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

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Photomedia
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“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.”  


“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?”  

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 bought 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
schoolboy rap-group received national press coverage, winning a Deadly Award in 2002 for their acclaimed song 'Down River'. While a discussion of these artworks is not part of the discussion of my paper, it is a context for my research.

Map of the Murray Darling Basin

In broad terms this paper is an investigation of different worldviews, different views of land and landscape by graziers, Aboriginal people, environmentalists and irrigators. These views carry with them different cultural understandings and different representations of the land - different and sometimes opposing views of its past and its future.

It seems in 2005 that, just as artists, historians, filmmakers, etc. are beginning to come to terms with Australian colonial history, as the El Nino seasons and the importance of ‘environmental flows’ in the Murray Darling Basin are increasingly understood, that technological changes and the global effects of population densities are creating other changes (greenhouse gasses, ozone
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.” ¹
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.\(^2\) I am not so much suggesting answers in this complex cultural area, as working through ideas for discussion.


Chapter 1
Red Ground - Black Ground

My visual work is a speculation on changes in the representation of a specific part of the Australian landscape over its relatively recent colonial history. I am interested in how we can begin to see the landscape in this relatively isolated area in a contemporary context, and of how our vision of land changes in turn our ways of interacting with it.

For this work I have photographed the red and grey country¹ of the Darling River near the town of Wilcannia in the west of New South Wales. The look of this land is vast, open and horizontal: it is that part of New South Wales where the dots on the map become sparser and the lines become longer and straighter the further west you travel.

Even though this country is vast and spacious, it is divided. Its surface is crossed by a network of fences, dividing the land into privately owned pastoral leases. Seen from above, fences, pipelines and the parallel lines of car tracks winding among the organic patterns of native vegetation make up the visual lexicon of the rangeland grazing industry.

The colonisation of Aboriginal tribal lands by the squatters and pastoralists occurred as recently as the mid nineteenth century in this area. Sheep and cattle, described by Tom Griffiths as ‘the shock troops of empire’² destroyed the pastures and tribal lives of the Bakindji people who had lived here for centuries. Today descendants of Aboriginal people are concentrated in the small towns, while non-Aboriginal people live on the pastoral properties surrounding them. This spatial and political reversal and the introduction of a European visual language to describe the land has, occurred here in little more than one hundred and fifty years.

At the heart of my enquiry is the question of how to make images that show the beauty of this landscape while also visually representing complex and difficult issues within the landscape’s European history: to represent the contested nature of a small part of the western division of New South Wales. I hope my images reflect these complexities in a way that adds to postcolonial debates within historical discourse and contemporary imagemaking. My project is part of a growing body of work by writers, filmmakers and artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are addressing issues of possession/dispossession, ‘white’ denial, history and landscape by creating images that look to both European-Australian visual traditions, and are increasingly alive to Aboriginal art and its visions of ‘country’. As an artist I am interested in the potential of changes in the language of art to increase our understanding of this country. Broadly speaking my project is to create a personal visual language that both engages with the
mutable practice of contemporary artmaking, and makes links with colonial history and contemporary landuse and environmental issues.

With this project I am working with connections between land and art, between land and art-about-land. At first I imagined these two areas as reasonably separate and that I was attempting to bring a politics of land to my artwork. Now I see they are more entangled. Land and art are part of a more encompassing colonial history, and in a colonial situation art about land already has a political dimension; colonial land is already contested and politicised. My artworks and this dissertation are speculations on the developing interface between art, land and colonisation in a specific area of Australia. What is occurring in this relatively isolated part of western New South Wales is similar to issues discussed by critical theorists Mark Dorrian and Gillian Rose in relation to postcolonial landscapes around the world. They write of an expanded field for landscape art practices across the social sciences, post structuralist and feminist approaches.\(^3\)

On a personal level, this land is ‘familiar’ territory to me as I was born in Wilcannia when my parents managed a sheep station eighty miles north, on the Darling River. In the early 1960’s we moved south of the town to our own property, which has its eastern boundary along the west side of the river. Although my father grew up in Sydney and my mother in fertile New Zealand, their five children grew up deeply attached to this landscape.

One of the things non-Indigenous Australians, especially those from country areas, share with Indigenous people is a deep attachment to the lands of our childhood. For non-Indigenous Australians however, this attachment is complicated by the understanding, not just of violent and racist events that occurred in Australian colonial history but that these events have until recently been universally repressed and unacknowledged by white society.\(^4\) Recent writings, including the ground-breaking work by Henry Reynolds and other historians including Tim Bonyhady, Tom Griffiths, Ann McGrath and Peter Read, have opened up this ‘blind spot’ in our history and serves as an important context for my research.

What I now understand is that during my childhood the social and economic environment in western New South Wales was a colonial one, with divisions in the community between wealth and poverty along racial lines. What I saw as a child in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s were disenfranchised Aboriginal people living on the fringes of towns, whereas as recently as the early twentieth century they were attached to their tribal lands on sheep stations, and in the 1850s and 1860’s were displaced by white men and their grazing animals arriving for the first time on the Darling. In just over one hundred and fifty years there has been a radical spatial
and political reversal in this western country, invaded by squatters, sheep and cattle years later than more eastern country.

In this written work I hope to reflect on these relatively recent changes to the use patterns and the look of this land. And in my photographs and the text/mud works I hope to reference these layers of history - the overlays of the linear marks of rangeland grazing with the more organic patterns of native vegetation. Unlike country further east which is divided into smaller paddocks, ploughed and sown with introduced grasses, the land out here, although it has been altered by rangeland grazing still retains the curved and organic shapes created by the contours of the land itself.

As a non-Indigenous artist I continue to see that this landscape resonates with Aboriginal lives. As a child I was aware of Aboriginal implements at specific sites, but recently I can see Aboriginal implements across this entire area. There are middens, fires, flints and canoe and shield trees all along the river, particularly where creeks and billabongs join the Darling. There are also flints, fires and large grinding dishes at the edges of flood plains, miles off the river in dry, flat, open, claypan country. It is only when you see these inhospitable spaces covered by floodwaters that you understand the seasonal logic of camping in these open spaces. Paul Carter describes how Aboriginal movements across country were “a form of social and political organisation ... expressed, not as a power over past and future ... but as a power over space ... The Aborigine (he says) did not travel for the sake of seeing new country, but in order to continue to inhabit his own.” 5

This project is also motivated by events in the early 1990's when for the first time we experienced the Darling River near Wilcannia as large stretches of dry river-bed. Until this time we considered ourselves as living on an ‘unregulated’ 6 and relatively isolated, section of the river which was the main source of water for the property. The experience of seeing the river in such a distressed state led to the realisation that it was part of a much larger complex of circumstances upstream. Economic structures, government policies and changing farming methods on the northern and eastern tributaries had altered this sparsely populated section of the river.

Since then water has become a major component of the legal and political life of the Darling River. Beginning in the late 1960s, various Government agencies allocated vast amounts of water to irrigate cotton in the north and center of New South Wales and around the town of Bourke.7 The fluctuations of the river are of no benefit to the irrigator who requires regular water on an annual basis, lots of it and at a low price. Cotton irrigators speak in ‘megs’ and ‘gigs’ 8 and the water entering the Darling from Queensland and central New South Wales is
being used over the summer growing season to irrigate cotton and other crops. Consequently, down river from Bourke, at Louth, Tilpa, Wilcannia & Menindee the river is often no longer a permanent stream but a series of stagnant green pools.

Historian Heather Goodall points out that recent battles over the control of water between the graziers and the technologically ordered irrigation industry are a repetition of an older history; the theft of Aboriginal lands by the sheep, cattle and firearms of the graziers. She discusses the potential for connections between the viewpoints of the Aborigines, the environmentalists and the graziers, as a way to see beyond the nineteenth century conflicts and the potential for creative links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people which focuses environmental issues.  

The water that flows past Wilcannia on any given day is now a mixture of water, pesticides, herbicides, fertilisers, town and industrial run-off that flows from a huge area of the Murray Darling Basin. The thesis of the irrigator is that any water that flows downstream, past the pumps, is water that is wasted. To the irrigator the river has stopped being a river system and has become a channel to irrigate a cash crop. These events of water extraction are part of a worldwide trend of industry and population pressures causing whole river systems in various countries to stop flowing to their oceans.

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1 The grey alluvial river country is referred to as the ‘black ground’ as opposed to the slightly higher ‘red’ sandy soils.
6 The Darling from Bourke to the dam wall at Menindee, called the ‘unregulated section’ is the only part of the Murray Darling Basin in NSW that is not controlled, dammed or channeled.
8 One Megalitre is one million litres, taking up a volume of ten metres cubed and often described as the volume of water in an Olympic sized swimming pool. One gigalitre is one thousand megalitres.
Chapter 2
The Lure of an Inland Sea

All three exploration parties to the Darling - Charles Sturt in 1830, Thomas Mitchell in 1835 and the Burke and Wills expedition in 1860 - travelled across nine hundred kilometres of country from Sydney or Melbourne with a boat in tow in case they encountered some version of the inland sea. Sturt was forced to turn back as the water in the Darling was too salty for men and animals to drink. Mitchell's men encountered shallow rocky stretches in a low river and were forced to abandon their two boats, while Burke left his specially built punt (with removable wheels) at Menindee, before disappearing forever into the interior.1

Charles Bayliss on the other hand, travelled from Sydney in 1886, as the photographer engaged by the Lyne Royal Commission to investigate the severe drought on the Darling country. Such was their incomprehension of the seasons that by the time the Commissioners arrived by train at Bourke, the river “was no longer the Darling, but the Nile, flooding the country for miles on either side.” 2 They travelled by paddle streamer on the flooded river, Bayliss capturing the first photographic records of the period.

