Wet River Dry Lake

Two Field Studies programs inform this exhibition. One took place in the region around Wentworth, notable as the place of convergence of the great Darling and Murray Rivers. The other program focused on Mungo National Park, an exemplar of open space and encapsulated time. These places, and the people who live in them, were the source of inspiration for the visual artwork, music compositions and writing that comprise Wet River Dry Lake.

As a public event Wet River Dry Lake has taken shape from diverse processes. Firstly, the exhibition was not curated in the conventional sense. There was no considered selection of work by a single unifying mind. From the outset, well before creative production began, all artists committed to exhibit, compose, perform and write. In the end there were only a few casualties, none attributable as one might expect to tight deadlines.

Secondly, there is no hiding the educational imperative. The exhibition is a graduation ceremony for all that has been learnt from two intensive periods of field research and related studio development. The final production of the work took place in the ANU School of Art Workshops or in the personal studios of the more established artists. For most of the contemporary musicians, new works were composed entirely in the field.

Lastly, the exhibition makes tangible the ideas, thoughts and feelings that were founded on quality sensory experience – raw but rich visual and aural ‘data’ that had not been processed previously for aesthetic contemplation.

In the work presented there is an authenticity and a relevance to time, place and the people who will experience the exhibition. The catalogue literary commentary was drafted as it happened - no pondering at length and breadth a finished work. The ink was dry before the paint. The voice recorded on-the-run. The music archived by the wind.

Wet River Dry Lake is a creative development of many conversations struck only months ago with people who the artists met and whose hospitality, company and passion were greatly appreciated.

Here we are represented between this cover in our chosen medium of expression. Through it we acknowledge the people and country of Mungo and Wentworth.

John Reid, Field Studies Convenor
Environment Studio, School of Art
The Australian National University

3.10. 2005
Wet River Dry Lake

Visual Art • Contemporary Music • Text

Field Studies
Environment Studio, School of Art
The Australian National University
in collaboration with the
Murray-Darling Basin Commission

Wednesday 12 - Sunday 16 October 2005

P.S. Ruby
and
Darling Street Venues
Wentworth NSW
Acknowledgements

Visual artists, musicians and writers contributing to this event would like to acknowledge the support and generosity of the following organisations:

- Murray-Darling Basin Commission
- P.S. Ruby Management Committee
- Sunraysia Sports Aircraft Club
- ANU Photography / ANU Printing

In particular we wish to thank: Lawrie Kirk, Annabel Walsh and family, Jill French, Carmel Chapman, Karen Arnold, Leon Wagner and P.S. Ruby Crew, Paul Cohrs, Leanne Cohrs, Christine Kelly, Alf Kelly, Mary Anne Martin, Peggy Thomas, Mary Whyte, Jeanette Hopp, Patricia Williamson, Lorraine Powell and Sunraysia Pilots, Wendy Craik, Isobel McBryde, Frank Tucker, Kay Tucker, Norm Boyd, Michael Westaway, Andrew Buffon, Steve Hederics, Anna Hederics, Suzanne James

Catalogue essay contributors: Dick Aitken is an arts writer. Antonia Aitken is a visual artist, Primestone Workshop, ANU School of Art. Leanne Dempsey is a communicator, CSIRO, Canberra.

The articles Effescence and Flash Back were written jointly by Leanne Bear and Dick Aitken. The article Art on a Bunk was compiled by Meg Buchanan.

Artists contributing to Art on a Bunk: Benjamin Ashe, Leanne Bear, Meg Buchanan. The Contextual Villains: Sarah Firth, Paul Hay

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
- Gold/Silversmithing • Wood • Glass
- Printmedia and Drawing
- Photomedia • Ceramics • Art Theory

Imagine your research proposal unfolding beyond the studio in locations that are inspirational for your topic

- Mix field work with studio development and critique presented 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 Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) is proud to support visual art and music students travelling to areas within the Murray-Darling Basin to seek inspiration from both the physical landscape and the communities that live there. The visual art and music compositions produced in response to this consultative field experience invariably interpret a wide range of environmental issues facing these areas. The students and the staff who work with them exchange knowledge and experiences with local artists and community and, through the resulting exhibitions and performances, make a contribution to community debate by providing another way of understanding the unique regional features of the Basin.

Artwork from the ANU School of Art Environment Studio Field Studies exhibitions has been photographically documented for inclusion in a number of major MDBC publications as aesthetic evaluations of field experience that can both inform and motivate. Wentworth was chosen as one Field Studies location for 2005 as the town commemorates throughout the year the 175th anniversary of Captain Charles Sturt’s arrival on the 23 January 1830 at the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers (where the town of Wentworth is now situated). Captain Sturt also captured the beauty of this area through art by producing a number of drawings and paintings.

The other Field Studies location for 2005 was Lake Mungo renowned for its indigenous heritage and not far, as the spirit travels, from Wentworth. The Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area, of which Lake Mungo is apart, will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2006. Wet River Dry Lake now provides, 175 years later in one respect, and 25 years in another, a thought provoking cultural commentary on the region.

I commend the work of the students and staff who organised the exhibition and performances, and acknowledge and thank the many people in the Wentworth area who provided assistance to these programs. Without this contribution the experience gained by the participants and this culminating event would not be as rich.

