Long to Belong
Contemporary narratives of place. Stories in landscape painting from a non-Indigenous perspective.

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B.A (Visual Arts)

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

How do Anglo-Australian artists paint themselves into the landscape with relevance and integrity, in spite of our complicated history? How do we submit to our own ‘small narratives’ and express an experience of land which considers but is not muted by postcolonial dialogues? How do individual artists form a visual language respondent to place and instructed by creative chance?

The painting studio is where these questions are raised and where formal problems arise. Disparate ideas are tested in the search for marks and images to build an ambiguous sensation of place. Reflection, doubt, and wonder are the forces behind the paintings, but landscape is the sustaining narrative, and the inquiry is personal, equivocal.

A remote valley on the Ellenborough River forms the background to the current body of work, but my practice has taken me to desert communities during the past decade. Living and working in these environments where Indigenous artists paint without inherent effort, immersed in their big narratives of country, our choice to paint landscape is a continual challenge. Regular field trips to the valley and visits back to the desert, immersion in the patterns and phenomena of land, issues of belonging, impermanence and nostalgia have driven this investigation. The almost anachronistic studio practice results in an exhibition of on-site drawings and painted landscape memoirs.

In the exegesis I examine my work through the prism of paintings by Indigenous artists from Haasts Bluff and Milikapiti. Non-Indigenous artists who engage with issues of landscape in a contemporary Australian context are also investigated, with a focus on cross-cultural dialogues, collaborations and formal painterly responses.
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The Ellenborough Valley, 1970-1988

In the winter of 1970 my parents moved from inner-city to country, having met as painters at East Sydney Technical College. I was a baby, the cold war was a shadow and the suburbs were banal; subsistence-living was an appealing alternative and their muse, beyond each other, was an anarchic spirit resonant with the zeitgeist of the times.

The valley which I refer to throughout the exegesis is formed by the Ellenborough River and lies below the dramatic Ellenborough Falls. The river is bordered by indigenous vegetation, predominantly water gums [tristaniopsis] and she-oaks [casuarinas]. The water is potable and abundant with eels. The grey basalt boulders and rock-ledge-banks are punctuated by dark green lomandra longifolium, traditionally used for making eel traps by the local Biripi people. Lichen and native orchids create a rich surface patina. Floods, when they come, are tremendously powerful, turning the water yellow ochre and frothing with white foam; whole trees rage past like javelins and the roar is pure tempest.

My parents paid for the remote 1200 acre property by farming cucumbers, cutting corkwood and splitting shingles. Access was, and remains, the greatest challenge to living or farming in the valley. Poor roads have deteriorated to become virtually impassable today. An old logging ‘snigg-trail’ re-bulldozed several years ago is so steep that only extreme four-wheel drive skills and dry weather allow an approach.

Seventy five per cent of the property is steep and forested, logged for hardwood, where possible, throughout the nineteen fifties. Cedar getters in the early twentieth century gave

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1 The National Art School in Paddington
2 The waterfall is in Elands; the valley lies between the Bulgong and Comboyne plateaus in the Great Dividing Range approximately 400 kilometres north of Sydney and seventy kilometers inland from the ‘mid-north coast’ area.
3 The Biripi or (Birpai) are recognised as the traditional Indigenous owners of the region from the Manning River north to the Upper Hastings river and to Port Macquarie on the coast. The Ngaku are another local people who may have territorial overlaps in the region of the valley especially during winter migrations inland. See Norman Tindale’s Tribes of Aboriginal Australia, published by the South Australian Museum.
http://www.samuseum.australia.sa.com/tindaletribes/birpai.htm accessed July 20, 2009. See also:
http://www.anbg.gov.au/aborig.s.e.aust/lomandra-longifolia.html and
way to dairy farmers between the war years, and the only neighbouring (absentee) landowners continue to run cattle in a rogue fashion. Open flat land skirts the river and slopes gently to the tree-line permitting a sense of enclosed parkland despite the bladey grass \textit{[imperata cylindrical]}, cock-spur, blackberry, privet and scotch thistle slowly encroaching. The local soil is poor and compacted, aside from some rich alluvial river-flats. Land of its kind is colloquially referred to by farmers as ‘marginal country’ in reference to its singular unsuitability for the occupation of grazing or agriculture after the raw resource of valuable timber has been removed.\(^4\)

The physical isolation of the valley was exacerbated by extreme social separation, further compounded by lack of electricity, telephone or reliable vehicles. After the first five years the utopian ideal was exhausted. A period of upheaval was followed by several months in Sydney before a return to the valley in 1976. New partners arrived for both parents, each resulting in more children. A sense of community and sociability replaced the solitariness of earlier years, although that was also temporary.

