

# LAND*mark* – *Undermining the mindset*

## ***From Railway Avenue to Sulphide Street***

It all started with a road trip....a little bit research trip, a little bit tourist jaunt, a little bit “fear and loathing”. It turned into a sensory overload.

Impressions of Townsville with its quirky domestic architecture, its prominent physical landmarks and its rapidly changing suburban face were strong, but travelling on that ribbon of bitumen threading its way through an endless horizon of yellow grass, a seeming sea of bleached monotony, through a place that from my perspective seemed used up and bled dry, those impressions were stronger. Arriving at our destination, 45 degrees in the shade, weighed down by the climate and cowering under the phallic presence of the stack, omnipresent and omnipotent, yet lit up like a Christmas tree at night, a strong sense of the bizarre took hold.

Covering such a huge distance, through a country of others, meeting artists, listening to an enormous range of concerns and a thousand stories; travelling through places so different and distinct, each requiring its own response, perhaps even its own exhibition; how does one draw the threads together. How can one have anything but a personal response?

What emerged were many personal responses to the thing that dominates in the region, the land itself and the climate. The word land is a particularly difficult one. Distinctions between land and country and representations of the land are problematic and culturally loaded, often referencing the metaphysical as well as the tangible. The country in this region is also a contested site on many levels. Words such as pastoralist and environmentalist are not without connotation. Yet simple binary readings are meaningless. The overriding impression is of a **land** that is **marked** by its inhabitants.

The word **landmark** and its use as an exhibition title is almost a cliché, too often used. But try as I might I could not find a word or phrase that had more relevant connections and more layers of meaning that pertain to the concerns of the show that were derived from the concerns of the artists.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary lists nine separate meanings for the word **land**, almost twenty for the word **mark**, and three for the word **landmark**. I have used the device of a number of these dictionary definitions to interweave certain notions, suppositions or observations that occurred to me as a starting point for the artists to work from. They still underpin the concerns of the show.

**land n. 1.** ground, soil, expanse of country

*On any trip between Townsville and Mt Isa it would be hard not to notice the expanse of land there; the vastness of the vista, an absence of water, a sense of fragility (the dry tropics, a rainshadow, they say), parched friable soil, in which life can lie dormant in deep cracks, the prickly acacia or chiny apple ubiquitous and triumphant. What happened?*

**land n. 2.** solid part of the earth's crust.

*The surface of the earth and under the crust, the layers below are visible, cut like a deep wound. Snatched colour, huge machines, gouging, retrieving the mother lode. Not always solid, that subterranean strength belying the fragility on the surface. Fossil reminders of another time....Huge eminences, outcrops, castles of rock become landmarks themselves.*

**land n. 3.** ground fenced off for tillage and agriculture

*The pastoral industry and its offshoots has had a long and complex history in the region. Notions of fencing, creating boundaries for land use have many layers, many distinct histories.*

**mark n. 1.** cross etc. made in place of a signature by an illiterate person

*A story from Mt Isa about a drover, not so long ago, leaving his thumbprint as his mark on the boss's form so that he could move freely across those boundaries made by men on their land. Another pastoral history.*

**mark n. 2.** written or painted symbol or sign

*There are signs everywhere and names. Street signs like Carbonate St and Sulphide St, old mine names derived from a stencil cut from the Texaco Star on a 4 gallon petrol drum; Black star, Shooting Star, Roo Star, Dark Star.. Signs forbidding entrance and warning of danger proliferate; EXPLOSIVES NO THROUGH ROAD, NO ENTRY AUTHORISED ENTRY ONLY, CAUTION HEAVY HAULAGE AND EXPLOSIVE VEHICLES, CRT "Your Local Bloke", Kalkadoon Mining Co. etc. Grids for streets with names from 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> that don't seem to be in sequence The list is endless.*