Lawrie Kirk
Manager Communication
Murray-Darling Basin Commission
Benjamin Ashe  The Definition of Things 1 2005 65.0x90.0cm
Type C print

Micky Allan Nights and Days - Emu Night, Detail 2005 175.0x240.0cm Pastel, colour pencil, pencil, gouache, synthetic polymer resin, plant dye on paper and drafting film
Timo Nest Leaghur Twilight Detail From Mungo Series 2005 18.0x15.0cm Type C print

The Contextual Villains Blueprint 2005 68.0x82.0cm Digital collage on archival paper
Captain Charles Sturt, on entering the Darling River from the Murray for the first time in 1830, had this to say:

The river preserved a breadth of one hundred yards and a depth of rather more than twelve feet. Its banks were sloping and grassy, and were overhung by trees of magnificent size. Indeed its appearance was so different from the water-worn banks of the sister stream that the men exclaimed, on entering it, that we had got to an English river. Its appearance almost certainly justified the expression; for the greenness of its banks was as new to us as the size of its timber. Its waters, though sweet, were turbid and had a taste of vegetable decay, as well as a slight tinge of green.¹

Today, 175 years on, few recognisable natural features of Sturt’s “English river” are discernable. One would be the turbid waters with their sweet taste of vegetable decay and tinge of green. Given his description of its sloping grassy banks at the junction, the Darling was obviously very high when Sturt was there. It is the same today as a result of a constant back up of Murray waters from this river’s Lock 10. Virtually all early descriptions, prior to the locks being built, contrast the green of the Murray with the milky-brown of the Darling because, at frequent low water, the latter runs at the bottom of a gutter of steep bare banks.

Since the earliest days of European exploration and settlement both the Murray and Darling Rivers and their tributaries have been responsible for much of Australia’s pastoral and agricultural success, and its attendant population growth and prosperity. However, this has not come about without substantial cost as manipulation of the rivers’ natural regime of uncertainty - flood one year, drought the next; phenomena without prediction until European ‘enterprise’ took control. Certainly, prior to this, the natural beauty of the Murray and Darling would only have been gently touched by millennia of Aboriginal presence.

This so-called ‘civilising progress’ was, of course, the outcome as land was cleared for the cultivation of food crops, stock was introduced, towns were built, and an extensive river lock system was engineered to control the Murray’s erratic flow. The result was water delivered as and when required for a vast irrigated area on both sides of this mighty river. And, so it is today.

The Murray and Darling rivers became significant trading corridors as the wool industry took off. Wood-fuelled paddle steamers, not least the newly restored P.S. Ruby (a century old in 2007), were the primary vehicles of river passage for the best part of a hundred years - from the first trips in 1853 till the closing of Murray Shipping Ltd in 1952. Their heyday was the 1850s to about 1920. As railways reached the river towns between the 1870s (Morgan 1878) and the early
1900s (Mildura 1903) the importance of paddle steamers as freight carriers declined.

Prior to connecting with railheads on the rivers, in their early days the paddle steamers carried the country’s bounty – the annual wool clip - from source to seaport exit where it would be loaded onto bigger boats and carried off for sale in London and other northern destinations. The returning profits helped make this country the rich, relaxed and comfortable place we live in today.

The rivers’ convergence gave us Wentworth which, in turn, achieved fame as Australia’s busiest inland port in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is claimed that both Wentworth and nearby Moorna were contenders in the race to become the country’s national capital. In reality they were two of dozens of towns nominated by the local citizenry for such an honour. Now Wentworth is a pleasant country town that plays second fiddle to a rapidly expanding Mildura, a few miles back along the Murray. The Wentworth community reckons it’s got the best of this deal.

A recurring theme underlies the rich and varied work of the group of practicing visual artists, musicians and writers and staff and students from the Australian National University Schools of Art and Music. They visited, lived (most on the Ruby) and worked in the environment around Wentworth for week long stretches in April and July this year. This is a perception of an apparently little disturbed nature on the one hand and a much altered landscape on the other; the latter due mostly to burgeoning European intervention throughout the past two centuries. There’s not much undisturbed nature anywhere around this part of the world these days. Some of it just looks like it.

Justin Clune, a third year student from the Photomedia Workshop, cleverly melded such contradictions as he viewed “these rivers as sacred sites that mirror their environment” in a pair of large colour photographs of River Red Gums (Eucalyptus camaldulensis) overhanging a tranquil Murray. Taken from the opposite bank and reflecting the trees’ canopies, these images imply a pristine landscape. One is just that. But the other shows a tall, man-made water tower competing for attention with an adjoining mature eucalypt, seemingly its partner. The two appear to make a “connection between community and these rivers... one of practicality and respect.” As Clune notes in describing his work: “The element of water has powerful links to ceremony, life and reflection” with “the continent ageing and evolving into a parched landscape intersected by significant rivers such as the Murray and Darling.”

For Visiting Fellow Meg Buchanan, previously head of Foundation Studies at the School, dedicated teacher, student mentor and, today, a distin-
gushed full-time painter and printmaker, inspiration came from "my memory of the flat lands - the red grey shimmer of landscape". Her two large evocative landscape paintings, Songs of Landscape, are subtly washed with background musical notations capturing the rhythms of the vast paddocks of Australia’s Mallee country. Settler impact imposes itself through the foreground intrusions of scattered parts of long abandoned farm implements. Rather than seeing these European agricultural practices negatively, Buchanan exposes the positive achievements of an often harsh, lonely and unforgiving rural life in "a pictorial expression that speaks of the intelligence and effort of this lifestyle and the beauty of its traces".

