An address about water

School of Art
The Australian National University
in collaboration with the
Murray-Darling Basin Commission
and
RiverConnect, a Project of the
Goulburn Broken Catchment
Management Authority and
the Greater Shepparton City Council

20 October - 19 November 2006

Shepparton Art Gallery
Eastbank Centre
70 Welsford St
Shepparton
Victoria 3630
Shepp. The Earth
Shepp, The Earth
An address about Water
Participants in the 2006 Shepparton Field Studies program would like to acknowledge the support and generosity of the following organisations:

• Murray-Darling Basin Commission
• Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority
• Greater Shepparton City Council
• Shepparton Art Gallery
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• Galways Restaurant
• SPC Ardmona Factory Sales
• Browns audiovisual
• ANU


The visual artwork presented in the exhibition Shepp: The Earth was inspired by field research conducted in regions surrounding Shepparton, Mooroopna and Waranga Basin, Victoria, in March, April, May, July, and September, 2006.

Rhonda Laing and John Laing, who both contributed to the Shepparton Field Study, kindly accepted an invitation to exhibit their recent work in the program exhibition.

Catalogue essay contributors:
Dick Aitken is an arts writer
Stephanie Lavau is a PhD scholar

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The Environment Studio, ANU School of Art, provides academic supervision and logistic assistance for sustained field research on environmental issues in conjunction with any of the School’s Workshops.

- Painting - Textiles - Sculpture
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- Imagine your research proposal unfurling beyond the studio in locations that are inspirational for your topic
- Mix field work with studio development and critical appraisal by practicing artists back in the School’s Workshops
- Access internationally renowned environmental experts in the University’s own Institute for Environment
- Contribute as an exhibiting visual artist to national agencies that are helping communities achieve a sustainable future

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The Environment Studio

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Ian Robertson
Fertile Land Fragile River: Fragile Land Fertile
River 2006. Detail 180.0 x 240.0 cm Oil on canvas
Water is the life blood of the Goulburn Valley region and its major rural centre, Shepparton. The region has an annual rainfall of just 400 mm per year – far too dry for intensive agriculture. Diverting the Goulburn River onto the flat plains of the valley more than 100 years ago has allowed for intensive dairy and horticultural industries to develop and prosper in what is a very dry climate.

Food processing industries such as SPC Ardmona and Murray Goulburn sprang up to cater for the primary produce and the Shepparton Irrigation Region became known as the Food Bowl of Australia with an estimated farm gate value of agricultural production of $1.24 billion in 2003-2004. The economic output from the region has been calculated at $5.2 billion and produces some 25 per cent of Victoria’s export earnings.

The social and economic wellbeing of the region is almost entirely reliant on the meandering Goulburn River and the water it provides to service irrigation, food processing, businesses and homes. And yet, like many Australian towns, Shepparton turned its back on the river. The magnificent remnant Red Gum Forest on the floodplains surrounding the river were considered wastelands – soils too poor to farm, too wet to build on!

For many the forest was a dumping ground for garden waste and unwanted household goods. Car wrecks and the occasional body are hauled from the murky depths of the river where it winds through the heart of Shepparton and Mooroopna. For many years, save for the occasional fisherman and vagrant, it appeared few people took the time to get to know the river. Access was difficult and buildings tended to be built with their backs to the river, including the council offices.

One exception was the local indigenous community which, before the arrival of Europeans, had lived and hunted along the banks of the waterway. With the demise of their traditional lifestyle many local Aborigines lived at Cummeragunga Mission near Barmah in New South Wales. Following a walk off the mission in the 1930s, large family groups settled on the banks of the Goulburn between Shepparton at Mooroopna on both sides of the Causeway near where Kidstown is now situated.

Later, many of the Aborigines were resettled in public housing but retained their strong affinity with the river which is central to their traditions and belief systems.

A growing appreciation of the natural environment has occurred in the general population in recent years as evidenced by the huge numbers of people opting for sea and tree changes. Walking tracks created by the Greater Shepparton Council have opened up the river environment and they are now busy with people walking, cycling and generally enjoying the beautiful surrounds.

This awakening has coincided with a strengthening of the indigenous community and the growing desire to reconnect with their traditions and participate. The Yorta Yorta Joint Body is giving the indigenous community the opportunity to participate in the management of the river environment.

From this environment RiverConnect has been born. Established by the Greater Shepparton City Council and the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, RiverConnect is a grand plan to re-connect the people of Shepparton and Mooroopna to the wonderful natural resource that exists in the centre of town.

The project has caught the imagination of many groups and individuals. Once an idea, RiverConnect is fast gaining a life of its own as artists, educators, land managers, indigenous and other community leaders recognise its potential as a vehicle to bring heart and soul to the community.

