

Geoff Lowe

born Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country 1952, lives Paris

The idea of good government, 1983

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

La Trobe University Art Collection. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Emmanuel Hirsh, 2003. LTU1809

The idea of bad government, 1983

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Geoff Lowe's practice is concerned with the multiple narratives we use to construct a world, and how this informs the shaping and telling of what individuals and societies have witnessed. Influenced by post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, Lowe explores how reality is perceived through cultural models. He has made a life-long investment in collaborative practice.

Lowe practised as a solo painter from 1972 to 1992 before he began collaborating with Jacqueline Riva as A Constructed World (ACW) from 1993. Collaboration has been central to Lowe's work since the '80s, a decade when he spent a significant period in residence in Italy. There, he was informed by the human scale and order in medieval painting, specifically *The allegory of good and bad government* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. These 14th-century frescos are in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, a council hall of the Republic of Siena's executive magistrates. In this painting, Lowe saw a model world of medieval Siena, both industrious and hardworking yet debased, slothful and open to treachery.

Completed on his return to Melbourne, Lowe's own paintings *The idea of good government* and *The idea of bad government* (1983) are ambitious in both scale and content. These massive panoramic paintings, measuring approximately 150 cm high and almost 4 m wide, reference quattrocento painting in their perspectival play and inclusion of multiple narrative structures in a single frame. The works were developed through conversations with over 100 people about their opinions on what constituted good and bad government. Lowe didn't want the paintings to come from his own feelings and ideas, but rather the narratives that live in and are communicated by other people. He continued this open process through the work of ACW with diverse collaborators: psychotherapy groups, members of the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia, people living with schizophrenia, amateur dance groups, unhoused teenagers and men, musicians and non-musicians, research groups, marine scientists, curators, theorists, eels and passersby, among others.

Lowe was interviewed about these two major paintings by controversial Italian leftist Adriano Sofri, who was incarcerated in the 1990s for a political murder in the '60s, a charge he has always contested. Sofri notes his surprise at such a direct transplant of Siena in Melbourne. In the 1985 interview, Lowe describes the context for aspects of both paintings. He speaks about a small landscape painting by his friend Greg Page that is inserted into the lower-left corner of *The idea of bad government*. The painting is embedded in an image of a television screen that sits in a building featuring an Ames room optical illusion. From here, the painting opens onto a ravaged landscape

of oil-slicked oceans, dead trees, graveyards and a red, smoke-filled sky of bushfires. A firefighter kneels in the foreground, setting a shrub on fire. The overall mood of the painting is heavy and dark.

In *The idea of good government*, a headless figure in the foreground operates as a narrator that positions the viewer in space, taking in the scene: the woman laying down with an attitude of openness, edible native Australian plants, architectural models referencing the Bank of Australia headquarters in Sydney, happiness personified by the group of people dancing and the dog resting with its trusting belly exposed. Lowe explains the inclusion of what appear to be two Australian First Nations figures as a direct reference to the work of Eugene von Guérard, a colonial painter trained in the German romantic tradition, and a comment on nineteenth-century representations of Black bodies and the role these histories have in structuring society today.

Unusually, these figures seem to be protecting a landscape that has already been cleared and repurposed as a Tuscan farm of olive trees and irrigated vegetables in neat rows. Beyond that, rocky outcrops are denuded of their trees; in the foreground, people dance and gather in what appears to be an open-cut mine. Looking at this painting over forty years after it was made brings up questions of the evolving accountability of governments. In the 21st century, so different from the 20th and the 14th, it is not possible to conceive of good government without an expectation of action addressing past colonial violence and future climate collapse. Viewing this painting now, one can see how our expectations of governments have changed. In Lowe's own words in the Sofri interview, 'I like the idea that the painting is also made up of what people think of it.'

Jacqui Shelton, 2023