

# The Challenged Landscape

In 1980 I met **Bonita Ely** in Rundle Street Mall Adelaide at a performance titled *Murray River Punch* (1980). She was wearing a twin set and pearls as she offered passersby a lethal cocktail containing a recipe of contents drawn from the Murray River. It was a time when the women's art movement was a proactive force and my head was full of feminist ideas. I had no knowledge there was a problem with Australia's landscape, yet from 1977 the Murray River was showing signs of stress with higher than normal levels of salt.

Since then Ely has become a leader in environmental art. Having grown up in Robinvale near Mildura in Victoria she has direct experience of that river's importance in relation to the land. Known mostly for her sculpture and installation work, she has recently made documentary photography her central medium in *The Murray's Edge* (2007). Her work in **The Challenged Landscape** includes a small selection of photographs from the series.

*The Murray's Edge* seems an appropriate summation of Ely's work on the Murray, a devastatingly honest depiction of the river's trajectory from its inception in the Snowy Mountains to its mouth at the Coorong in South Australia where it meets the Southern Ocean. In Ely's words: *The Murray is beset with blue green algae, turbidity, acid sulphate contamination, salination, torpidity, dried up lakes and red river gum die back. In South Australia it is barely flowing. Lake Alexandrina, the river's estuary, is a massive dust bowl dispersed with shallow pools of acid sulphate water.*



Ely takes an archaeological approach to the Murray. She is interested in the human interaction with the river, finding unprocessed garbage and general evidence of disrespect for the river and the environment connected to it. The water flow to the many lakes, anabranches and billabongs along the river has been blocked and redirected and the water is prioritised for agriculture and irrigation. Agricultural practices like ploughing are soaking up the water supply. As a result the ecosystems that depend on the lakes, the animals, the bird life and the fish are gone and the trees around the lakes are dying. Ely also refers to areas of Aboriginal occupation, for example, *Near Robinvale: Latje Latje Country* which depicts river red gums near Robinvale.

A number of the artists in *The Challenged Landscape* have spent their childhood in country Australia.

**Ruby Davies** grew up beside the Darling River on a sheep station near Wilcannia in western NSW. In an attempt to understand the environmental destruction that she has witnessed Davies has devoted much of her artistic practise to documenting the Darling River near Wilcannia, creating an invaluable record of its behaviour over time. Since 1991 Davies has seen the Darling River under circumstances of extremes; completely dry – captured in *Water as Life: The Town of Wilcannia and the Darling/Baaka* (2007) and swelling with water in *October 1998* (2010).

Davies' photographic work reflects a history of developments in camera technology that parallel the changes in the river. She has used various cameras ranging from handheld pinholes to airborne cameras suspended on a kite, to multiple cameras that create stereo effects.

Davies is interested in the paradox between the wide expanse of this semi-arid landscape and ongoing historical divisions and conflicts across its surface. Her forensic yet very personal commitment to imaging the river is evident in these notes sent to me in April 2009:



*It is important that recent battles over the privatisation of river water for the irrigation industry are seen in the context of earlier conflicts over both land and water as the first Europeans (and the sheep and cattle industries) destroyed the tribal lands of the Bakindji people. The images from Water Divining are influenced by my aerial photographic series Expanse (2005) and are also a response to the works of Indigenous artist Tommy McRae (1835 – 1901), particularly his insightful depictions of gum trees. The images are taken after there was a reasonable amount of water flowing in the Darling again and concentrate on the changing shadows and colours on the surface of the water as a way to imagine a wider view of the earth as part of a larger planetary system.*

The Darling runs from central Queensland down through NSW until it joins with the Murray at Wentworth just west of Mildura in Victoria, before

flowing to the ocean in South Australia at the lower lakes and the Coorong.

**Nici Cumpston** is unique in this group of artists in being indigenous. In addition to being a fine artist she is Assistant Curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia that makes her contribution an important one primarily because it emphasises the essential importance of the Aboriginal relationship to land.



