

## STEVE LOPES: STRENGTH OF PURPOSE

*Steve Lopes muses on the benefits of avoiding the pitfalls of overthinking.*

By James Compton



The heady mix of myth and legend that surrounds Gallipoli made Steve Lopes think twice about the importance of placing figurative elements in his landscape paintings. Actually it was probably thrice – from an initial workmanlike focus on the land, through thoughts and reflection of the sheer weight of historical conflict, and finally a realisation that his impressions of the place itself were actually stronger than he had realised.

“It was a deep and psychological sort of trip – it made me go very quiet, thinking about death in the landscape, I really worked

overtime in my own head to try to get to grips with it,” he reflects, some months later having only just finished his final work. “The experience resonated right into the studio, and I have spent months trying to resolve it. In fact I still don’t feel like I’ve got my head around it.”

In many ways, Lopes believes it is not such a bad thing that his wrestling with such subject matter still poses more questions than answers. Over his painting career, he has become quite well known for his figurative art – but this time he had to deal with a fear of producing “dumb art” by trying too hard to portray the Gallipoli myth. He has not, however ditched the approach entirely and believes that the four to five figurative works he came up with were all the better for the mistakes he made along the way.

That sense of the human experience was all-pervasive, greatly enhanced by the discovery only months before the trip that his wife’s family had a direct link with the campaign itself – a relation who had come back safely after fighting not only in Turkey but also in Europe.

Lopes tried to get inside the perspectives of the soldiers. He got down low to the ground, amongst the dirt and scrub, and even into remnant trenches. His output of 40+ oil-on-board creations built a story of notes from the field – a visual response to what the immediate surrounds might have been for soldiers marooned on the battlefield. For Lopes, even the stony ground of a foxhole became more than a grand vista.

Not that he was oblivious to the beauty around him. The rugged hillsides, the spring blooms, the peculiar blue of the Aegean coast – they all set up a great contrast to the grassroots subject matter



01



02



03



04

and made Lopes think even more deeply about lost youth. “There is an overwhelming sense of mortality and sacrifice,” Lopes reflects. “You see the beautiful vistas out over the sea, and realise that these may have been the last things that many soldiers would have seen before they died.

“The actual battles have become a military context for the human

condition – these were just young men who died, and after a while I realised what Idris (Murphy) said had some truth to it – what we were painting was this idea of a ‘sacred land’ that has some spiritual connection to the identity of modern Australia.”

The experience left Lopes with a sense of universal humility, no matter whether you were Australian,

New Zealander or Turkish. These were mostly kids who signed up for the ultimate finishing school. Many had a long journey to get to the battlefields, and no knowledge of what they were taking on until they were thrown into the thick of it.

“Reading several wartime letters, whether a suburban kid from Sydney or a Turkish farmer’s son, you get the sense that these were

01 Trench – The Nek, 2014, oil on board, 30 x 40cm  
02 Trench Study III, 2014, oil on board, 35 x 40cm  
03 Russell’s Top, 2014, oil on board, 38 x 45cm  
04 The Nek, Foxhole, 2014, oil on canvas, 180 x 130cm





05

boys suddenly forced into manhood – and it connects to the wider world,” Lopes explains. “Just as you’re starting to work it out, what life means – or might mean – the future is brutally wrenched away from you.”

Lopes, whose Sicilian ancestors were fighting for Italy against the Austro-Hungarian empire in the same period as Gallipoli, sees the role of a painter as partly to stimulate inward reflection: firstly in himself while doing the work, and secondly to promote the same sense of enquiry in his audience.

As soon as he arrived in Istanbul, he was struck by the weight of civilisation, the layers of history that echo down the centuries. In so many ways it’s a huge contrast to the modern history of post-colonial Australia, at the time of Gallipoli a nation not yet 15 years young. No wonder the Turks fought so fiercely to protect their land, their ideals from the assault of the “infidels”.

“Istanbul made me think about the importance of life’s rituals,” Lopes says, “how Turks are surrounded by art and architecture, the mosques, the pavements – even the pouring of tea has an artistic



06



07



08

05 Walkers Ridge – Still Life, 2014, oil on board, 120 x 120cm  
 06 The Nek, 2014, oil on board, 35 x 40cm  
 07 Trench Skyline, 2014, oil on board, 40 x 40cm  
 08 Anzac Cove diptych, 2014, oil on board, 50 x 98cm  
 Courtesy the artist and Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney

“No wonder the Turks fought so fiercely to protect their land, their ideals from the assault of the “infidels”.”

flourish. There is a soul there, a sense of people living with what they’ve got, and a richness that is not always about money.”

Back to his studio, Lopes seized the chance to build on the material he had collected from his field trip in a more meditative way. In Turkey, there was a strong sense of pressure – particularly the limited amount of time to absorb and then disgorge as much as possible into drawing, painting and writing. Over nine months or so, the creative process has left him emotionally tired.

“With the time and the quietness the studio affords you, some of the work I did back home is probably better in terms of painting,” says Lopes. “But the *plein air* work captures more emotive qualities because it was done on the spot: they are what they are. To do something a little more composed – that time back in the studio I found essential to bring forth the big ideas, to make sense of such intense subject matter.” ●

## Albert Champion’s hell of a war

Anzac Memorial historian Brad Manera found the war records of Steve Lopes’ family relative, great uncle Albert Champion. Here is Brad’s summary of Albert’s war, sent to Steve and his family.

“Your great great uncle, Private Albert Champion, had one hell of a war! He was among the first to enlist in New South Wales when recruiting started. He was just over 20 when he enlisted. It seems he had an unblemished record during training and was certainly on the strength of the 3rd (NSW) Battalion when they landed at Gallipoli just before lunchtime on 25 April, 1915.

He survived the battles of the landing and, like most of the 1st Division, was evacuated sick (with tonsillitis) in June and July.

They sent him back to Anzac Cove in time for the battle at Lone Pine

and he was badly wounded in the second week of the battle during one of the grenade duels in August. He suffered grenade fragment wounds to his right hand and was evacuated to Egypt for treatment.

Like the rest of the infantrymen who had seen a lot of fighting, Cairo offered some interesting distractions. He went absent without leave and was awarded Field Punishment No 2 and lost three days’ pay. He contracted an illness and was sent to Britain for treatment that lasted 46 days.

In late July /early August 1916 he was sent back to his unit that was

fighting on the Somme. He was in some of the bloodiest fighting of WW1 in the final months of 1916. He and his mates captured the Pozieres ridgeline and drove the Germans back to the Hindenburg line. He was only 21 but he certainly didn’t hang back. It was during this phase of the fighting that he was shot in the face and chest. These wounds nearly killed him and he remained in hospital for a year before being sent back to Australia and discharged as unfit for further service in early 1918.”