One of the first projects established under RiverConnect has been via the School of Art of the Australian National University in Canberra.
into the Murray Darling Basin in recent years, a group of artists from the ANU has visited Shepparton regularly throughout 2006 with the aim of responding to the natural environment and the place of water in the landscape and the community. As the Chair of the RiverConnect Steering Committee, I am delighted with the results. A body of work that provides a unique insight into Shepparton and the Goulburn Valley from the perspective of a talented and diverse group of artists – keen observers who have created works based on their interpretation of our environment. It is timely as we move into the worst drought in living memory, to reflect on the fragility of our landscape and our place in it. This body of work is a wonderful prompt to reflect on and consider both the past and the future.

Bill O’Kane
Chair RiverConnect Steering Committee

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Celebratory Note

John Reid

2006 marks the 10th anniversary of the ANU School of Art Field Studies program.

The 2006 Carrick Australian Awards for University Teaching acknowledged the Field Studies program for its innovative engagement of student artists with landscape, communities and environmental agencies.

2006 also marks 5 years of Field Studies programs in the Murray-Darling Basin in collaboration with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC): Corowa / Macquarie Marshes, 2001-02; Grenfell, 03; Gunnedah, 04; Wentworth, 05; and Shepparton / Mooroopna, 06.

The partnership with the MDBC will be formalised over the next three years through an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. The research will aim to configure an effective model for cultural production and distribution to inspire innovative cultural practice and enhance community natural resource management.

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They emerge, spectres from the shallows, anthropomorphic creatures rising from watery graves fringing the broad expanse of tranquil water stretching south until it fuses with a shimmering horizon where water and sky become one.

This was the powerful and haunting image confronting us on our arrival at Waranga Basin. The grotesque roots and stumps of long dead River Red Gums (Eucalyptus camaldulensis) cut down in their prime a century or more ago to provide timber mostly for buildings, fence posts and firewood are a sad reminder of the fate of these once majestic trees.

We were a group of visual artists and writers undertaking an Environment Studio Field Studies 2006 program at the Australian National University School of Art. We had come from Canberra to Greater Shepparton to learn about the place and its residents, explore the country, be inspired and make art.

Our companion and guide that day at Waranga Basin was Ella Anselmi, an elder of the region’s Yorta Yorta people. Waranga Basin appealed, not only for its strange ‘creatures’ and expansive vistas, but for the abundant chunks of ochres of many colours, iron-rusted stones and multifaceted quartz crystals scattered randomly around the sloping ‘beach’ below our point of arrival. We learnt that this unexpected artists’ bounty had reached this place when loads of tailings from the Rushworth goldfields, some twenty kilometres to the south-west, had been trucked in to build the basin’s retaining walls in the early years of the last century.

As some fossicked, others sat and listened to Ella tell stories of aboriginal dispossession through land grabs and the forced removal of aboriginal children from their families (leading to the phenomenon of the ‘stolen generation’). She spoke too of the callous and parsimonious treatment of the Yorta Yorta and other aboriginal peoples at the hands of administrators carrying out government policy, with little regard for the wellbeing of these descendents of the original custodians of the ground we were sitting on. Although today’s aboriginal people, in Shepparton and elsewhere, share the same rights as all Australians, it was not so many years ago that Ella’s stories were a reality.

The irony of the moment was not lost as, gazing out beyond the ochre fragments and ‘anthropomorphic creatures’, we were reminded that the development and wealth of this rapidly expanding region had not come without substantial human misery and cost, and environmental destruction. On the other hand, there is the creation of Waranga Basin, a vast reservoir sited on a natural 6000 acre swamp known by its aboriginal names ‘Baangyoobine’ or ‘Warranga’, or as ‘Gunns’ Swamp’ after an early pastoralist who established his squatting run, also called ‘Waranga’, in the surrounding area. The basin, that intercepts flow from Lake Eildon via the Goulburn River and its own catchment, has enabled the region, through the controlled release of water for irrigation via two man-made...
channels, to become what's known today as the 'Food Bowl of Australia' and supply forty percent of Victoria's milk.

Construction of this huge earth dam commenced in 1905 and was completed in 1915 using picks, shovels and horse-drawn scoops. Between 1915 and 1926 further work was undertaken to raise the embankment's height and insert a core wall to increase the basin's capacity to its present 411,000 mega litres.

Several artists were so inspired by our numerous visits to Waranga Basin that they were prompted to base their art on its 'creatures', its broad scope and its extraordinary colours. In one case ochres gleaned from the basin's waters edge found their way into the artist's work.

"Landscape painting particularly interests me as a vehicle through which to convey mood". These words aptly describe the work of AG Stokes, a recent graduate of the School's Painting Workshop who, with family living in Shepparton, knows the place well. The exposed contorted River Red Gum roots of the Waranga Basin's shallows are given ghostly life as they float in incongruous suspension above the ethereal landscapes below in her two exhibited oil paintings. Waranga Basin Sacrifice is a diptych depicting the basin, while the triptych Channel Vision looks down on the man-made Western Channel that takes water from the basin to distant Pyramid Hill and Boort. In addition to the strong presence of water, both works signify another reality: one of degradation as a consequence of the manipulation of the environment in the interests of water harvesting for irrigation. Ann Stokes observes that "the look of the land, which reflects its use, can also be interpreted as the price of change".