**Mark n. 3.** trace or visible sign left by person or thing, stain or scar

*We all leave our mark somehow. Some marks are symbolic some are inscribed on the land as scars and wounds. It is tempting for the outsider to see much of this country as a wounded environment - a terra infirma - that has been bled dry and stained forever. But this simple view may not be the case. The mine at Mt Isa can be seen as an open sore, the land in between when viewed from the road can be seen as almost dead, but this belies the true picture of a multitude of environments, where land is not merely at the mercy of our ministrations, with its own cycles, its own play between strength and fragility, however marked it seems. Metaphorically the further we go under the surface of appearances the closer we are to actuality.*

**mark v. 1.** trace out boundaries

*Boundaries, fences, chicken wire and cyclone mesh. The demarcation of the suburban block in the region with the low fence and, most often, the absence of wild foliage, the manicured lawn, the couple of ornamental pines, the utterly*

*seductive wooden boxed-in structure plonked in the middle is a highlight and points to that enduring Australian duality between horror and utopia. Tracing boundaries is akin to staking out ones possession, stamping a notion of ownership. No where was that more obvious than in the area behind MIM - a sense of possession of site so total, so exclusive, so secret, so paranoid..... forbidden access to a white man's sacred site.*

**landmark n. 1.** conspicuous object in district

*So many to choose from, but say... that fabulous phallic stack, the sugar shaker, Castle Hill, Venus Battery, the golden arches.....*

**landmark n. 2.** object or event marking a stage in a process or a turning point in history

*On the very day of our arrival in Mt Isa, sitting in the pub with the flickering TV in the corner, a silence fell as the announcement was made on the news, the Wik bill had been thrown out of the Senate. Vociferous opinion bounced around the room as all other news was overshadowed. Here that decision has consequences.*

During this time when issues of land use, ownership and possession had been foremost in the mind....at a time of meeting many people and artists concerned about their environment, its fragility and vulnerability, its guardianship...the coincidence of this news item seemed particularly synchronous. The very strong sense of parallel black and white histories in Townsville, Charters Towers and Mt Isa seemed pertinent. Histories that intertwined like those of Jupiter and Hugh Mosman, Townsville and Robert Towns, the slave trader; stories of both Aboriginal and white drovers and miners; stories of pastoral families and the fierce battles of the Kalkadoons, histories on a personal level that illuminate the big picture with a wealth of detail; layers of meaning and subtleties that are often glossed over in the rush to make laws and paint easily digested 'big pictures'. Landmark decisions are to be made this year.

There are many links between this project and *Mining the Mind Phase 1*. Not only the obvious one that mining as a land use practice links all the areas together historically, economically and environmentally. But in this concept it is the metaphorical usage of the term mining, the mining of personal histories, digging beneath the surface, undermining the big picture/stereotype, taking the subterranean stance, investigating the quirky, the idiosyncratic, the personal.

Being an outsider the impressions this region left on me were fleeting yet strong sensations. The artists in this show have all lived here for a considerable time. They have all responded to the theme differently but they share an interest in layering their work with deeply mined personal histories. They are not people who have marked the land but rather have been marked by it.

Cath Bowdler 1998

**Robin Bassingthwaite** lives and works on a station outside Richmond. Her work alludes to childhood memories of her life on the land in this remote region. The emu eggs with their inherent fragility/strength and brittleness can be seen as a metaphor for the land as well as the physical presences of the environment. Robin has used the pioneer craft of emu egg carving to inscribe the work with further layers of meaning and text including the traditional christmas cake recipe of her childhood made from the eggs themselves. In this work robin has lyrically interwoven metaphor, a strong sense of personal history and a feeling of place.

**Shirley MacNamarra** lives on a cattle station outside Mt Isa and has worked as an artist across media. Her position as an Aboriginal woman and a pastoralist whose family has been droving across central Qld for generations puts her in a unique position. Her work is deeply rooted in a sense of country referencing a pastoral history that is Aboriginal as well as white. She is using a form of layered ready made in the old morticed posts and rails from a disused stockyard on her station. The posts, at once anthropomorphic and monumental, are scored over with pentimenti, a literal layering of history of the animals and their handlers. The posts are boundary markers, defining space, marked by the land and its occupants. The posts speak of isolation, hard work and a rough-hewn strength yet when taken out of their context are strangely vulnerable and poignant.