In her artist statement Cumpston states: *I am connected to the Murray and the Darling River systems through my Barkindi family and for the past eighteen months, I have been documenting the demise of Nookamka Lake, otherwise known as Lake Bonney in the Riverland of South Australia. In September 2007 a decision was made to stop the flow of water into the lake from the Murray River. The water is receding at a much faster rate than was initially predicted, and as a result, there are many Aboriginal artefacts and remains being exposed. The original custodians of this country, on the west side of Lake Bonney, were the Nookamka people. The 'signs' (tree scars and ring trees) in the landscape, are evidence of Aboriginal occupation and reflect the connection people have had with this place over tens of thousands of years.*

Cumpston's wide format, large scale photographs panning and describing the horizon line of Nookamka Lake and the trees impacted by the cessation of sufficient water, are exquisite artworks made more so by a technique of photographing in black and white and then painstakingly and lovingly hand colouring the black and white print.

Interestingly, **Stephanie Valentin** is the fourth artist in *The Challenged Landscape* to have inherited a relationship with a particular location in Australia. Having grown up on a farm in the Murray Mallee area of South Australia, she frequently returns to work there, referencing the fragile and changing environment in the context of the human impact on its stability and climate change. The semi-arid mallee serves to illustrate a landscape poised on the edge of the habitable, between arable and desert.

Like the other artists in the exhibition, the imprint of this heritage has compelled Valentin to respond to the complexities of the relationship between humans and the environment. Her chosen artistic practice is more

conceptual and less documentary than the artists discussed so far, working rather with the imaginary. The passion for investigation into the realm of science and environmental balance is self evident in her memorable and unique work.

The series represented in *The Challenged Landscape* is *earthbound* (2009), in this series Valentin arranges scientific objects directly onto the soil using moonlight in combination with artificial light. Working with analogue film she forgoes the convenience of a digital camera thereby 'exposing' the process to the vagaries of chance and a dependency on environmental conditions. Her photographic professionalism shines through the poetically conceptual scenarios that provoke dreamlike contemplation.

A poignant image is *Rainbook* (2009) features the 1977 entry in a ledger in which her father diligently registered rainfall over many years.

She commented on the series that they are: "set in the ambiguous light between dusk and full moon, these tableaux appear as open ended experiments or apparitions that allude to our tenuous connection to the earth and the need to decipher its recent and elusive permutations."



The work of **Peter Solness** has an uncanny relationship to that of Stephanie Valentin. He also works under cover of dark, often at full moon (because he needs it to see what he is doing) with unusual lighting sources, in this case an array of small torches that he uses as a painter would use a brush. His canvas is the digital screen on his digital SLR camera. He exposes the digital file many times over as he enacts his genie-like work within the framed image area. One image can take up to four hours to produce. It is all in a nights work for Solness in the bushland within sixty kilometres of Sydney's CBD, an area that houses over four million people.

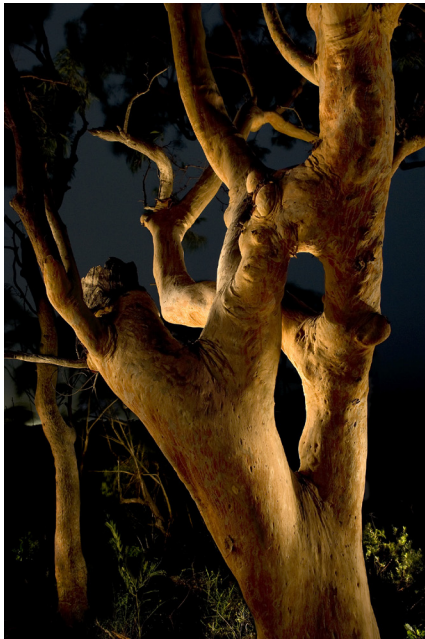
You may wonder at Solness' inclusion in an exhibition that is focussing on environmental devastation. The importance of his inclusion is a crucial and celebratory one. Solness documents the natural world that exists around us in an appropriately romantic way. He wants

his audience to realise its importance, and to honour and care for it. "Look at what is around us," he seems to be saying. This landscape is stunningly beautiful and it is all around us. These trees and plants are dependant on a balanced ecosystem and the significant elements of water, earth and air. Changes in weather cause water, and therefore land, to dry up.

