

EVERY LANDSCAPE IS A MEMORY

In his painting *A Land is not...* 1992, Ian Burn incorporates the text “A Landscape is not something you look at, but something you look through”. Burn lived several years in New York during the 1970s developing a taste for conceptual art, but upon returning to Australia he began investigating the way Australian landscape painting had been framed and theorised.¹ In many respects, the landscape of gum trees included in the background of *A Land is not . . .* is typical of the romanticised school of painting to emerge in Australia, but the inclusion of a sheet of Perspex floating on top of the scene asks us to consider the psychological and historical conditions that have dominated the experience of landscape since colonisation. In 2021, at a time of environmental urgency, it’s crucial to rethink these conditions. I would suggest, to further Burns’ statement, that today a landscape is not something we look through but something that we should be ‘with’.

On Earth presents a selection of historical and contemporary art that prompts us to reconsider representations of landscape, the exploitation of land, and the cultural memories that landscapes hold. In Tim Ingold’s 1993 essay, ‘The Temporality of the Landscape’, the author hoped that we could reconcile the dichotomy of landscape and culture.² Outlining landscape as existing within rhythmic and moving temporalities, the author posits the confluence of nature and culture as a dwelling space—rather than dominating or being dominated, we simply exist with the land and attenuate ourselves with it through overlapping rhythms.

Thoughts of being with the land across time are, of course, not new. Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson has written extensively on the concept of ‘belonging’ in a settler colony. She argues that Indigenous belonging, as opposed to non-Indigenous belonging is rooted in a connection with land. The foundation of ‘Australia’ and the correlated legal fiction of *terra nullius* only lent a hand in disconnecting land from culture. And this persists. Moreton-Robinson states: “The legal regime of the nation-state places Indigenous people in a state of homelessness because our ontological relationship to the land, which is the way we hold title, is incommensurable with its own exclusive claims of sovereignty.”³ This is not just political or cultural, but also a problem for the environment. As we have been seeing, the impact of climate change on Australia is becoming more ferocious not by the century, or the decade, but by the year, and part of this is a result of not paying attention to the land.

¹ One of Burn’s earliest essays on the topic was an investigation of the Heidelberg School—citing artists such as Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin and Arthur Streeton—in the formation of an imaginary of Australia through the lens of class. He states, “The Heidelberg painters taught us to see our bush environment in a new way, but at the same time they distorted our comprehension of that environment. The pictures allude to a reality of the bush, but embody the illusions of a class ‘way of seeing’.” See Burn, Ian, “Beating Around the Bush: The landscapes of the Heidelberg School” 1979, republished in *Dialogue* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991, 35-36)

² Ingold, Tim. “The Temporality of the Landscape.” *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): 152-74. Accessed March 31, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/124811>.

³ Moreton-Robinson, Aileen “Our story is in the land”: Why the Indigenous sense of belonging unsettles white Australia” ABC, Monday 9 November 2020 <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/our-story-is-in-the-land-indigenous-sense-of-belonging/11159992> Accessed 21 March 2021

The artworks in *On Earth* explore the many facets of the environmental change that we face—the impact of colonisation and Western ideology on the landscape, our being with nature and the non-human, the ways that memories are embedded within landscapes across time and space. It questions how we represent and interpret land, and asks for a reconsideration of the place of our bodies in relation to the earth. It features works that are poetic and powerful, and above all, commit us to action.

The Murray Darling river system extends from Queensland, travelling south west to end at its mouth in South Australia. It is but one of many natural systems across this continent that has seen a rapid decline in health.⁴ Mildura-born artist Bonita Ely has witnessed this decline over the four decades she has been creating work. Photographic documentation of her seminal performance, *Murray River Punch* 1980–8, in which the artist staged a cooking show—including ingredients such as human excrement, introduced species of fish, and agricultural chemicals—are served up to guests. Another of her works, *Life is full of situations* 1978, explores not only the degradation of the river but also the masculinity inherent in its colonisation—a crushed aluminium can that has been shot is seen alongside explorations of the sediments of the river, and the expansive ecologies that it covers. Barkandji artist, Nici Cumpston's work *Oh my Murray Darling* 2019 is a still photograph that the artist took of the original shoreline of Lake Nookamka (Bonney) in South Australia. In the early 20th century, the landscape was flooded with the construction of weirs and locks, and much of the land and subsequent evidence of Aboriginal habitation was buried.

