Mallee [mæli:]
Aesthetic responses to a semi-arid place
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Aesthetic responses to a semi-arid place

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School of Art Gallery
The Australian National University
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Sydney’s Alfred Park Budget Accommodation in Redfern was the venue of choice. The US delegation, Bill Gilbert, Yoshimi Hayashi, Cedra Wood and Blake Gibson, all associated with the University of New Mexico (UNM) field-based visual art research program, Land Arts, met their Australian counterpart and host, John Reid, Field Studies, School of Art, Australian National University (ANU), in the rear courtyard colonised by ... budget travellers. It was early evening Wednesday, 1st June 2011.

Planning for this international but intimate gathering of visual art field researchers began in September 2008 over the telephone. Bill Gilbert, Professor, Department of Art and Art History, UNM, Senior Associate Dean for Research and Director, Land Arts of the American West program, was wrapping-up with likeminded colleagues an environmental conference in Nevada convened by Bill Fox, Director, Centre for Art+Environment, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. In fact it was Bill Fox who dialled the number for Calperum Station in South Australia’s Riverland Biosphere where John Reid was waiting at 4.00 am to receive the call. Otherwise immersed at Calperum Station on an Australian Research Council Linkage Project, Engaging Visions, in partnership with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, John Reid gave an Australian voice to the findings of preliminary investigations by Bill Fox on his earlier visits to Australia and the desirability of artist exchange visits between the ANU and the UNM. The teleconference set the stage for the next step in 2010. John Reid visited Bill Gilbert in Albuquerque and the die was cast for a month-long field survey in Australia in the following year to be equitably funded by both the ANU and UNM.

Bill Gilbert was responsible for the first item on the 2011 Land Arts Australian field survey itinerary – June 1st: Dinner, Newtown, Louise Fowler-Smith, Senior Lecturer and Director, Imaging the Land International Research Institute (ILIRI), College of Fine Arts, University of NSW. Prospects were discussed for a future visit to the ILIRI field facility at Fowlers Gap in the semi-arid outback of New South Wales. Louise generously extended invitations to do so. Joseph Mougel, the last of the Land Arts artists to arrive, was collected at the Sydney International Terminal as the group headed south on Thursday, June 2nd, to spend three days at the ANU Coastal Field Station, Kioloa, between Ulladulla and Batemans Bay, NSW. As seasoned fieldworkers everyone had creative ideas in mind, ready to be played-out, tested, influenced or abandoned as the bus began to move along the coastal perimeter of New South Wales. There were stops along the way to gather bearings, make visual notations of landscape and collect materials. Art production began in earnest at Kioloa.

On Monday 6th June the group shifted focus to the estuary of the Yowaka River
and Lake Pambula just north of Eden on the NSW Far South Coast. Here, camping on the fringe of The Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu (MBG) Cultural Heritage Keeping Place, was an opportunity for the Land Arts artists to experience at first hand a Field Study field procedure. Also camping at Jigamy were 20 visual artist participants in the Eden Project – the 2011 ANU School of Art Field Study. The Study drew inspiration and information for art production from people: in various communities comprising the thin band of coastal population dependent on the natural resources and eco-services of the forests to the west and marine environment to the east; and from place: as direct observations of the forests and ocean in their various states of ecological health. The Americans were instantly a part of the Field Study research community and creative insights were shared all round.

After a week based at the NSW Far South Coast, the Land Arts group visited the ANU School of Art in Canberra. There were the obligatory Art Forum presentations, seminars addressing individual creative art practice and detailed discussions about the features of the Land Arts program as it is delivered in the US. A reciprocal visit by Australian artists to the UNM to see the Land Arts program in action in the field was starting to take shape.

In the eight days that remained before departure at the end of June the Land Arts group and John Reid were joined by Liz Coats, Fran Ifould, Micky Allan, Frank Thirion, Felicity Green, Kevin Miller and Bryn Jones for an intensive foray to Calperum Station in South Australia’s Riverland. Heike Qualitz, Amelia Zaraftis, Amanda Stuart, Caroline Huf and Wendy Teakel followed with supplementary Calperum trips. Welcomed and briefed by Dr Grant Whiteman, Manager of Riverland Operations for the Australian Landscape Trust (charged with the ecological conservation of Calperum Station and its extensive mallee landscape), the artists responded with creative enthusiasm. This catalogue documents the exhibition that resulted from this international group of visual artists.