Benjamin Ashe, a graduating student from Photomedia, spent his early years in rural Victoria and New South Wales. He was, like many visiting artists, absorbed by the evidence of an apparent overwhelming human intrusion into the natural riverine beauty and wind-blown plains of the region. Inspired by "the play off between ecological concerns and human life", Ashe described it as "the degradation of the amazing natural landscape by the invaders" and "the life giving nature of the land with its rich red earth". These observations are captured in a series of large colour prints depicting, in one, disintegrating sheep bones and, in the others, images of otherwise wind-rippled sand dunes trampled by a day’s coach loads of heavy-footed tourists. The natural prevailing winds thankfully remove all traces; disintegrating bones and footprints end up simply as ephemeral marks on a land cared for by the processes of weather.

Aboriginal bush tucker caught the imagination of cultural materials conservator and Gold and Silver Workshop degree student, Eileen Procter. "As we toured the countryside near Wentworth our Aboriginal elder and guide, Christine Kelly, picked up a plump stumpy-tailed lizard and invited us to "the delicious meal this nutritious creature would make when properly prepared, cooked on an open camp fire and savoured". This mouth-watering tale prompted this artist to make a three piece set of highly practical, handsome stainless steel cutlery. "Inspired by Aboriginal cooking methods and foods, the knife alludes to the stone tools often found around Lake Victoria". The Lake’s surrounding natural salt pans inspired another contribution: an ensemble of brooches and pendants; two set plain, the third bejewelled with a glittering faceted topaz ironically echoing the scarring of an otherwise beautiful land through irrigation. All are dominated by silver alloy / sterling silver bases that celebrate the beauty of the region’s naturally salt encrusted landscapes.

The other exhibitor showing jewellery is Ximena Briceno. After growing up in her native Peru she moved to the USA to live, study and work before arriving in Australia. Her work, which includes the pieces shown here, explores themes of identity, memory and place. The materials she uses are often sourced from her travels, and her pieces reflect a personal and cultural history.
Wet River Dry Lake

Eileen Procter was awarded an Honours degree from the School of Art last year and is now a Graduate in Residence in the School’s Gold and Silver Workshop. Her work at Wentworth comprises a set of three finely crafted necklaces, all inspired by the River Red Gums of the Murray’s verdant banks. Entitled as a whole, _Eucalyptus camaldulensis I, II and III_, each piece refers to botanical specimens collected from a magnificent River Red Gum at Wentworth. They are made from anodised aluminium, sterling silver and stainless steel. The first piece represents the tree’s leaves. The second takes its theme from the eucalypt’s branches, leaves and, with the addition of rubies, its flowers. The third of these finely crafted adornments is inspired by the root system of this splendid tree.

Some artists are born storytellers. Of the Wentworth group’s most eloquent was its leader, and Coordinator of the Environment Studio and Field Studies program at the ANU School of Art, John Reid. Art researcher, photographer and designer, his preoccupation is the issue of human rights and the aesthetic evaluation of landscape as, using metaphor, he tells the past and present stories of a region. Here, Reid interprets those of the Wentworth community in a series of immaculately composed mural-sized colour photographs. Each is made possible only through the eye of a tripod-mounted large format camera. Irony is never distant in images that make apparently innocent references, yet warn that all may not be well; such as coming across and recording a wayward garden in an otherwise manicured townscape. Or, in finding a cutting edge in the stump of a long gone, chain-sawed River Red Gum. Near the site of the shooting of 35 Aborigines at Rufus River in 1841, this once regal giant’s decaying roots lie exposed. Those of its other equally commanding ‘colleagues’ protrude from the eroded bank of an adjacent soggy watercourse. The scene is a grim metaphor for a notorious massacre.

Working together for over two years as _The Contextual Villains_ this duo comprises multimedia artists Rachel Peachey and Paul Mosig. Both recent graduates of the School, they are concerned with “creating multimedia collective narratives that deal with Australia’s perception of itself”. The Villains took a realistic view of the “natural cycle of birth, death and decay” they found in and around Wentworth as they observed the “disrepair, isolation and relationships between traditional country style and creeping city influences”. Their concerns are realised in a series of impressive digital collage prints that address perceptions of ‘progress’ through the influence of historical events which often result in abandoned dreams.

Paula Sammut is currently a Visiting Graduate Artist with the Environment Studio and Field Studies program at the ANU School of Art.
Studio at the school from which she graduated with Honours in 2004 after gaining a Visual Arts degree from Sydney College of the Arts some years earlier. As a result of exploring the country around Wentworth, this accomplished artist uses metaphor to express her concern for what she perceives as “the heartbreaking loss of natural habitat and ecosystems that support and give life to other living creatures as well as the natural environment itself.” In a compelling colour digital work a dominant Lord Buddha gazes upon St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, feeding a flock of hungry birds. The artist attempts “to represent aspects of sacredness and compassion within the self that reflect harmonious caring and the human deep ecological relationship with nature”.

