

Elioth Gruner: the texture of light

Elioth Gruner (1882-1939) is one of Australia's finest painters of landscape. His best years as an artist were between the two world wars of the last century, from around 1915 to 1939, the year he died. In that time Gruner's paintings of the farmlands of Sydney's western fringe near the foot of the Blue Mountains, and his subsequent explorations of both northern New South Wales and its south-eastern pocket from Sydney to the Victorian border, garnered him a substantial critical and popular following. Some of his best works were painted in the Canberra region, from the Southern Highlands to the Murrumbidgee River valley, the Cooma-Monaro plain and the South Coast.

He enjoyed the support of both conservative and progressive elements in the Sydney (and Australian) art establishment and his work was extensively published in *Art in Australia* from its first issue in 1916, with two special numbers devoted to his work in 1929 and 1933, and a monograph in 1922. Gruner exhibited regularly with the Sydney Society of Artists, then one of the very few venues for exhibition and sales of contemporary art. Between 1916 and 1937 he was awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape painting, administered by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, seven times.

Yet although successful in his lifetime, some of whose paintings remain beloved of gallery audiences and whose reputation has endured with many art historians and artists, Gruner's name has somewhat faded in the Australian art-historical record in the seventy-five years since his death. His searching, quiet, painterly and sometimes enigmatic interpretations of the Australian landscape fell between the late manifestation of Australian impressionism in the 1920s and the modernism of the 1940s generation; having died shortly after the outbreak of the second world war, by its end Gruner appeared to be yesterday's man.¹ This exhibition seeks to put Gruner's work up for reassessment, and to highlight his extensive painting in the Canberra region.

Elioth Gruner was born Elliott Lauritz Leganyer Gruner in 1882 in Gisborne, a town on the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand.² He was the youngest of five children of Elliott Gruner senior, a Norwegian of German heritage, and Mary Ann Brennan from Ireland. They had met and married in South Africa around 1860, where four children were born to them. The family migrated to New Zealand in 1875, then to Sydney in 1883, when Elliott junior was an infant, leaving their eldest child, a daughter, behind in Gisborne.

Gruner lived his early life in straitened circumstances. In the late 1880s his father is listed as working as a bailiff, but he died in 1891, leaving Gruner's eldest brother responsible for the family. After his

brother's marriage Gruner went to work aged fourteen to help support the family, and only two years later he was alone in that responsibility when his brother died prematurely. Gruner was employed as a draper's assistant for many years and did not become a full-time artist until 1912, when he was thirty, and he continued to support his mother until her death in 1922. As an adolescent he worked punishing twelve-hour days until the social reform legislation of the Early Closing Act of 1899 reduced evening and Saturday hours for shop-workers.

Around the age of twelve Gruner began art classes with Julian Ashton, initially at the Art Society of New South Wales and then at Ashton's own school, Académie Julian, established in 1896 in King Street, Sydney. Gruner's mother and brother Frederick had encouraged his youthful talents in drawing and music, and he continued his studies with Ashton outside of his long working hours.

Gruner's 1896 pencil drawing of Ashton looking back at his pupil, thoughtful and avuncular, is rendered in a broad confident graphic manner reminiscent of the teacher. With Ashton's encouragement Gruner submitted work to the Society of Artists and his still-life *Violets* was hung in their Spring exhibition of 1901. Thereafter he exhibited with the re-formed Society of Artists regularly for the remainder of his life.

Gruner's painting *In the fields* 1908 exemplifies Ashton's influence, and his dictum to paint landscape not in the studio but *en plein air*, working directly from nature to observe the effects of light and shade. The work's subject and vertical format echo paintings of Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton from around 1890 – breezy summer scenes with big skies and distant strolling figures. *In the fields*, although unsophisticated, has some of the lightness of Conder, and one can see that Gruner is experimenting with the brush, learning his technique. In this early excursion there is no detail of landscape, rather the accent is on sensation.

In the 1910s Gruner's quintessentially Sydney subjects of ocean beaches and the harbour also showed the influence of Australian impressionism in choice of motif and technique. *Arrival of the ferry* 1912 celebrates both the natural beauty and the modernity of the city, and employs the elongated format of Streeton's Sydney Harbour paintings of the 1890s to include a sense of the extent of the city's shoreline. Simple brushstrokes of broken colour form the elevated shore sprinkled with buildings and the distant city and daubs of white are rippled reflections on the water's surface; the ferry's smoke that cuts the horizon is a waft of translucent violet paint.

