Title
Dig a bit deeper – connection and contemporary landscape art

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Date 31st October 2012
Certificate of Originality

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisor Patricia Wilson-Adams for her encouragement, mentoring and support. To my partner Michael Moffitt has been endlessly patient throughout this process. Thanks to my daughter Billie for always believing in me. To my artist friends Camille Kersley, Pam Johnston, Maria Trott, Dennis Monks, Christine McMillan and Adrian Symes who are always inspiring, confronting and encouraging, I hope we have many more crazy drawing days in the wind. Jungian Psychotherapist Mariam Makinson has been a wise confidant and is a constant source of knowledge with regard to myths, dreams, stories and life’s processes.
I would like to thank Kris Smith for coming on board at the last minute to be my supervisor and to the University Gallery and The University of Newcastle for supporting me and exhibiting my recent work.
To all of the people who were a part of the process of On becoming a witch and to artists everywhere who inspire and astound me on a daily basis, my heartfelt thanks.
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Abstract

This paper examines how memory, knowledge and connection are imbued in place. Considering how place can inhabit self and self can inhabit place. This proposition is reinforced by looking at many models and cross cultural examples as well as the work of theorists such as Casey, Relph and Blowby.

The proposition that we are strongly related to our geographical locations, and by considering the similarities in make up of the earth to our bodies, a case is made that we are biologically and chemically part of the land. This becomes so by acknowledging that what we eat is of the land and hence there is a strong correlation between the two. It is then considered that since we are part of the land the land in turn becomes part of us.

The off campus performance work On becoming a Witch provided a very powerful link between the exegesis and the studio work. It examined yet another way in which one is able to relate to country by the use of ritual, myth and symbolism in a specific bush setting. It brought together skills related to theatre, opera, costume design and music. This has been fully documented as part of the exegesis.

The studio component of this thesis examines how one can closely relate one’s paintings and drawings to a sense of place and country by the use of materials such as ochres and the use of strong simple abstract forms. The use of a dominant symbol, the ziggurat, has been explained as well as the processes used with the result being a series of strong paintings and drawings. These act as a tangible link between self and a sense of place.
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4) The inclusion of these images in the research thesis adds significantly to its raison d’être because the images and their historical significance are the subject of discussion in the thesis.
Introduction  Dig a bit deeper – connection and contemporary landscape art

The research project ‘Dig a bit deeper – connection and contemporary landscape art examines how the physicality of the natural environment affects who we are and our responses to our environment: how place exists in us, how we exist in place and how this impacts on our presence in place.

In order to understand the notion of belonging as a non-indigenous person, of connection to place, a sense of the sacred, and identity - I will look at the links starting with the familiar and moving to the fleeting and ephemeral and back again.

One cannot begin to contemplate country without acknowledging that the original inhabitants lived and died for tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years in this ancient land. They sang and danced and told stories in all of the places that I have lived.

In chapter 1 I have investigated how memory, knowledge and connection are imbued in place. How the place can inhabit self and self can inhabit place. In order to reinforce my proposition I have looked at many models and cross-cultural examples in this chapter.

In Chapter 2 I have discussed the mapping of the places where I have lived and their geological properties and whether they have influenced my activities. By considering the similarities in makeup of the earth to our bodies, how, as the food partakes the qualities of where it is grown so too do the inhabitants. We biologically and chemically become part of the land and the land becomes part of us.

In Chapter 3 I have briefly examined the work of Colin McCahon and Hossein Valamanesh along with Rosalie Gascoigne, Rover Thomas, Judy Watson, Kimio Tsuchiya and Shigeo Toya and how they interpret the language of abstraction as a part of a broader conversation about defining the world in a poetic and simple form. Drawing on essential elements to create sensitive, powerful works that depict a connection to the world around us.

Chapter 4 is a description of the making of a site specific performance work that was held in the Central Tablelands in 2011. On becoming a witch was presented in the high cold country where I now live at Yetholme NSW. The script was entirely poetry. The images, sounds, sets, costumes and music were developed during the process of this research. Images of my artwork were projected during the performance; some of this was videoed and photographed. This involved me working with the local community and Arts OutWest, Charles Sturt University, Yetholme Progress Assn, local and interstate artists and the Local Stages Program of Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre. I was responsible for writing and directing the show as well as making sets and costumes. The performance, and the people
made a gentle impression on the landscape and the high country of Yetholme made an impression on all of those involved.