Three beautiful wool/cashmere fabric pieces are exhibited by Leonie Andrews. Each is nearly three metres long and marked with rust from discarded metal objects that lie, long abandoned, all over the place around Wentworth. The fabric pieces are then worked and reworked in a complex set of processes by Andrews who is a keen field naturalist with a passionate interest in native plants. She is presently a part-time student in the Textiles Workshop who often uses plants as dye sources for her work. These bold, yet subtly toned, statements are tie-dyed from extracts of Old Man Saltbush (Atriplex nummularia), River Cooba (Acacia stenophylla) and Mistletoe (Amyema miquelii). Each work carries its own distinctive colour field and symbolic pattern. The Murray and Darling rivers, cultivated fields seen from the air and the complex history of Aboriginal custodianship of the land, European intervention and, with good will, reconciliation and healing are the artist’s subjects here.

Born and bred in rural New South Wales, Wendy Teakel is a Senior Lecturer in the School’s Sculpture Workshop and an established and award winning artist. She is inspired by what she calls “the rural industrial landscape environments from very broad acre farming to intensive irrigation … in contrast to the cosy valleys and wooded hills of the Canberra landscape”. Teakel found Wentworth’s surrounding country “brimming full of life”. It inspired five large wash drawings overlayed with ‘pokerwork’, a technique that marks her pieces with found detritus such as rusty wire to introduce elements of toil: furrows in a cultivated paddock, or broken old fence lines. These evocative images, with their time-worn textures and rural hues of olive greens, dusty mauves and soft rose pinks allude, almost wistfully, to “time based cycles of farming practices” to which this artist seems inexorably drawn.

After receiving her Honours degree via the Glass Workshop in 2004 Gabrielle Heywood is, today, a professional artist and Graduate in Workshop and an established and award winning artist She is inspired by what she calls "the rural industrial landscape environments from very broad acre farming to intensive iriga-
Residence at the School. Her sources of inspiration were the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers, the River Red Gums flanking their banks and the associated Black Box (Eucalyptus largiflorens) trees, and salination – both naturally occurring and through land clearing and over-grazing. These concerns are realised in a series of dramatic cast crystal glass works. Decautication, represents the natural cyclical process of old bark curling away from a River Red Gum’s trunk exposing its new, near-white, ‘skin’. Confluence, comprising two pieces, tells us about “where the water of two rivers meets”. Rising, a bowl form, is a reminder of remnant eucalypts “relegated to narrow strips along roadsides, paddock boundaries … and in small clumps in the back paddock”. Broken Earth, another bowl form, depicts “a defeated landscape where only salt thrives. Pure white and dead-ly”. A full time photographer, Marzena Wasikowska teaches as a sessional staff member at the School of Art from which she graduated with a Masters degree in 2000. In a sense she was the group’s muse. She moved among us with quiet composure, much goodwill and sage advice. A series of thoughtfully composed colour photographs reflect her sense of wonder on discovering a ‘new’ environment and its people. In two pictures exploring the land from above, we see tracks criss-crossing an apparently natural landscape of scattered trees in an otherwise denuded plain. Another pair of photographs is of Wasikowska’s teenage children, Mia and Kai, who were a charming presence as they joined us in April. Standing on tree stumps lapped by the shore’s gentle waves they gaze wistfully across Lake Victoria. Are they thinking about the lake’s past natural grandeur? Or is it about today’s dead trees that rise as skeletons from the shallows? Hopefully, they’re dreaming of a time when this place is again reliant only on the ebb and flow of nature’s cycles. A triptych of three portraits are reminders of the real human salt of the earth. They’re all women – Aboriginal elders, a conserving pastoralist and an artist. Perhaps the most eloquent way of completing this essay is to refer to Michelle Grattan’s Back On The Wool Track. She quotes Charles Bean who, on a trip to the Wentworth area in 1908-09, described it as: ‘this delicate country that responds like a piano to whatever touches it’. References

1. Sturt, Charles, Two Expeditions into the interior of Southern Australia, during the years 1828, 1829, 1830 and 1831, 2 vols, London, 1833.

Note: All other quoted passages are taken from artist’s statements accompanying submissions for this catalogue essay.

Acknowledgement: Dr Jeannette Hope for helping the author disentangle fact from fiction.
Emily Jackett  Untitled 2005 30.5x20.3cm Type C print

Dorothy Noble  Untitled 1 Detail 124.0x68.0cm Rust print on chiffon
Stepping on to the ancient dry bed of Lake Mungo, one is overwhelmed by space and silence. Dotted with salt-bush, the lake bowl encircles and the dome of the sky engulfs as it changes through the day. The edges of the Lake take form from thousands of years of wild westerly winds, water erosion and a century of sheep grazing which has shaped lunettes or panicles. Layers of sand and silt have eroded away to stand like ancient figures or ruins, casting dramatic shadows with the moving sun. Behind the lunettes a wall of dunes suggests the shape of the Lake’s shore line. Vibrant green Peppercorn trees contrast with the rich red tones of sand. Expanses of mallee mark the outer borders of Lake Mungo and the connected dried lakes, Leaghur and Arumpa. 15,000 years ago Lake Mungo was part of a rich and fertile chain of lakes fed by the Lachlan River. Middens of calcified freshwater clams, roots and fireplaces, exposed by the winds and moving sands, are evidence of this era.