When we first arrived in the valley, \textit{The Hut} was the only building; we lived in \textit{The Tipi} for three years, while \textit{The Barn} was being constructed. These buildings are referred to in more detail throughout the paper.\(^5\)

During my childhood and into adolescence the valley was a playground. I was oblivious to the ambivalence that it provoked in grown men and women, enmeshed in their personal relationships and the challenges of working the land holistically and economically. Both parents continued to paint, my mother especially. Textas were always available for drawing, a natural remedy for dispelling childish boredom. Horse-riding, swimming and roaming on foot were regular activities.


\(^5\) The ‘house’ was built later by my father with his second wife.
Remote Art Centres 1997-2002, 2005-06

After leaving the mid-north coast region in 1989 I travelled and worked around Northern Australia before studying for a B.A in painting in Darwin. In 1997 I moved to Central Australia, spending two years at Haasts Bluff (Ikuntji) and then Balgo in North-west W.A before moving north to the Tiwi Islands (Melville Island). In each of these three Indigenous communities I worked in the art centres as art co-ordinator.⁶

In 2005-06 I spent another year working in the Indigenous arts industry, first in Darwin and then back in Balgo as acting director of Warlayirti Art Centre. That period confirmed the difficulties of making art within the art centre environment, despite the inspiration gained more by osmosis than overt exchange or clear intention. It was in Balgo in the summer of 2005-06 that I proposed Long to Belong. Visits back to the desert in 2007 and 2008 have further contributed to the exegesis.

The Valley 2002-2009

Going back to the valley in 2002 was a physical and psychological return to the environment of my earliest memories, with the additional richness of sharing the landscape with my own young sons. There is nothing rare about homecoming as a catalyst for a particular art genre, autobiographical work scored from memory and personal narratives. However it is this fallible, ordinary response, grounded in personal research of a familiar place (for lack of a perceivable alternative) which mirrors my observations of Aboriginal artists working in their respective communities, and one that I expressed through a return to regular painting.⁷

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⁶ Art co-ordinators are also known as arts advisors; more recently art centres have adopted roles for art centre managers and directors, studio assistants and office staff. Co-ordinators used to perform all necessary duties.

⁷ Notably Crimson Threads (2003) with Dorothy Galeledba, Michelle Culpitt and Annie Mirron, curated by Rilka Oakley at VCA Gallery (touring Gosford & Tamworth Regional Galleries) and From The Valley Floor (2005), Watson Place Gallery Melbourne.
Introduction

The form of this exegesis is multilayered and rhizome-like in structure. It is a working document detailing my observations, thought processes and art-making over a three year period. The poetic voice, experiential methodology and a considered response to a variety of artists’ works are the primary forces behind the writing and provide a frame through which to view the studio work.

What makes the document atypical is my analysis of Indigenous artists work as a prism through which to view and discuss my own work and issues relevant to current Australian landscape painting. This approach is not taken lightly or without risks, but since the original conception of the research I have become convinced it is a legitimate approach. In most instances I cite works of which I have had direct first-hand experience.

There is a tendency to bracket off subjective responses to Indigenous art and rely on over-arching theory, either anthropological or visual arts based histories and critiques.\(^8\) To generalize and over-simplify, the former is concerned with the original context and the cultural function of the ‘artifact’, while the latter re-contextualises the artifact as art object within a Western art-historical discourse. Each of these schools of enquiry have their own limitations although there is a trend towards a more collaborative approach, spanning both disciplines. However each leads inevitably by different tracks to the discourse of post-colonialism and identity politics, and by extension to Indigenous social, spiritual and political realities, Australian non-indigenous secularism, and the ethics and assumptions of cross-cultural as well as cross-disciplinary dialogue and association.

The challenge has been to navigate through these issues, drawing on the artworks and personal relationships or experiences surrounding their production without allowing anxiety or guilt to implode on the writing.