Gruner must have known Streeton's artist camp paintings of the mid-1890s when he painted *Blue and gold* (also known as *Sydney Harbour*)

in 1913. Choosing the same location on the north shore of the harbour from Cremorne to Taylors Bay, in this and other works from this time Gruner employed Streeton's high vantage point for sweeping views across the wooded foreshore, its promontories jutting into the blue of the water. *Blue and gold* 1913 looks west to the city from Chowder Head across Taylors Bay to Bradleys Head. Gruner did not employ the same rich tones as Streeton, his preference was for the soft glowing pinks and bronzes of afternoon light (and later the flush of early morning). In this work his treatment of the water is exceptionally atmospheric – striations of green, brown and pale blue suggest the moving light over undertones of seaweed and shallows. A larger version of this composition, *Dreamy morning, Middle Harbour* 1913 (not in this exhibition), was purchased from the 1913 Society of Artists Spring exhibition, an important early sale. *Mosman and Cremorne Bay* 1919 extended Gruner's treatment of water into the major subject of the painting; in this work very little detail is conveyed, the whole surface is vigorously worked in long brushstrokes, joining sky, headlands and harbour into a subdued, tonal essay.

In 1912, encouraged by his old teacher Julian Ashton, and the sales of his work, Gruner left the drapery business to be an artist full-time. Ashton employed him to manage a gallery in Bligh Street for the promotion of Australian art, and then as a teacher in his school. The Gruner family moved to Bondi and he began a series of beach paintings that brought him strong sales and positive attention in the press, and were favourably compared with Conder's.

Gruner spent much of the summer of 1912-13 at the beach painting and body-surfing, often in the company of friends including Jack Lecky, whom he had met when they both worked at Farmer's department store and who became a member of the Gruner household. The works from these excursions around Bondi, Tamarama, Bronte, Coogee and Manly are vibrant and economical studies in colour and tone and demonstrate a new interest and facility in the simple arrangement of figures in patterns. *Bondi Beach* c1912 is an almost abstract arrangement of paint strokes on a flat brown patch of sand, while *The wave* c1913 is a jewel-like composition of glassy sea breaking over the littoral in bands of grey-green-blue. The crisp simple sweeps of sand, sea and sky in *On the beach* 1912 and *Beach scene* c1912 seem to show the same group of white-clad figures looking out to sea; close inspection suggests that the figures in the latter work may have been added after the scene. Some later paintings in the same genre, notably *The beach* 1918 (NERAM), with its parasols and striped beach awnings, demonstrated an interest in the decorative impulse of Japonisme and the work of E Phillips Fox, while *The beach* 1918 (Wesfarmers), is evidence of the artist's increasing enthusiasm for the representation of weather effects and large skies.

In 1915 Gruner visited Melbourne where he had two important encounters: with Camille Corot's *The bent tree* c1855-60 at the National Gallery of Victoria, and with Max Meldrum, the influential artist-teacher and advocate of tonalism in painting. The influence of Corot is evident in a number of paintings from 1916-20 where the tree is the central motif, its branches forming a feathery canopy through which a crepuscular sky glows, such as *August morning* 1916, where Gruner overlaid barely suggested patches of foliage melting into sky with a tracery of branches and daubs of white that pull the shimmer of morning sun into the setting. In subsequent years and through the different streams of Gruner's work he continued to aspire to the clarity, lyricism and quiet drama in Corot's landscape art.³

Gruner made a handful of paintings that seem to employ Meldrum's theory of tonal relations, of which *Morning mists* c1915 is perhaps the most reductive, a monochromatic harbour scene, with the land and water barely discernible, reminiscent of Clarice Beckett, Meldrum's star disciple. *Afternoon, Bondi* 1915, is a tonal study in a reduced palette of blue, white, cream and pale gold, with the blue shadows across the woman's swept-up billowing dress forming an abstract pattern.

The most strikingly Meldrumite painting by Gruner is his *Self portrait* 1915, unusual in several respects as he is known to have painted only a very few portraits. Gruner paints himself in the dark tones of a modern Rembrandt, brush in hand, with battered felt hat and eyes in shadow, against a velvety brown-black background. The flesh tones are painted with fine brushstrokes but the collar is a vigorous stripe of cream that defines the neck and shoulders of his body. Gruner's enigmatic expression and face half in shadow concurs with the personality described by his friends and acquaintances: reserved, diffident and sometimes distant, yet also slightly puckish.

Although the influence of Meldrum's influence appears short-lived in Gruner's painting practice, Mary Eagle has noted that his 'visionary discovery in 1915 was light ... and light was central to Meldrum's doctrine of tone'.⁴ Gruner's breakthrough understanding of light was made on a trip to the farmlands of Emu Plains, on the western fringe of Sydney, with his friend and fellow-painter Gordon Esling, when they rented a hut on a farming property owned by James Innes. For the next few years, until around 1920, Gruner returned there to paint for extended periods, sleeping on the floor of the hut and often rising before dawn to paint. He travelled by train from Sydney, across the Nepean River to Emu Plains Railway Station, and from there walked several miles to the Innes's small farm on rising land in the shadow of the Blue Mountains. The lush grasslands of Emu Plains lie in a corner of the Nepean bounded by the course of the river to the north and east and the mountains to the west, and in the early twentieth century it was all farmland and orchard.