Kate Shaw's *The Cloud* 2019, while not directly referencing the Murray Darling, alludes to environmental change. Using striking colour combinations, her works convey both a sense of toxicity and of being outside or separate to the landscape. *The Cloud* comments on our detachment from nature, using colour to explore the layers of toxic histories that the natural world has endured.

Warraba Weatherall uses tree trunks of both the ironbark and the river red gum. Both are found across the continent, the river red gum most commonly along the Murray Darling system—it relies on water for survival. *Propagate* 2021 sees these trunks unearthed, fractured, removed from their environments and placed inside large steel cages. Originally, these sculptures formed part of a work that marked the thirty-year anniversary of the establishment of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Rather than carving a pattern into the trunk, as a burial tree would be marked, Weatherall carved numbers referring to recommendations made by the report. In *Propagate*, the artist charred one of these trunks, making reference not only to the lack of action on the recommendations but also as a comment on the fire and drought we see across the country as a result of colonising.

Political posters created from the late 1970s to the mid-90s are included in *On Earth*. The 1980s were an explosive time for land rights and environmental concerns in Australia. One of the country's largest campaigns against the degradation of the

⁴ See, for example, Department of Primary Industries, 'Fish kills in NSW 2019-20' <<https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/threats/fish-kills-2019-2020>> Accessed 01 March 2021

natural environment began in the late 1970s, with protests against the building of a dam on the Gordon River in Tasmania.

The decade also saw a large anti-nuclear movement emerge, particularly in response to the mining of uranium in the Top End, in relation to calls for nuclear disarmament, and growing concerns over land rights. Three posters by Toni Robertson address the issue of uranium mining and nuclear power, while two—made by The Women’s Domestic Needlework Group in Sydney and the Campaign Against Police Powers in Brisbane address issues of land rights—one in relation to mining, and the other in relation to the unprecedented powers given to police during Brisbane’s Commonwealth Games in 1982.⁵ Greg Forsyth’s poster, *Dance for the trees* 1988 was made at a time when people were lobbying for the protection of the Great Sandy Region, including Fraser Island (K’Gari)—logging ceased on the Island in 1991. And Ray Beattie’s words echo in the present: “Impartiality is not neutral... Silent rage can’t work miracles.”

Four colonial-era paintings feature in the exhibition. They are markers of representation of land at a time when non-Indigenous Australia was forming its identity. These paintings ask us to consider what has changed in these landscapes over the more than a century since they were painted and, in juxtaposition to other works in the exhibition, act as a cue to question how representation of land has shaped the identity of the continent. Depicting a mine site on a river system just outside Ballarat, an unknown artist—likely the wife of a railway worker—captures a large open-cut in a once heavily-treed area of Black Hill, or Bowdun as it is known in Wadawurrung language. *Mines, Black Hill, Ballarat* 1899 portrays an almost romantic view of the mining in an era that was much fraught with both dispossession and racial tensions that resulted from the White Australia Policy in 1901.

Further colonial-era paintings depict Brisbane in the late 19th Century. Brisbane wasn’t prominent in the national conversations around landscape—Isaac Walter Jenner, one of the most accomplished colonial painters, is rarely mentioned in Australian art history books—these landscapes give us a glimpse into some of the early views of Brisbane. They are also titled simply as the place which they capture. Jenner’s *Brisbane River from Hamilton (from Toorak Hill)* 1885 depicts the view from what was once an Indigenous campground with Indigenous rock wells (for water storage) but quickly became a place which has become one of the city’s most ‘cosmopolitan’ suburbs, primarily for its view.⁶ Felled trees are visible in the foreground, making way for the construction that was to make that hill a boom. George Seymour Owen’s *View from Bay View Hotel, Scarborough Queensland Sept 1889* depicts the foreshore at Scarborough, devoid of both sailing vessels and humans, though the work was painted just after the first steamer service from Brisbane would transport day-trippers to the Redcliffe Peninsula. A watercolour by an unknown artist depicting a view of Brisbane from Paddington is also featured—in it can be seen three landmarks that were built in the colonial era: The Bishopsbourne