My own painting practice has been affected by my five years working as an arts co-ordinator in remote Aboriginal art centres and in the Aboriginal art industry across northern and central Australia. It would be negligent not to assess this in some detail, as the initial studio research was in part a response to experiencing my landscape of origin after having spent several years on land actively inhabited by Indigenous people.\textsuperscript{9} Using my personal diaries, reflecting on and about paintings from Haasts Bluff and Tiwi regions I tease out issues relevant to paintings within different cultural frameworks in a contemporary Australian context, acknowledging difference and recognizing parallel enquiries and universal themes.

There is a temptation to over-state the impact of these experiences, and certainly for the reader, first-hand accounts of Indigenous painting practices and interactions between cultures are interesting and enlightening. It is not, however, the main concern of this exegesis, which is an enquiry dedicated to my own practice \textit{in light of personal experience (out bush) but not solely because of it}. The populism (and the political), surrounding Indigenous art – not unwarranted – initially made me tentative about this methodology, but I believe it is a necessary investigation that attempts to move beyond lip-service to acknowledge what is essentially all of Australia’s foundation culture.

In addition to eclectic reading from recent Australian art history and theory, exhibition catalogues, artists’ monologues and reviews, as well as memoirs and oral and social histories have helped formulate my ideas. In my role as art co-ordinator I was an invited guest due to my ability to function \textit{usefully} in the commercial art industry. It was the primary concern of the artists that I would maintain access to resources and to successfully market their artwork. As writer and cultural studies academic Stephen Mueke has observed on the issue of researching indigenous cultural territory,

\begin{quote}
They [non-Indigenous researchers] are less willing to take up the speaking position of objectivity implied by the realist ethnographic text. Rather, they feel that it is more honest to tell the story of their involvement. This
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} Fred Myers elaborates on the sense of being in one’s own country as ‘not having to ask’, i.e being the most authoritative for that country, commanding a sense of autonomy and that most invaluable aspect of Pintupi identity, ‘freedom’. See Myers, \textit{Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines}, 156.
involves a subjective rather than an objective view, a response to being hurt by rejection when ‘they were only trying to help’. While I am no longer ‘trying to help’, I am using the subjective voice and the objects of material culture overtly exchanged for cash, which are available for multiple readings and purposes including observation, reflection and discussion. American art critic and poet Susan Stewart describes the souvenir as the ‘authentic object’ representative of the authentic experience sought within an exchange economy. An increasingly distanced and mediated relationship to the phenomenological world gives way to a ‘nostalgic myth of contact and presence’, reachable by proxy in the possession of the souvenir.  

In the context of my home and studio, the Indigenous painters’ works I have referred to in this paper do become signifiers of the ‘exotic past’ which Stewart identifies. I acknowledge them as beautiful objects, as exotic mementoes of ‘the other’, as excellent financial investments and as artistic inspirations. Ultimately they are loaded with unknowable meanings, and by separation from their original context, as Stewart would argue, they have been hijacked to represent not the maker, but the owner/possessor.

But Stewart’s is not the last word, published as it was in 1993, the year I began my art-school training in Darwin. What has emerged over the course of this research is that artworks can be invested with the power to transcend context and deliver ‘positive, life-enhancing qualities to humanity,’ as American ethologist Ellen Dissanayake proposes. She argues that art making is specific to human behavior and identifies the process as ‘making special’. Dissanayake’s position counters the post-modern detachment that I was so disenchanted with during my 1990s art-school education, the antithesis of which was embodied by the Aboriginal artists who became my colleagues soon afterwards.

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10 Stephen Muecke, Textural Spaces (Perth: API Network Australian Research Institute, 2005), 47.
11 See Morphy, Becoming Art: Exploring Cross Cultural Categories, 35, 177.
13 Ibid., 135.
15 Ethologists study animal behavior in its natural habit, proposing evolutionary outcomes. Not to be confused with ethnologists who make scientific comparisons across cultures.
Dissanayake describes a four-stage naturalistic aesthetics to apply as a measure of transcendence from ‘proto-aesthetic arousal’ to an ‘experience of fullness’. Firstly she identifies ‘accessibility and strikingness’ which combines striking combinations of pattern, colours, form or sound to give ‘a pleasurable and interesting cognitive and sensual experience’, effectively capturing our attention. ‘Tangible relevance’ lends impact to these outstanding visual features if ‘embedded in a context of relevance to life’ through culture. Dissanayake acknowledges that a powerful response to proto-aesthetic qualities can exist without cultural literacy, although ‘some emotional power may be denied’.

