

Holding Silence

Unique visions of Territory landscapes

11 September – 24 October

Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts & Culture Centre

BILLY BENN PERRURLE JENNIFER TAYLOR SARAH PIRRIE ADRIAN JANGALA ROBERTSON
LINDA JOY ALISON INKAMALA GILLIAN BANKS KIM MAHOOD MARIE ABBOTT
LENIE NAMATJIRA GLORIA PANNKA CURATED BY CATH BOWDLER

Billy Benn Perrurle, *Artetyerre*, acrylic on canvas



Billy Benn



Jennifer Taylor, *Mparntwe*, oil on board

How, in this post-colonial era, can artists engage with representing landscape? Country across the Northern Territory bears the visible legacy of colonial practices and environmental degradation. When non-Indigenous artists paint landscape in the NT they are invariably painting what was, and still to a large extent is, Aboriginal land – land subject to a violent history of dispossession.

In this way landscape painting in the Northern Territory can be inherently problematic for non-Indigenous artists despite their undoubted long-term connection to country and their strong feelings of attachment to it. Representing country can be seen

as putting a claim on it.

For Aboriginal people country is all – the font of knowledge, the law and stories. They believe that during the creation period features of the land were made by the actions of ancestral heroes who imprinted their bodies, their tools and their actions onto the ground. These sites became imbued with power and energy and individuals are spiritually linked to these sites. Country is seen as alive and dynamic, however today many Indigenous people are alienated and exiled from their ancestral lands and memories are often associated with loss.

This does not diminish non-Indigenous artists' relationships to country or their right to represent it. Jennifer Taylor has written about these issues as part of coming to terms with being a painter of country in Central Australia. She believes that painting *can* be a form of 'caring for country' for non-Indigenous artists, if approached from an ethical and considered position. She considers Ian Burn's assertion that contemporary Australian landscape painting is primarily concerned with loss and asks how 'painting can assert continuity of connection with

country' for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists who choose to work in the landscape tradition (Taylor, 2014:v). The title of the exhibition *Holding Silence* refers to the notion of 'holding' or caring for country; of being in it and being respectful of its power, vulnerability and history. The exhibition explores some of the issues faced by landscape painters in the Northern Territory today.

For many non-Indigenous artists there are some notable strategies by which they can actively engage with the 'placedness' and the presence of country.

Plein air painting is painting in the 'open air' directly from the landscape, capturing the immediacy and vitality of the experience.

Plein air painting was pioneered in Europe in the 1850s by the Barbizon School of painters and made famous by Monet and other French Impressionists. They wanted to capture the quality of light and atmospheric dynamism by moving out of their dingy studios with newly developed portable paint tubes and collapsible easels and painting what they saw. Their works were a revelation that changed the course of painting irrevocably.



Gillian Banks, *Glimpse of Magic NT*, oil on canvas

Plein air painting has a phenomenological dimension where the senses are actively engaged and the artist is attuned to the sights, sounds, smells and atmosphere around them. It is an embodied, grounded and immersive practice. For many contemporary artists *plein air* painting is about being present – listening to the land and feeling its power directly. A number of artists in this exhibition produce works in the field as well as in the studio, such as Linda Joy, Gillian Banks, Jennifer Taylor and Kim Mahood. These artists possess the ability to work quickly in an uninhibited and direct way. Jennifer Taylor in particular has explored painting on Aboriginal country in central Australia through *plein air* practice. She states ‘Celebrating country through painting can be an aspect of ‘holding’ country, protecting and honouring it as a ground for life’ (Taylor, 2014:5).

For some artists there is an acknowledgement of Indigenous presence and the consequences of colonialism evident in their work. Jennifer Taylor and Kim Mahood maintain active relationships with Indigenous people in the country that they represent. Kim Mahood grew up in Central Australia and on Tanami Downs Station, and has maintained strong connections with the Warlpiri Traditional Owners of the station. She continues to spend several months each year in the Tanami and Great Sandy Desert region, working on cultural and environmental mapping projects. Her works tend to be intimate in scale and often feature snippets of



Adrian Jangala Robertson, *Yalpirakinu*, acrylic on canvas



Linda Joy, *Wurre (Rainbow Valley)*, ink on canvas



Alison Inkamala, *Finke River, Ntaria*, acrylic on canvas

text with musings on cross-cultural exchanges or misunderstandings – an Indigenous presence literally written into the work.

The majority of works in this exhibition are small watercolours on paper. This points to another strategy for painting a contested landscape – scale. These artists paint on a scale that is respectful and reverent. There is a lightness of touch and a subtlety of treatment. Gillian Banks and Linda Joy are long term Territorians who feel a deep attachment to the environment. Joy's works in this exhibition are the result of a residency in Alice Springs and are part of a large body of work documenting major sites and landforms in the NT. She often uses an aerial perspective, creating mesmerising works of great detail. Banks' works are loose and impressionistic with an ethereal quality. Like many artists in the exhibition she keeps a visual diary of sketches that may be translated into more finished works in the studio. Sarah Pirrie's delicate watercolour and pencil works are from the *Terraforming* series. Though not landscapes in the traditional sense they portray a littoral zone where sedimentary rock and the detritus of the modern world coalesce to reveal the effect of human waste on the ecosystem.

Interestingly the Indigenous works in this exhibition are not created *en plein air*. They are painted from memory and deep knowledge of ancestral country. The artists from *Ngurratjuta Itja Ntjarra / Many Hands Arts Centre* paint in the

Hermannsburg watercolour tradition initiated by Albert Namatjira and Rex Battarbee in the 1930s. For many years this style of painting was critically diminished as 'chocolate box' art, painted by Aboriginal people who merely copied a European style. This view was revised in the 1980s and there has been an acknowledgement that the artists of the Hermannsburg School view their country in the same way as other Aboriginal artists, as animated and spiritually alive. They work in the art centre but they are calling up their country and caring for it by depicting it in distinctly personal styles. Jillian Namatjira says that 'just like dot painting, landscape painting... keeps the dreaming strong' (Taylor, 2014:198). Wenten Rubuntja discussed the degradation of his sacred country by tourism and other European interventions but continued by saying 'Doesn't matter what sort of painting we do in this country, it still belongs to the people' (Taylor, 2014:198).

Alison Inkamala was also born near Hermannsburg and learned to paint in the watercolour tradition. However after a stroke she abandoned watercolours for acrylics as they were easier for her to use. She now paints in Alice Springs in a loose and raw style, depicting her country but often includes roads and other remnants of the present day world.

Billy Benn Perrurle's jewel-like vignettes depict his father's country of Artetyerre (Harts Range). They are vivid and immediate interpretations

of a remembered and loved country. Perrurle developed his idiosyncratic style, like fellow artist Adrian Jangala Robertson, at Bindi Arts in Alice Springs. He passed away in 2012 but poignantly stated that he wanted to paint every hill in his country so it would not be forgotten.

Holding Silence brings together a diverse group of artists with a shared interest in depicting country. There are distinct threads running through their works and methodologies. Landscape painting can be seen as an old and somewhat tired genre, but this exhibition poses some ideas about artists who chose to represent 'country' rather than landscape, and celebrate their place in the Northern Territory.

Cath Bowdler, 2015

Taylor, J., *Portraits of country: a plein air painter in Arrernte country*, 2014
https://espace.cdu.edu.au/eserv/cdu:44885/Thesis_CDU_44885_Taylor_J.pdf



**Godinymayin Yijard Rivers
Arts & Culture Centre**

Stuart Highway, Katherine East
 08 8972 3751
shop@gyracc.org.au

www.gyracc.org.au



Proudly sponsored by
**Northern Territory
Government**