



Jude Roberts

Drawing the artesian

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Bore drain, 2014
drawing on kitakata paper, 420 x 520mm

The phrase to ‘draw water’ is a complicated assertion, read at one level it refers to filling a bucket with water from a well, on another level it refers to an impossible task for an artist or draughtsperson, namely the depiction and representation of an element notoriously perceived as one in constant movement. Water is an impossible subject to draw, a dynamic of unrest, incapable of effective expression. In the case of the Great Artesian Basin even the surface image of water is denied, it remains an invisible presence in the land shaping everything about it while resisting our easy consumption as representation. This resistance to image is an appropriate quality for a substance that is both ubiquitous and utterly essential to life. Water is the one value whose absence would rapidly end the human situation and yet it has a taken for granted status that is impossible to comprehend. (Badiou, 2009, p. 72.)

For Jude Roberts it is precisely these qualities of water that leads her through her graphic investigations of the land and sites of the GAB landscape. The condition of water as a resource that is both abundant and invisible is hauntingly present in the region that she has chosen to explore. Western Queensland with the GAB is possessed of an enormous subterranean aquifer. The idea of an inland sea haunted the early explorers of Australia as a part of an imagined abundance that was waiting discovery just over the horizon. The truth was much stranger, a vast inland lake did exist, below their feet, submerged and contained within the ancient geology of the region. The indigenous peoples of the region knew of this vast resource as a series of water holes and places where the water surfaced and seasonally ran as ground water flooding dry streambeds and irri-

gating temporarily parts of the land. The intermittency of the events and their scattered location produces a complex effusion of fauna and flora at such sites.

Roberts associates this phenomenon within the complexity of site as a vital part of what makes a location a ‘place’. It is central to her practice that the drawings she makes are based exclusively on her encounter with the specific site she is investigating. She literally immerses her paper in the ground water, and rubs the surface of the river bank and dry beds across the papers at these special points on the map, collecting the agricultural and industrial detritus accumulated over time at the site as the graphical tools by which to render the vast array of marks occupying the surface of her drawings. For Roberts it is only possible to achieve the evocation of specificity of site by engaging directly with the exacting conditions of the location. In her practice she uses the widest variety of means at her disposal in order to capture the complexity of this specific place, and most critically the precise colouration of the sediments from the specific bodies of water.

There is both a vertical and a horizontal axis to her investigations, vertical in the sense that everything from the tree canopy, the wind, bird song, shadow, leaf litter, animal tracks, geologic cuttings and the intermittent appearance of ground water all contribute to the construction of her images of the site; and horizontal in the sense that her work is inclusive of the history of the site, its array of traces of indigenous presence, early settlement, pastoral and industrial use, recent mining and agricultural interventions as well as the extent of contemporary community of farmers and towns people, all dependent, over time, on the critical yet unseen presence of water.

In one sense these drawings become a part of these places, an extension of the site itself, and she has discussed burying the drawings back at these sites from where they have come, a return that would close the circle of their relation to life, geology and difference.

The prevailing characteristic of the Australian landscape is ‘fragility’ and it is this condition that makes the use of paper in Roberts practice so profound. The paper that she uses and reuses evokes a sense of lightness and fragility, it absorbs the elements of the land investigated, soaking up the alluvial stains from the pigmented rivers and streams, it gently wraps around forms and leaves indexical traces of abandoned equipment and farm machinery, it can be fashioned into replicas of forms like tents, and functions as a device to catch the falling material of the sites. To witness these transformations of the paper is to connect through time to the myriad changes wrought upon the land, the paper here functions like a skin, lightly touching the earth and revealing and repairing its relationship to the tactile reality of the land. There is a sense of the ancestral produced by this process, an image of something anterior to human presence. Drawing here is not a practice of depiction, she is not setting a view from which the viewer constructs a concept of landscape, rather this is an immersive practice in which the image surrounds your view and leads into a multilayered experience of place. There is a strong realisation of geomorphology, of site as specific phenomena compressed within waves of time. This different reading of space overwhelms our habitual thinking of time as an eternal present or interrupted deviation from an unfolding directional arrow. (Meillassoux, 2009, p.10.)

Geology disturbs our sense of time, it offers us not just the fossil record of habitation of the past but evokes something stranger, a suggestion of an order and era prior even to terrestrial life. Roberts’ brings a profound historical account of the challenges met by the people who live and work in the region of the Great Artesian Basin. Her work documents both the subtle and barbaric changes that have played out across this misunderstood and fragile resource.

Finally it is to the paper that our eye is drawn to, the multiform range of marks, printed, stained and pressed into the absorbency of surface and unwound before us in a complex and layered experience of place. We do not see these works in the conventional encounter with a wall but rather we become a part of a journey stretched out around us, like entering into a Chinese scroll painting, our view meanders and wanders until our entire observation is incorporated and surrounded by the experience.