Morning light 1916 was painted outside the hut looking east towards the Innes farmhouse and the rising sun with a glimpse of the river to the left of the trees. The slightly elevated point of view allows for an expansive vista across the paddocks to the misted horizon line, with nearly two-thirds of the painting sky. Gruner invested the pastoral subject with both intimacy and universality; the turning figure lit by the sun draws us into the scene, which is a meditation on light and atmosphere. In the foreground the painting's surface is animated by choppy vigorous brushwork and highlights of vivid colour, almost pulsing from the effect of the sun, which is just beyond vision.⁵

This painting made Gruner's reputation when it was exhibited in the Society of Artists' Annual Exhibition in November 1916. It was awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape and purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the first work by Gruner to enter the collection.

With the Emu Plains paintings Gruner established his practice of working into the sun in the manner of the nineteenth-century Barbizon *plein air* painters, of whom Corot was the leading figure. Reacting against Romanticism, the French Barbizon painters preceded the Impressionists and were influential in their emphasis on working directly from nature, *en plein air*.

Gruner's favoured time of day was early morning for its atmospheric possibilities and the long shadows cast by a rising sun. Painting around the Innes property his subjects were the farm buildings, cattle, stockyards and paddocks. In *Summer morning* 1916 the emphasis is on the rich summer grass being harvested for stockfeed. The horizon line divides the painting in half, the two parts pulled together in the figure of the standing harvester, the central focus of the work. The subject is pure Barbizon, domestic rural labour with a brisk contemporary flavour. Gruner painted the foreground grasses with long broken brushstrokes in brilliant greens, flecked with violet shadows and tinged with yellow light, and the sky is an almost monochrome white, like a blanket of light over this scene of fecundity.

This period saw Gruner experimenting with his use of the brush for different effects, and the surfaces of these pastoral paintings are markedly different from one another. The corner of the paddock in *Spring morning* 1917 is painted in short, choppy strokes in tones of green, while the grass in *Autumn fog* 1918 is a lush meadow of layers of uneven brushstrokes, richly worked over and subtly coloured, with its barely sketched soft background foliage sinking into the mist.

The *magnum opus* of Gruner's Emu Plains series is *Spring frost* 1919. The aspect looking east is similar to *Morning light*, but down on the flat in the home paddocks close to the farmhouse and its cloak of

shade trees. The same glimpse of river can be seen far left, but in this work the focus is not verdant pastures stretching into the distance but the homestead, farmer and herd, which form a large central triangle in the painting with its apex the peppercorn trees. The dark mass of trees and house are rendered with soft, velvety strokes like charcoal drawing and recede before the brilliance of the silhouetted cows, which are lit as if from within. The painting's palette of blue-green-grey-violet is complemented with the pale gold of sky and foreground grass. Gruner worked the sky after the trees, giving it mass and density so that it appears to envelop the scene, with the light from the unseen sun spilling over the paddock, an effect made by variegated highlights of cream and yellow between and through the long blue shadows cast by the herd. The cows are the most substantial forms in *Spring frost*, and the most closely painted, in crisp brown and white with contours edged in white and gold.

It is a bucolic scene, a lyrical paean to pastoral Australia, but it also represents Gruner's desire to make light tangible on the canvas, to paint it as a force in nature. Its source, the sun, invisible here as elsewhere in Gruner's painting, is celebrated as a life force renewing the earth. It was painted on very cold mornings, with Gruner wrapping himself in chaff bags to avoid frostbite, and these sensory conditions surely informed the intensity of the artist's vision of rising sun permeating frosty earth. In this work, and the Emu Plains series in general, there is an inevitable echo of the war that had begun in 1914 and was not long over, in the fervent will towards regeneration that it seems to represent.

Spring frost is one of Gruner's largest compositions and was greeted with acclaim when exhibited at the Society of Artists' exhibition in October 1919. For the second time Gruner was awarded the Wynne Prize, and the painting was bought by a pastoralist, Frederick White from Exeter in the Southern Highlands (who donated it after Gruner's death to the Art Gallery of New South Wales; he owned other paintings by Gruner, including *The beach* 1918, in this exhibition).

By now Gruner's reputation as an artist was well-established and he enjoyed the support of influential figures in the Sydney art world, importantly Sydney Ure Smith, editor of *Art in Australia*, who published his work in the magazine's first issue in 1916 (with a commentary by Howard Ashton, son of Julian).