Growing up on a farm in Western Australia "with plenty of space to breathe", nationally acclaimed professional ceramic artist and inspiring teacher Bev Hogg is preoccupied with the "interconnectedness of humans and the environment". Perhaps this is why she took little time to build a rapport with the people and country of the Shepparton region. Hogg is well known for her idiosyncratic hand-built human and non-human animal forms, usually ironic and whimsical, sometimes sombre and forbidding. So, it is neither surprising that she was immediately drawn to the "spectral creatures" of Waranga Basin, nor that they became the focus of her exhibited work River Creatures – Wild and Dammed.

Hogg tells us that these copper oxide and slip coloured mid-fired clay figures are "dendritic mythical creatures that fuse the river, gums, animals and the surrounding environment. They are conveyors of creation and destruction, as too is the river. They travel and inhabit all time, imagined and actual, weaving past and present with the future. They speak of our relationships with people, animals and country – rural and urban, man-made and natural".

The longer you spend in the Shepparton Shepp. The Earth
A G Stokes  Wangara Basin apparition III  2006  24.0 x 26.5 cm  
Lithograph on Arches paper

Bev Hogg  River Creatures  Wild and Dammed  2006  25.0 x 50.0 x 50.0 cm  4 pieces  Clay, copper glaze and slips
region, the more you come to appreciate the dominance of water in its many guises and in its intimate connection to the community it serves. The Goulburn and Broken Rivers meandering through Shepparton and surrounding towns, and the numerous tributaries, lakes, dams, weirs and networks of channels dividing the countryside into a green patchwork, are a constant reminder of irrigation's vital role in the region's fruit and vegetable growing and dairy farming pursuits. The waterways also offer a wealth of recreational opportunities eagerly sought by locals and visitors alike. However, despite an apparent abundance of water, it must be realised that the Goulburn Valley, like much of Australia, is also gripped by drought and, as a result, its water is fast becoming a scarce and increasingly precious commodity.

It was inevitable that water would, in one form or another, become the dominant theme in the artwork of nearly all of those who participated in the Shepparton field trips this year. Not only were we camped on the banks of the Goulburn River at Cemetery Bend, but water was never far away, either physically or in our thoughts, as we travelled around.

John Reid, visual artist, art researcher, graphic designer, storyteller, Coordinator of the ANU School of Art Environment Studio and Convenor of the Field Studies program, mostly uses photography to express the artistic ideas that emerge from his explorations. He was inspired by the Goulburn Broken Catchment Authority's RiverConnect project and its "bold and admirable quest to subscribe to the rivers' importance as a cultural asset and as the focus of a twenty year plan". Reid's two superb colour images, The Grand Scheme of Things (1 and 2), graphically show the irrigation process at work, as it "seems ever poised to quench the thirst of agricultural enterprise that, in turn, will satisfy the appetites of populations big and small, near and far". The work "invites the viewer to ponder not only what a channel takes and delivers now; but what it is taking from, and delivering to, the future."

Timo Nest's twenty five year photographic journey through the Australian landscape has led him to admire the abstract expressionist painters, particularly Mark Rothko, and the work of the late American landscape and wildlife photographer Eliot Porter who, in later life, was renowned for his "abstractions from nature." Today Nest, an honours student in the Photomedia Workshop, explores "details most people do not notice in the environment" through abstraction and minimalism achieved by isolating his subjects to the point where they become, essentially, colour field studies. His three intriguing prints, The Junction, characterise the confluence of the Goulburn and Broken rivers at different times of the year. As Nest says "the emergence of the two rivers is almost lost, but is still there in an ambiguous way; as a reference to the environmental degradation of the river system, the clouding of the waters, and its effects felt downstream."
Our Shepparton excursions were enriched this year by the presence of several exchange students and visiting artists from Singapore, Japan, France and the USA, all of whom were experiencing Australian rural life for the first time.

Visiting Singaporean Masters candidate and talented young abstract painter, Ardi Bin Abdullah (cover image), was absorbed by the contrast of naturally meandering rivers with the rigidly imposed patterns of cultivated subdivisions, the straight lines of irrigation channels and roadways, and the rich and muted tones of this intriguing chequerboard. It was a low level light aircraft flight that appealed most to Ardi who “experienced an overview of Shepparton that led to a sense of dislocation and unfamiliarity” as he endeavoured to connect the countryside viewed from above with that seen at ground level. His large canvas, Shepparton View No 16, painted in acrylics admirably captures the breadth and character of this landscape. A grid of overlapping ochre and ‘earthy’ parallel lines, interspersed with liquid blues and greens denoting sinuous and straight waterways, appear to ‘hover’ over the canvas, tempting the viewer to share the artist’s attempt to capture a sense of rhythm, tranquillity and spatial harmony.

The sweeping vista and distant flat horizon of Waranga Basin caught the imagination of Akane Naohara, a Japanese exchange student from the School’s Painting Workshop. In her small landscape, The Basin (p 5), painted in oils, she expresses remarkable sensitivity to the vast spaces of the Australian rural environment that she is experiencing for the first time.

