

What to be or not to be?

Mildura *Palimpsest* #2

Cath Bowdler

I feel I should start this with a disclaimer, rather like the one in the exhibition's catalogue that states firmly: 'This is not a Mildura Sculpture Triennial'.¹ That said, it underlines one of the greatest problems the recent Mildura *Palimpsest* faces; that of perception and expectation. It is inevitable that any national art event with the word Mildura in the title will always be compared with the Triennials and in some measure be cast in their shadow. A hard act to follow. Everyone I have spoken to makes the assumption that the *Palimpsest* is a revival of the old event, merely assigned a new more postmodern sounding name.

Many remember the heydays of the Triennials in the mid 70s with great affection and even excitement, not just because of the quality of the work and the artists they attracted but also because of the experimental, issues-based, site-specific, ex-gallery nature of much of the work.

Palimpsest is a completely different kettle of fish. Still embryonic and not quite fully formed, it would be harsh to make comparisons.

Palimpsest #2 comes under the umbrella of the larger Mildura Arts Festival and was held at the Mildura Art Centre from February 26 to March 27 this year. It is the second time this event has been staged. The word *Palimpsest* means literally writing on an old parchment, which has been obliterated, and written over. It is used in this context to describe the way the landscape has been altered by humans and natural processes.

To quote the flyer, 'The Mildura region's economy relies principally on irrigated agriculture, tourism and dryland farming. All of these industries impacted on the land, resulting in a dramatically altered landscape'². The organisers called for work that was site-specific, installation based, sculptural and conceptual, and which explored the impact of

humans on the land and the social aspects of change. They got lots of the latter but very little of the former. Most of the work was situated in various rooms of the Mildura Art Centre. Some of these spaces were artist-friendly, some, definitely not. It was also open to all artists and all who put in proposals were accommodated in the show.

The initial impression of the exhibition was one of great variation in the quality of the works, literally the sublime to the ridiculous. Some very good pieces were interspersed with some first time efforts. Much of the work in the show was by local artists and most of them were making work about political issues close to their hearts. There were all the PC narratives of migrant workers, Aboriginal dispossession and land degradation; quite a lot of 'mea culpa' as well as wide-eyed idealism. This of course is fine if the art stands up to the worthy sentiments. If the art is a mere excuse for

the ideas, the works tend to look amateurish as some did in this show.

There were some very good works in the show nonetheless. Co-ordinator, Ian Hamilton (aka) Doolan did one of the most successful pieces, perfectly sited in a huge room with very low light, it consisted of a Beuysian strip of grey underfelt suspended on a brick wall. A fine irregular slit had been cut into it,



Pam Lofts, 'Landmarks #2', sandstone, 2 x 2ms.

through which neon light seeped. This piece was the companion piece to his light works in the irrigation canals that criss-cross the area, one of the few outdoor, site-specific pieces.

Alice Springs artist Pamela Lofts 'Landmarks #2' was situated in the same darkened room. Dramatically spotlighted, it consisted of eight beautifully striated, peach-coloured sandstone rocks from the desert near Alice Springs. Into their smooth-cut faces were carved the words, 'Tread softly

because you tread on my(your/our) dreams', a quote from WB Yeats, slightly altered to encompass more possible readings, including that of Aboriginal dreamings. These two minimal pieces worked beautifully.

Local Aboriginal artists Jill Antione and Marie Clark created a multi-media collage shown in a natural amphitheatre near the Murray. This piece was complemented by a work in the gallery where the artists used a canoe/scar motif to contain complex, digitally-manipulated images relating to their heritage in the area.

A show such as this raised some interesting if perennial issues about thematic shows and regional art. The thorny old topic raised its rather depleted head in the post-exhibition de brief that most of the artists attended on the day after the opening.

This show exemplifies all the ways in which the notion of regionalism is both a failure and a success. The underlying theme of the show, which highlights ecological and environmental degradation and the changes to the landscape, is to be applauded. It is one that works naturally in regional centres where these issues are key ones. This was stressed by co-ordinator, Ian Hamilton, in his introduction to the catalogue. 'It is in the regional centres and regional communities that the impact of global trade and resource depletion are felt most strongly – Issues like sustainability, regional identity, land and water management and reconciliation are more pressing'³.