From around 1916 Gruner was represented by the artist and agent Gayfield Shaw in various chambers in the city, while continuing to exhibit with the Society of Artists. By 1918 Gruner's paintings were selling well and were being collected by a number of prominent patrons including Howard Hinton and Senator R D Elliott, as well as represented in the state art gallery.⁶ Gruner established a correspondence and friendship with Hans Heysen, whose work he

admired, later staying with him at The Cedars, his house and studio in the Adelaide Hills.

In the last months of the war, although conflicted between empathy for suffering and aversion to killing, Gruner enlisted in the army, having been unsuccessful in joining the Medical Corps. Prior to and during his brief service government ministers were petitioned by Gruner's friends, including the poet Mary Gilmore and Norman Lindsay, the maverick artist, to keep him from the trenches. He was still serving at Liverpool camp when the war ended and was discharged at the end of 1918.

Norman Lindsay was perhaps Gruner's greatest champion, writing extensively on his work and sustaining a long friendship with him. Lindsay regarded Gruner as 'the greatest painter of pure light the world has ever seen'.⁷ Gruner visited Lindsay's home at Springwood in the Blue Mountains often, and although they saw less of each other in later years Rose Lindsay was one of the last people to see Gruner before he died. At Springwood he met Norman's son Jack Lindsay, the writer and poet and youthful player in Sydney's artistic and literary bohemia of the 1920s. In that milieu Gruner's reserve seems to have been less and his sexual preferences understood, even if they went largely unremarked. Jack Lindsay describes 'an uneasy bisexuality' in his memoir *The roaring twenties*, and also quotes his brother Ray, in reference to the legendary beauty of Ann Brennan, bohemian party girl (and daughter of poet Christopher Brennan) – 'everybody was in love with her, even Gruner'.⁸

The experience of living and working in the landscape as he had at Emu Plains established a pattern for Gruner and for the next twenty years he spent long periods travelling and painting in the field. He visited and revisited painting sites up and down New South Wales, camping or staying with friends, travelling by train, horse and cart, and walking long miles to find his subject.

He first travelled north in 1919, seeking a site for a commission from the Art Gallery of New South Wales for a national landscape, and although the resulting work *Valley of the Tweed* 1921 (AGNSW collection, not in this exhibition) is the least successful of his expansive views, Gruner's discovery of the northern regions was important. *Valley of the Sovereign* 1920 has the spontaneity and freshness lacking in the official commission, and conveys a sense of moisture and haze hanging in the atmosphere; *The River Sovereign* 1920 is a joyful return to Corot, expressively painted in rapid broad strokes, with a brilliant blue and violet shifting sky.⁹

The harbour from Killountan c1919 is a rare domestic Sydney view from the period, a commission from Gruner's friend and patron John Lane Mullins, a prominent Sydney lawyer and art lover whose home

Killountan was in Double Bay, in Sydney's eastern suburbs. The breezy view of Double Bay across Killountan's hedged lawn and hydrangeas takes in the grand nineteenth-century houses of Lindesay and Carthona on Darling Point, and interestingly echoes the composition of Conrad Martens's *View from Rose Bank* 1840 (NGA collection).

After years of living in rental properties around Bondi, in 1920 Gruner was able from the sale of his paintings to buy a house in Tamarama where he remained for the rest of his life. The death of his mother in 1922 was devastating, but also freed him to consider overseas travel. Sydney Ure Smith nominated Gruner to manage the exhibition of Australian art organised by the Society of Artists for display at the Royal Academy in London, and he departed in February 1923 with his passage paid by Howard Hinton. Gruner remained in Europe for two years, living from sales and commissions, and after the Australian exhibition opened in October 1923 spent most of the following year walking and painting in France and Italy, with trips to Paris, Rome, Naples and Capri and an extended stay in St Tropez.

Gruner responded positively to the works of Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne that he saw in London and Paris, and the paintings from his continental stay evince a decisive turn towards structure and rhythm as core principles. *Aloes, St Tropez* c1924 reflects this shift as well as a new interest in heightened colour that came from experiencing at first-hand the Mediterranean light he had seen in Gauguin's work. Broad flat planes of blue, orange, green and cream are constructed into the view across terracotta roofs and a stand of succulent *aloe vera* plants to the bay beyond. The flowing rhythms in this painting derive from the relationship between the geometry of solid forms and the diagonals of paths and shadows and cloud, which have equal solidity. Although the exuberant colour of Gruner's Mediterranean paintings was not to last, thereafter he looked to colour as one of the means of finding a truth in the particularities of landscape.

