

Palimpsest # 7 - Displacement

“Artists are only any good in so far as they have an obsession with something. My obsession is the science of ecology or the pattern which connects everything.” (John Wolseley)¹

Making these patterns of connection visible is a strong undercurrent this year in *Palimpsest # 7*. Ranging from literal interpretations to the universal metaphysics of Domenico de Clario’s *Memory Palace (machine for contacting the dead)*. Though perhaps the point of exploring connectivity is ultimately to demonstrate that the local and the universal may be the same thing.

Palimpsest (meaning a parchment, or similar support, from which writing has been erased to allow the re-inscription of another text) is a site specific visual art event based in Mildura but extending to a number of communities along the Murray Darling Basin. It is a multi-venue event utilising a mix of formal gallery spaces (The Mildura Art Centre, The Art Vault and Gallery 25) and outdoor and informal spaces such as the Old Wentworth Gaol, the disused Cottee’s Cordial Factory, a salt pan (Lamberts swamp), a suburban garden and various studio and outdoor spaces **around La Trobe University** and Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. A bus carried visitors between venues to negotiate the geography and coordinate with onsite artists’ talks at most locations.

Environmental and social sustainability has been the underlying theme of *Palimpsest* since its inception in 1998. It is a theme which continues to draw both senior and emerging artists to create site specific works and take part in the discussions, symposia and convivial dinners (hosted by chef Stefano De Pieri). This year fifty artists from all over Australia, and one from Japan, gathered in Mildura for *Palimpsest #7*.

Mildura has been a magnet for artists since the Mildura Sculpture Triennials of the 1970s.² It’s a powerful location, ancient song lines stretch across the rivers and lagoons and inland to Lake Mungo. Hugging the rivers, vast blue horizons intersect with row upon row of vivid green citrus and vines ruled into the red desert sands. The view from the plane flying in shows that this was once a sea bed of rippling dunes. There are undercurrents here that can carry you in many directions.

Displacement is *Palimpsest # 7*’s overall theme and it’s fascinating to see what happens when art is displaced from the metropolitan white cube. Returning art to the real life contexts of open air sites, disused factories and suburban gardens is part of the attraction for artists. But there are much more pressing issues animating *Palimpsest # 7*, and the environment - natural, built and sociological – is the core of it. The reality of life in this border country is a microcosm of the most pressing issues facing Australia today. Reconciliation seems urgent on every level.

There is a raw confrontation between the past and the future embodied in this unique location. The past is not buried here but sketched across the surface of the earth. The future too is in sharp focus. The question of whether any kind of sustainable future is possible here is a constant refrain with apocalyptic scenarios envisioned, not by artists, but by bureaucrats determining policy from the asphalt covered environs of suburbia. The head of Victoria’s Department of Sustainability and Environment, Campbell Fitzpatrick, recently stated that the people of this region will be Australia’s first climate change refugees.”³

Artist, Dimitri Nikkas' *Vertical Garden* is a quirky exploration of the kind of future Fitzpatrick's type of thinking might engender. Nikkas' inspired sculpture is installed in the front garden of a Mildura home. Nikkas spied the garden on route to his son's primary school and asked the householders if they would allow him to install his work as the centrepiece. No other element of the garden's careful geometry, of coloured glass, stone, ceramic and contrasting gravel, was disturbed. Nikkas simply added the central structure built from recycled metal covered with synthetic lawn. The form is based on the carefully maintained topiary pencil pines in the drive alongside the house (not visible in the photo). No water required in this garden. Even the flowers in the window box are artificial. Mr Fitzpatrick would be proud.

The environmental theme had been strengthened in 2000 when Palimpsest #3 was conceived with the visionary addition of an art/science symposium. John Wolseley opened Palimpsest #3 and is back again for Palimpsest # 7, but this time as a participating artist. Wolseley collaborated with dancer Siobhan Murphy and video artist Dominic Redfern in the multi-media installation *Refugia* (a biological term to describe a haven in times of crisis). *Refugia* is based on a small area of Mallee scrub that survived recent fires. A place of refuge where animals can shelter until the crisis abates and a seed bank for the flora of the area.

Wolseley described his refugia ... "This particular area is very important in the Australian psyche, being on the edge of the desert and also the biggest rivers in Australia. This region, and the bush generally, is a place to work out our survival strategies ... one of the strategies is to identify those nodal points which are the strongholds of natural and human culture."⁴

In *Refugia* Wolseley inverts the role of land as subject with a technique which gives the land itself agency in the creative process. Redfern's video shows Murphy weaving a slow dance and Wolseley moving the paper in a controlled flight across the same ground. Through this movement the charred scrub inscribes itself onto the paper's surface and the dancer's body. The work explores "the mark of the land on the memory and the body," engaging with a vital discourse which has dominated contemporary land art since Australian conceptual artists, such as John Davis, began developing their own language of landscape in the early 1970s and post-colonialism challenged the European landscape paradigm in the early 1980s.