Calperum Station 2011 (front) Blake Gibson, Caroline Huf, Kevin Miller, Bill Gilbert, Micky Allan, Cedra Wood, Bryn Jones, Liz Coats, (back) Fran Ifould, Felicity Green, Grant Whiteman. Photograph: John Reid
Around Calperum there are salt lakes and red earth and Mallee trees and it is sometimes difficult to tell what is ‘alive’ and what is ‘dead’. Swirls of crusted golden crystals mingle with rising salt and scorpions, dragonflies and whitened frogs. The classic silver/grey of Australian ‘dead’ gums protruding from muddy edges or scattered over the plains seem as alive in the whole as anything else. Movement and rest, life and death seem indivisibly part of the same interactive whole.

In this collaborative series we have combined photographs with imagery of original artwork, including drawings made by Micky at Calperum or directly on her return. The resulting photographs have then been hand painted to a more or less degree.

Micky Allan and Steenus von Steensen
Desert Dies/Desert Blooms II 2011
digital pigment prints on rag paper
71.5 x 51.0 cm
Micky Allan and Steenus von Steensen

*Desert Dies/Desert Blooms I* 2011

digital pigment prints on rag paper

71.5 x 51.0 cm
Walking out into the spaciousness of Calperum encouraged a merging with terrain I hadn’t experienced before; seeing, touching and smelling regenerating clusters of growing things: the colours and textures, the softness and hardness of surfaces, patterns of growth that reveal internal consistency. Some things were familiar, while others I had no name for, except by species likeness. Walking for hours without meeting any significant boundary and being open to the living environment caused me to reflect on ways of being in natural environments and how much we impact on them. The semi-arid landscape of Calperum Station with all of its mutability and developing self-sufficiency is a source of inspiration for a painter like myself, whose practice is both abstract and responsive to sensory influences in the environment.
Liz Coats
*Streaming #3* 2011
Acrylic media on polycotton canvas
109.5 x 88.5 cm

Photograph: Stuart Hay
The paintings were made
during a residency at
Megalo Print Studio, Canberra
From journal entry 21 June 2011: Camping at Dry Frogamerry on Calperum Station deep in Mallee country South Australia.

It’s only been 24 hours, and Joseph, one of the four American artists has wandered back to our camp site, confused, dehydrated, and without John. Plans are immediately made to take him to the local hospital, as his core body temperature continues to drop. He points in a direction in which he last saw John alive. With determination and urgency, I set out to search for him. After 40 minutes of tracking I found a single boot print in the sand, leading me further, deeper into the disorienting bush. For two and half hours I followed a chaotic pattern of tracks till I saw him, alive, draped on a low hanging branch, looking up intensely into a southern sky. Although John had been found safe and well, today a small part of him remains irretrievably missing in the depth of the Mallee country.

Frank Thirion  
*Mallee Country; Looking for John Reid (detail)*  2011  
natural pigments and acrylic paint on 80 canvas boards  200.0 x 300.0 cm
I am particularly sensitive to the ways our environment has been affected by two hundred years of colonial tenure. Through my art practice, based in the landscape, I have discovered a renewed interest in the question of land ownership, (defined by possession), or stewardship (a responsibility assumed by oneself). I am interested in the way the spirit of a landscape matches my own spirit, giving me a pathway to connect with the landform and land use from an attitude of kinship with the land itself. To this end I have travelled to isolated areas, communicated with Indigenous people of the inland river systems of New South Wales and enjoyed the inspiration available in the remnant forests in south eastern Australia.

I enjoy using my field locations as my studio. Water is the process as much (or even more) than it is the content of these works. Wet paper applied directly to found objects in remote places, not used to being regarded with an artist’s eye, have delivered up some delicious, serendipitous combinations of colour and texture. In many of these works the paper can be perceived as a thin sculpture of the land itself, taking on both the feel and the fragility of land surfaces barely surviving. These works are an out-pouring of my own thirst for new images of an ancient, fleeting beauty in the land.
Fran Ifould  *Calperum Salt Lake*  2011  81.0 x 120.0 cm  Ink and acrylic on Hahnemühle paper
Caroline Huf  

Caroline Huf  *Back to the Mallee*  2011  Stop motion animation (detail)
The clearing of Mallee scrubland for agriculture has caused a grave salinity problem and the loss of habitat for native animals. This animation was made at Calperum station using materials found on site. A piece of wire mesh that had protected a newly planted tree, grows into a ball and rolls across the landscape, taking the viewer on a journey from the cracked earth of the farm, across the salt pan and back to the Mallee.
This photograph, and many others taken at Calperum, have been the reference point for several paintings and drawings made in the studio. The transformational power of water as it moves across this landscape overlays the evidence of a very damaged system. We witnessed its gradual retreat and the tentative revegitaton that comes after flood.
Presently a candidate for PhD in Visual Arts in the Sculpture Workshop, my visual practice explores human relationships with the Australian natural environment, with particular focus on unwanted species, such as dingoes and wild dogs. In these object based and performative works, I explore the position of the introduced species, which in terms of natural heritage, is often seen as the outsider.
**Splash** is a short performance video shot in the Mallee forest on the surface of a dried salt lake. **Sun Hole** is a photographic documentation of the evidence of the passage of time while digging the hole for Splash.