Associate Professor Donal Fitzpatrick

Notes and Texts

Badiou, Alain. *Logics of Worlds*, (Trans), Alberto Toscano, Continuum, London, 2009. Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude*, (Trans), Ray Brassier, Continuum, London, 2009.

Exhibitions

July 17 - 25, 2015
Drawing the artesian
White box, Level 4 and *The Project Gallery*, Webb Centre, Griffith University, Southbank, Brisbane.

January 8 - 20, 2015
Body Politic
Icebox Project Space, The Crane Art Centre, 1400 North American St, Philadelphia, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/visual-creative-arts/queensland-college-art/qca-publications/body-politic>

November - March 20, 2014/15
Mythsapes in the Watery Realm
School of Art Gallery, Aberystwyth University, Wales (November) *Project Gallery* (March - April), Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

December 18 - February 28, 2015
An artistic and cultural collaboration
Shandong University of Arts, China
QCA Galleries, Griffith University, Australia.

May 16 - June 29, 2014
Bimblebox
Bimblebox; Art Science Nature, 2013, Redlands Gallery and Toured Australia by Museums and Galleries Queensland. <http://www.bimbleboxexhibition.com/>

March 13 - April 6, 2014
Aquifer
Crane Art Centre, Philadelphia. Exhibition Catalogue, <http://issuu.com/qcagriffith/docs/035-14-philli-final-revised>

April 19 - May 31, 2013
Unraveling the Maranoa: One River arts project
Mitchell on Maranoa Gallery, Mitchell, Qld. <http://oneriver.com.au/one-river-projects/one-river-mitchell/>

August 24, 2013
One River Projects
Belconnen Arts Centre, exhibited as part of the Centenary of Canberra, at the ACT, http://regionalarts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/RAA-Belonging_final_lores.pdf

August 2012/13/14
Marie Ellis Drawing Prize
Jugglers Art Space, Brisbane.

April 25 - 27, 2013
Document Bimblebox
Sawtooth ARI, Level 2, 160 Cimitiere St, Launceston, Tasmania.

October 27–November 30, 2013
Kedumba Drawing Award
Wild Valley Art Park, Wentworth Falls, NSW.

September 21-26, 2012
In a Landscape
Raygun Lab Project Space, Toowoomba.
Archived <http://raygunlab.com>

Conferences/Presentations

March 22, 2013
World Water Day Symposium
QCA Project Gallery, Griffith University, Southbank.
A Presentation from the top of the banks of the Maranoa River, Foyleview, Mitchell, through a digital interactive platform, <http://water-wheel.net>

August 25, 2013
Critical Undercurrents
A One River Symposium
National Museum Australia, Canberra.
Barbara Paulson, an assistant curator with the Museum’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, facilitated the talk by artists who participated in the One River project.

Publications

Vol 33, Issue 4, 2013, p 67-70.
“Artistic Witness at the Front line of Queensland’s Galilee Basin”
Artlink
Author: Jackson, B.

Vol 48 Winter 2013, No. 2 12-13 2013.
“Bimblebox Art Project”
Imprint
Author: Sampson, J.

2013
“The River Makes its Mark”
One River blog
Wahlquist, A., Allen L., The River makes its mark
<http://oneriver.com.au/tag/asa-wahlquist/>

2014
“Unraveling the Maranoa”
Belonging: Great Art Stories from Regional Australia Publications
Allen L,
http://regionalarts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/RAA-Belonging_final_lores.pdf

Collections

The Kedumba Collection,
Orange Regional Gallery NSW

Griffith Artworks,
Griffith University, Brisbane Qld.

State Library of Queensland,
Brisbane, Qld.



Artificial Horizon 2015
2 x 3 colour lithograph on Vellum Arches, 171 x 66.5cm



Subterranean Boundaries, 2015
mixed media with shot perforations on hand made Japanese paper, 1820 x 650mm x 2
scrolls. Photo Darcy Foott



River Recharge (series 2 of 4) 2015,
river stains and mixed media on khadi/Arches paper with shot perforations, khadi paper
300 x 410mm, Arches 280 x 220mm



Greater Acceleration (3) 2013,
monotype and drawing on khadi paper, 208cm x 70cm



Drawings from 'ever flowing' series, 2015,
mixed media on polypropylene, 30 x 21cm



Drawing from 'ever flowing' series, 2015,
mixed media on polypropylene, 30 x 21cm



Working on frottages on bed of Wallam Creek, Lussvale, Mitchell, 2014



Drawing on kozo paper on Wallam Creek, 2014



Geo-graphis (Drawing the Earth), 2015,
lithographic crayon on kozo paper, plastic rod, wire, light, dimensions variable

Drawing is one of the most primordial ways that humans interact with the earth and the process allows the human expression of self in relation to others and the natural world. The transfer and mark making methods I use are fundamental to drawing yet they can communicate complexities such as the phenomena of groundwater basins in which my research lies.

