

A sea of grass, a field of dreams....

The untitled installation at Scott Creek Station, a cattle property west of Katherine (NT), took place over a six-month period in 1996. It can be seen as an intervention into the landscape and as a metaphor for our intrusion into this fragile environment, which can be at once tenuous and oppressive. The work is deliberately ambiguous, both enticing and incongruous. The images depict the climatic changes experienced at the site from the monsoonal wet to the long grass of the dry season.

Cath Bowdler uses acrylic-mounted photographic prints to record her site-specific, environmental installation. She has chosen to work within a landscape that bears enigmatic signs of another cultural occupation juxtaposed with the recent occupation of the country by the pastoral industry.

This is a country that is teeming with activity and yet appears still when the viewer first engages with the subject. In the installation the silence is palpable, nonetheless the buzz of energy, hard to define, resonates from the place. Alien fixtures in a surreal landscape, the silver boats glint and reflect the light through the passage of day and night. As the last stars shake out the darkness and give way to the rising sun, a radiance and aura is reflected back at the viewer. A seductive glinting on a swathing sea of grasses fresh and tall after the torrential rains of the wet.

Such engagement invokes Walter Benjamin's description of aura. "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return".¹ Inherent in us all is a Janus like quality and with it the power to look forward and reflect backward on the darker side of an individual. The boats serve as triggers to our collective memories, contemplating the foreign impositions on the landscape created by European settlers.

Over the passage of the six months that Bowdler's boats were installed, the occupants of the termite mounds, the effects of the weather and native animals; the environment itself reclaimed the site. The cattle too played a role in the breakdown of the site as the large beasts yielded to curiosity and over time helped to dislodge the metal boats.

Cath Bowdler's installation creates an environment that both seduces and creates a sense of unease. This is an artistic response to a landscape of unique character, power and atmosphere.

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¹ Benjamin, W. cited in Waterlow, N., *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861-1996*, MCA, Sydney, 1996 p 28