Solness' titles express his enthusiasm for the existence of the trees, rocks and plants within his images – *Extraordinary Tree* (2009), *Splendid Rock*. (2010).

Solness expresses his intentions for the work in this way: 'My intention is to depict the landscape of the Sydney Basin region as a primitive and exotic place. I

want to recreate the same sense of wonder and strangeness that was felt by the first white settlers to these shores in the late 18th Century. By selectively choosing environments where the pulse of the natural world is still strong, I'm hoping to create a reference point and a reminder to us all, that the natural world, with all its primal energy and magnificent design, will ultimately prevail over the vanity of passing civilizations.'



**Michael Hall** has a point of difference from the other artists in *The Challenged Landscape*. He is confronting the issues of climate change head on and declares this in his artist statement: *Mainstream Australia will not be aware we are the world's largest emitter of CO2 per head of population. We emit a staggering 20.58 tons per head surpassing the USA in 2009*. His project is ambitious in that he is documenting the effects of climate change in Australia and throughout the world. He is doing so with a large format film camera that by nature lends weight to the impact of the image because it yields fine quality in the print.

Two series by Hall have been selected for the exhibition. One depicts in a classic picturesque way, the eerie effect of a desiccated landscape resulting from a paucity of water. Many of Hall's works confuse the eye and mind because they play with the conventions of landscape photography. They present a beautifully composed landscape which has associations to traditional representations of landscape, yet at closer scrutiny it is something else. This is very much the case in *Drought* (2009) where the cracked earth and dried out trees against a pale blue sky seem to suggest perfection yet quite the opposite is being depicted.

The second series documents bushfires. It seemed important to include fire as one of the essential elements alongside, water, earth and ether. When the system is out a balance it is either too wet or too dry. In most cases we have seen here, there is a paucity of moisture, water, and therefore of life. When temperatures escalate the earth dries out and fire can result. The graphic devastation caused by fire is vividly depicted in Hall's series.



In traditional Indian Ayurvedic belief there are five elements that are the fundamental building blocks of the universe. They are Ether, Air, Fire, Water and Earth. When these elements fall out of equilibrium we must take action to bring them into balance. This idea applies to human health as well as to nature. In one of Stephanie Valentin's earlier series, *ether* (2006) she focuses upon important ecological issues. She says about this series, *ether reflects upon the unwitting engagement of the landscape as laboratory, and an altering of the chemical composition of air and ocean is an experiment with increasingly complex consequences*.

There is clear commitment and concern in the work of these photographers. It is said we can no longer create social change through photography however these images are refreshing in their passion.

May Peter Solness' torchlight magic, Nici Cumpston's portrayal of the devastated landscape as beauty, Stephanie Valentin's tableaux of the imagination, Ruby Davies' passionate engagement with the Darling, Bonita Ely's thorough and determined gaze at the Murray and Michael Hall's ambition to alert us to the need for global change - educate us and arouse our intelligence to appreciate the landscape around us before it is too late.

### Sandy Edwards, March 2010

#### Images

**Bonita Ely** *Murray Headwaters: Spring*, 2008, inkjet print. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

**Ruby Davies**, *Water as life: The town of Wilcannia and the Darling / Baaka*, 2007, pure pigment print on art paper, edition 1/5

**Nici Cumpston** *Nookamka - Lake Bonney*, 2010, inkjet archival print on canvas, hand coloured with watercolours and pencils. Courtesy the artist and Gallerysmith, Melbourne.

**Stephanie Valentin** *Rainbook* 2009, from the *earthbound* series, pigment print, Courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney.

**Peter Solness**, *Extraordinary Tree*, 2009, inkjet prints on watercolour paper, Courtesy the artist.

**Michael Hall** *Drought* (2009) from the climate change series, digital print, Courtesy the artist.