**Field Notes:**

1. Needed to dig a hole.
2. Got shovel.
3. Walked to dig site.
   NOTE: Observed flock of emus and four kangaroos.
4. Identified ideal location (picturesque background, clear foreground); set up documentation equipment.
5. Removed boots.
6. Placed camera 10 m away from hole.
7. Donned yellow jumpsuit.
8. Marked hole-diameter large enough to accommodate human (60 cm).
9. Took photograph with sun behind camera; me in hole.
10. Removed 3 cm of sediment from hole and deposited behind camera.
11. Repositioned documentation equipment with sun behind camera.
12. Repeat steps 9-11 twenty-seven times.
   NOTE: On twelfth cycle, discovered water.
13. Paused on twenty-seventh cycle with discovery of solid crystal substrate.
15. Repeat steps 9-11 twenty-one times.
   NOTE: Failed to dig deeper.
16. Stopped digging hole.
   NOTE: Discovered surface instability around hole.
17. Completed hole-digging documentation.
18. Photographed dirt piles and hole for Sun Hole images as the sun set.
19. Rolled up jumpsuit pant legs.
20. Set up camera to document Splash
   NOTE: Observed crow call.
22. Walked away from camera.
23. Walked into hole.
   NOTE: Splash.
24. Stepped out of hole.
25. Walked back to camera.
   NOTE: Observed crow call.
27. Repeat steps 20-25 three times.
28. Packed up documentation equipment.
29. Filled in hole.
   NOTE: Displaced water from hole.
30. Put on boots.
31. Walked back to camp.
   NOTE: Dark.
32. Saw headlights in distance.
33. Picked up by John Reid.
What is an artist to do if he wants to make totally sustainable art? Artistic activity often relies on repeated failures and wasted attempts before any kind of mastery is achieved. And is it an obligation for any artist dealing with the environment to educate the public or help bring about some social change? This work is informed by a relationship with the natural world based on limitation and the fact that it is also human nature to be bored, disinterested and easily distracted.

Blake Gibson

*Little Tremors* 2011
Dimensions variable
Video installation 3 min. video loop
When we drove inland to Calperum Station I was still thinking of the horizon and the line it made with the sky. Here I was imagining going back in time and gazing at a line that had been unchanged since before white settlement. Therefore I would be looking back in time more than 200 years. Unfortunately the landscape is still a changed landscape and I can only look back some 50 years here as well. When we do finally stumble across Mallee Country you can’t see the horizon but I know that I’m walking through something much older than any horizon I can see. The disappointing thing is that if you look hard there are still intrusions into these landscapes including my own presence.
Heike Qualitz

Heike Qualitz  *In & out of place I, II & III*  2011  43.0 x 55.0cm  pigment on rag
Exploring what lies beyond, discovering with the light of curiosity, the fleeting presence of all.
What do you convey of your experience when you have little understanding or knowledge of a place, and minimal time to learn more?

This triptych represents my imaginative association with and spontaneous response to Calperum Station during a brief visit in 2011. On site, my actions were fuelled both by a sense of wonderment at the unfamiliar surroundings, and a strong desire to communicate my delight at experiencing the place with others. I performed semaphore-like postures with my body on the surface of the earth, facing upwards towards satellites which could have better communicated my message via SMS, had I had any thoughts formed worthy of communicating. The vibrant yellow-green of the paddy melons presented a suitably alarming hue with which to transmit my signals. Further, working with this material provided me with a tactile immersive task to carry-out – a way of connecting to the place.

Amelia Zaraftis
Loud and clear I, II, III, (Calperum Station, SA) 2011
Arizona 250 GT print on bond paper
135 x 90 cm
Photograph: Caroline Huf
When I was a kid, my mom explained to me that the difference between a flower and a weed is that a weed is a flower that grows where it’s not wanted. I’m interested in the idea of what makes something desirable, from community to community, and from person to person, and have found that there seems to be an incredibly fine line between exotic and threatening, and a narrow margin between tediously common and unsettlingly alien. The discussions about the species that thrive in Australia have intrigued me since I visited; it’s a complicated process, trying to figure out one’s place in the world: what belongs, what doesn’t, and who decides.