Phillip Hunter also alluded to this discourse speaking at his drawing exhibition *Between The Lines* at Gallery 25... "The subject of landscape now is so big and so interwoven with every media, film, sound the internet and our various explorations of the origins of space and so on, it seems very different from the subject that landscape was as a genre. It's more now the subject of being alive."

Denise James' installation *The Dance* on the salt pan at Lamberts swamp addressed these ideas from a more personal perspective. *The Dance* speaks of the fragility and interconnectedness of all-life and the imminence of death. Constructed from beeswax sourced from a local apiary James' has fashioned a series of life-sized standing female figures which cling to the remnant branches and stumps of trees protruding through the thick crystalline salt surface. In the harsh Mildura sun the figures will soon breakdown and, losing their last tenuous grip, will slide into a formless yellow stain on the sparkling surface of the salt. It would be easy for a work of art to be overwhelmed by a landscape as dramatic as this salt pan. But James' work was completely in control of the terrible majesty of the site.

In her artist's talk James told the story of Lamberts swamp, which was once a freshwater wetland teeming with life. A neighbouring farmer built his home on a rise overlooking the swamp so that he and his wife could enjoy the seasonal migration of the birds. When his wife died he planted a grove of trees in memoriam which, when seen from the air, spells out her name 'Isabella'.

Another poignant work on a similar theme was Kate Vivian's *Transformed Landscape* in the courtyard of the Old Wentworth Gaol. Vivian sources 'wild clays' and works them into ceramic flowers which are then re-installed en-masse back into the landscape from which the clay was dug. The resulting work is literally a transformation of the earth into a domesticated, meticulously rowed, monoculture. In this case the 500 ceramic flowers have been displaced from their original site near Ballarat into the Old Wentworth Gaol. *Transformed Landscape* has an austere beauty and speaks of the confinement of the human spirit, not only by the four walls of the gaol, but by a failure of the imagination.

The Old Wentworth Gaol component of *Palimpsest # 7*, curated by photographer and **La Trobe University lecturer** Kristian Haggblom, showed work by seventeen artists and focused on a sub-theme of 're-socialisation.' Haggblom stated that he wanted "to turn things on their head... This is not so much about the land it's more about how we think and how that creates space."⁵ Overall the gaol had a seventies 'anything goes' feel to it, reflecting a renewed interest amongst younger artists in engaging with the conceptual and ephemeral art practices that animated art in the seventies.

The most successful works are those which engage directly with the site. Colin Langridge's neon winking hand *Low Voltage Rock and Roll*, dominated the long central hall between the male prisoner's cells. Philip Samartzis' sound-scape *Insect Woman*,⁶ recorded and engineered on site, provided a unifying thread in an eclectic exhibition. Juan Ford's delightful chalk on blackboard drawing *Bad to the Bone* dissected a late C19th portrait of a criminal based on the then popular pseudo science of Physiognomy. The medium and the subject of Ford's work formed an elegant palimpsest in itself, as the decommissioned gaol was used by a local high school from 1927 until the 1950s for human science classes.

The two women's cells were particularly strong. Shay Minster's five metre high inflatable clown, (a la the larger than life figures which welcome drivers into roadside carwashes and the like), expressed her concern with "something being forced into a space where it can't fulfil its intended purpose, it can't be itself. These air dancers are very active they dance about like crazy and here it's restricted by the shape and size of the cell."⁷

In an adjoining cell Sangeeta Sandrasegar created an exquisite wall mounted cut out based on the myth of Medusa. *Take away that monster/That face that makes men stone, whoever she is*, is a powerful statement on the enforcement of social norms and the vicious circle of motherless abandonment that often leads to gaol. The use of myth deepened the resonances of the work to encompass the erotic and the creative in the indomitable female spirit. The artist's lucid description of her work reveals her research into the incarceration of women which informed this piece.⁸

The most moving work in the gaol was the cross-cultural collaborative installation *A Well Stocked Fridge* by Neil Fetting and Peter Peterson. The work brings Fetting's obsession with excavating old shoes from the saline slime at Lake Tyrrell together with Peterson's poignant personal history as an

Aboriginal man and Barkinji elder. The installation is composed of three parts: a fridge with a drawing by Peterson on the open door is stuffed with shoes donated by men from the local Aboriginal community, an offering bowl of fridge magnets which bear the slogan “no survivors only leftovers” and the cell itself which has been darkened and left bare.