Her day job as a CSIRO scientist leading a research program on water in the Murray-Darling Basin has enhanced Sarah Ryan’s artistic vision, evidenced by her series of splendid colour photographs of Goulburn – Broken river scenes juxtaposed with ones of irrigation channels. Initially Parallel Rivers; Goulburn and Broken Rivers, Canals was intended to “contrast the crooked edges and richness of vegetation around the natural rivers in the Shepparton region with the straight edges and bareness of the man-made irrigation canals”. Ryan tells us that “Later I started to see how the reflections of the sky created very different shapes, light and colours in the two systems. They were broken up by abundant overhanging trees and shrubs along the natural river bank, while reflections in the vegetation-denuded canals were uniform and bland. This, then, became my focus”. Sarah Ryan’s images also allude to “the functional values of the rivers in providing food and habitat for wildlife, branches and dead trees as snags for the wellbeing of fish, nutrients for water borne organisms, traps for sediment and temperature stabilisation. In contrast, apart from efficiently conveying water, the irrigation channels offer little else of benefit.”

The health and wellbeing of the rivers, billabongs and other natural water bodies of Greater Shepparton and their adjacent
The Water for a Healthy Country Flagship is a national research program addressing one of Australia’s most pressing natural resource issues – sustainable management of our water resources. The Flagship is a partnership of leading Australian scientists, research institutions, private enterprises, community groups, government and non-government organisations and CSIRO. The research focuses on developing better knowledge of how whole water systems work. In the Murray Region, this means connecting the influences on water supply in upper catchments with the influences on the use and value of water in irrigation and its role in maintaining water ecosystems. This enhanced knowledge is provided to water managers in ways that expand their options for getting more benefits from our limited and variable water supplies.
Ian Robertson. He dwells on "how aboriginal people once lived, met and had fun at the site we were camped on at Cemetery Bend, with its remnant River Red Gums and imagined past beauty, while today the fishermen and duck hunters who meet there carve their names into fallen trees with chain saws and leave their fishing lines to choke up the shallows and entangle unsuspecting water birds". Robertson investigates these and other apparent dichotomies in Fertile Land Fragile River, Fragile Land Fertile Water, a set of four evocative oil paintings each linked by depictions of water level indicator boards alluding to human manipulation of the region’s waterways. A ghostly dead tree in one, a parched billabong reduced to a mosaic of cracked dried mud in another. The third depicts water gushing into an outlet channel from Waranga Basin, while the last shows sediment clouding the ankle deep water of the Goulburn River after its water has been diverted for irrigation use.

Antonia Aitken is completing her honours year in the School’s Printmedia and Drawing Workshop. She tells her own story: "After three days of walking, sitting and listening, and watching the Goulburn River near our base camp at Cemetery Bend, I sat and drew the river, ever changing as the wind rippled the water. Disillusioned and distressed by how degraded this area of river was through complacency and neglect, I felt pretty sad. The experience in Shepparton was confronting for me, being alien to this type of country and completely unaware of the complexity of the environmental and political issues surrounding the river. I was amazed by the extent of human control in the river’s flow and, in turn, its ecological health. Overwhelmed by the experience, I used drawing as a time to reflect and contemplate where I was and my experience of this place. My eight small sketches, four of the river and four of the River Red Gum forested flood plain, are ink and wash drawings made on site near Cemetery Bend. The velvety softness and tonal subtleties of the river contrast with the linear, vertical forest in this humble, intact, but worn and scarred, environment.”

With an interest in the relationship between primary producers and consumers, Bridget Nicholson (page 19), who completed a Masters in Visual Arts at the School last year, was fascinated by the region’s irrigation channels. She observed that “whenever we saw them they were brimful of water and I found the contrast with the river we were camped next to disturbing. The river seemed quite low but its level would fluctuate frequently, unrelated to rainfall”. This is not surprising as the entire system is under human control. Water may be ordered for ‘delivery’ at a specified time on a particular date and is ‘delivered’ accordingly via the channels. In Gone, an image of water use on a domestic scale, Nicholson has used a commercial white clay body, coloured clay collected from a dry billabong and recycled copper pipe to construct a visually
Antonia Aitken  
*Cemetery Bend* f 2006  17.5 x 22.5 cm  Ink and wash on rag paper

Carolyn Young  
*Crown Land near Wyuna* 2006  80.0 x 60.0 cm  Type C print
arresting and thought provoking ceramic and metal sculpture. The work relates to the wall hang bathroom vanity unit and its plumbing. "It symbolises water and its cycles – the continuous movement of water flowing from its collected source, through channels and plumbing pipes, to its end use; and back again through the recycling process". The colours of the work are also symbolic. The white clay suggests traditional vitreous china bathroom units; the billabong clay reminds one of the stains of time and use, while the colours of the old copper pipes resonate with those of the native bush.