The third point is ‘evocative resonance’, essentially a ‘complexity and density of meaning evoked through metaphor’ (or mysterious content) which ‘evokes intangible aspects of the human condition’.

If all the previous criteria are present in an artwork, then ‘satisfying fullness’, ‘rightness, and resolution may follow – an experience rarely invoked; fine workmanship, care and skill are usually essential to this achievement’.

As a final point, Dissanayake calls on learned discernment as integral to judging an artwork, citing the difference between impact and import: ‘if impact is wow, import is wonder.’

**Landscape and phenomenology**

In spite of its potential misreading, ‘reflecting imperial and colonial points of view’, or a gaze of sovereignty, I select the use of ‘landscape’ throughout the exegesis as it has positive associations for me as word that was in regular usage throughout my childhood in relation to places and paintings. To me the vista implies spaciousness and freedom, rather than a speculative, dominant agenda.

Without overtly applying the theory of phenomenology, I do draw on its central idea as methodology in forming the studio work and the paper. It underpins ‘the story’.

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18 Ibid.: 58.

[phenomenology] is our ‘bodily’ intentionality [which] brings the possibility of meaning into our experience, ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations.\(^{20}\)

Retracing ‘lived experience,’ I start chapter one by looking at Ikuntji artists’ use of the tree motif as referent to place. Through examining the same form in non-Indigenous painters’ practices I draw out some of the possibilities in the tree as subject matter across cultural and social landscapes and the possibility of the tree as a signifier of Aboriginality since contact. The chapter concludes with Studio: Part I where I discuss my own work in Portraits of Trees exhibited at Watt Space Gallery in October 2007.

An exploration of ‘creative research’ motivated by my experiences of visiting the desert and the valley over the course of the research evolved into chapter two on the artist’s field trip. By investigating the different ways artists articulate or quantify their experience of places (country/landscape) both foreign and familiar I make some sense of my own approach. I examine the group exhibitions Walk and On The Heysen Trail to provide some examples of the ‘field trip as research’, and discuss the role of bush trips in remote Aboriginal communities. Again I conclude the chapter in Studio Part II with analysis of my on site drawings from the valley and central Australia.

Chapter three highlights curatorial and individual artist’s work – aesthetic, collaborative and dialogical – which engage with Indigenous painting, including curator Felicity Fenner’s Talking About Abstraction and the work of Tim Johnson. I also discuss the role of pattern in the work of Tiwi artist Kitty Kantilla, and look at my own incorporation of pattern as a pictorial device through the exhibition Wonder at Place Gallery in May 2009.

Art theorist Lorand Hegyi refers to artists as ‘solitary story-tellers….contextualized in the immediate reality of a micro-community,’\(^{21}\) re-iterating Lyotard’s rejection of the ‘grand-narrative.’\(^{22}\) Central to the final chapter is the valley as a foundation for multiple narratives. By being attentive to divergence and overlaps in narratives of Indigenous and white cultures, and between mainstream or recognized myths or narratives as opposed to ‘small storytelling,’ I


exploit personal narratives in the studio to create sometimes ambiguous imagery to uncover ‘landscape memoirs’ in paint.

Dissanayake’s four-point model discussed earlier comes close to the criteria I used to evaluate Indigenous artworks in the art centres, and I have used her framework in parts of the paper as a reference point for discussing paintings that have strong appeal for my arts practice; I also critique my studio work using this standard in Studio Part IV, at the close of the final chapter.

The intention is for the exegesis and studio work to build strong grounds for the continued practice of landscape painting, despite the challenge posed by broad acceptance of Aboriginal art as the most appropriate and powerful expression of landscape today. By reflecting the depth and eclecticism of thinking that underpins the studio processes and production I aim to shed light on the multiple layers and ideas that underpin all successful artworks.

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23 My generalization was visually captivating, beautiful or outstanding aesthetically; The story or narrative, including the place and traditions of origin; Inherent but inaccessible ceremonial or secret/sacred possibilities; and political and celebratory documents of identity and presence.
1. Una Rey *Lost kitchen: goldenrod* (detail) 2008 oil on canvas