

## The Tyranny of Paradise or ...on being an emerging artist in Darwin

*We travelled about six miles and a half NNW...The sandy slopes around the swamps were covered with Banksia, the Melaleuca gum, and Pandanus and a rich profusion of grasses and low sedges surrounded the deep pools of spring water. Kangaroos and various birds; particularly the white cockatoo, were numerous; and the little bees came like flies on our hands and on my paper, and indicated an abundance of honey; a small species of cicada had risen from its slumbers and was singing most cheerfully.<sup>1</sup>*

This engaging view of a part of the Northern Territory not far from Darwin by explorer Ludwig Leichhardt in 1845 suggests an abundant, bountiful land, almost a land of 'milk and honey'. However, on the same page of his journal, he describes the "disheartening and

sickening view of a tremendously rocky country" that he and his companions still have to traverse.

The writing in this journal shows the history of white interaction with the land, seen as both enticing and inviting and as frightening and alien. The journal expresses a deeply ambivalent view of place that is echoed in the sentiments of many of the people who choose to live and work in the Top End of Australia. There is often a strong sense of attraction and repulsion, "anxiety and desire" (to borrow a phrase from Alice Springs artist Pam Lofts) that you encounter as you become subject to the inherently cyclical nature of living in the Northern Territory.

As the manic excitement of the dry season, with its plethora of Festivals, conferences, exhibitions and interstate visitors begins to dissipate, the build-up to the Wet starts again in earnest. A certain sense of apprehension pervades the community. This is not merely trepidation about how we will cope with the build-up and its madness, but is also to do with the nagging concern about which friends and colleagues are going to announce that they are leaving. Can they stay for one more season or will they too have to move on for the sake of career, family or sanity?

The condition of being an emerging artist in Darwin is troublesome as it seems that one does not so much emerge in Darwin, as transit through it. The notion of emergence is so often coupled with the act of leaving that the two become synonymous. There are many reasons why it is difficult to

sustain a viable practice in Darwin. A scarcity of exhibition venues, a lack of rigorous criticism, distance from major shows, and not least the preconceptions of others as to what should constitute art from this region: the usual peripheral gripes.

However the issue of transience in the Territory is one that can be overplayed. There is a solid community of resident, non-indigenous artists who have worked in the Territory for a long time, and who, despite their marginalised status and small number, have worked consistently. Recently there is a feeling that a new generation of younger artists is going to stay around for a while, for whom the obvious detractions are outweighed by the attractions. There seems to be a genuine buzz about the place. Some like myself have found this to be a land of incredible opportunity, uniquely stimulating and challenging. It is also for many a very warm, supportive and particularly right-sized pond in which to learn to swim.

For those who stay for more than a few seasons there are some abiding issues that are pertinent to art practice in this region. Some inform, encroach upon and enrich one's practice, others represent the serious shortcomings of working in an area so marginal to the mainstream that the place seems to exist solely in the imagination of others. The peculiarities and specificities of place, physical, cultural and political are so pronounced and unique here that many on their first visit remark that "it doesn't feel like Australia at all" or rather that it feels like some construction of the 'real Australia', raw and untouched.

Some salient points that make Darwin unique are its Wet/Dry tropical climate; its significant indigenous population (25%); its relative proximity to centres in Asia rather than to those of Australia; its politically conservative Country Liberal Party government, in power for the entire 19 years of self government; its ethnic diversity; its banal, suburban, public service mentality; its alarmingly quick makeover as a slick resort town; and its proximity to the most extraordinary natural wilderness, that at the same



Cath Bowdler *Scott Creek Installation* galvanised iron discs, circa 1m square. (An environmental installation on a cattle station 70 km west of Katherine NT. Installed for six months from the wet to the dry 1996, and documented monthly when accessible.)



time is the oldest consistently inhabited environment on earth.

It is a place of extremes and dichotomies, yet simple binary readings, wet/dry, old culture/new culture, cosmopolitan/parochial mask an intensely rich and layered environment. The interrogation/rejection of popular stereotypes, ie. that of the exotic, isolated frontier, is necessary in order to gain any real understanding of the place.

The issue of isolation in a physical sense can be overplayed. No longer in this digitally interconnected world where communities in Arnhem Land have their own website can one cry poor about isolation at least in terms of information exchange. The real problem for artists is not isolation but invisibility.