Devon pastorale c1924 presages Gruner's later Australian landscapes, in particular those of south-eastern New South Wales, in its sweeping simplification of hills and foreground, and patchwork of green, violet and dusky pink. The device of the hedgerows marking out the contours of the hills is a feature of Gruner's later work, where fences, paths and lines of trees play a crucial part in describing the structure and space within landscape.

Gruner returned to Australia in 1925 and towards the end of the year travelled to South Australia where he painted several views in the Adelaide Hills. *Piccadilly Valley* 1926 demonstrates that Gruner could still produce an expansive landscape, but the South Australian view incorporated his new grasp of rhythm, and its rolling view from hillside pines to market gardens and vineyards has a sense of locale

and wholeness which is absent from works such as *Valley of the Tweed*.

Nor is *Man and mountains* 1926, painted in the Blue Mountains the same year, a painting with national aspirations, rather universal and particular. Its dramatic mass of blue-black cliffs dominate the foreground, establishing the core ingredients of the mountain landscape, from where it leaps into a sun-bathed wooded valley and up to the distant blue ranges.

That same movement is present in *The pines* 1926, which although painted near Mt Lofty in the Adelaide Hills, describes an intimate view, one with an aura of mystery in the rooftop and chimneys glimpsed over a hedge, the dark avenue of pines and the path that disappears into the painting. Gruner almost, but not entirely, encloses the scene with the dark weight of trees on either side, but the opening of sky in the left corner propels the view up and out. This composition was repeated in *The poplars* c1926, without the dark massing of trees and with a mid-ground of low hills. But he has included the distant poplar in the centre, which pulls the view along the path and points up to the cirrus cloud that arcs into the sky and mirrors the snaking path below.

In *Spring at Bathurst* c1926 Gruner used his palette of harmonising soft greens and grey-blue-violet in a pastoral view that encompasses homestead, farmland and the distant Blue Mountains. Although the features in the landscape have resonances with his early pastoral paintings, *Spring at Bathurst*, like *The pines* and *The poplars*, shows that Gruner had begun to work with the picture plane in a modern manner, consciously framing the view and dividing the surface with blocks of colour overlaid with lines; acknowledging the illusion involved in the act of painting.

Thereafter Gruner's practice was characterised by the simplification of form, reduction of detail, and a colour palette of internal harmonies and tonal shifts that reflect the ongoing influence of Meldrum. He also pared back his brush technique to a thinner application in broader sweeps, particularly for distance. Elements of naturalism remained in the work and Gruner frequently employed a painterly impressionist handling of the foreground plane as an introductory passage into the painting.

Although his engagement with modern art baffled his conservative adherents, Gruner's reputation remained high and he sold most of the work in his first solo commercial exhibition at Sydney's Macquarie Galleries in August 1926, in which he displayed the fruits of his new style. The Art Gallery of New South Wales bought *Man and mountains* and Howard Hinton acquired *The pines*. Later in the year Gruner took part in the inaugural exhibition of the Contemporary Group, which

included the work of George Lambert, Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston, Kenneth MacQueen, Roland Wakelin and Roy de Maistre, among others.

Lambert was an important influence on Gruner in the 1920s for his adherence to a reductive aesthetic and his support of progressive art. It is likely that he introduced Gruner to the pastoralist Granville Ryrie, on whose Michelago property Lambert painted *The squatter's daughter* in 1923-24 (NGA collection); Gruner stayed there in 1922 and painted several elevated views of the valleys and peaks of the Monaro from hills on the property.¹⁰ Interestingly Ryrie had already acquired Gruner's *Mosman and Cremorne Bay* 1919 (from Gayfield Shaw) the year it was painted. Earlier in 1922 Gruner had travelled to the nearby Araluen Valley south of Braidwood in the Southern Tablelands to fulfil a commission for the Union Club of Sydney, resulting in the large *Araluen Valley* 1922 (not in this exhibition), and Lambert visited him while he worked on the painting.

Subsequently, after Gruner's return from Europe, from the mid-1920s until his death, he travelled extensively in south-eastern New South Wales to paint: in the Southern Highlands, the Southern Tablelands, through Canberra, Yass and the Murrumbidgee River corridor, up on the windswept Cooma-Monaro plain and down at the South Coast. He travelled by train, at least initially, on the main southern line from Sydney, which goes through the Southern Highlands towns of Mittagong and Bowral and on to Goulburn and Yass. His country hosts and friends drove him in search of painting sites, and after 1929, when Gruner bought a car, he drove himself. Many of the works made on his travels were painted on the properties of the pastoralists with whom he stayed.

Gruner's success as an artist was due in no small measure to his courting of potential patrons who came into the sphere of influence of the Sydney art establishment. His popularity gave him entree to lawyers, academics, business people and country landowners, many of them members of the old-established Union and Australian Clubs of Sydney, and it seems likely that the clubs were the conduit for Gruner's pastoral connections in south-eastern New South Wales.