Early settlers had similar difficulties with water that never seemed to be in the right place at the right time. Bonyhady describes how to the settlers it appeared to be either in wanton abundance or distressing scarcity. Towards the end of the 1888 drought 5 million sheep in NSW had died and in 1890 floodwaters swept across the country, drowning half a million more.3 It proved difficult to find a consistent vision for this land. The fluctuations and unpredictability of natural events, of floods and droughts in quick succession, were confusing for people acclimatised to temperate Northern Hemisphere seasons.

In this chapter, I sketch the background to and the effects of colonisation on the Aboriginal lands of the Darling. It is of necessity a brief overview centering on a number of images - the first attempts at European visions for this landscape. Using the theme of water or lack of it, I discuss images by Thomas Mitchell, Ludwig Becker, William Anderson Cawthorne and Reg Sharpless. I draw on historian Paul Carter’s ideas of spatial history and the impossibility of imagining that events and people from the past can be isolated from the flow of time, extracted from their history. As a way of conceiving of the connections between the past and present (and our future) he suggests, “it is not so much that the travellers and settlers belong to our past, but that we belong to their future.” 4 It is in this spirit, of looking at the present day as the future of past decisions, of past events and ways of seeing, that this chapter is conceived.
**Surveyor: Thomas Mitchell.**

Mitchell was the first European to travel from near where Bourke is today, following the Darling for five hundred kilometres to where Menindee now stands. This took him past the present site of Wilcannia where I am photographing and where he encountered the war-like Bakandji people. Mitchell’s use of the journal continued the practice established in Europe of using the sketchbook as a scientific component of exploration and colonisation – a visual collecting and mapping of foreign territories.

An articulate and lyrical writer, Mitchell was also an accomplished artist. He used a small optical device called a camera lucida - bringing a European Renaissance perspective and Imperialist cultural vision to this landscape. Mitchell’s text as well as his images provides the artistic material for investigation in this section.

Mitchell’s journal, perpetuating the ‘heroic’ figure of the explorer, gives the impression that he travelled almost alone, yet he was accompanied by an array of equipment including boat carriages, carts, European animals, food supplies and twenty-three men, including a blacksmith and his personal servant. Unlike the Aboriginal people they met, the Europeans required an imported infrastructure for their survival.
Mitchell’s journals indicate his absorption in the thrill of exploration. He writes, “the sense of gratification … is intense … and cannot be known to him, whose life is counted out in monotonous succession of hours of eating and sleeping within a house.” 7 He is well known for his insightful understanding of Aboriginal use of fire to generate grass, and attract kangaroos, 8 however, like the Europeans that followed he failed to recognise the spiritual dimensions of Aboriginal life.

Reading Mitchell’s accounts today there are obvious contradictions regarding his position in the landscape. On the one hand, he discusses his sense of intruding on the ‘original inhabitants’, of feeling a need to ask permission for invading their territories, yet at other times, especially when threatened, he is decisive in asserting what he perceives as the superiority of European culture, evidenced in his use of firearms. 9 As an artist it is interesting to peer into the gaps of these complexities as a way of imagining the colonisation process itself. He was instructed on the one hand, to assess the lands’ potential for grazing and on the other to maintain the integrity of the native inhabitants whose lands they were scrutinising, measuring and securing for the British crown. What explorers perceived as a reasonably blank slate was an already culturally delineated landscape. They were in effect blundering across complex living spaces with little way of comprehending what they were seeing. Mitchell was forced to retreat from near the present site of Menindee when violence erupted on the river, after one of Mitchell’s men reneged on a deal he had made with an Aboriginal woman.
In a published etching, *The River Darling* of 1835, taken from an original sketch by Mitchell it is possible to read an assumed cultural superiority toward the landscape and the Aboriginal people. In the published image, a version of the traditional pastoral scene, Mitchell adopts the convention of the wide view of the river. He shows three European men all armed with rifles, escorting a mob of sheep and cattle towards the water. Their gaze into the center of the image invites us, the viewer to also survey the scene as spectator, perhaps as potential occupier of the space. The river emerges from the distant vanishing point travelling past the feet of the Europeans, appearing to flow metaphorically into an abundant future. Aboriginal people on the far side of the riverbank are portrayed as dancing figures silhouetted by smoke and fires - recognisable tropes for a vision of hell. It is not difficult to imagine why this image was chosen for publication for a colonial audience in Britain and Australia, while other more poetic images remained unpublished. Mitchell's unpublished pencil sketch of a gum tree as it bends and twists towards the river suggests his empathy with natural elements in the landscape. The gestures of the sketch are delicate and lyrical, the branches stretching to the edges of the paper and enveloping the viewer. The tree as the sole motif of the drawing is described in and for itself rather than in relation to other structures or ideologies, unlike the published image.
Artist and Naturalist: Ludwig Becker.

Bobby Hardie in *West of the Darling*, discusses the fear the river Aborigines had of dying of thirst in the back country off the river. They explained to the Europeans the dangers of becoming marooned beside drying up water holes with an impassable stretch of waterless country between themselves and the river.\(^\text{11}\) Despite this, Europeans continued to imagine well-watered grasslands, and Hardy describes how many men returned physically and psychically exhausted after near death experiences in the western country.\(^\text{12}\)

![Ludwig Becker, *River Darling and the Mouth of Pamamaroo Creek*, 1860, watercolour, 13.8 x 22.7 cm](image)

In the 1860s the Burke and Wills expedition was the first to hire an artist to document the journey. Ludwig Becker was a German artist and naturalist who during his relatively short time with the exploration party, and despite often punishing conditions left a body of acutely observed water colours and detailed pencil sketches. While he had no difficulty creating lush and picturesque scenes of the Darling, he was challenged by his first encounter with the outback horizon. He described the flat land as, “very peculiar: the plain looks like a calm ocean with green water; the horizon appears to be much higher than the point the spectator stands on... during the dry season these plains are bare of grass and hard like bricks.”\(^\text{13}\)

After a sojourn on the Darling, Becker travelled during the heat of summer, in January 1861, with a party led by the bushman William Wright to bring supplies to the Cooper. The country, covered with water and native grasses when the main party set out was now so dry, that their horses nearly all perished on the first leg of the journey.
Ludwig Becker, *Camp on the Edge of the Earthy or Mud Plains 40 Miles from Duroadoo*, 1861, watercolour, 17.5 x 25.5 cm, collection State Library of Victoria

Ludwig Becker, *View from Mt Hope*, 1860, watercolour, 12.6 x 17.8 cm, collection State Library of Victoria
The party encountered increasing difficulties after they turned down the advice of two Aboriginal guides who left the party after explaining (they threw sand into the air to indicate the nature of the country) that to continue following Burke's tracks would lead to certain death. Bonyhady explains that Wright, fearing he may never find Burke if he abandoned his tracks, made a fateful decision to travel in the driest country and therefore without the guides. In the majority of paintings completed by Becker in this dry country he divides the images with the straight line of the horizon. Despite the unfamiliarity of the flat terrain, the lack of accepted devices for describing depth and the limited vertical features for composition, Becker succeeded in creating a body of exquisite images, regardless of or perhaps magnified by, the life threatening conditions west of the Darling. Becker made his last painting on the Bullo Creek, up towards Cooper Creek, just weeks before perishing from starvation, exhaustion, and scurvy on the 29th of April 1861.

It is difficult to read his images today except through the veil of the knowledge of his death. What are we then to make of these images? Are they a result of greed for land and the foolish insistence on finding well-watered pastures in this dry expanse? Or are they to be seen as an early example of the ‘tragic heroic’, the battle of the European against the ‘demonic’ Australian landscape?

It is more interesting to find embedded in Becker’s images a way to think about the different cultural understandings of Aboriginal and European people towards the land. Bonyhady shows how the explorers travelling on the inland creeks were dying, while the Aboriginal people on the same creeks were mobile and well fed. The focus of recent writing has been on Europeans deficient understanding of the landscape. Whilst this is largely the case, a more creative investigation would be to focus on the complexity and depth of knowledge of Aboriginal people in relation to their survival in the country. What are and were their understandings and how could they help us all to comprehend this land today?

**Self-taught artist and archivist: W. A. Cawthorne**

There has been a renewed historical interest from South Australian academics including historians Robert Foster and Amanda Nettlebeck in the series of events generally referred to as the Rufus River Massacres (which occurred near the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers). This event was imaged by only a small number of artists, who not being present during the event, created their works from secondary sources. I am researching the watercolours created by William Anderson Cawthorne a largely self-taught artist who developed a close relationship with the Aboriginal tribes on the Torrens River in Adelaide, near to where he lived. There is not so much a discrepancy with the historical facts represented in the images of the massacres on the Rufus, but with the interpretation of those events. It is generally agreed that violence
broke out in 1841 between the Maraura tribes and groups of overlanders droving large herds of cattle and sheep from the Murrumbidgee, through densely settled Aboriginal territories on the rivers, across to the new city of Adelaide.

The findings of the government inquiry into the shooting of Aboriginal people exonerated Europeans from responsibility for Aboriginal deaths, defending the conduct of the overlanders and police parties as “justifiable, indeed unavoidable in the circumstances.” In this way the nineteenth century official historical record produced an image of South Australia based on peaceful ‘settlement’ and largely driven by ideals of European expansion and progress. This minimised Aboriginal agency and generally silenced Aboriginal perspectives.

Using a contrapuntal reading of historical records and documents, Foster and Nettlebeck have looked again at these events to reveal a determined body of Aboriginal people intent on defending their lands. Their findings reveal the area around the Murray Darling junction as a major food and cultural centre, with trade and ceremonial links extending into surrounding areas. This is corroborated by Charles Sturt whose journals of 1844 describe densely populated village-like settlements along the Rufus River.

