

It's not on any map; true places never are

Lived in landscape becomes local place. The 'view' comes from the inside, as much visceral as visual.

I used to make field journals filled with pressed plants, snatches of local comment, species lists with dirt-track logs, naming stories and traces of what was before or thought to have been. Hard data, soft data to some. Search and research that a science worker does daily. Often in the remote and arid, the mudmap was the only travelling guide. Mudmaps are those jottings of tracks taken, directions headed, land features of personal meaning. Hand-sketched markers that trace passage in body and mind. In notebooks later, they appear as simplified drawings of line and text, still true to their origins but carrying new association of autobiography and abstracted depiction of place.

Poems for land and body (1997)

'Growing-up' in a landscape is perhaps more a growing of land into the body. Land is then known viscerally as lived rhythm, as much as mental image and story. Once embedded in the body, landplaces may be felt in recall as much as seen by the mind's eye. What does one make of a place newly encountered yet uncannily familiar? What does one make with the cascade of sensory memory of formative homeplaces?

"You can't go home again, it is said. Neither can you ever leave. The landscape of your childhood is ineradicable. For better or worse, it is apt to be the landscape against which all subsequent ones are measured. And in some remote place you turn a corner and are confronted with an approximation of that original landscape, the reflexive gasp is as physical as that caused by a blow to the chest. It is your 'double' that you have run into

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The desire to map and mark, in a non-literal personal route-taking, is coded deep by cultural memory and immigrant forebears. Mine were northern mountain people who traded the alpine cool of Lombardy for the wet and dry warmth of northern Queensland. Now, the north-eastern coast and its ribbon of coastal range pervades my imagination

wherever I go. Much further south, Birdwood (as it was named by early tree-fellers) marks a tiny rural community on the Forbes River, eastern New South Wales. With first encounter, this country compelled sensuous recall of those familiar homeplaces of the tropical north-east: insistent, unsettling in intensity, yet immensely intriguing.

With time, I have gone back to aesthetically explore this encounter with a “double”, and to learn local histories of person, plant, animal, from within. *Poems for Land and Body: the Birdwood Series*², an assemblage of vessels, small ceramic wall panels and paintings on board, was elicited by this sustained association over recent years. The objects made of this meeting stand as holders of encounter in absence, personal place-settings of mountain, river, season, question and suggestion. They embody response rather than depict or emulate landscape, and attempt to distil in volume and surface those spatial and temporal layers of connection and recall triggered during making itself. Embedded in their making from thought to touch is remembered rhythm and ‘feel’ – dimensions, I’d contend of the particular and the ineffable.

My main ceramic response was the minimal vessel: thin-walled reservoirs with deep interior wells and encircling outer surfaces open to personal mark and inscription. With this series, I came to a re-energised appreciation of possible languages of the vessel. Previous *Reticulae* and *Breath* series (1996–7) explored ideas of flux between inner and outer, nature and culture via perforated sculptural objects and vessel forms.³ In recent years, several contemporary craft theorists have explored the conflation of ‘vessel’, human body (usually female) and fixed containment, and the limitations of this continued association for possibilities of both body and craft.⁴ I hold a different understanding of the vessel than that derived from Euro-Christian body-as-vessel and vessel-as-body analogies. A more relevant and feasible metaphor to my intents is a biological one, where the word vessel describes an active conduit – of respiratory oxygen, blood, water, plant sugars – in a network of life support. A continuous corporeal thread between inner and outer that both contains and carries flow. Perhaps then, the empty ceramic vessel is already filled to the brim with the dynamic entity of air, encloses space shaped for contemplation, and is active in evoking memory and association. If small, its physical portability makes it truly of the body – available to the hold of hand as well as eye.

