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*Contested Visions, Expansive Views:  
the Landscape of the Darling River  
in Western NSW*

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Photomedia

## **CONTENTS**

Acknowledgements	3
List of Illustrations	4
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1 Red Ground, Black Ground</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2 The Lure of an Inland Sea</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3 Working in Translation: Language, Landscape, Art</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>4 Double Vision of the Australian Landscape</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>5 Patterns of Country: Figure and Ground (in Dirt)</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>56</b>
List of Works	65
Bibliography	66

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Introduction

Map of the Murray Darling Basin

### Chapter Two

Thomas Mitchell, *Sketch for 'The River Darling'*, 1835, collection Mitchell Library

Thomas Mitchell, *20<sup>th</sup> June, on the Darling*, 1835, unpublished sketch, collection Mitchell Library

Thomas Mitchell, *The River Darling*, 1835, a lithograph after a sketch by Mitchell

Ludwig Becker, *River Darling and the Mouth of Pamamaroo Creek*, 1860, watercolour, 13.8 x 22.7 cm, collection State Library of Victoria

Ludwig Becker, *Camp on the Edge of the Earthy or Mud Plains 40 Miles from Duroadoo*, 17.5 x 25.5 cm, 1861, collection State Library of Victoria

Ludwig Becker, *View from Mt Hope*, 12.6 x 17.8 cm, 1860, collection State Library of Victoria

W. A. Cawthorne, *A Fight on the Murray in the Scene Painting Style*, 1844, watercolour on paper, collection The Mitchell Library

Reg Sharpless, *Woolwaggons on the Ivanhoe to Mossgiel Road*, silver gelatin photograph, The Mitchell Library n.d.

### Chapter Four

Fiona Foley, *Lie of the Land*, Melbourne, dimensions various, 1990

Fiona Foley, *Black Velvet II*, Museum of Contemporary Art, dimensions various, 2002

Gordon Bennett, *Explorer (The Inland Sea)*, 1993, woodcut on Japanese paper, 45.5 x 61 cm

Gordon Bennett, *Aboriginal Generative*, 1993, etching, 60 x 39.8 cm

Gordon Bennett, *Terra Nullius (as far as the eye can see)*, 1993, soft ground etching, 79.7 x 60.6 cm

Linda Sproul, *The White Woman Project*, 1995

Lynette Wallworth, *Still: Waiting*, 2004, interactive video work

Rea, *Don't Shoot Till You See the Whites of Their Eyes (detail)*, 1999, type C photograph

### Chapter Five

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red diagonal)*, type C photograph, 80 x 80cms

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey curve 2)*, type C photograph, 80 x 80cm

Documentation of flying camera and kite, January 2005

Ruby Davies, experiments with mud on gallery wall and photographic surfaces, dimensions various, 2003-2005

"Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings." <sup>1</sup>

"So spatial history does not go confidently forward. It does not organize its subject matter into a nationalist enterprise. It advances exploratively, even metaphorically, recognizing that the future is invented. Going back, it questions the assumptions that the past has been settled once and for all. It undermines the empirical stability of roads and buildings. It runs the risk of becoming as intangible as distant views. Its objects are intentions and, suggesting the plurality of historical directions, it constantly risks escaping into poetry, biography or a form of immaterialism positivists might think nihilistic. After all, what can you do with a horizon?" <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1993, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay, an Essay in Spatial History*, Faber and Faber, London, Boston 1987, p. 296.

*As a young teenager I went riding with two Aboriginal stockmen bringing mobs of sheep in for shearing. My father would have given me scant instruction, to stay near the tail of the mob, to be useful but to keep out of the way. This meant the stockmen were on either side and in control of the direction and speed - I was merely bringing up the rear.*

*They were riding big horses. Anxious and hollow-rumped, thin and ewe necked, one black, one bay, tossing their heads and throwing foam from the bit into the air, splattering their chests. They rode up and down the outside, the flank of the mob, stringing the sheep out in a thin dusty wisp. And when they turned back toward the tail of the mob, the sheep would leap and rush forward in a wave toward the leaders. I, in turn, was to hurry along the 'stragglers' at the back.*

*Sometimes they would swap sides and occasionally I would be on the flank for a while. We were often up to half a kilometer apart, herding different parts of the mob. They were young men, tall, thin and they laughed a lot. I was sometimes unsure what to do, and they were not going to explain things to their boss's daughter.*

## Introduction

This paper grows out of my ongoing practice of photographing the Darling River in western NSW. My interest in imaging the landscape and representing the contemporary divisions within it led me to investigate previous colonial conflicts, which occurred as white explorers in the 1830's and squatters in the 1850's took over the Aboriginal tribal lands on the Darling. In this paper I investigate the images created by explorers, artists and photographers, which were the beginnings of a Eurocentric vision for this land. These images were created in the context of a colonial history which forms the ideological backdrop to historical events and representations of this land.

