townsville 1944* Drawing in Sketchbook.
164. J.C. Goodchild *Located.*
165. Paul Nash *Target Area: Whitney Bombers Over Berlin 1941 Watercolour.*
166. Douglas Annand Travelling Steerage in a Fortress 1944 Pencil.
we had a very smooth trip across
coming in near Bathurst. The
trees were a surprise of the
water and flats gave the
appearance of very high
cliffs
2nd or 3rd in height from the water
on present tide level to the high
line.

From the air - Dale brown with
huge clay scolls of yellowish
clay just under the water & the
water slowly heating over them.

Looking like thin white lace curtains
around the perimeter the water was
dark greenish green shading off
to the bluish violet clays.

169. René Magritte *La reconnaissance infinie* 1933.
170. Eric Thake, Drawing in correspondence 1944.
171. Paul Nash Cloudscape Oil.
172. Paul Nash Cumulus Head 1944 Oil.
173. Salvador Dalí *Melancholia or Portrait of Clare* 1942 Oil.
175. René Magritte *Les marches d’été* 1938 Oil.
177. Richard Carline *Mount Hermon and Mount Sannin above the Clouds* C.1918 Oil.