⁵ Brisbane Times, ‘1982 Commonwealth Games protests’ *Brisbane Times*, October 5 2012 <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/1982-commonwealth-games-protests-20121005-273px.html> Accessed 01 March 2021

⁶ See Mapping Brisbane History, ‘Toorak Hill Aboriginal Wells and Camp’ <https://mappingbrisbanehistory.com.au/history-location/toorak-hillaboriginal-wells-and-camp-513/> Accessed 26 March 2021

(residence of Brisbane's first Anglican bishop); Parliament House; and the first Victoria Bridge and the old observatory windmill in Spring Hill.

While these colonial paintings are devoid of people, two prints from Michael Cook's *Stickman* series place the human figure back in the landscape. The series comprises ten prints and tells the story of colonisation on the backdrop of an archetypal Australian desert. The series starts with plentiful plants, animals, and the figure of an Aboriginal man, and ends with images of dispossession and death. In the two prints—number eight and nine from the series—a British red-coat is introduced to the narrative, chasing the figure from the land, followed by the image of a man sitting with a wombat in front of a mass grave. *Stickman* is a story of loss and of the impact of invasion on unceded territories. Cook here reverses the idea of terra nullius—the European idea that in 1788, there was a lack of sophisticated cultivation of the land, or that there were no socio-political structures that indicated 'ownership' of land—by including the human figure in the landscape, as opposed to other colonial paintings such as those included in this exhibition.

Keemon Williams's *Heritage Listed* 2019 juxtaposes of the man-made and natural sand. The artist here hand-cast breezeblocks, reminiscent of architecture in the tropics and subtropics. Here, Williams drew upon his memory of growing up in Far North Queensland, responding to the sense of isolation and detachment from culture that the artist felt as a young man through a pervasive imported architecture. At the same time, the artist re-empowers his Kuku Yalanji heritage by using the colours common to his community's shields. 'Heritage listed' here has a double meaning – that of the heritage listing of architecture that has only very recently been built and the oft lacking acknowledgement of the longer histories of the country. Williams makes visible this heritage.

Likewise, invoking memories of environment, Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori and Dale Harding's works are homages to the lands of their families. Harding's *Emetic painting 1 (ceremony for toxic masculinities)* 2018 was made while the artist was between a residency in Sweden and showing work in Liverpool. The brushed colours are reminiscent of the sandstone country of Central Queensland. Atop this landscape, a poem is written as a response to the colonial attitudes he encountered in Britain. The reverence of Country is perceptible but also the start of a larger conversation around the power of language in the domination of land. The final words in the poem, "Ngaya dhiligu yinda", are in the Bidjara language.

Gabori's painting, *Dibirdibi Country*, is one of many that the artist painted of her husband's Country. Gabori's deft use of colour and gesture is evident in this reflection of the land—depicting the large saltpan areas between Malbaa (grass) plains and the iron stone ridges up north. Rather than using colour to demarcate land, here the colours sit with each other, on top of each other, moving together. Gabori captures her own love for the place that sustained her, her ancestors and the ecologies around Dibirdibi Country for millennia.

Also featuring in *On Earth* are three watercolours by painters from the Hermannsburg School. While the School was and is often typified by the use of watercolours as primary media using Western ideas of perspective, the style also expresses the deep connections with the artists' home country. Jillian Namatjira's