This research has involved me in an investigation across three different disciplines; Australian history, Australian visual art, and environmental aspects of human interactions with the land. The postcolonial histories which inform my work are themselves re-evaluations of earlier histories. This recent history has revealed, amid the images of European 'settlement' and 'progress', views of frontier violence and Aboriginal resistance to colonisation that were excluded from earlier histories.

The fan-like shape of the Darling River, which for millennia has brought water to this dry land, is the motif that focuses my investigation. I discuss the relatively recent degradation of the river, which is the focus of contemporary conflicts between graziers, Aboriginal people, environmentalists and irrigators. Because large-scale irrigation now has the capacity to divert the flows of entire rivers for the irrigation of cash crops, the insecurities of earlier generations over the 'unpredictable' floods and their perception of lack of control over water - has been entirely reversed. 'Control' of water is now held by irrigators and the river down stream from the pumps is kept at a constant low, becoming a chain of stagnant waterholes during summer. Like many rivers in industrialised countries, the Darling no longer flows to its ocean.

The physical characteristics of rangeland grazing are an important background to my paper. Although the introduction of sheep and cattle has altered and degraded this landscape, unlike ploughed country to the east this land retains much of its native vegetation and an Aboriginal history embedded across its surface. This paper is an investigation of the changing representations of the Australian landscape, and central to my paper (and a result of growing up in this area) is my recognition, at an early age, of cultural difference in the context of this landscape. I became aware of contradictions in how Aboriginal people were treated by the 'white' community and I glimpsed the distinct cultural viewpoints held by Aboriginal people. A connection to country continues to be expressed in art produced by Aboriginal people in the Wilcannia area, including work by Badger Bates and Waddy Harris. *The Wilcannia Mob*, a





depletion, climate changes) that once again appear to be unpredictable and beyond our control. While this environmental discussion is outside the scope of the current paper it is a context for my investigation of this landscape.

In chapter one I focus on the vastness of this landscape but also the spatial and political divisions across its surface. I introduce issues regarding the recent extraction of water from the Darling.

In chapter two I discuss the history of this 'outback' landscape focusing on the production of images by artists, explorers and the early pastoral industry. I discuss the Darling River, the focus of exploration and 'settlement', as also the site of conflict between Aboriginal people and Europeans in their search for water and pastures.

In chapter three, I discuss the work of three academics who write about a 'double vision' occurring in the Australian landscape when both the Aboriginal and the Western viewpoints are activated at the one time.

In chapter four I look at the work of a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous contemporary artists who are developing innovative ways of engaging with the archives of Australian art and history.

In chapter five I discuss my own photographic and installation based art practice, my use of kites to make aerial photographs of the patterns of country and my interest in using mud from the river as material in my art practice.

As a non-Indigenous person I am acutely aware of the cultural complexities of researching Aboriginal representations and experiences of colonisation. Sue Best in an essay in *Postcolonial + Art: Where Now?* is one writer who has discussed the reluctance of many non-Aboriginal artists to engage with Aboriginality, based on an understanding of the 'appropriative violence' of speaking on behalf of and thus once again alienating the 'other.' Discussing the work of Joan Brassil, Best outlines her belief that when working with landscape, to represent the settlers' relationship to land without reference to Aboriginal connections to land is once again to 'forget' "a major feature of the Australian political landscape ... the continuing question of Aboriginal land rights. In other words, when landscape is the genre chosen to express identity, emplacement, or national belonging, then to ignore the central conflict over land and its meanings is to act in bad faith." <sup>1</sup>

Some academics discuss an incommensurability between the attitudes to land by European and Indigenous artists. Ian North and Charles Green in the *Meridian* catalogue (2003) discuss a move away from ideas of theft or appropriation of cultures toward ideas of 'entanglements' between cultures. They discuss the meeting of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views as a 'cultural interweaving'. Yet both writers express an uncertainty in just how these cultural exchanges may actually work.<sup>2</sup> I am not so much suggesting answers in this complex cultural area, as working through ideas for discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Best, 'You Are on Aboriginal Land: Landscape after Land Rights', in *Postcolonial + Art: Where Now*, Artspace, Sydney, 2001. Unpaginated essay. See also, introduction by Green.

<sup>2</sup> See articles 'Empire' by Charles Green and 'Revolution's Gift' by Ian North, in Rachel Kent, Russell Storer, and Vivienne Webb, eds, *Meridian: Focus on Contemporary Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2003.