Around 1921 Gruner first visited Manar, a large cattle and sheep property between Bungendore and Braidwood, on the other side of the Tinderry Range from Michelago. Manar belonged to Deuchar Gordon (1871-1951), whose family had extensive established holdings in the region going back to the 1830s. Gordon was a member – and president in the 1930s – of the Australian Club, established in 1837 to facilitate the 'social and literary interests of the colony and for the general interests of country gentlemen', and he and other landowners in the region such as Granville Ryrie of Michelago and the Langs at Carlaminda on the Monaro, hosted artists and writers and supported

their work. Gruner was a welcome visitor to these homesteads, interested in the land as well as the social pursuits of their owners – music, literature, gardens.

Gruner's relationship with the Gordons lasted until his death, close to twenty years, and he returned to Manar a number of times. Deuchar and other members of his family purchased Gruner's paintings and the artist made them a number of gifts of works.

Gruner sometimes repeated a view, particularly an ambitious one, in a smaller and larger format, often presenting the smaller one as a gift to a country host. The two versions of his 1921 view of *Manar landscape* are taken from a hill behind the homestead looking north-east with the Budawang Ranges forming the horizon. The house is not the subject of the view, but the fulcrum, its oasis of established evergreen trees the settled heart of the landscape. Although the view is quite conventional in composition and style, there is evidence in the simple even treatment of the hills to the left and the distant mountains of Gruner paring back his painting to a drier, flatter approach, removed from the seduction of paint surfaces. The later *Manar landscape* 1928 looks south-east towards the coast from a hill on the other side of the homestead, with the Budawang Ranges again the horizon line, and is distinctly modern in its division into flat bands of green and olive fields and forests, with the contours of the land and the driveways and paddock boundaries criss-crossing in rhythmic patterns.

Gruner also made paintings around the homestead, in the rambling garden and orchard which supplied the family with apples, pears, quinces and plums and was central to life at Manar. The exuberant *Autumn, Manar* c1939 is one of several paintings using the motif of a stand of fruit trees against a backdrop of spreading evergreens to explore the transient beauty of seasonal change. They are worked in a post-impressionist manner, with splashes of colour for leaves (and blossoms) and rich emerald and violet shadows. *The drive, Manar* c1939 is poignant, possibly representing Gruner's last leaving of the property, and its white sky and tracery of trees and dwindling autumn leaves casts the landscape in a wintry pallor.

Gruner was drawn to the quiet grandeur of this region of dry plains and bare hills ringed with ancient mountain ranges, which suited his increasing interest in the construction of landscape through its underlying form. The air is crisp and dry in this part of the world, giving it great clarity of light and sense of distance and space, qualities the artist sought to encapsulate within the reductive modernism of his mature style.

Landscape, New South Wales c1927 is an expansive view of the Monaro country around Cooma, on the high plains south of Canberra that rise to the Snowy Mountains; the sparseness of this landscape is

indicated with thin dry paint application in parched colour overlaid with darker smudges sketching in the scant foliage. Gruner also painted a number of views on Carlaminda, a property belonging to the Lang family, and views of Cooma township, one of which, *Cooma* 1927, he donated to the local Returned Soldiers' Club, an arrangement apparently brokered by R A McKillop, a local stock and station agent who acquired several paintings by Gruner of the Cooma-Monaro district, and, later, two key views back into the Murrumbidgee River valley.

The following year Gruner was painting in the sheep country between Yass and Goulburn north of Canberra, and produced a series of small paintings with low horizon where the subject is the changing weather effects in the sky. *Between showers* 1928 and *Thunderstorm* 1928 show the same line of undulating hills cast in shadow and reduced to essentials; the thinly painted skies are poetic tonal essays conveying drama and a sense of location. Gruner spent much of the next decade exploring the Murrumbidgee River corridor, south from Yass to the village of Tharwa in the shadow of Mt Tennent¹¹, following the river back towards its headwaters in the mountains. His subject became, in his own words, 'the anatomy of the earth' and the Murrumbidgee paintings depict the ancient hills as broad simple masses pushed up from the river valley and arranged in undulating rhythms across the picture plane. They are largely empty of signs of human habitation.