The fridge is a multi-layered metaphor. A familiar domestic object displaced from the home, its shape evokes a tomb or the cell itself. The shoes have echoes of the Holocaust and of the process of assimilation in outback missions where the enforced wearing of shoes was an intolerable restriction of freedom. And, the first thing that happens when you enter gaol is your shoes are taken away, because of the laces. The cell also is a symbolic site representing the gulf between non-indigenous males (for whom a gaol experience is rare) and indigenous males for whom it is unusual not to have had a stint in gaol. Fettleing described the significance of the fridge magnets “I still find it strange the way the Howard Government used the fridge magnet as a way of terrorising us with their anti-terrorism policies. The inscription ‘no survivors only leftovers’... we all have leftovers in the fridge, but those people who came out of prison after 25 years were all leftovers, they weren’t survivors.”⁹

This work issues a challenge for future Palimpsest’s to engage more directly with indigenous artists and the layers of indigenous story that are inscribed into this land.

The Mildura Fringe component, curated by Geoffrey Brown, represented twenty local and interstate artists whose strong engagement with the whole event added diversity and dynamism to the dialogue. Elizabeth van Herwaarden’s *The Great Recycler* is subversively fashioned from mould, Anne Lord’s *Mulch for Deep Time*, an installation of domestic cleaning containers wrought from garden mulch and Corinne Colbert’s whimsical *Wind Sock Frock* were inventive responses to the environmental imperative. Kerryn Sylvia’s *Hydrometry*, was more poetic. Her found wooden bowls connected by barely visible fine wire moved soundlessly over the surface of the lake in response to each puff of wind. Floating ‘outside consciousness’¹⁰ this meditative work revealed the power of transposition. In this altered context these simple utilitarian objects acquired a sacred quality, like church bells or temple bowls.

There is a wonderful potentiality in the sprawling eclecticism of *Palimpsest*, both geographically and artistically. Loosely held together by the overall theme the works cluster like small galaxies into sympathetic or accidental convergences of form or concept. The repetition of flower forms in the gaol for example, and the repeated reference to the interconnectedness of all life in many of the artists’ talks.

Amidst all this diversity one work took centre stage providing a conceptual hub which expanded the reach of the whole event. Domenico de Clario’s installation and performance *Memory Palace (machine-for-contacting-the-dead)* is vast, complex and deeply layered. The performance, a twelve hour all night vigil of blindfolded piano playing, began at full moon rise on Good Friday and ended at dawn the following day. The piano playing activated the machine. All night it yearned and trilled towards the spirit – that which is not, or is no longer, material.

It was possible to envision the installation as either a machine or an organism. He referred to both in his artist’s talk. The line of neon lights beneath the central grated drain in the main chamber represented the spine. The array of lights around the periphery suggested nerve ganglions. The entry

rooms (relatively small) – life. The main room (vast and cavernous) – death. A separate smaller warehouse with its playful fountain evoked childhood. A small ante-chamber filled with children’s chairs arrayed around a box of birds nests filled with eggs – the school years, or perhaps the unborn, or the unrealised lives that are not being lived by the living.

The artist created something of a Plato’s cave here in Mildura in 2009. There is even an illusory fire to add to the cave-like effect. A chandelier placed on the concrete floor in the centre of the courtyard almost outshone the moon. It drew the audience like any campfire would.

When first viewed the whole installation appears to be a haphazard configuration of eclectic junk linked by electrical cord and neon light. Like life it expands to fill every corner of the space available. In places it coalesces into a dense almost ordered clutter. And throughout, except in the childhood chambers, there are the regular intervals created by a strange array of tubular steel dressing chairs, positioned like sentinels around the room, each connected by electrical cord and demarcated by paired verticals of neon.

Each chair is bathed in a different wash of intensely coloured fluorescent light. The colours represent the seven chakras of Hindu mysticism. The artist explained that the dressing chairs represent the careful attention bestowed on appearances throughout life. But perhaps not just the way we dress our ‘selves’ but also the importance given to appearance and form by philosophers such as Plato.

The chairs also represent a small claimable personal space within a communal space such as a large family (or the planet) – ‘my chair’ – and therefore the territory we can claim as a temporary (though not uncontested) dominion for ourselves.