As a non-Indigenous person investigating this violent European/Indigenous history I feel it is appropriate to acknowledge that this is complicated intellectual and emotional territory. One becomes aware of cultural prejudices occurring at a subliminal level. This manifests as a tendency to relate to aspects of ‘progress’ and the forward, gestural inclination of narrative, despite being critical of these constructions. Nettlebeck with reference to Paul Carter’s critique of narrative history, discusses “the self-conscious metaphor of history as a stage, on which the colonial actor ‘blazes a trail’ towards a future of progress and success, was a common feature of retrospective assessments of the colonial years.” An awareness of these mental shifts is increasingly of interest to my research and artistic practice.

* A Fight on the Murray in the Scene Painting Style of 1844, by William A. Cawthorne is one of a small number of images produced in relation to these events. Unlike the images by Mitchell and Becker, who were commissioned by government authorities, Cawthorne’s image was produced as part of his own considerable body of personal research.

This image is of interest to my project because of the different ways that it relates to the European ‘settlement’ of the lands of the Central Darling. Firstly, this image and the events surrounding it are conceptually linked to my interest in the portrayal of conflict in the present day landscape of the Darling. The conflict on the Rufus, and the spatial alterations that resulted; the obliteration of Aboriginal people from the landscape, yet the abundance of tools,
campsites and implements across the entire space reflects similar spatial arrangements in the central Darling. The generally held view is that there were never ‘many’ Aboriginal people on the Darling. The documented intensity of conflict on the Rufus, the reports of 200 to 500 warriors confronting the overlanders and police, indicate people determined to defend their lands from intruders and presents an image counter to the colonial concepts of terra nullius.

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

The events on the Rufus are also directly relevant because the first squatters on the central Darling came not from Sydney, but from Adelaide, via the Murray/Darling junction. It is often pointed out that without links to coastal cities (for markets and supplies) it was difficult for Europeans to survive in the landscape, however Aboriginal resistance and defense of land also created a substantial deterrent to the spread of pastoralism. To emphasise Aboriginal resistance is to acknowledge aspects of conflict in the landscape and Aboriginal dependence on country. It was only after the further destruction of Aboriginal society, the dividing of the lands at the junction into pastoral leases, that white people began in the mid 1850’s to move up the Darling from the Murray.

Taken on face value Cawthorne’s image has a naive and somewhat tentative style, which sits uneasily with the violence depicted. The image shows a tightly massed group of Aboriginal people who appear to be trapped on a low riverbank between two armed and mounted European parties. The horsemen shoot directly at the Aboriginal people from close range. The scene has an abject quality, not unlike depictions of firing squads. The Cawthorne image indicates that it took the combined actions of police, government forces, squatters and
overlanders to defeat the Maraura. The Protector of Aboriginal people was also present during the scene depicted, as I will discuss directly.

Cawthorne was known as a bookish young man with a disdain for colonial society. He and his mother arrived in Adelaide in 1841, and opened a school where they both taught.\textsuperscript{23} From the age of 17, in 1842 he kept a diary. His entry of 23 November 1842 reveals his preference for solitude and reading rather than “spending an hour or so to frivolous amusements and unedifying conversations.”\textsuperscript{24} Cawthorne has left a comprehensive body of images including accounts of legends, customs and the language of the Aboriginal tribes near his home on the Torrens. He was instructed in the local Aboriginal language by his friend ‘Captain Jack’ and Cawthorne’s empathy is further suggested by his decision to name his son, Charles Witto-Witto Cawthorne.\textsuperscript{25}

There is evidence in Cawthorne’s diaries of his friendship with Matthew Moorehouse the Protector of Aborigines who was present at the shootings, and that he had access to Moorehouse’s diaries of the events on the Rufus. Because of his close contact with Aboriginal tribes, historians suggest that Cawthorne’s image is influenced by first hand accounts from Aboriginal survivors at the Rufus.\textsuperscript{26}

Nettlebeck compares Cawthorne’s image to one by S. T. Gill. She maintains that Gill’s image which dramatises the heroics of the overlanders, showing the Europeans surrounded by Aboriginal warriors - is supportive of the enquiry which exonerated the Europeans.\textsuperscript{27} Cawthorne’s image by contrast, while it depicts violence, has none of the strident gestures often associated with violent subjects. His image is unusual for its time, in documenting the banal horror of the killing of Aboriginal people by Europeans.

\textit{Amateur photographer: Reg Sharpless}

Squatters first arrived on the central Darling in the 1850’s in small numbers herding sheep and cattle on unfenced ‘runs’ along the river. It was only when the first paddle steamers created a supply line to markets from the Murray River to Bourke, that the river frontages around what is now Wilcannia, were occupied with a sense of permanency. The economy flourished and sheep numbers increased dramatically.\textsuperscript{28} By the turn of the new century however, only forty to fifty years after the arrival of the first sheep, a combination of lack of rain, massive overstocking and the spread of rabbits across the state caused the first man-made and devastating drought. Bobbie Hardie, described how “the land around the waters, already overstocked with sheep, now had to support an enormous rabbit population as well...when the grass was gone the rabbits bore down on the edible shrubs, ruining the salt bush and ringbarking the young mulga

... lacking sufficient quality fodder the pastoralists lopped more and more of the young trees to feed their starving sheep and the desolation spread and deepened." ²⁹

Two images of wool transportation, one a painting by George Lambert, the other a photograph by jackaroo and amateur photographer Reg Sharpless, reflect different portrayals of man’s combatative relationship to the landscape at this time. Both images show woolbales being hauled by teams of horses across the grey alluvial plains and both images use the flat horizon to contrast the angles of the variously tilting loads - the degrees of tilt giving some indication of the levels of adversity between man and the ‘unpredictable’ climate. Lambert, a Russian immigrant was influenced by time spent at the small town of Nevertire on the Bogan River for his painting *Across the Black Soil Plains* of 1899. The efforts of the pastoralists are signified by the power and sweat of thirteen heavy horses as they throw their weight into the harness, dragging the precariously tilting load across the extended canvas. The majesty of the single, white lead horse against the grey sky renders the muddy and somewhat undignified journey to market, as a difficult yet heroic labour.

In the Sharpless photograph on the other hand, there is a sense of resigned defeat. The horses have been unharnessed. The drays are stranded in the sticky alluvial mud. All aspects
of the composition, the leaning men, the tilting loads, radiate out from the watery puddle in the centre of the image.

Both images have a dog as an integral part of the composition. In Lambert’s painting, it is the eagerness of the small, silhouetted dog that appears to drive the composition forward. The dog in the foreground of the Sharpless photograph glances back into the image, appearing to reflect on the comedy of errors, the desperation of human toil in front of him.

Other photographic images in a reportage style, taken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show various dramatic effects of both drought and flood on the land: dust storms filling the skies; men with rifles parading the limp bodies of thousands of dead rabbits; mulga and acacia trees, their roots exposed by soil erosion; paddlesteamers run aground on the dried up Darling River; and the inundation of the town of Bourke by floodwaters. These images reflect visions of the land as an ongoing site of conflict for white Australians. For the explorers, overlanders, squatters and the South Australian government, the Aboriginal tribes were the focus of this hostility while in the twentieth century the focus shifted to a battleground of man and machinery against what was seen as a harsh, erratic and unforgiving natural world. It is only since the 1960's that floods on the Darling have been seen as playing a positive role in the pastoral industry. Heather Goodall and Tom Griffiths both write of the understanding between contemporary graziers, Aboriginal people and the unpredictable cycles of the floods.  

In the present day, on occasions when floodwaters from central New South Wales and southern Queensland converge down the Cuttaburra and the Paroo Channels to the Darling, it does appear as if Sturt’s vision of the inland sea has come to life. Water covers the land for miles as far as the eye can see! Bonyhady writes about nineteenth century ‘water conservationists’ who were confounded by seeing these fluctuations; enormous sheets of water covering the land for one season, followed by dry, cracked earth the following summer. Their belief that “nature was imperfect and ripe for improvement” led to calls for locks and weirs across the Darling.  

The present day irrigators also see the flow of water to the ocean as a wastage by nature, rather than the fluctuations and cycles of a living river system. The massive over allocations of water from the Darling to the irrigation industry, their desire for abundant, regular and permanent water in this dry land, could be seen as a more recent manifestation of the explorer’s misguided belief in the existence of an ‘inland sea’.


5 The length of river travelled by Mitchell is today referred to as the ‘unregulated’ section of the Darling Basin. It is the only part of the basin that is not dammed, channeled and otherwise controlled by man.


7 Ibid, p. 19.

8 See Frank Welsh, *Great Southern Land: A New History of Australia* Penguin Books, London, 2004, p. 18. Welsh quotes Mitchell who writes, “Fire, grass and kangaroos, and human inhabitants, seem all dependant on each other for existence in Australia: Fire is necessary to burn the grass, and form those open forests, in which we find the large forest kangaroo; the native applies that fire to the grass at certain seasons, in order that a young green crop may subsequently spring up, and so attract and enable him to kill or take the kangaroo with nets…but for this simple process, the Australian wood had probably contained as thick a jungle as those of New Zealand or America, instead of the open forests in which the white men now find grass for their cattle, to the exclusion of the kangaroo.”

9 Mitchell, *Three Expeditions*. Mitchell discusses both these aspects at various times in his trip along the Darling in 1853.

10 Mitchell journals indicate that especially when approaching the river he required his men to carry firearms, as they feared attack from the Aboriginal tribes.


12 Ibid. p.83. Hardie describes how Caddell exploring the country west of the Darling Annab ranch took an Aboriginal guide with him to find pastures. When the Aboriginal man protested at the dryness of the country they were crossing, Hardie describes how Caddell chained him to the saddle dragging him along. “It was terrible country they came to – when the food and water gave out they killed one of the horses and drank its blood. At the end of a week they staggered in to the Murray, eighty miles below the destination Caddell had in mind.”