The process of erosion is the landscape’s way of giving up its secrets...” Dorothy Noble, Sculptor

In April this year I experienced Mungo National Park in the Willandra Lakes district of New South Wales for the first time. The trip, initiated by the Environment Studio Field Studies program at the Australian National University School of Art, was led by Sydney painter Ian Bettinson. It involved five ANU visual arts students and four international exchange students and practicing artists working in photography, ceramics, printmaking, sculpture, painting and textiles. Bettinson had already spent significant time in the region. He described it as ‘an endless and transforming subject’. For many the first trip to Lake Mungo was a time to experience and endeavour to make sense of this deeply spiritual, cultural and political site; to walk, draw, write, talk and photograph. “The fading light of dusk and the reflected violets on the red Mungo sands and the layers of history left lying around by previous inhabitants, stimulated a connection with the time-less nature of the place. Shadows and forms in the sand dunes carry a sense of it being a deeply spiritual place.” Ian Robertson, Painter

Being on Lake Mungo encourages a recognition and acknowledgement of one’s identity, cultural and social awareness and connection with this land. I found myself tiptoeing across this sacred landscape mindful of disturbing the past. Lake Mungo is a site layered with over 40,000 years of Indigenous culture, spirituality and memory; 200 years of white settlement and grazing history; and 30 years of regeneration and a return of the land to the Indigenous people under the National Parks Authority and World Heritage protection. It is a sacred site for the Indigenous groups of the area: the Barkindji, Ngiyampaa and Mutthi Mutthi people and a place imbedded with the recent violence and struggles of a post-colonial society. Much of the

Gathering Time
Antonia Aitken

Antonia Aitken Noting Mungo Detail 2005 28.5 cm width, variable length Ink on Pianola roll
work was a response to the questions “How do I locate myself within this place?” and “How do I begin to represent or record the sense of time and layering?”

Guided through the lunettes by the Indigenous rangers provided the chance to hear about and see Lake Mungo culturally and spiritually. We were shown ancient fireplaces, middens and hairy-nosed wombat bones and told about the three clan groups and their totems; the Emu and the Western Grey Kangaroo, which we had seen wandering the landscape, “The exposure of the layering of the landscape, of time, of earth, of bones, of human history; allows us to walk back in time, to walk through the centuries, to look at our antecedents and before human life as we know it.”

Dorothy Noble, Sculptor

While this program provided an opportunity for individual field research and art making, the trip was also a chance to communicate and collaborate with other artists and the Lake Mungo community. In July we returned with a group of people, half of whom were new faces, this time led by Sydney painter Charles Cooper. On the first trip we experienced a landscape that was hot and dusty with the effects of the drought evidenced by the emaciated animals leaving the park to find water. Eight days solid rain a week before the second trip had transformed the Lake into a bright-green mossy landscape. Both trips provided chances to share skills and techniques for visually exploring and representing the place and experience.

Rust-dying techniques were introduced to the group by American textiles student Julie Schneider. She used rust to dye a series of envelopes and scraps of fabric with objects found near the Lake Leaghur Shearers Quarters where we were based. She worked further into the envelopes with sewing and drawing and mailed them back to herself in Canberra from the towns we passed on the way home. Schneider used found objects from the site to inspire and create traces of place and explore ideas of erosion and “distance, solstice and things lost and found”.

Dorothy Noble, a sculpture student, also used the rust-dying technique to create wall hangings. She rust-stained her cloth with found pressed metal moulding that had been used to decorate the walls and ceilings in the Leaghur Homestead. This was a popular form of interior decoration at the turn of the last century. Her hangings reference the struggle early settlers faced in trying to make this alien desert country “home” – isolated from their families, medical care and domestic comforts.

Through photography and mixed media Emily Jackett used teacups and teabags as a medium for talking about community and the collective experience of drinking tea. Sharing tea with the people at Lake Mungo was an important opportunity for our group to hear about life in desert country and gain insights into the area through its...
traditional owners and the graziers who still live on the properties bordering the National Park. They, too, enjoyed seeing our work as it developed.

Artists such as Austrian Margit Brünner and British textiles student Louisa Oats explored the landscape by using their bodies to inform their imagery. Margit Brünner surveyed the landscape by moving through it and recording ‘the spirit of the place’, with spontaneous mark-making onto a page. The outcome was a series of fluid watercolour drawings – impulsive marks floating on top of one another and capturing a sense of place and time. Oats used the idea of tiptoeing across the Mungo environment, then stepping on a soft ground etching plate leaving an imprint of her foot. Locating the self and recording uneasy footsteps on the landscape was a recurring theme for some artists. Bettinson commented on how we develop a heightened awareness “of our own bodies and presence within this vast space”.

My work was preoccupied with these ideas. Making a time-based work, which involved drawing daily onto a section of a Pianola roll on the lakebed, provided a way of exploring this physical awareness. I used ink and salt to draw and record the shadows and traces of objects found on my walks in the landscape. This process of making allowed me the time to contemplate being on the site. Most of the ink used was created on site from the plant matter gathered from a nearby property by Canberra artist Jenny Lawrence who made natural dyes from the saltbush, peppercorn and butterbush plants for colouring yarn and silk. Through dyeing, Lawrence developed another way of recording or capturing the Lake Mungo environment.