**Barbera Pierce** lives and works in Townsville in the shadow of Castle Rock. Her practice, which could loosely be called assemblage, focuses on the local environment that encroaches on the boundary of her dwelling. Her concerns are often domestic and as such her constructions have referenced shelters. This piece is a measuring device pertaining to notions of marking boundaries and surveying. Its scale referring to the approximate length of outstretched arms. Pierces agglomerations of personal memorabilia, building material and found objects bound together suggest another interweaving of personal history both material and immaterial. The support structure, itself a warping board references the elevated house as material support for the personally charged fragments. Pierce sees the coming together of these pieces as akin to the process of osmosis where the distinction between inside and outside are blurred.. The slow organic process of construction, as pieces are added, altered and rearranged suggests the formation of a microcosm and the passing of time as the parts are assimilated into a complex and ambiguous whole.

**Anne Lord** is a Townsville based artist and academic who works in many media. Lord was raised on a property in the Julia Creek area and much of her previous work has been in relation to land use and land degradation in its physical and psychological manifestations. Anne uses ready made *objet trouve* of a series of metal offset printing plates as the substrate or ground on which she works. The layering of drawing over image and text can be seen as subverting the order of things in some way. The hidden subtext of news or information refers to land use, mining weather etc. where an equivalence is set up where these issues or specificities become a meaningless background on which marks are placed. The drawings are of hand gestures or signs and have an ambivalent relation to the text or image. The drawings are made with ochre/conté and bitumen on metal. All elements that have an earthy materiality and a layering of possible connotations and readings.

**Andrew Turrier** lives and works in Charters Towers as an artist and educator. His work is primarily about the nature of painting and illusion whilst obliquely drawing on the rather unique physical and cultural environment in which he lives. His work here is a multi-levelled discourse on the nature and the illusion of space on a metaphysical as well as a particular level. Mirror Maze, to quote Andrew is a...“painting of space that is physically very small, even claustrophobic, while visually promising an infinity....Like the mirror's surface the painted surface of the canvas is the source of the illusion.” The work also rather poetically refers to the down-at-heel mirror maze that visits Charters Towers every year at show time. The paintings speak to us of the concerns of someone living in a particular country town surrounded by an almost limitless sense of space. They contain witty jokes referencing mining, isolation, suburban dislocation, seen from a quirky personal perspective whilst also dealing with the perennial modernist dilemmas about painting itself.

**Brett Adlington** is a Townsville artist who works primarily as a photographer. Brett's focus is on the rapidly changing urban landscape. He documents the disturbing psychological

emptiness of the new housing estates that are proliferating in regional centres every where that result in a homogenising of local particularity. On the outskirts of the urban environment land is carved up and re-made into small blocks, comodified for easy sale. His photos mimic the blandness of these constructed environments with a formal minimalism but also a wry humour. The particularity of the Townsville climate and its demarcation into wet and dry is alluded to by the use of turf – the natural carpet that can be bought by the metre and layed. Notions of lawn as opposed to grass calls into question notions of nature, which becomes a quaint backdrop to an urban nightmare.

**Helen Waterer** is an artist who lived in Townsville for ten years and has recently relocated to Byron Bay. Helen's three ambiguous objects have many referents both psychological and physical and are an oblique summation of her feelings about a place in which she has spent formative years and has now left. Her concerns are with a structure of interdependence between people, communities and their environment. – "how we move from experience to different states of being". The bright lattice forms represent a coalescence of random attributes and associations with place, an interlacing of ideas. The amorphous forms can be read as flowers, or toys or odd garden tools, sweet and innocent. Yet there are more menacing associations. The lattice also references vernacular domestic architecture and domesticity itself, 'garden shed dreaming'.