My work and my process are discussed in Chapter 5. I have used ochres and soil, sticks and charcoal. One of the main aims has been to relate the work to place. The cycles of life and death are a constant theme, as well as dark and light.

Researching belonging as a non-indigenous person, I have come to the understanding that the land claims us, indigenises us, relative to how long we spend in a place, whether it is four years or 40,000 years. We are born and we eat the food from where we are, taking the nutrients from the soil and water. The earth’s crust contains most of the mineral nutrients our body needs, and the chemical composition of a rock, such as granite, is similar to the composition of the human body. Through my artwork I am attempting to articulate the tangible and intangible relationship I have to country.

My studio work has been informed by visiting and mapping places where I have lived during my life and, by the taking of photographs I have also worked on drawings, paintings, poetry and sculpture. The use of earth elements was in part to immerse myself in the physicality of the places that I have inhabited.

During the course of my research I visited Goolagong cemetery in Central western NSW and discovered four generations of my mothers’ ancestors buried there. This was a pivotal point in my work, which led to further investigation of stories, symbols and myths related to the earth and the mother. The pentagon and the ziggurat were recurring themes in the performance work On becoming a witch. The pentagon originated from linking places of significance for me on a map in my local area. This linking formed the shape a pentagon. The Ziggurat was the base of the gravestones found at Goolagong. The Babylonian ‘Mountain of Heaven’ represents the point of contact between heaven and earth.1 Much of this material has informed the studio component of my work. From this research in the past four and a half years I have developed a strong body of paintings and drawings.

1 Barbara G Walker. Womens Encyclopaedia of Myths and Secrets Harper Collins NY p.1101
Prologue   Recollections

I have moved about all my life so my attachment to place comes from feelings, experiences, memory and recollections plus those little bits of country that get inside and don’t leave.

Yetholme is new to me, yet there is a history here, a familiarity, three generations of my partner’s family have lived here. The history of the region, even of white settlement goes much further back. The molybdenite mines, the gold diggings, the coalmines, the soldier settlers who struggled after the Second World War with families on small plots attempting to scratch a living from the land are all part of this history. The fields where the Waradjuri people, led by the warrior Windradyne, were slaughtered are not that far away.

Many of the species that were around when indigenous inhabitants lived in the area are extinct. There were koalas, quolls, bandicoots and many other small marsupials. The loss of habitat, cats, dogs, pigs, foxes and humans ensured they are here no longer. In a local newspaper clipping from the 1944 there is a photograph of a fungi called Blackfellas Bread so called because Indigenous locals used to bake it. The bread resembled a large potato with a taste of boiled rice, which was found when farmers were ploughing virgin soil at Yetholme. Indigenous and non-indigenous people I have spoken to have no recollection of the fungi now.

There seems to be so little real bush left in the Central Tablelands region. There are areas of remnant bush, of regenerated bushland, some open fields where we have to struggle to keep the weeds down and there are problems with feral pigs, rabbits and foxes. The rare and endangered Purple Copper Wing butterfly, resides in the Bassaria bushes just outside our back door. The butterfly has a symbiotic relationship with a small ant that lives at the foot of the bush. The butterfly lays its eggs on the bush and when they hatch, the ant takes the larvae down to their nest at the base of the bush. There they secrete a liquid, which is eaten by the ants. At night the ants carry the larvae back up the bush to eat the new leaves. A symbiosis where each party could not exist without the other.

I am sixth generation Australian. What does that mean? My mother’s father was from Goolagong and my mother was born in Nyngan, her mother at Peera Bore between Bourke and Broken Hill. On a visit to Goolagong in 2010 I discovered at the local cemetery a whole area put aside for the Irish Catholic, and four generations my mother’s people dating back to 1822 were buried there. This was a revelation, as I had no real understanding of my connection to this place west of the mountains. The graves of my ancestors lay not very far from where I now live and I had no idea of this connection
when I moved here. Many of the graves consisted of a stone ziggurat\(^2\) with a cross sprouting from the last of the four steps.

I have not felt any particular attachment to these people, that their bones lay in the soil of the central tablelands and that they had a relationship with the area is something new to consider. Is it possible that some of the experience they had of the living in the area are imbued in my very cells? The food they ate, the life they lived could well be a part of my very makeup and the country they lived may also have their imprint.

\(^2\) Ziggurat- Babylonian “Mountain of Heaven” the pyramid that served as temple and palace in Mesopotamian towns. At its summit, the king consummated his sacred marriage to the Goddess, this being the point of contact between heaven and earth