The eleven vessels of this series were thrown and altered towards subtle asymmetry and lean. Most were tall base-tapering forms that assumed the stances of vertical boles

of blue gum and rainforest species on the mountain crest. There, a sense of stilled movement often exists as satin-skinned January gums line up at the rainforest edge, cradling pencil cedar and sorrel. *Summer Gums Pot*, for example, came as a circling script of gum silhouettes on white hot days, a scroll map of the spatial rhythm of pale trunks at a mountain's distance, and a mind's eye image, distant in time and geography, of the thin band of rose gums edging rainforest in the tropical north. *Black Treefern Pot*, precarious and purple black, carried a double ring of inlaid drawings abstracted from studies of *Cyathea australis*, elegant, haunting and ancient, encountered suddenly in dark closed forest or standing resilient in open, hot clearings.

Others chart walking transit and thought. *Cutting across dead tree hill*, a burnt orange cylinder, recast regular mid-summer crossings of a hill paddock spiked with stumps of original forest: a succinct microhistory of local nature and one cultural response, laid out and visually compelling as a rolling pattern of forms cut by hand.

Exhibited in relationship with the vessels was a group of paintings and drawings in gouache, acrylics, mountain ochre and shellac. Most were completed as studies in the Birdwood region and directly influenced vessel surfaces in the studio later (eg. *House of Rose Robin*, *House of White Cedar*). Others were resolved after taking a vessel from the kiln – a two-way conversation between pot and painting where one informed the resolution of the other. Ceramic wall panels – page-sized paperclay slabs – carried quickly drafted inlays of line and impressings of local plant species. As clay drawings using both the plasticity of wet clay and the inscribable surface of the hardened slab, they connected vessels to paintings. As increasingly distilled and abstracted pages, they carry mostly unanswered questions left to hang.

Leaf, Shadow, Ash, Water (1998)

At the meeting of land and body is the intake and release of breath: the essential and the sublime. Beyond associative memory and feel, being north again in body prompted the vessel installation *leaf, shadow, ash, water*⁵. Winter in Townsville is dry, crisp, light-filled, family-dense. As familiar, are granite orange hills (*Orange Hinterland Group*, *Ridgelines*), cool coastal creeks (*Creek Leaf Series*), dry season leaf fall (*Leaf Series*).

Leaves, I'd suggest, are eloquent markers of the particular and flux of place. Displaced from their source on a page or pot, they ask not just what, but where from, when and whom? As powerful to layered recall as photographs dropping from collected albums. Each day in rainforest, a path is laid out ahead and behind in new leaf fall. One walks on soft beds of 2D-like forms turning to sweet rot, a mesmerising contrast with my other home footpaths of inner Sydney. In this series, local leaf impressions came to rest encircling vessel interiors as shallow embossings highlighted to stark black and white portraits.

Vessel forms ranged from minimal bowl (creek forms) to vertical reservoir (coastal range forms). Most were hand-cupable for skimming creek water, scooping river, collecting leaf fall. Or the thought of doing so. White, like black, assumed some prominence. The white of northern light and reflection of all visible colours, not bleached absence. The black of deep shadow, the unlit of photograph, of histories hidden. Inlaid line, elaborated into dense hatching or vertical bands, continued to develop as a satisfying dialect for places and personal past reconnected with by my walking body (*Hill Hatch*). Linear glaze inlay (resonant, in after-sight, of quartz seams on orange-pink granites) began as a new experimental direction, adding the texture of vitreous melt to the personal cartography of the line (*Orange Hinterland Group*; *Creeklines*).

"Landscape's most crucial condition is considered to be space, but its deepest theme is time".⁶ To shape, mark and inscribe is to map places of personal meaning and value with physical and psychological dimensions. Making with clay renders materially-solid (if still ephemeral) the space of the intangible and nuance in the encounter of body and land. Such places, and the experiences carried from them, are never static in time or memory, and continue to be fluid wells of self and spirit wherever I reside in a multi-centred existence. They also oblige one, with the approach of century turn, to critically reflect on the making of cultural and natural histories of land on this continent.

Citation

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