A more optimistic approach to the Shepparton region was taken by natural resource scientist, artist and Masters of Philosophy candidate in Visual Arts at the ANU, Carolyn Young. She explored, in a pair of splendidly composed colour photographs, how people who care look after their environment. Of one, Jordans Bend, she says: "I wanted to capture how the private gardener is responding to the river, and represent the private outlook into the public space. My image also symbolises gardening in Australia (including my own garden), where we have mixed the exotic with the native to appease our sense of beauty." Carolyn Young’s second picture, Crown Land Near Wunna, "results from a visit to a local farmer whose property backs onto the crown reserve along the Goulburn River. I asked the farmer to show me what he thought was a good outcome for his farm and the environment. The image is of this ‘good outcome’: the dense vegetation that has played a key role in stabilising the riverbanks". Young concludes: "Other local inspirations were the Shepparton town folk I met while I was photographing the reserves and gardens; their obvious enjoyment of the river was a pleasure to watch".

Award winning glass artist Gabrielle Heywood, who lives today in nearby Wangaratta, joined the second trip to Shepparton. She tells of being "inspired by the vagaries of environmental change through dramatically chilling frosts, heat waves and the rise and fall of the river and the unpredictable and often vanishing landscape, the bountiful and the leaner times of living in such a place", and how the these vagaries have affected her way of interpreting the physical world through her art. Heywood quotes the celebrated aboriginal landscape painter Albert Namijira, who made the profound observation that "Landscape is not something you look at; it is something you look through". The artist has embraced this characteristically aboriginal way of approaching country in her triptych, Life on the River, which is made from strips of multi coloured float glass enhanced with glass enamels and held together with a steel framework and supports. When viewed from a distance the piece takes on a transparency enabling the eye to apparently travel through it; moving closer, the glass appears to lose this transparency as the enamels become evident and contribute to an opacity not initially observed. Thus, the work becomes "a piece..."
Peter Bobbs  Texture Experiments 1 and 2  2006  Left: 10.0 x 5.0 x 5.0 cm  Right: 10.0 x 10.0 x 5.0 cm  Pit-fired clay

Bridget Nicholson  Working drawing for clay and metal sculpture titled Gone

Gabrielle Heywood  Life on the River  2006  Detail  170.0 x 180.0 x 56.0 cm  Float glass, glass enamels, steel
It took little time for American ceramics exchange student Peter Bobbs, from the University of Southern California, to become enamoured of the indigenous flora found along the banks of the Goulburn River and beyond. River Red Gums and various rough barked eucalypts, including Yellow and Grey Box species were particular favourites. Their characteristic structures and bark surfaces found their way into a series of smoky grey/black hand built, pit fired, container forms, including a strikingly rugged torso-like piece reminiscent of one of Waranga Basin’s ‘spectral creatures’. Here, the typical Red Gum’s smooth and reddish trunk is captured through the application of a terra cotta slip to the pot’s surface prior to firing.

Frottage (rubbing) was the medium employed by New York based American visual, installation and performance artist, poet and freelance curator Marshall Weber who was visiting Australia, including the ANU School of Art, early this year. He joined the first field trip to see the country and meet its people. He was moved by stories of aboriginal life along the Goulburn River and recognised in them the universal themes of contemporary indigenous struggle. Part of Weber’s travel agenda was to extend an international project called Monument, whereby he and other artists investigate the texts and aesthetics of public memorials and monuments in many countries. Graphite and wax crayon are used to make rubbings from architectural elements, plaques and statues. The images and texts from these surfaces are collaged onto paper or Mylar.

Since childhood Marshall Weber has maintained a life long commitment to anti-war activities. This, together with his Australian field experience, led to the making of both *War Love* and *We Forget*. The homilies, well meaning clichés and stirring and solemn words (and their individual letters) found on the brass plaques of public memorials have been copied and rearranged to produce his evocative messages. Weber’s most poignant anti-war artworks derive their impact by the rubbing of words and letters from actual war memorials.

Ludovic Boulard Le Fur, affectionately known as ‘Ludo’, joined the second excursion as a Printmedia and Drawing Workshop exchange student from Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris. He found his semester in Australia both exciting and energising, particularly his week in Shepparton, and later in Central Australia, where he discovered landscapes of great power and magic. Myths became a source of fascination and inspiration, even an obsession, as he learnt about aboriginal spirits that appeared to him as ghostly mythological figures akin to the native American’s ‘Bigfoot’ or the ‘Yeti’ of the Himalayas. Among the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang people there are numerous spirits, as there are throughout aboriginal Australia. Ludo’s unidentified, humanoid-like apparation emerges from the depths and hovers darkly...
and ominously over a brightly coloured landscape in two crayon frottaged images on paper; the rubbings taken from tree surfaces. “This technique is used”, Ludo tells us, “because it enables me to draw directly from nature, it best represents the spirit of nature”. 