There is a wealth of solid issue here and the strength of the show was its focus on this 'topophillia' as Neil Fetting called it⁴. Consequently the feel of the work in this show is hot, impassioned and issue based. In many ways, it is the perfect antidote to much of the cool, self referencing deconstruction seen in so much urban contemporary art. There was also a sense of earnestness and didacticism, unfortunately. This is both its saving grace and its downfall.

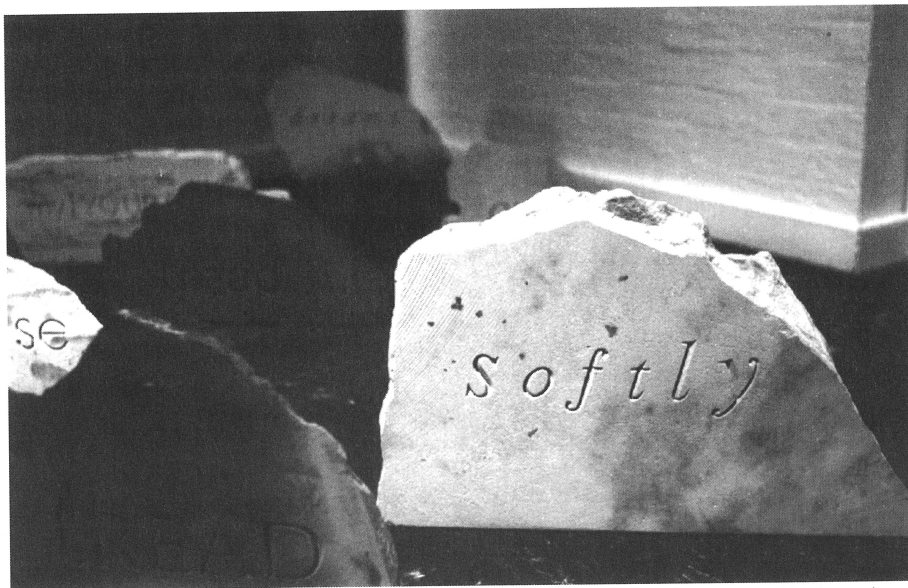
At the de-brief after the show the desire to keep the deeply egalitarian nature of the event in terms of artists inclusion and curatorial policy became evident. Issues such as local access, open curatorial policy, a deep suspicion of so called

'star' artists, were all counterpointed with the desire to raise the profile of the exhibition and attract good fundraising and good crowds. The two positions almost equally divided into two camps - one of locals who wanted the show to remain all inclusive and the other of opposing outsiders who felt a better standard was necessary.

This inclusiveness that many of the current participants were desperate to maintain and foster, of course goes with the environmentally conscious and reconciliatory theme. The fact that the organisers had such a meeting for all the artists and genuinely canvassed their views attests to the egalitarianism. But the issue remains how can a higher profile, which is necessary for the *Palimpsest* to grow and thrive, be achieved without the inclusion of more experienced, professional artists?

The Mildura *Palimpsest* is still embryonic. If it is to grow as an important national, regional art event it will need a stronger sense of direction and a stronger curatorial hand. As part of the wider Mildura Arts Festival it needs to open

during Writer's Week or when some other major events are on to provide more impetus for participants as well as audience. Major effort needs to go into encouraging site-specific or environmental works outside the gallery spaces, more in line with the theme of the show. As Steve Naylor so poignantly puts it in his 'Where to from here' musings at the end of the catalogue, 'Can this project reach the potential achieved



Pam Lofts, 'Landmarks #2' (detail), sandstone, 2 x 2ms.

by the Mildura Triennials?'⁵. He doesn't think so and I can only agree with most of his recommendations. Therefore *Palimpsest* needs to free itself from its antecedent as much as possible and create its own stamp. The environmental theme is as current and important as it ever was, as evidenced by the last *Perspecta*, *Between Art and Nature*, so the challenge is for the art live up to it in a regional centre. Hopefully next year.

Footnotes:

- 1 Ian Hamilton, Mildura *Palimpsest* # 2 Catalogue p 5
- 2 Mildura *Palimpsest* Information Flyer
- 3 Ian Hamilton, Mildura *Palimpsest* # 2 Catalogue p 5
- 4 Neil Fetting, *ibid* p 6
- 5 Steve Naylor, *ibid* p 43

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