Ceramic students Sue Langwill and Julia Schumacher worked collaboratively creating small clay works, which emerged after several days of their sitting together in the dunes behind our base camp at Leaghur. Langwill made a collection of clay bone forms, referencing the layered skeletal remains of animals found on the dunes, which she fired in a pit under our cooking fire. Schumacher took a plaster cast of a section of earth and later slip cast it, creating wafer-thin impressions of the contours and markings of the site. The scale of the sky is overwhelming, when one first stands on this desert country. It constantly moves and shifts as clouds roll across the lakebed and the sun rises and sets. On an overcast day during the second trip, our Canberra artist Jenny Lawrence who made natural dyes from the saltbush, peppercorn and butterbush plants for colouring yarn and silk. Through dyeing, Lawrence developed another way of recording or capturing the Lake Mungo environment.

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Gathering Time
different times over the day, recording the shifting colours and light.

Charles Cooper also explored the striking contrast of this country when dry and wet in a series of hypnotic colour field paintings. Ian Robertson, another painter, created work inspired by the same daily cycle. He documented this through delicate watercolour and acrylic studies. On the first field trip, Ian Bettinson created a series of paintings which break the landscape down into two parts; the land and sky and aim to challenge our reading of the landscape by representing these elements in equal parts, with a centred glowing horizon line.

For those who participated in both field trips, the second visit enabled further development and consolidation of artwork. For all the artists involved in this field research program and art making opportunity it was a time to collaborate, gather ideas and material and absorb this environment’s unique and powerful presence.
Jenny Lawrence  Silk Road to Lake Mungo. A memory for C19th Chinese Labourers  Detail 2005 Dimensions variable. Natural dyed silk (saltbush), wool, monofilament, wood and rice

Gabrielle Heywood  Rising 2005 44.0cm diameter x 4.0cm Found object, Murray River Gourmet Salt
On the way to the bubbling source of the Murray River we were driving through an unseen, unknown forest at night. We were only able to guess at the mysterious dark shapes looming above and around. There was a strong sense of damp, deep ancient earth.

From this magical source of inspiration Leanne Bear’s Effervescence was born. It is her contribution as the 2005 Environment Studio Visiting Artist to the Field Studies program at Wentworth. Effervescence is a suite of works that includes the public performance of a new composition, INDI; an exhibited photographic image and other pieces contributed to Art on a Bunk.

**INDI:** a ‘liquid’ art experience

From the field trip to Wentworth in July, the Murray and its environs provided a deep well of material, namely sounds of water flowing, flora and fauna and the hint of a platypus perhaps. But other elements, from tragic to quirky, such as the Rufus River Massacre, cracked earth, a child’s doll and a muddy and chaotic drive through rutted puddles leapt into the mix. These words merely hint at what Leanne Bear* is offering us in her performance of **INDI** that opens the 2005 MDBC International River Health Conference in Mildura. Her newly composed mixed-media piece, described as a ‘liquid’ art experience, is a unique blending of music, light and visual art.

In Bear’s production, **INDI** composed especially for the Conference, sounds of the river, native birds singing, crickets and the elusive platypus are subtly interwoven in a tone poem of colour, myth and reality. The music and its accompanying film of lapping water take us on a journey down the Murray from its origin to its junction with the Darling and beyond. **INDI** is also a musical interpretation of Leanne Bear’s enigmatic photograph, **Violin Emerging**, being exhibited on the P.S. Ruby. A violin seemingly emerges from serene waters that reflect the dappled light of a still, sunny day. The mirror forms the shape of the music, where even the violins sparkle in mirror-image, dividing and rippling in a kaleidoscope of the senses. Imagine, flowing as an undercurrent, a mysterious creature – a platypus – lurking unseen in its increasingly threatened environment. In this subtle interpretation of the real and imagined can be found the curious and the quirky.

With Chris Stone as violinist, and a professional crew operating a full stage set of sound, light and two large background screens, the audience will be treated to a sound-scape sampled from river sources, synchronised with projected images and an atmospheric light show. Leanne Bear’s primary collaborators in **INDI** are Chris Stone from the ANU School of Music Contemporary Music Ensemble and Editing Engineer, Niven Stines. This

**Effervescence**

Music and Visual Art Celebrating Australia’s Mightiest Rivers
The Contemporary Music Ensemble
School of Music The Australian National University

Tor Fromyhr, Head of Strings, Director Contemporary Music Ensemble, ANU School of Music, coordinates the Contemporary Music Ensemble performance of Emma Kelly’s Salt Bush, Nampoo Station, Devils Elbow, NSW, July 2005. The Contemporary Music Ensemble was formed in 1998 and regularly participates in ANU School of Art Field Studies programs.

Emma Kelly Salt Bush Graphic Score Detail 2005 42x29.7cm Pencil, paper

commission has been made possible through support from the ANU Vice-Chancellor’s Discretionary Fund. The 2005 MDBC International River Health Conference is sponsored by the Murray Darling Basin Commission.

* Leanne Bear, violinist, composer, and visual and performance artist, is currently a Visiting Artist at the ANU School of Art, which has helped foster her passion for merging art forms. The mixed-media performance project, Fluffy Purple Violins, comprising photomedia, contemporary classical violin music and sound effects, improvisation, artist books and installation was premiered in her solo exhibition at Canberra Contemporary Art Space, February 2005.
Vast saltbush plains, boats on a lock, animal tracks in the bush, the P.S. Ruby, an old shed, a playground seesaw and a beautiful, 'acoustic' tower at the Murray-Darling junction absorbed the group of music makers from the ANU School of Music who joined visual artists from the same university’s School of Art at Wentworth in July this year.