After growing up in Shepparton, Benjamin Ashe moved to Canberra to study in the Photomedia Workshop. He now lives and works in Melbourne. He tells us that, after a ten year absence, he is excited about reconnecting with his home town despite feeling a sense of displacement in earlier days. Ashe also tells us that his work is informed by “the displacement and dispossession of the indigenous communities of the Shepparton area … the beautiful indigenous elders and their heart wrenching stories as they counterpoint my own experience and have opened up new perspectives for me”. Ashe says of the figures in his strangely haunting photographs, Borrowed Ghosts, “none are intended to be identified as known persons; instead they are to be seen as ‘borrowed ghosts’, ‘borrowed histories’, ‘borrowed experiences’, clouded and partially obscure. They are intended to act as visual metaphors for my own sense of alienation. I have no right to feel displaced and dispossessed when I think of the past experiences of the aboriginal elders of Shepparton, but I do.”

Two residents of the region are represented in the exhibition. Psychologist and part time visual artist Rhonda Laing, and her photographer husband John. They live near rural Toolamba, largely orchard and dairying country, some 15 kilometres south of Shepparton. As Rhonda Laing says: “We live on a four acre patch which John and I have carved into a living sculpture. We have one beautiful human child, Zoe, and countless species of flora and fauna treasures. Inspiration comes from my environment, my family, literature and art”. Embedded is a sinuous sculpture crafted from “a curvaceous piece of old furniture reclaimed from the firewood pile … it reminded me of the curves of the river and of the idealised female body … the wood lent itself – actually demanded, that I carve it … something I’d never done before although I’m totally at home building with clay”. Describing the making process and the finished work, Rhonda explains: “Everything I do is informed by my bush and water environment. As this work evolved I realised how embedded I am in my environment … the figures, a mother and newborn baby, arose as if they were always there, just waiting to surface … the carved ‘ripples’ represent the flow of the river, or of a tree branch. The curves in the piece echo those of the river – no straight lines – no black and white truths. As a whole the sculpture symbolises the nurturing and sustaining powers of the river … it feeds the body and the soul with its life giving force”. … John Laing talks of “learning about the responsibilities that come with being the caretaker of some of this beautiful land. I am privileged to have the time to devote to Shepp, The Earth
encouraging other life forms to live. The best way I know of doing this is to grow a forest at home and educate people about the need to care for the ecological health of our region. I occasionally take spiders and insects and their homes out to schools to share their sheer beauty with the kids". It is no surprise to learn that John is an active member of the Dhurringile and District Landcare Group and many other community bodies in the region. And as he says, somewhat self effacingly, "I do like to take the odd photo". The 'odd photo' in this show is Katydid, a splendid colour print of an indigenous hopper, or Katydid, silky iridescent green against the rough dark brown of the trunk of a Red Box (Eucalyptus polyanthemos) in the Laing’s heavily wooded garden. The image, John tells us, "took quite a chase to capture as ‘Katy’ kept running away, until suddenly she stopped, turned and looked straight into the camera lens."

Photography is the chosen form of expression for full-time artist Marzena Wasikowska, who is also a sessional staff member of the ANU School of Art. Building on her tradition of Field Study portraiture, Wasikowska responded to a number of prominent women, suggested by the Mayor who are actively contributing to the Shepparton community. A Chequered Landscape integrates impressive colour portraits with photographs taken as she travelled from one shoot to the next (teaming-up with photographer John Reid to complete a frantic schedule).

The subjects are Cr Jenny Houlihan, Mayor of Greater Shepparton; Jeanette Powell MP, Member for Shepparton in the Victorian Legislative Assembly; Hon Wendy Lovell MP, Member for North Eastern Province in the Victorian Legislative Council; Hon Dr Sharman Stone MP, Member for Murray in the Australian Federal Parliament; and Yorta Yorta elders, Ella Anselmi and her sister, Doris Atkinson and Ella’s niece, Petah Atkinson. Portraits of Bangerang elder, Irene Thomas; Marlene Atkinson, Administrator of the Bangerang Cultural Centre Co-operative and her sister, Jane Atkinson were taken by John Reid. All of these portraits are juxtaposed in Wasikowska’s final photographic assemblage with images of the town, the Goulburn River, orchards, market gardens and the surrounding countryside referencing the scope of responsibilities that these community leaders have in Greater Shepparton life.

It is clear that the advent of irrigation, coupled with high levels of immigration, have played a significant role informing the region’s character. While it is acknowledged that the Goulburn Valley’s future prosperity is threatened by the consequences of climate change these problems are being urgently tackled. Today, many conservation initiatives are in place through the programs of the Goulburn Broken Regional Catchment Strategy, the RiverConnect project, Landcare groups and other environmental bodies. The arts, too, are actively contributing to
But I think away from the scientific side of things that it’s the human characteristics more than anything else that we don’t understand. I don’t think we understand the dynamics of how people think and work and live along the river, and how do we tap into that?" (Lachlan) *

Contemporary natural resource management (NRM) recognises that successful management outcomes require effective engagement with people as well as the biophysical environment. Natural resource managers seek to integrate scientific and technical knowledges of an environment with an appreciation of the various significances of this environment to relevant communities and stakeholders. Research into local communities’ experiences of their natural surroundings is being conducted by scholars from a variety of social science disciplines. These studies explore the complex emotional, symbolic and practical connections that people have with the natural environments they encounter in their everyday lives. Such scholarship has been aptly described as the "ecology of the heart".