Drawing the artesian is a body of work that examines new ways to engage with, perceive, and imagine the groundwater basins that lie below the Nebine, Wallam and Maranoa watersheds including the Great Artesian Basin (GAB). I use varying mediums, processes and research to look into the past and imagine the future of the areas I work in. By their very nature, groundwater systems are challenging to visualise, often making them difficult to understand scientifically, yet people interact with them and have done so for generations. I'm interested in the way humans interact with the earth's land and water, and the often contradictory traces that are left on the land. I have followed various stock routes to document specific water sites including the headwaters of the Maranoa River, a recharge area for the GAB and further south on the Culgoa floodplains where waters from the Wallam /Nebine creeks disperse. These routes play a prominent part in the narratives of groundwater which are a continuum of historical and present-day tracks/roads, many of which have origins with indigenous peoples' pathways and trading connections. Since European settlement they have been used by explorers, surveyors, pastoralists and others to link water sources and human activity.

This landscape is familiar to me as I lived for many years on the Wallam Creek catchment and I return to places on river and creek beds, bore sites, turkey

nest dams and along bore drain. The drawing methods I use incorporate forms of chance, which link ideas to unknown or at least unlooked-for meanings. Collaborating with land, water and other elements is instrumental while mark making on and in areas of inland Australia. Paper responds immediately to these circumstances. It has a memory of where it was rolled, folded and creased and so can take on something of the surface it once laid on such as flood fences and objects from the pastoral landscape. *Subterranean Boundaries* (2015) and other scrolls, are works that have evolved over several years. The handmade Japanese papers have been imprinted on several netting fences, tied to rung trees, and have been placed in various earth and creek beds. With one, I swept it over coals after a controlled burn. Finally I have washed over these impressions with black paint and ink and shot holes through the surface.

My practice also incorporates forms of print, particularly lithography, which retains all of the expressive ranges of drawing media. These materials and processes are integral to the geographical aspects of stone, earth and groundwater, which store the past, both literally and metaphorically. Transferring textures of the terrain allows me to imagine and sense the ceiling of the underground basins by integrating my body directly with the earth. Groundwater permeates through, silt and sand, through the unconsolidated layer of earth that undergoes constant flux and movements to the deeper layers of geological basins where water is encased, stored or filtered through. The water transports sediments, nutrients and minerals that are dissolved and deposited and can reach its destination thousands of years later.

George Kubler (1962) stated that the past already yields the future. In contemporary ideology it is a way of continually rediscovering or re-evaluating our world. For the series *ever flowing* (2015) I have sourced photographs from the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century depicting families beside the outpour of water from newly drilled bores and have redrawn myself into these events. The drawn miniature figures show the enormity of the human endeavour as I re-imagine the exhilaration and freedom that these communities experienced. It would have been a glorious sight for those living in semi-arid and desert landscapes “knowing” that their futures on the land were “forever” secured with water.

To investigate the difficulty of capturing the hidden interrelationships of land/water systems, I incorporated the use of a sextant in my drawing process. The sextant, normally a marine instrument, was used by early European explorers and surveyors to navigate and calculate their geographical position on land. As the terrain has an uneven and sometimes obscured view of the horizon, unlike the sea, use of a sextant on land requires an artificial horizon, which is created with mercury, a mirror, or a plate of molasses. In *Artificial Horizon* (2015) I have interpreted the action of the sextant, bringing a celestial object from the past down onto the horizon through the eyepiece, reconnecting with the earth's surface on paper. This process reinstates the fragile moments of discovery in drawing with the environment.

I would like to acknowledge the Gungarri, Bidjarra and Kooma people of Western Queensland, Maranoa and Nebine area who are the traditional custodians of the land that is the area of my research project. Catri-

ona Moore states that most Australians now recognise that “reconciliation and environmental sustainability are related issues”, and my research supports this broader understanding.

George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 1962)

Catriona Moore, “Not Just a Pretty Picture: Art as Ecological Communication,” in *Water wind art and Debate: How Environmental Concerns Impact on Disciplinary Research*, ed. Gavin Birch (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2007).

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My Grandfather, ‘Captain Herd takes a sight’ (with sextant), sourced from J.R.W. Taylor, *Gold from the Sea*, 1942. Image by J.M Leonard.

1



1 Video Installation, projection on lithographic stone.

4



4 Drawing at Thrushton National Park.

2



2 Soaking paper at Tego Springs, Culgoa National Park.

5



5 Japanese scroll paper, hanging on stock yard fence.

3



3 Walking through bore drain, Cunnamulla.

6



6 Sighting a “star” in the studio.



Drawing the artesian, July 16–30 2015,
White box,
Level 4, Griffith University, Southbank
and July 16–25 2015,
Project Gallery,
Webb Centre, Griffith University, Southbank,
Brisbane.