On the Murrumbidgee 1929 was painted on the road from Yass to Wee Jasper at the first view of the river near the Taemas crossing. It is an imposing landscape, so highly constructed that the artist's tools are evident: its complex composition of intersecting flat planes in high-key colour leads the eye into the landscape along the zigzag of the river valley in the foreground and middle ground whereafter there is a leap to the horizon line over the softly modelled hills and mountains in the distance. The residual naturalism of this painting, with its foreground details of large eucalypts and grazing sheep, is stripped from others in the series, such as *Murrumbidgee River* and *Landscape* (both 1929); the latter is a tonal painting dominated by the swelling rhythmic foreground hills that enfold the river as it opens into the Burrinjuck Dam. *Murrumbidgee River* shares the intense colour of *Rolling hills near Yass* 1929, a painting remarkable for its almost aerial view of steep dry rocky slopes that appear to be carved out of the landscape.

Gruner's Murrumbidgee paintings marked the high point of his progression towards creating modern landscape from a *plein air* practice of direct observation before the subject. Working with the flat picture plane, these paintings emphasise not the optical illusion created by surface effects, but form within landscape. They also convey distinctive regional characteristics, which were recognised and appreciated for their evocation of place. Gruner's sustained connection with the landscape of the region informed his

understanding of its geology, vegetation, seasonal changes, weather patterns and human occupation.

Murrumbidgee Ranges, Canberra 1934 is a wide view looking west from off the Cotter Road. These mountains are on the edge of the Brindabella Range, which rise loftily to Canberra's west on the border of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The grazing sheep, trails of smoke and stretch of road in the mid-ground identify it as a settled, pastoral landscape, and it was probably painted from a hill on the Winslade property where Gruner may have stayed. Less rigorously rendered than the earlier Murrumbidgee paintings, its rhythms are effected through tonalist modelling rather than blocks of contrasting vivid colour. The more limited palette of blue, grey, olive and gold is highlighted with soft pink, suggesting a landscape bathed in late afternoon sun. The viewer's eye is drawn from the foreground in shadow to the towering eucalypts, the dark mass of hillside behind, and following the lie of the land into the centre of the painting.

Weetangera, Canberra 1937, with an even more muted palette, shares the lyrical mood of *Murrumbidgee Ranges* and the same sense of enfolded landscape and dry, pastel-like application of paint. Its unusual square format emphasises the heavily wooded slopes at the centre of the painting towards which the eye travels along the winding river, disappearing from sight behind the hill, which imbues it with a quiet sense of mystery.

At the time both these paintings were greatly admired and recognised as significant statements of Gruner's art practice, and both were awarded the Wynne Prize (as had *On the Murrumbidgee* in 1929). The particular character of the Murrumbidgee valley, and Gruner's poetic modernist treatment of it, combined to produce works that were regarded in the 1930s as contributing to an idea of national landscape. *Art in Australia* reproduced *Murrumbidgee Ranges* in its November issue for 1934, and subsequently as one of its six Christmas cards for 1936. In the year it was made the work was selected to illustrate the menu for an official reception at Parliament House in Canberra honouring the state visit of the Duke of Gloucester.

Weetangera was immediately purchased from the artist by R A McKillop, who had moved to Canberra in the 1930s, but after it was viewed by members of the National Travel Association, including Charles Lloyd Jones, a Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, McKillop was persuaded to offer it to the gallery, who acquired it some months later. By then Gruner had been accorded the rare privilege of a large loan exhibition of his work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1932-33, which included over 100 works, and *Art in Australia* had devoted its June 1933 issue to his painting. In 1936 Gruner was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Western Australia to

paint a landscape for the gallery and toured the state, producing a number of paintings, two of which the gallery acquired, including *The Blackwood River, Bridgetown* 1936.

The critical and popular success that Gruner enjoyed in the 1930s extended beyond Sydney to the country regions where he worked and, in particular, to the Canberra region, where his pastoralist connections were enlarged by a growing patronage from the burgeoning society of the city of Canberra. His work was shown in the fourth exhibition of the local Artists Society in May 1934, including several paintings lent by McKillop, by then an established businessman in Canberra and President of its Chamber of Commerce, and one of Gruner's Canberra hosts. Another was Robert Broinowski, Usher of the Black Rod of the Senate (and later Clerk of the Senate), who had moved to Canberra in 1927 and was closely involved with the cultural life of the city. A published poet and knowledgeable gardener – responsible for the establishment of the Parliament House rose gardens – Broinowski was also a bushwalker and took Gruner to local painting sites. The artist also frequently stayed in a camping site on the Molonglo River where he received visitors, including, it was reported, the Governor-General.¹² *Poplars at Canberra* c1930 and the pastel poplar drawing in this exhibition (a gift from Gruner to Broinowski) were probably made near the camp.

Although increasingly reserved and even reclusive in Sydney from the late 1920s, Gruner seems to have been a freer spirit on his travels, unguarded away from the spotlight. Around 1928 he met Brian Cannell who was to live with him until Gruner's death, and their meeting is coincident with Gruner spending progressively more time painting away from Sydney, in his company. They were hosted together in Canberra and both were guests at various vice-regal receptions at Government House and Parliament House in the late 1930s.

