

# Foreword



View near the Great Ocean Road Victoria 2005

## Aesthetic encounters of the human kind Dr Gilbert Burgh

**H**ave you ever looked at something and found yourself with no words to describe the feelings you are experiencing? Think carefully! Maybe you stood at the foot of Uluru, or looked as far as your eye can see across the Blue Mountains, or climbed the Harbour Bridge, or walked up to the peak of Bald Rock Mountain and encountered breathtaking views, leaving you speechless or in awe. You know something very certain, an intuitive experience that you are unable to describe to others. When asked ‘what is it you know?’ you discover yourself struggling to find words, unable to give an answer that mirrors your conviction of certainty about your experience – the knowledge you have acquired seems to resist all verbal description!

These sorts of experiences are not uncommon. Encounters with what might be called ‘natural art’ or ‘the art of nature’ can leave us momentarily mystified or confronted with a life changing experience. For the first time you see the world as precious, or new, or fragile. Whatever it is you experience, you believe you are truly seeing and knowing something that you had not recognised previously to your encounter. Aesthetic encounters such as these are not unique to the art found in nature. People can and do have similar intuitive experiences when looking at art created by humans (or even, by elephants!)

What is art?

The term ‘art’ is notoriously difficult to explain. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, assumed that the purpose of art is to represent reality. But he also believed that knowledge of reality cannot be derived from experience because the world as it seems to us is not the real world but only a shadow of true reality. Only the mind has the capacity to grasp the essence of things, what Plato called the world of ‘Forms.’ Because artists draw from their own experiences of the world, for Plato art captures an image of an image, and