19 Recent research by Archaeologist Colin Pardoe’s reveals the determination of the Aborigines to defend this particular territory. He describes this area around the Murray Darling junction as “the Aboriginal equivalent of Sydney - the heart and hub of the pre-European continent, linking trade and cultural routes from all points.” (quoted in Fatal Collisions p 29) Large number of Aboriginal warriors (reports of 200 to 500 people) armed with spears and waddies defended their territories from the overlanders.


22 I would like to thank Margo Neale for alerting me to the culturally biased caption at the Mitchell Library describing this image, and the need to examine the language used to describe historical events.

23 Ian Brice, ‘Reluctant Schoolmaster in a Volantarist Colony’, p. 81.

24 Ibid, p. 84.
27 Foster, Hosking, and Nettelbeck, Fatal Collisions: The South Australian Frontier and the Violence of Memory, p. 40.
29 Hardy, West of the Darling, p. 190.
Chapter 3
Working in Translation: Language, Landscape, Art

In this chapter, I discuss the ideas of three people working with concepts of Australian identity, language and landscape in a contemporary, postcolonial context. Their ideas, though not directly connected with art practice, have direct relevance to art’s exploration of the Australian landscape.

Jay Arthur is a lexical cartographer who creates ‘word maps’, using the language of ‘settler’ Australians through the twentieth century. In The Default Country, Arthur has assembled collections of ‘word maps’ that show the intersecting and often conflicting (linguistic) views towards the natural Australian environment over time. She describes her book as “a study of ‘Australia’ or more accurately, the several sometimes mutually inconsistent Australia’s, found in the language of its non-indigenous inhabitants.”

Like my research, her linguistic work has obvious similarities with the work of many Australian artists who are finding ways of expanding existing visual models of the Australian landscape. Arthur is describing a coming-into-being of this land, a vision created as we continue to ‘explore’ its various characteristics.

Arthur’s thesis is to describe the English language imported from Britain as ‘a second language’ for the Australian continent. She describes how the English language itself creates a comparison with the green and verdant rolling hills of the English countryside. As Australia does not fit this image, our language contains within it a continual reminder of the difference of the Australian terrain. Arthur theorises this as a ‘default image’ - a land with flowing streams and four distinct seasons - existing within the language spoken in Australia. In this way, Arthur theorises Australians as ‘working in translation’ in their efforts to describe the landscape of this country with the English language. This creates a ‘double vision’ within settler Australians views of this country.

In The Default Country, Arthur traces changes in the English language over the last century which have created the nuances of Australian English in response to the specificity of this place. For instance the rivers of Australia do not behave as permanently flowing English streams; and extra words have been added such as ‘intermittent’, ‘dry’, ‘a chain of waterholes’, etc. Similarly, the land requires words such as ‘flat’, ‘desolate’, ‘outback’, as the English language assumes a green-ness and wetness.
Arthur outlines a number of lexicons containing words that describe non-Indigenous relations to the indigenous flora and fauna of this country as one would describe a ‘war’. We believe ourselves to be ‘in battle’ with the dingo, struggling against native trees by ‘burning off’, ‘bashing’, ‘slashing’ and ‘logging’. Our language positions us in a continual vigilance against what is seen as the ‘erratic and irrational’ nature of ‘drought’, ‘flood’ and ‘bush fires’. This antagonistic language Arthur maintains, is however continuing to change, and in the later chapters of her book she groups together words which indicate a sense of loss in relation to indigenous worlds, such as the ‘extinction’ of native species and the ‘loss’ and ‘rarity’ of native habitats. In relation to my research the positive interest in the Paroo as the last ‘wild’ river and the Darling as the only ‘unregulated’ section of river in NSW indicates a shift in attitude in this country. Arthur discusses a recent lexicon which recognises the negative environmental consequences of colonisation with a renewed interest in the natural elements and the knowledge of Aboriginal people in relation to this landscape.

Arthur writes of her personal identity as a ‘settler’, relating to her family connections with English culture and language. Later, her understanding of ‘the settler’ is increasingly layered and complicated, when she becomes aware of the experiences of Aboriginal people in Northern Australia as colonised and displaced people in their own country. She explains that the “experience, from my involvement in indigenous studies, produced a sense of living in someone else’s country which was profoundly ‘unsettling’.” Through her work in the Northern Territory Arthur becomes aware of a colonised landscape, one that has much in common with my own visual investigations. She explains,

Beneath this lexicographical interest lies the knowledge, like a splinter in the skin one can never quite forget, of being part of an occupying culture. When I view Australia from the air, I find that I am always looking at two landscapes: the indigenous and the ‘settled’. I observe marks of watercourses, the extent of woodlands, fencelines, roads, stock tracks leading to a watering point...each landscape contained other stories, other ways of looking at land ... The knowledge of another understanding of place puts the constructed nature of the occupiers’ understanding of Australia for me into clearer focus.4

This ‘unsettling’ experience described by Arthur, and her understanding of Australia as the home of dispossessed Aboriginal people, connects with concepts discussed by Ken Gelder and Mary Jane Jacobs in Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation.

Gelder and Jacobs discuss Aboriginal sacredness as having a momentous effect on high powered and political decisions in Australia. They describe the friction and power reversals
occurring when ‘secret’ and spiritual connections to land are enunciated by Aboriginal people in the contemporary political arena. Their study examines how Aboriginal spiritual ideas and concepts of land, when thrown into the rational, scientific, linear spaces of contemporary politics are causing mayhem and consternation.

Gelder and Jacobs investigate Sigmund Freud’s concept of the Uncanny to describe the contradictions created by the Aboriginal sacred. Freud used the German words heimlich (meaning homely, the familiar, the accessible) and unheimlich (the unfamiliar, strange and inaccessible) to render his concept of the Uncanny. Gelder and Jacobs link this concept to recent non-Indigenous experiences where Aboriginal lives and links to land are suddenly seen to exist (or to reemerge from the landscape as described by Arthur and others), and settler Australians find themselves living in a familiar ‘home’, at the moment it is also revealed to have another ‘unfamiliar’ history previously hidden from view. At this moment, the familiar and the unfamiliar exist simultaneously; one place appears as two places with two parallel and seemingly irreconcilable histories. There are obvious parallels between Jay Arthur’s use of the double vision caused by the linguistic ‘default’ within the Australian language and Gelder and Jacobs’ use of Freud’s ‘Uncanny’ to comprehend the effects of the Aboriginal sacred.

One of the aims of postcolonial studies is to reconcile the conflicts, inequalities and psychological contradictions embedded in colonised landscapes. Gelder and Jacobs speak of the purpose of their research as being to, “contemplate the possibility of producing a postcolonial narrative which, rather than falling into a binary that either distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’ or brings us all together as the same, would instead think through the uncanny implications of being in place and ‘out of place’ at precisely the same time.” Throughout their book they discuss the mechanism whereby the fluidity of the uncanny causes unexpected shifts in power relations which they describe as the “redistributive powers of postcoloniality” in contemporary Australian life and politics.

There are comparisons between Arthur’s study of the changes in Australian English as it finds ways to describe the Indigenous landscape and seasons, and the struggles by non-Indigenous artists to depict the Australian landscape using artistic tools from a European tradition. The European rendering of the landscape has worked over the years to structure the landscape as ‘familiar’ for non-Indigenous lives. During this search for an Australian art language there has been a disinterest, referred to in 1980 by Bernard Smith as “a white blanket of forgetfulness” by most non-Indigenous artists in the portrayal of Aboriginal people, as well as an incomprehension of Aboriginal people as contemporary artists. The continued opposition in a contemporary context, between the traditional and contemporary can be seen as a colonialist positioning of Aboriginality as the primitive ‘other’.
In a general sense, there is a familiarity throughout modern and postmodern art practice with ideas of the double vision, the uncanny and making strange. These ideas are integral to the modernist tradition, as discussed variously by Norman Bryson, Robert Hughes and others. The rise of Aboriginal depictions of country in the last thirty years, in the national and the international arenas, has challenged images of peaceful 'settlement' popularised by artists such as Streeton, McCubbin and Lambert. Central Desert Aboriginal paintings speak of spiritual and cultural connections to land not experienced by non-Indigenous Australians.

There are important moral and ethical issues, of unequal power relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people resulting from colonialist relationships and theft of land and culture. As a non-Indigenous artist interested in imaging the Australian landscape, and speaking from a position of privilege within it, how does one acknowledge the inequalities still existing in this landscape? Is there a way to work with these social, political and artistic inequalities to reveal the contradictions within a colonialist landscape?

Some theorists propose an incommensurabilty between Aboriginal art and art of the west, while still others suggest various appropriations over a number of years, citing for instance the paintings of Albert Namatjira, Fred Williams, Margaret Preston and Arthur Boyd to name just a few. The concept of an ongoing dialogue is suggested by Andrew Sayer in his book *Australia Art* which while it aims to be an inclusive history, has difficulty linking “the art of Australia’s Indigenous peoples and the art of the people who have lived in Australia since its colonisation by Britain in 1788.” 10 He writes however, that to encompass both traditions “is not easy”. His solution is to maintain two narrative strands justifying “that there is a duality in the art of Australia” which he rather clumsily describes as “multifaceted rather that a singular reading of separate but shared and (partly) coterminous histories.” 11

It could be argued that the Aboriginal sacred does inject something into Australian postcolonial life and art that western art is unable to accommodate - forces that cause radical shifts in power relationships as discussed by Gelder and Jacobs. Throughout their book they discuss the “activating function”12 of the Aboriginal sacred, of how in a postcolonial situation “even when something is being talked down, it is always at the same time activated and given new potential.”13 In an art context, there is the possibility to see the challenges of Aboriginal art as creating new and unexpected relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ideas and artworks, including the power reversals discussed by Gelder and Jacobs, and the emergence of something beyond the boundaries of what we may have imagined for the future.
In the next chapter I will use the concepts of the ‘double vision’ put forward by Arthur and Gelder and Jacobs to look at the relatively recent visibility of Aboriginal art in Australia. I will look at how Aboriginal views of the landscape and of colonial history are challenging and influencing non-Aboriginal depictions of the landscape. I am interested in how these changes are affecting the artmaking practices of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, in how both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists are working with the Australian landscape in a postcolonial context.