This invisibility arises not only as a result of distance from metropolitan centres but also: "...as a result of a general identification of Territory visual culture as Aboriginal."<sup>2</sup>

The issue of the interaction between black and white is inescapable as not only are Aboriginal people and their art a constant, ubiquitous presence, but their relation to the place we inhabit is palpable. In fact most non-indigenous artists find the proximity to Aboriginal art and artists deeply inspirational and many regard it as a rare privilege. Rather than being overshadowed by the enormity of Aboriginal art in the region, it can be viewed almost as a way in, to help people understand this environment more fully through a deeply felt and coded level of knowledge of which we can only hope to scratch the surface. As Gary Catalano has noted: "It is exactly this deeply intimate sense of place which Aboriginal culture has to offer Australians of European descent. Although the whole thrust of modern technology seeks to erase distinctions of place, it is only in relation to a deeply known place that we gain full possession of and insight into our being."<sup>3</sup> This is one of the abiding attractions of staying here.

Invisibility is not merely confined to the art world. In national newspapers Darwin is routinely left out of articles and off tables and graphs indicating national trends whilst statistics from the other state

and territory capitals create the national picture. This is not a big issue in itself but it points to a problem of perception. It is as if Darwin does not exist statistically, or in reality, in the consciousness of the rest of the country but inhabits the imagination, or perhaps the subconscious, of the nation as the last exotic untouched outpost. When an outsider envisions art from the Top End they tend to think of either the profusion of Aboriginal art or the often banal representations of Kakadu billabongs painted *en masse* for the tourist market, often by interstate artists. To inhabit the space between these two extremes of representation can be particularly difficult.

I did my training in Sydney and lived there for many years before my precipitous and unplanned six month trip to the Territory turned into seven years later. Previously as a committed urban dweller I would never, in my wildest dreams, have imagined that I would have taken to birdwatching, or be making art about the landscape/natural environment. It was very comforting to note, on a recent trip to Sydney, that I was not the only one working *Between Art and Nature*.

But what different nature, if the recent *Perspecta 97* exhibitions are any guide. Here we don't have "nature as culture" or "nature as mediated experience". We have "nature as nature" dominating our experience. Literally creeping into your environment, battering down the door, living in the closet, and on the lounge room wall, laughing at you at night, growing, creeping crawling, overwhelming. Especially as the humidity rises. The interface between culture and nature is impossible to ignore here.

When I first came to the Territory I was initially seduced, as was Ludwig Leichhardt, by that wonderful profusion of wildlife in my immediate vicinity; the red dragonflies, the rainbow bee-eaters, the finches and the frill-necked lizard on the mango tree in the garden; the seemingly exotic. But after I had been here longer another layer of perception opened on a macro rather than a micro level. Despite the rhetoric of the tourist brochures, the

landscape here is not easy to love, let alone understand. It does not fit into classically defined or constructed parameters of the beautiful or the picturesque. There is a phrase used by some disgruntled tourists in Kakadu which is "Kakadon't". This describes their dissatisfaction at having to sit through the seemingly endless kilometres of flat scrubby bush in between the good bits; the 'eminences' that we can understand as grand, important or culturally significant.

It is this landscape's very alienness, its refusal to signify that is its strength, its difference. Analysing our position in relation to the environment, a position which is tenuous and insubstantial as well as oppressive and endangering, is challenging. Negotiating one's own relationship with it in the light of its indigenous history is also problematic. Attempts to deal with the land in any meaningful way can often seem paltry and insubstantial. I can only deal with metaphors of white intrusions into the landscape so I choose to work on cattle stations for that reason and tend to agree with Maurice O'Riordan's assertion that: "Post-colonial art practice in the Territory is about collapsing the ways we have objectified the land and its indigenous cultures."<sup>4</sup>

In the *Between Art & Nature* catalogue, curator Victoria Lynn states: "At a time when the connection between land and the indigenous people of Australia is under threat of being severed, it is particularly appropriate that *Australian Perspecta 1997* is expressing the poetic, symbolic and historical meeting points of human culture with the natural world."<sup>5</sup> This is exactly the major thrust of a lot of work in the Northern Territory by both black and white artists. □

#### Footnotes

1. Leichhardt, Ludwig *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Moreton Bay to Port Essington* T&W Boone, London, 1847 p475.
2. O'Riordan, Maurice 'Contemporary Territory Review' *Eyeline* 25, Spring, 1994, p45.
3. Catalano, Gary *An Intimate Australia* Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985 p97.
4. O'Riordan, *op cit*, p46.
5. Lynn, Victoria *Between Art and Nature Australian Perspecta 97* catalogue 1997, p17.