Gruner's staunchest Sydney patron, Saul Symonds, maintained a property in Bowral in the Southern Highlands, Willyama, where Gruner and Cannell stayed in the 1930s, in the guest cottage (which was known as 'Gruner's house'). Symonds was a barrister before entering the family business, a furniture emporium in Pitt Street, and a leading figure in the Jewish community and avid art collector, who owned more than 30 paintings by Gruner. Many were of Bowral subjects, such as *Kangaloon* 1932 (the name of a nearby hamlet). This painting is characteristic of the series, a closely framed patchwork of colour that evokes the intimate nature of the Highlands landscape – in contrast to the Murrumbidgee – with its ploughed fields and modest farmhouses. The billowing clouds are the source of its soft, clear light.

Gruner continued to travel in northern New South Wales in the 1930s, in the Bellinger Valley and on the coast at Nambucca Heads.

Shelley Beach, Nambucca Heads 1933 is one of a number of views of this beach and is evidence of the artist's ability to envision a conventional view with a strikingly modern perspective. Its clarity and brilliance is achieved through the juxtaposition of pale pink sand and blue shadows against the soft greens of the coastal scrub.

Although the last years of Gruner's life were clouded by ill-health, in that time he produced some of his most assured work. Gruner had struggled with alcoholism and depression since at least the late 1920s and on occasion was hospitalised, so his death from chronic kidney failure at the age of 56 was not unexpected. His old friend and former partner Jack Lecky had died in 1936, which was a blow, and the outbreak of war in September 1939 may have contributed to his final collapse.

Gruner is a fascinating figure in Australian art history. His work was championed in his lifetime by conservative artists and critics such as James s MacDonald, Lionel Lindsay and Howard Ashton, who saw Gruner as the natural successor to the Australian landscape tradition pioneered by the Australian impressionists, particularly Arthur Streeton. But he was also regarded as an important artist by more progressive commentators, including Basil Burdett, who described him in 1929 as 'amongst the few artists who must represent this period of Australian art to posterity'.¹³ As a teacher at Julian Ashton's school he was influential for younger artists, including modernists Dorrit Black, Grace Crowley and Adrian Feint. Few if any other Australian artists have enjoyed such breadth of critical regard. Gruner's practice and career offers interesting insights into Australian cultural life in both the city and in the bush. In particular his extensive engagement with pastoral life demonstrates the importance of modern culture and the arts, particularly an interest in painting, music, literature and the garden movement, in the rural homesteads of the period.

In the progression of Gruner's work from the lyrical pastorales of Emu Plains to the modern interpretations of landscape exemplified in his paintings of the Canberra region, he retained an unswerving commitment to painting before the motif, the sun full on the canvas. In Gruner's practice light always remained an essential element within the landscape, although the emphasis shifted from the creation of optical effects on the surface of the painting to encapsulating light through embodied clarity of form. Gruner's significant achievement as an artist was his ability to create landscape paintings that are highly evocative of place, within a modernist vocabulary of rigorous geometry, strong modelling and carefully considered colour.

Deborah Clark

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- ¹ The distinguished Australian art historian Bernard Smith's assessment of Gruner in *Australian Painting* in 1970 was that his work was sentimental and lacked character.
- ² The artist used several versions of his name in his lifetime, including 'Grüner' with an umlaut; from around 1922 he adopted 'Elioth' as the spelling of his first name. Elioth Gruner is now the current accepted spelling of his name.
- ³ A woodcut after Corot's *The bent tree* was one of the 30 or so works of art in Gruner's own modest collection at his death.
- ⁴ Mary Eagle, *Australian modern painting between the wars 1914-1939*, p 38
- ⁵ Information about the Innes farm is from Judy Jones, 'The Innes family of Emu Plains and *Spring Frost*'.
- ⁶ Howard Hinton was a major art patron and benefactor, who donated more than 100 works of art to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and more than 1000 to the Teachers College, Armidale, now in the collection of the New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale, NSW.
- ⁷ Norman Lindsay, *Elioth Gruner*, unpaginated.
- ⁸ Jack Lindsay, *The roaring twenties*, p141
- ⁹ The location is probably the Severn Valley near Tenterfield in the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales.
- ¹⁰ A large view of the Michelago Valley is in the collection of the National Art School, Sydney.
- ¹¹ The spelling of this mountain has changed over time; Tennent is now standard, Gruner spelt it 'Tennant'
- ¹² W G Buckle, 'Elioth Gruner', *Art in Australia*, November 1939, p15
- ¹³ Basil Burdett, 'The later work of Elioth Gruner', *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, no 27, March 1929, unpaginated