Petermann Ranges, Central Australia 1985 captures an area West of Hermannsburg, close to where the artist was born in Areyonga. Namatjira used bold colours and contrasting linework, while Claude Pannka, also featured, is more subtle in his use of line. Painted later in the artist's life, the two depictions of the Central Australian landscape portray a sense of movement—the artist defies perspective in his watercolours, evident in *Central Australian landscape* 1964, and ever so slightly tilts the background of his pictures, encouraging viewers to contemplate the movement of land over time. While not part of the Hermannsburg school, Joe Rootsey was often referred to as 'The Second Namatjira'. Born in 1918, the Barrow Point artist was the first Indigenous person to be officially trained in an art school in the 1950s—and one of the first considered as a serious contemporary artist. It's not known where this work was painted, but the colours are similar to other works that he painted West of Barrow Point and around Laura in Far North Queensland. It was an area that had little been depicted in the Western painting style at the time, by artists both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

In the work *This Placed (almost but not quite)* 2018, Worimi artist Dean Cross holds up a postcard of Albert Namatjira's *Ghost gum and waterhole, Central Australia* c. 1955 against the backdrop of a mountain range in China. Cross was on an artist residency on the outskirts of Beijing when he made this work, thinking through what it meant to be Indigenous in a foreign land and grappling with the lack of understanding around issues of colonisation at that time and in that place.

Yasmin Smith's *Bundle of Ntaria Branches* are the outcome of the time she spent in Ntaria (Hermannsburg) in 2014, where she lived and worked with the Hermannsburg potters on their less-commonly-used technique of slab-building ceramics. Travelling back to Ntaria in 2015, the artist collected branches of river red gum, mulga and date palm trees that had been planted by the Lutherans, who established a mission there in 1849. With permission from traditional owners, Smith used tree ash from cooking fires found behind the mission's old church to create a glaze for her Ntaria Branches. This method of using the tree ash as the glaze to decorate the artist's cast ceramic branches has now become common in her practice and is the result of the desire to not just represent the landscape, but rather to be the landscape.

Kinly Grey's *I can't wait for this feeling again* and *Post James* (both from 2014) rethinks landscape and the genre's elevated history. The works mimic American artists James Turrell's elaborate 'Skyspace' sculptures, which allow viewers inside an enclosed or semi-enclosed space to view the sky through an aperture in the ceiling. Instead, Grey makes their own 'Skyspace' by cutting an aperture into a simple cardboard box and taking it to different locations to experience a heightened sense of being in the world—whether that be in a suburban park or on a beach.

More visceral and creaking, Robert Andrew's *A Connective Reveal - Country* 2021 uses machinery, earth pigments and soil to create a Brutalist-looking monument—a structure that slowly, over time, sees string pulling away at the compacted dirt so it eventually crumbles. In doing so, it reveals layers of histories—sedimentary and poetic—as Andrew expands on the concept of the movement of earth across temporalities. The sculpture itself takes months to erode, eventually leaving the string—like its skeleton—as a marker. Emma Fielden also plays the slow game. In *Dialogue* 2020, the artist and her friend, Tarik Ahlip, pound away at a large boulder

of limestone for over six hours. Limestone can be found across the world. Fielden uses it as a vessel to express the cosmic nature of land—small particles splinter off the rock, looking almost like stars in the night sky, while on the micro level, the artist's body becomes as beat down by the consistent degradation of the rock, as the rock itself.

Cultural memory is always embedded within land and journeys across it. Sancintya Mohini Simpson delves into her familial past to draw out histories of indentured labour, social and cultural identities, and the physical and emotional memories they hold across generations and geographies. *Remnants of my ancestors* 2019 takes the artist's maternal history and the journey from India to South Africa, where indentured labour was common from the 1860s until the 1920s and where her ancestors worked on sugar plantations in Natal. These times were renowned—much like the blackbirding of South Sea Islanders in Australia—for the ill treatment of workers, often women. The artist draws on the landscape to elicit these memories. A narration over the top of the moving image explores, through poetry, her familial connections to these landscapes and to memories of a connection with the natural environment at a time when domination over nature—and culture—was prevalent and is continuing.

Art has the capacity to ask questions rather than being an answer. *On Earth* asks us to ruminate upon the ways in which our surrounds have been shaped by our cultural being in the world. It implores us to consider our relationships with nature, the history of exploitation and perceived domination over land. This exhibition invites us to go on to think through our everyday interactions with nature and consider it as part of us—as part of culture.

- Sarah Werkmeister, curator of *On Earth*

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