2 The area of the Darling from Bourke to Menindee (the section travelled by Mitchell) is the only section of the Murray Darling Basin not controlled by dams, weirs and other regulatory systems.
7 Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, p. 139.
8 Ibid. p.143.
11 Ibid. p.1.
12 Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* p.xvi.
13 Ibid. p. 143.
Chapter 4
The Double Vision of the Australian Landscape

In this chapter I look at a number of contemporary artists who engage with ideas of a ‘double vision’ of the landscape and the ‘uncanny’ as outlined above. Many of these artists are visually interrogating Australian colonial archives and histories. I look at a number of artists whose work has been influential on my own thinking and practice.

A number of Aboriginal artists discuss the ‘double vision’, the ‘unsettling’ aspects of the colonial frontier, as a lived reality - rather than a learned phenomenon. It is Aboriginal art’s influence, the ways it has revealed the politics and social realities of Australia’s history, that can be ‘unsettling’ and ‘uncanny’ for non-Indigenous artists and viewers alike. In this chapter I look at some of the ways Aboriginal art is expanding the parameters of Australia’s history. There is a lot going on in this fascinating area of research.

For instance, Ian McLean investigates the controversial term ‘white Aborigine’ to discuss ways that non-Indigenous Australians have identified with aspects of Aboriginal culture. In so doing he “tell(s) a story of the invention of Australian subjectivity.” He discusses how at the centre of the concept of the ‘self’ is an unconscious repression of the concept of the ‘other’. The term ‘white aborigine’ was first used in a contemporary context by Paul Taylor, discussing the Popism exhibition in 1983. Taylor attempted to expand the position of Australian art beyond the limitations of being the ‘other’ to art centres of Europe and the USA. In doing so he unwittingly reproduced these same power relations, appropriating the tropes of Aboriginality in an attempt to create an identity for the (non-Aboriginal) artists in the Popism show. I will discuss this further in relation to Gordon Bennett’s work.

The work by the following artists can be seen in the context of a number of curated exhibitions including; Paraculture (Sydney 1990), Seven Histories (Melbourne 1995), Spirit and Place (Sydney 1996), The Adelaide Biennale (2000), Native Title Business (2002-2005) and Meridian (Sydney 2003) which have addressed Australian colonialist history, Indigenous and non-Indigenous reconciliation, and issues of national identity.

Ian North, writing in the Meridian catalogue (2004) discusses the recent visibility of Aboriginal art as a revolution in Australian contemporary art practice, effecting a paradigm shift in cultural relations across Australia. He sites the widespread “opening of the non-Indigenous mind to Aboriginal culture” and writes that all relevant art, is now “after’ Aboriginal arts’ ‘rise to consciousness,” in the Australian art community. With its concerns for “the spatial and
topographical” Aboriginal art “is helping to animate and remap not only Australian but International art history and culture.”

Fiona Foley
Fiona Foley is an Aboriginal artist who grew up in the Hervey Bay area near Fraser Island (known to the Aboriginal people as Thoorgine). She is a descendant on her mothers side of the Wondunna clan of the Badtjala tribe or language group. As an artist who engages with history, ideas and memory, Foley's practice works at the centre of the ‘double vision’ of Australian art and history. She has researched a multitude of archives to both reclaim her lost heritage and to critique the ideologies of colonisation. Foley speaks about the colonised vision of Australia that she and other Aboriginal people continue to live with. “From when we are children most of us have had our traditional culture taken away from us. We're forced to live by two laws which oppose one another. We are forced to adapt – we have to go to western schools, and have to learn about history, which usually begins in 1788.” Her diptych Your Heroes are not our Heroes... is a striking example of her position in relation to Australian culture. It announces the split at the ideological centre of constructions of Australian identity.

There are a number of different components to Foley's practice. She uses the soft textures of pastel and paint and the flattened colours of sand and sea to make images of her cultural land on Thoorgine. In her sculpture and installation works, which deal in a more confrontational way with history and memory, Foley has found a powerful voice by introducing a range of Aboriginally significant, materials to the space of the gallery. In yet other works, Foley has
developed a series of self-portraits as result of searching anthropological archives. She discovered visual similarities between the breasts of Aboriginal women and her own breasts and she realised in a very potent way that she could be looking at her ancestors. In the resulting work she creatively contributes to and alters this archive. I concentrate here on two of Foley’s works.

In *Land Deal* at the National Gallery of Australia in 1995, Foley has assembled objects that John Batman exchanged for a vast tract of land belonging to the Wurendjeri people. On the walls of the gallery are paraded the axes, trinkets, the grey blankets and the mirrors, for the contemporary viewer’s contemplation. In the centre of the installation is a floor piece, a swirling circular design which references the sand paintings of traditional Aboriginal ceremonies as well as perhaps the floor patterns of European cathedrals and plazas. Made from white flour on an ochre ground the work has a decorative seduction at the same time as being a potent reminder of the practice of mixing poison with flour to kill dispossessed and often starving Aboriginal people. In the gallery this history is reflected for the contemporary viewer, whose gaze is captured in the mirrors placed at eye level between the knives and the scissors. In a potent mirroring of history these objects are ‘given’ once more – this time to the viewer for a contemplation of the history of Aboriginal dispossession.

In *Fuck me harder, Black Velvet II*, and *On the blanket* shown collectively at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2002 as part of the Meridian exhibition, Foley is visually recalling the
sexual violence of frontier colonisation - the rape, murder and sexually transmitted diseases inflicted by white men on black women. For Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences this is tough work, evoking extremely bleak aspects of Australian history. Again Foley uses a combination of wall and floor pieces. The central floor work is visually seductive and there is again a double edge to the work. The black vagina, large enough to encase the body is not simply a passive recipient of history. These chilies continue to inflict pain, perhaps the pain of desire but also the burning and destruction of ‘white’ representations of history, into the site of the museum.

In these works, shown at the National Gallery of Australia and the MCA, Foley is displaying the destructive ‘exchanges’ of the colonialist regime - the theft of Aboriginal land and the black female body as a site of colonialist violence. In the culturally structured space of the gallery the artist mirrors the violence of Australia’s history, enabling the viewer to reflect on the horrors of a colonialist regime. Yet this time, there is an opportunity to experience and learn from these artworks.

Gordon Bennett

Gordon Bennett’s artwork is driven by a personal crisis of identity bought about by the realisation as a young teenager, of his Aboriginal heritage on his mother’s side. As an orphan from the Cherbourg reserve 240 kilometres northwest of Brisbane she had survived in her adult life by hiding her Aboriginality. Bennett described the implosion of his sense of self after years of internalising racist ideologies and enduring the racism of his workmates toward Aboriginal people. He reacted to this crisis with “silence, self-loathing and denial of my heritage.” He became aware that, “My self worth ... my sense of ‘Australianness’ ... had as its foundation the narratives of colonialism. I had never thought to questions those narratives ... Neither had I thought to question the representations of Aborigines as the quintessential ‘primitive Other’ against which the ‘civilised’ collective ‘Self’ of my peers was measured.”

Since graduating in 1988 Bennett has developed an art practice using deconstructive and appropriative strategies to critique colonial history and Enlightenment philosophies. Bennett works within a western representational framework, manifesting the split in his self-identity (and the identity of the Australian nation) by using a divided canvas and inserting text and diagrammatic structures into archival images. He utilises the archives of Australian colonial history and modernist painting, as sites from which to re-articulate an Aboriginal history and subjectivity.

In relation to my imagery of the landscape of the Darling River, I am specifically interested in Bennett’s paintings that unravel ideologies of colonisation, exploration and ‘settlement’. (The
Plough, Landscape Painting, Explorer (The Inland Sea), Aboriginal Generative and Terra Nullius (as far as the eye can see). It was Bennett’s image of The Plough (1988) that led me to further question the position of the pastoral industry in the Australian landscape, to understand that the process of colonisation proceeded in tandem with the destruction of Aboriginal cultures throughout Australia. In the woodcut image Explorer (The Inland Sea) (1993) the futility of the search for a permanent inland ocean is captured in the drowning man’s look of horror; or is it a look of incomprehension as he attempts to juggle a series of concentric circles, the symbol of the Aboriginal campfire, in his fingers? Bennett appears to be saying that the explorer is burning as he drowns in a sea of his own territorialising imagination.

Bennett has paid particular attention over his career, to diagrams of single point perspective, revealing the positioning of the Aboriginal ‘other’ at the ‘vanishing point’ of Western Enlightenment philosophies. Bennett’s representation of this ontological dilemma is seen in the etchings Aboriginal Generative (1993) and Terra Nullius (as far as the eye can see) (1993). In Aboriginal Generative he uses the motif of Aboriginal figures fleeing the modernist perspectival grid. Hand written text from Ian McLean’s White Aborigines: Cultural Imperatives of Australian Colonialism have replaced Bennett’s dots as the textured ground in this etching. The squatter
ironically adopts the pose of Aboriginal men seen in representations of corrobories by many artists including Cawthorne, Mitchell and others. (Three tiny figures in Mitchell’s *The River Darling* (1835) can be seen in this iconic pose). *In Terra Nullius (as far as the eye can see)* Bennett shows an axe-wielding forester who has, with the collusion of single point perspective, gridded the land, felling trees and killing Aboriginal men across the entire vista.