The birth and growth of Wentworth and other towns along the Murray and Darling Rivers springing from the pioneering spirit of the early European explorers, settlement and prosperity and the contemplative musings of other creative artists also worked their way into this richly layered tapestry to inspire *Flash Back*.

This new music work by composer and violinist, Chris Stone, will be the highlight of the School of Music’s contribution to *Wet River Dry Lake* in Wentworth. The work will be performed by members of the School’s Contemporary Music Ensemble (CME) comprising, in this performance, Tor Fromyhr, Chris Stone and Leanne Bear.

The CME, an initiative of the School of Music, offers students and visiting artists the opportunity to open doors to areas beyond the School’s confines and work with practicing visual artists, art students and writers.

In 2005 the CME enabled the Head of Strings and the ensemble’s founder, Tor Fromyhr, and students Chris Stone, Emma Kelly, and Shannon Reid to absorb and assess the Wentworth region with Environment Studio Visiting Artist, Leanne Bear. They created spontaneous performances and carefully plotted musical events in response to the rich source of inspiration.

*Flash Back*, one of the musical outcomes of this year’s collaboration between the Schools of Music and Art, will premiere at Wentworth’s Red Café at 6.30 pm on Saturday 15 October.
A river is a large flow of water. Water is a multi-dimensional entity. It is element, nature, personality, blood. It is thirst-quencher, power-generator, it gives and takes life. It is literally essential—the essence of life.

Water is a global commodity. It is vital to and shared between all living creatures. It is also, in many parts of the world, under threat. The world’s freshwater supply makes up less than 3% of the world’s water, and less than 1% not frozen or underground. This precious remaining water is a finite resource that is subject to growing stress from human population growth and expansion. In the last few centuries many of the world’s rivers have changed; beyond repair or recognition.

“I try to imagine 1830 and Captain Charles Sturt’s great expedition – he would have seen rivers in their natural state – sometimes good, sometimes not so good. After the introduction of the 14 weirs in the Murray (11 beyond the Darling from Mildura to Blanchetown SA) and the completion of the Hume Weir in 1936, a flow has been maintained for the length of the Murray at all times, despite drought periods. Only in the last 10 years or so have the warning signs started to flash – IT’S TIME we all started to become more aware of a disaster waiting to happen! – Carmel Chapman, Wentworth Shire Council Information Officer.

A river is spirit. This place has been occupied by people for tens of thousands of years. There was always food, shelter and family. There was comfort and beauty. There was spirit, art and life in abundance. This place has history, the memory of ancestors and the knowledge of centuries.

A river is prosperity. European settlers regarded the river as an unpredictable, uncontrolled resource. Early settlers did not recognize the history of Aboriginal occupation; they did not see the Basin as a place that was friendly for human habitation. To them it was a beautiful, frightening and inspiring ‘wilderness’, a poetic place untouched by change. They quickly recognized the Murray in terms of its future potential to generate agricultural wealth for Australia. 95% of the Basin’s land area is comprised of dryland regions. To some settlers the waters of the river held the key to the ‘greening’ of these arid lands. The river was ‘liquid gold’.

A river is a system in flux. Over the past century the Murray has been regulated through a series of locks, weirs and dams to store water and draw it out of the river for irrigation and other uses. Wealth has indeed flowed out of these waters, in the form of world-class produce, textiles and industry. People have flowed in, from other nations and other cultures. Farms, towns and roads have sprung up along the shores. Settler Australians have introduced new plants and animals to the region and the icons of infrastructure have sprung up: fences, railroads, telegraph posts, sealed and
unsealed roads, service stations, paddydocks, irrigation channels, power lines and buildings galore. These changes have taken their toll, and the Murray-Darling is not a healthy river system. Salinity, drought, erosion, regulation, loss of biodiversity... Things have changed in this place, and not always for the better.

“We used to swim all the time, as kids. The difference between us swimming in the river then and the kids swimming in the river now is our kids don’t know what a flood is.” – Andrew Buffon, Brickmaker.

What is a healthy river? We know when a river has lost its health, but can we genuinely understand why? There are many ways to measure the health of a river depending on the desired outcome. In the global scramble to protect our dwindling fresh water resources, authorities have investigated the impacts of environmental management, economics and society on the sustainability of river systems. The final frontier, of course, is human culture. River is landscape – and landscape is culture.

“It’s been like a kidney machine to me I guess, like the river of life, life blood... I guess I’ve always had a passion for the river.” – Marg Whyte, Artist.

The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Synthesis Report draws a distinction between the services provided by a functional ecosystem and human well-being. The report identifies three ways in which natural systems impact on human populations: provisioning services (by which we obtain our resources such as food, fuel and materials), regulating services (such as air quality, water quality and climate regulation) and cultural services: ‘the nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences’. While scientists, agriculturalists, ecologists and government are working together to identify and record reliable indicators for the physical health of river systems, focus on the cultural health of river communities is falling behind. Faced with the urgency of a rapidly declining environment, the real need to maintain sustainable cultural communities has not always been given a high priority by decision makers in the past.

“Now they ask a lot of questions about this and that. I say, ‘You’re talking to an Aboriginal person now. But when you put the locks and weirs in, and put in rice and cotton, you never talked to an Aboriginal person. You talk to them now that the damage is done!’” – Alf Kelly, Indigenous Representative.