Cedra Wood

When I was a kid, my mom explained to me that the difference between a flower and a weed is that a weed is a flower that grows where it’s not wanted. I’m interested in the idea of what makes something desirable, from community to community, and from person to person, and have found that there seems to be an incredibly fine line between exotic and threatening, and a narrow margin between tediously common and unsettlingly alien. The discussions about the species that thrive in Australia have intrigued me since I visited; it’s a complicated process, trying to figure out one’s place in the world: what belongs, what doesn’t, and who decides.

Cedra Wood  Invasive  2011
23.0 x 15.0  egg tempera on panel
Cedra Wood  *Hide*  2011  23.0 x 15.0  acrylic on panel

Cedra Wood  *Stalk*  2011  23.0 x 15.0  acrylic on panel
Bill Gilbert

Arriving for the first time in Australia I found myself faced with the problem of how to orient; gain a sense of where I was and a way to navigate in strange terrain. Following marked roads and well worn trails is a common approach. For this work I took my clue from sailors and navigated with the help of a constellation familiar to me from the sky in the northern hemisphere. Walking Hercules onto the ground at Calperum Station took me on an arbitrary, cross country route through the Mallee woodlands for a close encounter with South Australia’s flora and fauna. Good times. Met an Emu.
The camera is an eminently suitable device for image making in the field. It feeds on movement and the tireless search for the penultimate edit of the world, the radiant enunciation of form by ambient light, the aesthetic experience afforded by formal relationships and the admission of significance for a third party that may lay eyes on the subsequent print. In the context of a working day this constellation of attributes is rare. Also, the photographers’ powers of concentration to contrive these circumstances are limited. Eyes wander from the task. Inevitably they come to rest on other things that happen to be in the vicinity. Despite deflection from the photographic imperative, the eye is still alert to aesthetic experience where forms come together in exquisite relationships and the senses respond by sending a charge to the brain – POW! This happened to me when the situation I have described above prevailed at Calperum Station. I stumbled, visually, over a drum cast to the ground in the saline but arid expanses of the Biosphere. The image opposite is of the drum’s external surface. There is a likeness of someone (Is it Ludwig Leichhardt?) standing in an optically distorted landscape that appears as it would to a spectator suffering from a condition wrought by deprivation of water or by being stroked excessively by the sun. It could, in fact, be Leichardt’s very own vision - his last apparition of a human being. What, then, is Leichardt’s image (of him, or by him) doing on a drum centuries after his disappearance and thousands of kilometres from where he was thought to have disappeared? I picked up the drum (heavy with mystery) to look more intently at what it had to offer. From this moment the drum became a Found Object. Its surface, now, must be protected from the elements, from careless handling, from the envy of other artists, from fanatics who are threatened by western culture, from politicians who beat drums for citizens obese from greed. Promoted in status and destined for the air conditioned eternity of the art gallery, this drum will beat in harmony with visiting hearts - especially those that are sensitive to the harsh realities of human folly.
My approach to making art is essentially a performative time-based practice. The presence of the body is implicit, whether in the scale and construction of three dimensional works or in the repetitions and rhythms of paintings and drawings. Rusted iron and twine picked up on a walk around Calperum form the basis of Biosphere Fragment made largely on the ground at the camp site. It evolved out of earlier processes of tracking around the water’s edge and walking across country; observing remnants of past land use patterns and introductions of new ones. The mark made by the twine and drill holes is a pulse, like a breath or a footprint, a virtual inhabiting and animating of place. It is a mark that does not require a particular dexterity, but is simply the body’s trace moving through the work. The work is as much about being as about seeing.
My Honours research explored the question: What is a boundary? My initial assumptions related to a boundary between man and nature and used the fence as a literal metaphor to explain this relationship. A field trip to Calprum Station in South Australia refocused my research to define the boundary as the extent of my energy. Through this small action of throwing sticks in the air I was able to create spatial boundaries. Which were subsequently mapped through space photographically and sculpturally.
Yoshimi Hayashi

What does it really mean to know a place? How do we know that we actually know it at all? Why does it matter that one own a bit of a place? Why do we find it so necessary to make a mark on a place or to collect a memory of our visit? To leave those memories or to be left with and burdened by someone else’s life journey summarized in a small shiny utensil. Is it a functionless taboo object or should we just use it and live in this moment?

Yoshimi Hayashi  Just one Cup  2011  souvenir spoons & maps  indicative piece for large installation  dimensions variable
Yoshimi Hayashi  *Just one cup*  2011  video performance still