As a background it is useful to briefly review some of the theoretical dialogue prior to Bennett. He began his professional career at a time when Aboriginal art was beginning to be discussed in a positive way by some writers and theorists. Others however appeared to be recreating a politics of separation and dismissal. In a controversial 1982 article, *Locality Fails*, Imants Tillers began by outlining the resurgence of regional aspects of Australian art including Aboriginality. He then went on to argue that any development of ‘local content’ is rendered futile, citing developments in quantum physics to make his point. His inference is that Aboriginal art, which he envisages in a fixed anthropological framework is unable to interact with the world of contemporary science or art. Tillers followed this article by appropriating motifs from a painting by Aboriginal artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra into his own painting *The Nine Shots*, (1985).

Before I discuss Bennett’s ‘reply’ to Tillers, *The Nine Ricochet’s (Fall Down Black Fella, Jump up White Fella)* I would like to focus on Bennett’s use of dots, as a way to further discuss the cultural complexities at the centre of his art practice. Although Bennett has consciously utilised Aboriginal dots of Western Desert art, his dots are also linked to the dots of colour reproduction, connecting Bennett’s work to the ideas of mechanical reproduction espoused by the theorist Walter Benjamin. Bennett discusses his obvious pleasure in the process of blowing up, with the aid of the photocopy machine, the textbook images from Australian history. In the process of enlargement, he recognised the possibilities of getting into the ‘grain’ of the original images. Bennett recognised in the distorted spaces of reproduction, a place where he could insert the signifiers of Australian Aboriginality. Bennett had created a unique way to connect representations of the colonised and the coloniser in the one image and to complicate, critique and invert colonialist ideologies.

When Bennett inserted Tillers’ image of the Pataphysical man into the site of a massacre of Aboriginal people, in *The Nine Ricochet’s (Fall down blackfella, jump up whitefella)* (1990) his use of dots announced the Aboriginal authorship of the image. Further, in his cropping of the original image Bennett accentuates the axe, hovering over the slain bodies of two Aboriginal men. This axe at the edge of the painting is linked via the diagonal line of the squatter’s rifle, to the image of Tillers’ Pataphysical man such that the point of the rifle is embedded in the center of Tillers painting. There have been numerous articles written about the controversy.
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
between Bennett and Tillers, subsequent to Bennett’s image *The Nine Richochet’s* winning the Moet and Chandon Prize in 1991. Anne Marsh discusses Bennett’s work in an article titled *A Menace in Australian History.*\(^{12}\) The title is a reference to the writings of Homi Bhabha who theorises Indigenous artists as a ‘mimic men’ with the ability to challenge colonial authority from a position of being ‘a menace within’ the colonial culture. Both Marsh and Rex Butler discuss Bennett’s ongoing career in terms of an artistic vision which opens up possibilities for appropriation, counter appropriation - extending the parameters of Aboriginal art. Butler recognises in Bennett’s art project an expansive concept for Aboriginal art beyond “particular set(s) of qualities or locations” defined by ‘white’ historians and theorists.\(^{13}\) It could be suggested that the power of Bennett’s art (working from within the divided colonialist structures of contemporary Australian art and history) relates to the experience of the ‘uncanny’ and the ‘activating function’ of the Aboriginal sacred, as discussed by Gelder and Jacobs and referred to in chapter three of this paper.

**Linda Sproul**

Linda Sproul is an artist who started her photographic and performance based *White Woman Project* in 1995.\(^{14}\) Like Foley and Bennett, Sproul investigates the visual archive, intervening in codes of painting and photography.\(^{15}\) Her project is complex, controversial and challenging, raising issues of class, race, gender and national identity. She uses her own body in both photographic and performance works.

Her project is relevant to my discussion of ‘double vision’, as Sproul is attempting to point out the dual position of the white woman in the colonialist project. Sproul specifically interrogates the white woman’s cultural position as subservient to the dominant male culture yet having symbolic power over both male and female Aboriginal ‘other’.

Sproul combines the figure of the white woman with her interest in mourning – the attire, the gloves, the gestures of sorrow acted out by the figure of the colonial woman. It is unclear from the writing on Sproul’s performance works however, just why the woman is depicted in mourning. Are the mini-deaths, “all the little deaths you have every day, ego deaths,”\(^{16}\) an indication of the impossibility for the white woman to step outside the male paradigm, or is she dying because like the Hereford bull (whose ringlet tail-ends she wears as hair extensions) she is part of the colonising culture.

In linking the white woman to the British breed of cattle Sproul is indicating the white woman collusion with the white man in destruction of Aboriginal society. Like the cattle, she has been “instrumental in the dispossession of Aborigines from their land, the reduction of native fauna
which served as their food supply, and the cause of racial conflict when the Aborigines killed the stock.” 17 Whilst this is certainly the case I believe the position of the white woman is more complex.

It could be counter argued, that the white woman’s position as the objectified ‘other’ of white male power structures gives her an empathy with the oppression of the Aboriginal ‘other’. This recalls concepts raised by Jay Arthur who discusses the ‘unsettling’ understanding of being part of a ‘settler’ society, which is increasingly understood as having dispossessed Aboriginal cultures. Arthur discusses this knowledge as giving non-Indigenous people increasing empathy towards, and an interest in Aboriginal art and culture. This ‘double vision’ at the level of the ‘settlers’ identity is further echoed in the position of the Australian nation as both a sovereign state and as ‘other’ to a British throne. These discourses are part of the ongoing complexity of the colonial-postcolonial project in Australian art.

Linda Sproul, White Woman Project, 1995

In her work Sproul is making direct reference to paintings by Impressionist artist Tom Roberts who played a part in configuring Australia as a powerful though antipodean part of the British pastoral empire. Art theorists have often referred to qualities of ‘innocence’ in both Sproul and Roberts’ representations of women.18 I would argue however, that Roberts’ work is successful because of his ability to allude to the sexuality of the white woman. Although I acknowledge that these representations still objectify the woman in the male (artists’) gaze I would like to briefly discuss A Summer Morning Tiff of 1886.
The painting shows a woman who has chosen the bushland surrounding the farm as the place to go after an altercation. By implication, this interesting reversal places the male artist in the home. In the top right hand corner of the painting, one railing in the fence between the cleared land and the bush beyond, has fallen. This suggests a possibility that the woman may disappear, beyond the patriarchal order, out into the ‘wilds’ of the uncleared bushland behind her. On the other hand her return to the patriarchal order, is signified by the slight curve of the foreground sapling as it overlaps the white fabric of her dress. The success of Roberts painting lies in the tensions created in the woman’s position. I don’t find these possibilities so readily apparent in Sprouls work.

In *Difficult to Light: The White Woman Project #2* Sproul takes the role of a specific Indigenous woman, Ellen, originally photographed as ethnographic ‘research’ in the 1870’s. Sproul recreates the tropes of the ethnographic portrait - the bleak, frontal lighting, described by Anne Marsh as “the ‘straight’ panoptic gaze of the State - positioning herself as the incarcerated subject.” 19 Like the original photographs Sproul’s images include measuring devices as signifiers of the surveillance of the female Indigenous body.

Sproul has also placed twentieth century images of herself as pin-up stars including Betty Grable, Monroe and Madonna together with those of herself as Ellen. Even though the viewer reads all the images through a constructed objectifying grid, the readings of the ‘sexually alluring’ white women work to once more objectify and oppress the Aboriginal figure who is shown always bare breasted and often completely naked. The whole exercise is also confounding for the viewer, as there is no way of reading the figure of Ellen as *Aboriginal*. Because there are no signifiers of her Aboriginality, the reading slips into that other instance of abjection and incarceration, the psychiatric photograph. Sproul’s images in this series are confrontational but there is little visual complexity. The photographic codes used, the harsh frontal lighting, tend to foreclose more speculative readings.

Foley’s intervention in the nineteenth century archives, though equally tough, contains more possibilities for speculation. Her images often need to be read ‘against the grain’ to retrieve meanings from images constructed by the imperial gaze. However I would like to suggest here, that not all images in the nineteenth century archive are as absolute in their negative constructions as Sproul’s images imply. In the same year that Tom Roberts painted *A Summer Morning Tiff*, Charles Bayliss was sailing down the Darling. In his archive there is a photograph titled according to the objectifying terminology of the day as, *Group of Blacks, Dunlop Station*. Older people sit and stand to the right of the image while two young Aboriginal women on the left of the photograph smile into the camera. One of them wears a full length white dress. The flooded Darling can be seen bathed in sunlight behind the standing figures and three seated older Aboriginal women wear the white skull caps of mourning. The more we examine the
culturally intersecting aspects of the archive the more we find such contradictions and possibilities for speculation. These complexities, the way that lived realities rub against the ideological constructs and changing histories, are challenges which suggest points of intersection and dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists.

**Lynette Wallworth and Rea**

In this section I discuss the reactions of two artists, non-Indigenous multi-media artist Lynette Wallworth and Indigenous digital-photographic artist Rea, to the challenge of producing work for the exhibition *Terra Alterius, Land of Another* at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney in 2004.

The exhibition, curated by Margaret Farmer invited artists to, “imagine an Australia that was not colonised by Britain as terra nullius, land of no one, but recognised by the British as being ... the land of another.” 20 The curatorial premise of the exhibition was to encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to create “previously unimagined possibilities” 21 for Australian cultural history. The challenges created by the ahistoric premise of the exhibition, the assertion that you could wind back time and imagine a past of mutual cultural understanding (in a country where terra nullius is still unresolved) proved difficult for a number of artists in the exhibition.