However, internationally the importance of culture in maintaining sustainable development is being increasingly recognized. Cultural sustainability is being valued more and more as a crucial aspect of any effort towards
effective development, along with awareness of the fact that culture and environment are eternally linked.

“I care about the environment. I really dislike the idea that the environment’s number one and I dislike the idea that humans have got to be number one too: it has to be a combination.” – Mark King, Wentworth Shire Council.

The 1995 Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, entitled Our Creative Diversity, discusses the value of creative arts in developing policies for sustainability, including environmental sustainability.

In a community suffering from water stress, creative arts can act as a form of advocacy, allowing people to develop creative ways of moving towards a more sustainable future.

“I think if you can restore the functionality of the river and link that back to changing of the seasons, back to a wetter cycle, I think the whole place will be a lot happier, that’s for sure.” – Scott Jaensch, CEO Barkindji Biosphere Project.

A river is common ground. Developing and exhibiting fine artwork in conjunction with the community is a two-way process. Artists interact with people and the environment. They make connections and find a common ground that will help them to develop as cultural practitioners. People in the community can direct their thoughts and feelings into this process, and find themselves and their place reflected in a new form. Intangibles – thought, emotion, language, memory, sight and sound – can take on solidity, and tangibles are redefined and reinterpreted.

This exhibition, set on the junction of two of Australia’s greatest rivers, is also a bridge. Creativity and the waters of life mingle to make up a statement that bridges culture, environment, place, spirit and community.

“The rivers of this country link us all. I live on the Murrumbidgee River, part of this Murray Darling Basin system. While visiting Wentworth I have started to see and understand another part of this great system. The subtleties of such a landscape are only revealed over time. I hope the work I have made here conveys some of what I have seen in the land and have learned from the Wentworth community.” – Leonie Andrews, Artist.

The river has been regulate but human creativity is at liberty to reinterpret the past and shape the future.

References
1 Water – here, there and everywhere, Freshwater Website, Environment Canada
3 Hatton Macdonald and Young, A Case Study of the Murray-Darling Basin, CSIRO, Australia, 2001
Ian Robertson  Road to Terra Nullus 2005 45.0x90.0cm Oil on cotton canvas

Wendy Teakel  Wentworth Paddock II 2005 76.0x55.0cm Acrylic and pokerwork on paper
While the P.S. Ruby’s primary role was to transport wool and other commodities, it also carried passengers in some comfort. Cabins, each with two bunk beds, accommodated these travellers.

This year, participants in the Wentworth Field Studies program enjoyed a similar privilege. Inspired by this experience artists, Wendy Teakel and Meg Buchanan, hatched the idea of utilising the cabins as art installation spaces, and thereby further integrating the P.S. Ruby into the exhibition, *Wet River Dry Lake*.

**Art on a Bunk**

*An Exhibition in the Hallways and Cabins of the P.S. Ruby*

- *The Contextual Villains* by Rob Little: Layering of oral histories and field recordings create an aural landscape that explores through history human interaction in the Wentworth region.
- *Menindee Dusk* by Rob Little: A photograph that has been printed for mounting along the length of a bunk. The play of light on the waters of the Menindee Lakes can be enjoyed in bed.
- *Salt Rising* by Gabrielle Heywood: An installation dealing with salinity in the Murray-Darling Basin. Her work asks us to reflect on an aspect of our lives without water.
- *History Quilt* by Benjamin Ashe: “History Quilt is about how history can be as visceral as flesh and as unobtrusive as air. It references the feminine traditions of sewing and quilt making.”
- *From Port to Port* by Meg Buchanan: From Port to Port represents the artist’s reflections on her experience of the Murray-Darling area. Photocopies on acetate of written materials collected in the area spill from a traveler’s portmanteau onto a bunk – the traveler encumbered by past and present.
- *Effervescence* by Leanne Bear: Effervescence is a transitory ‘bunk media’ installation that includes video with soundtrack, Rufus Walk; and mixed media assemblage that relates to experiences of the area, travel and cabin life with her two toddlers.
- *Wet and Dry* by Sarah Firth: Wet and Dry plays with the layering of fragments, how they create narratives.

**Installation Details**

- *Menindee Dusk* by Rob Little: 2005 15.0x110.0cm Digital giclee photo rag print
and the way they are read in relation to their particular spatial context - in this case, the P.S. Ruby. “My work focuses on the tension between constructed human realities and the natural world.”

Dan Stewart-Moore

A steel and timber sculptural work that addresses the spatial qualities and energies of the cabin. The installation represents the traces of people who have slept there and those who have cared for the vessel throughout its life.

Ian Robertson

“Landscape painting is my vehicle for conceptualising profit, history, identity, spiritual connection, isolation, the timelessness, ownership and custodianship. The viewer is invited to add their own narrative to this work rendered on calico sheets and a pillow - add to the stylised sky, to the horizon, and to the vast empty tracts that overlay evidence of human intervention.”

WetRiverDryLake

NEB Branch Wentworth will operate from the Visitor Information Centre, Darling Street, Wentworth. Funds raised from the exchange of Australian currency for NEB notes will be donated to P.S. Ruby youth river health education initiatives.

Environment Studio Field Studies 2005. First program poster 3/05

Environment Studio Field Studies 2005. Last program poster 9/05