As part of my research into the social dynamics of the management of the Goulburn River, I’ve been speaking with long term residents of the Goulburn Valley as well as people involved in the river’s management. During these conversations, it has become evident that people’s relations with the river encompass a diverse range of experiences and emotions. In this ecology of the heart, I explore some of these significances of the river to local communities - the river as sustenance, identity, tonic, and nature - as well as the interconnections among these.

* References of this form relate to interviews undertaken as part of my PhD research into the social dynamics of the management of the Goulburn River. This project is supported by The University of Melbourne and CSIRO. All interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their privacy. In thanking the many individuals who have so generously shared their experiences of the river with me, I hope that this ecology of the heart does justice to their stories.

An Ecology of the Heart: Exploring the Significances of the Goulburn River to Local Communities

Stephanie Lavau

Shepp. The Earth

A Chequered Landscape

Marzena Wasikowska

2006  Detail 20.0 x 20.0 cm  Type C print
River as sustenance

The significances of the river as sustenance for local communities extends beyond its waters, encompassing its channel, riparian lands, floodplains, minerals, and biological life. For local communities, the river offers fertile riparian farmland, access to water supply, drainage of wastewater, resources for aquaculture, capacity for power generation, and tourism facilities. Local industries and individuals thus use the river as resource and infrastructure that support local livelihoods and regional economy.

As expected, people frequently spoke of the river as a source of water supply. For urban residents such as Bernie and Margaret, the Goulburn provides domestic water supply through the town pumping station and treatment plant. Orchardists Peter and Margaret pump water from the river for use around the house, garden and orchards, and also have an allocation from irrigation channels for farm use. Mary waters her stock from the river, as well as pumping from the river for garden and fire protection purposes.

These accounts of the river’s utility are not purely about its value as sustenance, but also engage with issues such as community and personal identity. In particular, the role of the river as irrigation water supply for the Goulburn Valley is often spoken of with great pride. For Bernie, as for others, the re-construction of Eildon Dam in the 1950s was a landmark event for local communities: “It was the duplication of the Eildon Dam that provided the water for the lifeblood of this whole area which produces canned fruit, vegetables, et cetera, plus the huge dairy industry … If it wasn’t for that, Shepparton wouldn’t be what it is today.” According to Noel: “It’s clear we just wouldn’t be here, but having said that neither would Shepparton be here, if the Goulburn River wasn’t here.”

Celebrating the Goulburn as the “lifeblood” of the valley acknowledges its “support for the economic well-being of the region” (Jack), but also its significance as an identifying image of the Goulburn Valley, as a symbol of the history of thriving settlement in the valley, and as a raison d’ètre for these communities.

Despite such enthusiasm for irrigation, there are concerns that irrigation compromises other relations with the river. Although Hal acknowledged the economic value of irrigation, for him it also represented a threat to the river as authentic Australian nature: “It’s just pride in being Australian I guess, and we wonder if we have an Australian river, why don’t we have Australian fish in it. So why aren’t there Australian fish in the river in the Goulburn? It’s because it’s too cold and you don’t get floods at the right time.” Sally commented with disdain on the river’s waters being used to sustain Mediterranean landscapes: “How would I like the river? With its beautiful wattle trees blooming and no olive trees and no grape vines on the river. We would have paddocks of lucerne and fat lambs grazing on them or nice red cattle.” The appreciation of the Goulburn Valley, as a symbol of the history of thriving settlement in the valley, and as a raison d’ètre for these communities.
tion of the irrigation functions of the river was thus highly subjective and contested. The value of irrigation was judged in relation to other experiences of the river, local livelihoods, and landscapes.

River as identity

The river as identity manifested as talk of personal, family and community character and history. The river as a home was a particularly poignant and recurring theme. The acquisition of land along the river was often linked to residents’ family history and livelihoods. As Sally stated of the cropping and grazing property that her father bought in the early 1900s: "You feel you’ve got something when you’ve got a bit of river land … It’s gold really, river flats." Such long-lived family connections to the river were also experienced by Les and Anne, whose riverside farm had "been in the family for well over a hundred years". Alice and Jim’s family selected their land as part of a government scheme in the 1880s to encourage more settlers into developing agricultural areas. For others, the initial attraction of living near the river was the natural setting. Bernie and Margaret built their riverside house in Shepparton 30 years ago as an alternative to the “urban block with four sides and big fences.” Mary and her husband bought their rural property on the upper Goulburn for its "remoteness, peace and quiet … the river was the attraction". These valley dwellers expressed strong attachment to their riverside homes. Mary and Alice respectively articulated the pleasure of living by the river as “paradise” and “heaven”. As Bernie pointed out, the fact that people rarely moved out of his neighbourhood was testament to a broader appreciation of the riverside as a good place to live. Stories of home variously related the river as family history, local heritage, and self-identify, but also the river as livelihood, security, a natural place, beauty and solitude. For some, the river was expressed as a pivotal factor in their personal development and was integral to their sense of personal identity and well-being. Alice has lived by the river all her life, and the river has beckoned Jim back from the city for his retirement. The river has been their family’s water supply, swimming pool, garden, refrigerator, playground, laundry, fishing spot, and party venue. As such, the river has been a prominent feature in their lives. Alice and Jim attributed some of their personal qualities, such as their sense of independence and determination, to the demands of this river lifestyle. As Alice explained: "It made our outlook completely different I feel … That’s why I said to you that [the river] was pretty nearly all we knew. We knew it all our lives. We saw it in all its moods. And as I say, I still love it although it washed us out twice." Many people commented on the variety of historical significances of the river in relation to rural industry and settlement: the harnessing of the river as water supply for agricultural development; the origins of Shepparton as a river crossing point for goldfield travellers in the 1850s; the paddle
steamers that plied the lower reaches of the river in the 1880s for trade and recreational purposes. In these examples, the river was attributed heritage value for its contributions to rural industry and settlement. People also spoke of the ways in which the river has historically complicated and impeded local livelihoods. Stories about flood were prominent amongst their diverse memories and family anecdotes of life by the river. Their proficiency at listing off the flood years, their descriptions of the individual characteristics of each flood, as well as their prolific collections of photos and stories, all pointed to the significance and memorableness of flood in the history of settlement in the valley. The heritage significance of the river was thus characterised by both positive and negative relations.