Marcia Langton in the catalogue essay discusses the complexities of the coexistence of multiple cultural views. She recognises on the one hand, the innovative possibilities for artists to accept the challenge of rethinking terra nullius and “draw(ing) attention to the ambiguity of being ‘in between’ – living between old and new lands, between Aboriginal systems of law ... and the postcolonial regime.” 22 She acknowledges the difficulties of the exhibition concept, writing, “the concept of Australia as a post-colonial social entity ... is a tricky challenge in Australian intellectual and cultural life,” 23 which requires confronting lived realities of dispossession and racism by all Australians.
Wallworth reinterprets the motif of the gum tree in an interactive video installation called *Still: Waiting*. The moment you enter the dark interior of the space, a huge and screeching flock of Sulphur Crested Cockatoos bursts from an aging gum tree in the middle distance. A sign at the entrance to the space forewarns the viewer, *Everything is changed by your presence, and stillness reveals.*

In this installation you are presented with the possibility of gazing on an undisturbed, Edenic situation, of viewing a landscape without being positioned as the disturbing intruder. Yet this proves an impossible desire, as even the smallest movement of the viewer entering the space triggers the disturbing screeching and fleeing of the birds. The installation is a reflection on the impossibility of a neutral, unmotivated viewing position. Our movements, if in haste and closed to reflection, perpetuate chaos and destruction in the confined space. Yet when we have been in the installation for a while, we are able to begin to view the complex interactions of the birds. We are never able to determine however, to what extent our presence has altered the situation.

Wallworth’s work can be read as a metaphor for the meetings between Europeans including Mitchell, Becker, Cawthorne who encountered Indigenous lives in the Australian landscape at a time when the land was understood as ‘the land of another’. The exhibition draws attention to the complexity of the cross-cultural encounter and the importance of the subject position. Mitchell’s ability to ‘see’ was prescribed by his European acculturation, combined with the physical requirement of his cumbersome party to continually move through the landscape. Becker, also continually moving, unified his journey with the motif of the relentless horizon - focusing on what had previously appeared so strange to him. The archive created by Cawthorne, who stayed still long enough to develop a sustained body of work, was influenced by his personal experience of the tragedy of the destruction of Aboriginal lives around him.

Although Rea desired to make a work for the exhibition, she found it very difficult to separate the idealism of invention implied by the exhibition, from the disadvantages and racism experienced in her life. Her solution was to contribute a catalogue essay explaining her reasons for not making a work. In doing so she points out the complex artistic and philosophical difficulties raised by *Terra Alterius: Land of Another*.

Rea, from the Gamilaroi and Wailwan people, grew up in Coonabarabran and knew about her Aboriginal heritage from an early age. She writes that she was unaware however of the British invasion of Australia and she grew up in an environment where her mother and grandmother were reluctant to speak about the effects of colonisation on their own lives.24
Rea's practice has focused on the 'blak' female body using confrontational strategies to interrogate colonial structures and challenge the viewer. Rea was reluctant to make work for the sake of a curatorial premise that overlooked the unresolved oppression of Aboriginal Australians. “As an adult, (she writes) I have had to learn how to deal with the harsh realities and pain that my true knowledge of how Australia was colonised has bequeathed to me. Sometimes I cannot find the words or clearly identify the complexity of feelings.” 25 She explains that “a huge imaginative leap is required before I am even able to envisage the concept of Terra Alterius: Land of Another and I am not sure that I can do it.” 26 Rea recognises that to intellectually alter history with out changing the violence and oppression in people’s lives is a futile and contradictory exercise.

Langton, in discussing art practice and history agrees that “innovation is required to make a new possibility and that this requires critical imagination and not merely historical deliberation.” 27 She suggests that “postcolonial subjectivities depicted in all their pleasurable and painful aspects provide part of the answer”, and that to go beyond a repetition of the past involves a desire to “engage, to make history, to be implicated and to change.” 28
In relation to my own subject position in the colonialist landscape, it is my experience as a ‘white woman’, my attachment to the landscape (and my horror of being removed from it) that ironically leads to my comprehension of the violence of the removal of Aboriginal people from this land. Contained within this understanding (of attachment and removal), is the recognition of my privileged position in the colonialist structure, and my historical role in Aboriginal dispossession. This difficult and distressing understanding widens my comprehension of history and of Australian art - as it generates ways of continuing, tentatively and exploratively to reflect history and relationships to land in my artworks.

3 Beyond the Pale, The Adelaide Biennale curated by Brenda Croft, is entirely composed of works by Indigenous artists, as is Native Title Business, a travelling exhibition curated by Joan G Winter.
4 Ibid. p. 28.
6 Benjamin Genocchio, Fiona Foley, Solitaire, Piper Press, Sydney, 2001. p.32
7 Ibid. p.57.
9 Genocchio, Fiona Foley, Solitaire. p. 29. Shawn Foley writes about the violence of the colonial frontier on Badtjala land, “By the 1840’s a colonial frontier war raged…. By this time brutalities included open and indiscriminate massacres and an early form of chemical warfare in which flour was laced with arsenic.”
11 Ianmants Tillers, 'Locality Fails,' Art & Text no. 6, Winter 1982.
15 My discussion centres on two of Sprouls works. The White Woman Project at the AGNSW as part of Perspecta 1995 and Difficult to Light: The White Woman Project #2 shown at ACCA in 1997.
16 Ibid. p. 234.
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Langton, 'The Others.'
28 Ibid.
Chapter 5
Patterns of Country: Figure and Ground (in Dirt)

This project, which began as an investigation of the changing representations of the landscape of the Darling River, has led me to investigate European representations of this land and the Aboriginal history embedded in it. The revelations of Aboriginal history (of resistance and dispossession) within the ‘familiar’ landscape of rangeland grazing is the ‘double vision’ at the centre of my investigation - the ‘double vision’ that I now understand is Australian colonial history. I work with this ‘double vision’ using photographic media together with text works made with material from the landscape applied directly to the gallery wall.

When I am working in the horizontal expanse of the landscape I can begin to reread the experience of being (a white woman) in the landscape. It is possible to imagine the site lines of Western perspective stretched across the open salt-bush country, converging towards the centre of the far horizon. The random scatter of low bushes at my feet complies, becoming more intense the closer they are to the imagined vanishing point. It is possible to sense the exhilaration felt by Mitchell and to recreate the sense of control over the land made possible with European ideology, compass and eyeglass.

Gordon Bennett’s critique of the scopic control over the already occupied territory, his revelations of the power structures inherent in the imperial vision can also be envisioned. His understanding that “the history of the theories of ‘primitive’ societies, is the history of an illusion, as much an illusion as the construction of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface” seems relevant in this seemingly expansive landscape.

Something about the land however evades these structured visions, and as I move across the country distant landmarks appear and reappear, disorienting the sense of human purpose and confounding straight lines. It becomes difficult to articulate, particularly with the concentrated vision of the camera lens, the political, colonial and historical dimensions of this land. These ideas dissolve and the particularities of the site threaten to overwhelm the visions I may have had from the theoretical safety of Sydney. Like the detailed sketches by Becker and Mitchell it is easy to become seduced by the minutiae and, as well as photographing I find myself collecting small bushes, burrs and red and grey mud from creeks and the river. A wider, more conceptual view is difficult to keep in mind.

When I first started photographing I looked at images by Peter Goin (USA) who photographed the haunting beauty and the horror of Nevada’s nuclear test sites. I was also attracted to the
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red diagonal)*, type C photograph, 80x80cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey curve)*, type C photograph, 80x80cm
images of Terry Evans who photographed the land used by the US military as a munitions building and testing site. Like me, they were both dealing with the aftermath of events which had altered the landscape irrevocably - although I wasn't making these connections so easily then. Evans' work used ground level and aerial views and she intensified the readings of single photographs by pairing her images. My interest in Evans' aerial photographs drew me to the 'world' of kite aerial photography. I detail these technicalities in the appendix.

By using the kite, my image production took on a physicality reminiscent of the journeys of Thomas Mitchell. Like Mitchell I came with equipment and visions which attempt to structure this landscape. Instead of the chain dragged by Mitchell's men, I measure with the optics of the camera lens and the long line of the kite string. My image production relates to the considerable physical exertion required to launch the kite in a robust wind and to have it 'sit' at a point in the sky where the images show detail, yet have enough height to activate the patterns in the landscape below. My practice is related to the wind, the length of shadows on the land and the angles of the camera in relation to the vista and the horizon.

As a non-Indigenous woman in the landscape I am working to register the 'unsettling' aspects of colonialist history written about by Arthur, and illuminated in the artworks discussed in the previous chapter. I am creating photographs that have recognisable qualities and then by juxtaposition or a change in scale, disorient the viewer. I want my images to offer a sense of security, which is then overturned, with a glimpse of something more difficult to comprehend.

My aerial photographs are more intimate than satellite photographs which are now readily available over the internet from cameras that continually circle the globe. In wanting to find a viewpoint that analyzes the settlers' (or graziers') relations to land, my images to some extent reference the aerial orientations of Western and Central Desert painting. Yet unlike Aboriginal images my photographs are angled out towards the horizon and as photographic works, contain the illusion of depth and 'the real'. I see these photographs as being within a documentary tradition, one perhaps more aligned to Alexander Rodchenko, who often held his camera aloft in his desire for a 'birds eye perspective' reflecting a revolutionary Russian aesthetic. My photography is perhaps also a way, with my feet on the ground, to metaphysically (and momentarily) experience different and unexpected viewpoints of this land; to find something I didn't know about a landscape previously experienced as 'familiar'.

The images I have chosen from the proof-sheets are the more abstract ones. I am using modernist conventions of line, texture and the grey and red colours of the earth (with the acidic green of the river) to create the aspects of discord I am seeking. The visible marks in the landscape, the fencelines, sheep tracks and the organic patterns of creeks and vegetation,
work as metaphors for the tensions in the landscape. As I am exhibiting the photographic works adjacent to text/wall work, there is an interplay between the photographic illusion of depth and the flatness and pattern of the wall work, between the ‘language’ of the photographic and the ‘language’ of the mud and the text.

Documentation of flying camera and kite, January 2005, Photographs Marlene Davies.