River as tonic

The river as tonic was significant as a place of sport, recreation, socialising, holidays, and private leisure. However, residents' anecdotes indicated that the form and popularity of such enjoyment of the river had changed dramatically in recent times, as other significances of the river intersected with the river as tonic.

Stories of various leisure activities demonstrated that the river has always been a popular site for sport. According to Hal, Jim and Bernie, the river was once a popular swimming hole for school groups, families and individuals. Many cited concerns with sedimentation and pollution as reasons why they no longer swam regularly in the river. This rubbishing of the river similarly affected the fishing prospects in the river, a pastime which was largely spoken of in nostalgic terms. Sally reminisced: "It was absolutely beautiful on the Goulburn River. My two sons used to go fishing and take me too on a Sunday afternoon … I used to love those days, to be out with my two sons fishing." Hunting and poaching were also frequently described as activities of the past; they were no longer viewed as appropriate due to a growing appreciation of the river as Australian nature. As a child, Hal used to go poaching with his father: "We'd catch crayfish in drum-nets, and fish as well, and things you shouldn’t catch like platypus and water rats and tortoises, and all that sort of thing … Those days you’d cringe at the thought of having done it. Ideas change a lot." Rod joked: "The fishing bodies now are anti-poaching, whereas ten years ago it would have been a real problem. So I was pretty good giving up poaching 30 years ago, I was." Jim expressed interest in taking up fishing for cod again to improve his diet, but he felt "remorse at murdering them". In these anecdotes, the strengthening significance of the river as nature intersected and altered the experiences of the river for fishing and hunting.

The current recreational relationship with the wildlife of the river was more frequently portrayed as one of observation, with talk of admiring the bird, water and plant life whilst kayaking the river, horse riding or walking along its banks. These
were favoured over sports such as motorboating and motor biking along the river, which were now seen as potentially ecologically harmful. Such recreational activities were framed and experienced as engagements between the river as tonic and the river as nature. Such dramatic behavioural and attitudinal changes towards recreational practices emphasised the changing nature of the significance of the river to individuals and communities.

Residents expressed a very strong sense of the ecological river, and this manifested in particular through narratives of environmental change. The loss of wildlife from the river’s banks and waters was frequently remarked upon, drawing on memories of spotting platypus, water rats and sugar gliders, of hearing the frogs croaking, of diving for crayfish, shrimp and mussels, and of catching native fish. People told of the disappearance of grass, reeds and algae in the river, and reduced cover of ti-tree and wattles along the banks. Changes were noted in the chemical and physical nature of the river, such as the decline in water quality, erosion of banks, loss of sandbars, alterations to the pathway, lower water temperatures near Eildon, modified flow and flooding regimes.

Such ecological changes were attributed to a variety of man-made causes: agricultural practices, urbanisation, land clearing, water storages, former mining activities, and the introduction of carp. Occasionally natural causes were also invoked. Amidst these stories of ecological decline, there were some tentative stories of improvement to specific ecological aspects of the river in particular places: increased numbers of cod, growing populations of crayfish, and improved water quality. Expressed as personal experience, local anecdotes, fisherman’s tales, and family legends, residents related different significances of the river as nature: as habitat, wildlife, Australian-ness, ecological process, a counterpoint to urbanisation, and a changeable landscape.

Most people with whom I spoke had had involvement in managing the river, either formally on management committees or informally through activities such as replanting, weed control and rubbish removal. Their motivations for doing so combined the desire to “preserve and enhance the environment” with “being prepared to work for the community” (Peter). Mary justified her contribution: “It’s like anything in this world. You’ve got to look after the river. You’ve got to look after the environment.” Such talk of stewardship demonstrated their attachment to the river, affording a sense of protecting and restoring vulnerable nature, of contributing to community identity, and of ensuring future opportunities for sustenance and recreation.