**Intermittent (lakes and creeks)**

Maps of the Western Division reveal that many of the lakes, creeks and rivers have Aboriginal names while the bores and ground tanks, dug with European equipment, have Western names. This reflects Paul Carter’s revelation, that instead of naming places, place names reflect histories, and a palimpsest of colonial history can be seen in the curve and occasionally the flow of creeks, lakes and rivers across Western NSW.

For the work *Intermittent* I am writing the names of the rivers that flow into the Darling onto the gallery wall using the grey viscous mud from the river. These names are a combination of Aboriginal and English words and this work addresses the ‘entanglements’ of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal histories as discussed by Charles Green and Ian North.

In showing photographs together with the pattern-oriented text work, I am attempting to articulate the structures of a colonising vision - one which in turn structures our vision of this landscape. While my position as a non-Indigenous woman links me to a history of a European visual tradition, I see my visual work as a way to reflect the contradictions embedded in this tradition. I admire Gordon Bennett’s stated aim to ‘create a turbulence’ and to “jolt the spectator out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and perhaps foster empathy and understanding of contemporary issues that effect all of us as human beings.” Bennett’s images and the history I am researching have played a part in challenging and expanding my understanding of the landscape. Like Bennett and others working with language - Bea Maddock, John Dunkley-Smith, Paul Carter and Ruark Lewis - I
am also interested in the ways that art is capable of “exceed(ing) the boundaries of language” 7

In putting Aboriginal words on the wall I am primarily indicating my comprehension of the role played by Aboriginal people in Australian history and their ongoing links with country. As discussed previously in this paper, Sue Best maintains that to represent the landscape without reference to Aboriginal connections to land perpetuates a visual blindness, a visual terra nullius. 8 However to represent Aboriginal connections also presents complexities and my work addresses questions of innovative ways as a non-Indigenous artist, to represent divisive aspects of colonialist history, in the context of ongoing contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal connections to the landscape.

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

I am experimenting with dots of mud stenciled onto the wall of the gallery, as a way to form the letters (much like the dots of light emitting diodes form letters) and as a way of visualising the Darling as an intermittent stream since the pollution and reduced flows have made it a chain of waterholes since 1991. 9 The dots create a shimmering effect when viewed from close-up, making the words difficult to read and alluding to the tensions of a landscape with two languages, and to the complexities of translation. The dots echo the patterns created by native vegetation seen in my aerial photographs. They also however, reference dots of Aboriginal painting, including the dots used by Bennett, which act to reference his Aboriginality. In a culture where the predominant interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people has been cultural theft by non-Indigenous people it becomes difficult to articulate a position of being influenced through inspiration. The question becomes how to keep my vision empathetic with, yet separate from, Aboriginal representations of history and country. Perhaps difficulty and uncertainly is part of the process of finding new ways to envisage this colonialist landscape.

As I conclude this paper I have not fully resolved the issues relating to the dots. The process of researching the paper has heightened the issues of cultural appropriation, (influence or inspiration) between Aboriginal / non-Aboriginal art. Yet to go beyond the
paradigm of a divided colonial culture, steps are required to expand artistic language and a continued artistic discourse is part of this process. As discussed by Marcia Langton in my previous chapter, this artistic dilemma heightens the correlation between cultural production and the realities of oppression and dispossession in Australian society. Ian North in discussing the revolutionary influence of Aboriginal art envisages “a paradigm beyond the Australian (colonial) context.” He writes of a “a cultural interweaving” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art, yet he expresses uncertainty with how it may actually work.

The ‘tremor’ in my images, the slight shake on the surface of the photographs and the visual agitation of the mud/text work might be linked to Ian North’s discussion of ‘cultural interweaving’ and the complexities of envisioning a postcolonial artistic practice. It is also linked to Paul Carter’s assertion that “spatial history does not go confidently forward.” The tremor is my way of “advancing exploratively” of “recognising that the future is invented.” The tremor is also a reflection of the experience of being a ‘white woman’ in a colonialist Australian society. It registers the contradictions of living in a society that proclaims itself as individualistic, with structural divisions according to class and gender, and deep structural divisions along racial lines according to dispossession/possession in relation to land. My childhood comprehension that the Aboriginal stockmen wouldn’t tell me what to do was a particular instance of a certain communication across these divisions. These painful aspects of history originate not in Aboriginal culture but in non-Indigenous social and psychological coloniser structures, which continue to operate today. The tremor is an understanding of my historical role in these structures, and my understanding of the contested nature of cultural productions that engage with these divisions in people’s lives.
7 Ibid. p. 53.
Conclusion

I started photographing to find out about the landscape of the Darling River country. At the time I articulated a desire 'to find something I didn't know yet' about an area I imagined as familiar. At first I thought I was seeing Aboriginal art in the patterns of the country, that my aerial photographs looked like representations of country by contemporary Western and Central desert Aboriginal artists - similar patterns in the spacing of trees, the flow of contours, the textures of native vegetation. I have discovered that my views of land and its representation are influenced by Aboriginal art and its views of country. Aboriginal art speaks to me as it does to many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across Australia and internationally. It is altering views of land and land-scape and understandings of Aboriginal culture and history. Aboriginal art is challenging non-Indigenous awareness of Australia's colonialist past.

The majority of the art works, histories and theoretical texts, I have researched for this paper express a desire to come to terms with the violent aspects of Australia’s colonialist past. This desire for reconciliation is a seismic historical shift, one that entails monumental changes in concepts of non-Indigenous identity, on a personal and national level. These changes entail recognition of the violence within non-Indigenous ‘settler’ culture, towards Aboriginal people and towards the land itself. These changes involve recognition of the historical role of Aboriginal people as active defenders of their territory and cultures.

The South Australian history revealed by historians Robert Foster and Amanda Nettlebeck has been influential on my artistic vision of the Australian landscape. They reveal the land as a contested site at the centre of colonial constructions of history. Like works by artists and art theorists they discuss a need (in the present) to reconcile both ‘sides’ of this history - the violent dispossession and the heroic deeds of ‘settlement’. They see these ‘double visions’ as “ultimately false dichotomies” and they maintain that to understand Australian history is to comprehend that the heroic deeds of ‘settlement’ and the violence towards Aboriginal culture are (the narratives of) Australian colonial history.¹

Integral to the views constructed by this paper is an image of a foreign ‘settler’ attempting to describe a landscape with language and tools from another place and time. My research has led me to the conclusion that Jay Arthur’s linguistic ‘double vision’ is an instance of broader divisions at the centre of the colonialist project. In this way, representations of peaceful and ‘settled’ pastures across Australia are representations of stolen lands; peaceful and ‘settled’ lands are stolen lands, settlement is invasion.

¹
I have indicated that greed over exclusive occupancy of land and water was at the heart of the journey of European ‘settlement’ to the Darling River. ‘Settler’ economies, with little comprehension of the fluidity of the land and a mercantile relationship to it, took approximately fifty years to turn the west of NSW into a dust bowl. More recently, a similar relationship to the water has taken thirty years to pollute the major river system of Eastern Australia - although Aboriginal people lived here for millennia, keeping the land and water in park like conditions.

My artistic vision of this land comes from a personal involvement with the materials of the landscape; the red and black country, the sheep tracks, the organic and changeable cycles of water from rivers and creeks and the vistas of an expansive horizon. It builds on an awareness of Aboriginal dispossession described in chapter one as a ‘radical spatial and political reversal’ of Aboriginal and settler-occupied grazing land around Wilcannia. This understanding is extended and intensified by the art practices of Foley, Bennett, Sproul and many others working in Australia today.

Like Linda Sproul I am aware of the complexities of my position as a ‘white woman’. As the daughter of a grazier, it is my feelings of connectedness to the ‘indigenous’ aspects of the landscape - to the native vegetation, the organic contours, and the sounds of the Aboriginal language written into the landscape - that reveals to me the violence and pain of Aboriginal dispossession. As a ‘white woman’ whose views are influenced by recent histories and by Aboriginal art, I understand that it is not possible, however, to be ‘simply’ influenced by Aboriginal art. To engage in visual dialogue, to reference Aboriginal art in my own practice for instance, is to risk repeating the appropriative structures of colonisation. However to not show the Aboriginal connection to land is, as argued by Sue Best, to repeat a visual terra nullius. To focus exclusively on environmental issues, for instance, leaves out the important links between colonialist history and the construction of Aboriginal people and the natural elements of the landscape as ‘other’. To begin to articulate ‘intersections’ and ‘cultural interweavings’ as discussed by Ian North and Charles Green, opens up possibilities for discussions and an articulation of future possibilities beyond ongoing Indigenous oppression and dispossession.

I am aware of working at an historical time of monumental shifts in consciousness toward land and representations of land - of working ‘after’ Aboriginal arts ‘unsettling’ of Australian art and colonial history. As a way to articulate the ‘double vision’ of colonialist history I am working with a combination of photographic tools and patterns constructed with materials from the landscape. As a visual artist I am combining different materials as a way to open up possibilities for contemplation and speculation on art, history, and the interaction with a
landscape vital to everyone’s future. Like the struggle over geography, discussed by Edward Said, representations of land are metaphors for ideas and ideologies, for ways of interacting with the natural world. My art practice registers a desire to find ways for non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to interact with the elements of the earth (the mud, the dirt, the dust and the soil) which links its beauty and survival to ours.

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (shadow I)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (pale green)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red fence)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red cross)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey curve)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey track)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (fence)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (shadow 2)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (green)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (curve 2)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (shadow 3)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
List of Works

Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red diagonal)*, type C photograph, 80x80cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey curve 2)*, c-type photograph, 80x80cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (shadow 1)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (pale green)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red fence)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (red cross)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey curve)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey track)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (fence)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (grey)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (shadow 2)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (green)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (curve 2)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
Ruby Davies, *Patterns of Country (shadow 3)*, 2005, type C photograph, 80 x 80 cm
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