In front of each dressing chair, where a mirror might be expected, the artist has drawn a ‘Platonic solid,’¹¹ as a focus for contemplation. The chairs are strategically placed viewing points from which we are invited to contemplate the installation. They create nodal points that play between the outer and inner life, the visible and the invisible. But they face the wall, making the whole installation behind us invisible. Our attention is focused on the wall where the faint ‘platonic solid,’ only centimetres from our noses, is lost in the gloom. Instead the eye is constantly drawn by the exquisite play of colour and shadow thrown by the brightly coloured fluorescent tubes against the textured surfaces of wall and floor.

De Clario states that the work “does not attempt to transport us elsewhere; rather it attempts, through creating opportunities for an experience of the invisible, to function as a catalyst for a deeper interaction with the visible.”¹²

This concern for the visible, the real, is a grappling with knowledge and truth, with existence, not fantasy or illusion. By evoking Plato – the father of Western thought¹³ – de Clario draws us into an exploration of the essence of our culture, of knowledge and the knowable. But he appears also to be challenging Plato by drawing the audience deeper into the cave, into contemplation of the inner life of the spirit, and away from reason and light. The installation is designed to be experienced in the dark of night not in the light of day.

Speaking as though *Memory Palace (machine for contacting the dead)* is sentient De Clario said, "Its ultimate hope is that through this process it may provide an opportunity to glimpse the indivisibility that permeates all worlds and all things."

Perhaps then he is saying that the 'indivisibility' of the material and the spiritual, the visible and invisible, is the light, and everything else is just shadows on the wall.

For many indigenous cultures, including Australian Aboriginal cultures, the indivisibility of matter and spirit and the connectedness of all life is a central principle. This concept is now familiar to us from Eastern mysticism at least. But the Western mind has great difficulty understanding it because it is not a matter to be grasped simply by the mind, but by the whole organism.

To grasp this simple idea fully is a project so vast that perhaps the only way through is contemplation under the full moon guided by the seed sounds of the universe.¹⁴

By a fascinating coalition or coincidence, as I was driving up from Melbourne to view *Palimpsest #7* I heard an Australian scientist on the radio talking about a recent achievement of his group of colleagues. They have mapped a corner of the universe. A very difficult thing to do since it must be mapped in three dimensional space. What they found was that galaxies are distributed, not evenly, or randomly, but gather in nodal constellations of varying densities along meandering filaments of interconnection. Like populations (of people, birds, animals, plants) along rivers.

Whether the population of the Murray Darling Basin is sustainable or not will depend on how we think about or imagine the future here. Mildura, for one, is doing an extraordinary job of sustaining the discourse on these vital issues.

But there is a profoundly under-represented element in *Palimpsest*, as in the whole discourse on these issues in the art world and the wider community, and that is engagement with Aboriginal Australia. As David Mowaljarlai said, "we have a gift for white people, but they are having difficulty accepting it... it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself."¹⁵ Until a meaningful dialogue is opened up Australia will always be living in the shadows of its Colonial past.

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¹ John Wolseley, interview with the author, Mildura Palimpsest #7, 4 April 2009.

² *Palimpsest* is the most recent incarnation of a series of visual arts festivals which started with the Mildura Sculpture Prize in 1961 and continued with the seminal Mildura Sculpture Triennials from 1970-1982.

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- ³ Peter Ker, 'Exodus Fears for Murray Towns', *The Age*, Wed 18 March 2009, p 7.
- ⁴ John Wolseley, interview with the author, *Mildura Palimpsest #7*, 4 April 2009.
- ⁵ Kristian Haggblom, interview with the author, *Mildura Palimpsest #7*, 4 April 2009.
- ⁶ *Insect Woman* will be presented at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town in October as part of the Echoes Project, supported by the Melbourne Festival. A performance version of the work will be presented at the National Centre for Contemporary Art in Moscow in June.
- ⁷ Shay Minster, interview with the author, *Mildura Palimpsest #7*, 4 April 2009.
- ⁸ For the full artist's statement see Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Murray Darling Palimpsest #7, website, <http://www.artsmildura.com.au/palimpsest/artistsdetail09.asp?ARTEVENTID=191>
- ⁹ Neil Fetting, interview with the author, *Mildura Palimpsest #7*, 4 April 2009.
- ¹⁰ Kerry Sylvia, artist's statement, Murray Darling Palimpsest #7 official website, <http://www.artsmildura.com.au/palimpsest/artistsdetail09.asp?ARTEVENTID=191>
- ¹¹ There are five platonic solids much discussed by geometers over many millennia, most famously Euclid in his book *Elements*. Plato associated four of the solids with the elements earth, air, fire and water, the fifth he described as used by God "for arranging the constellations on the whole heaven." http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic_solid. See also http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_cave.
- ¹² Domenico de Clario, room sheet no 2, Good Friday 10 April 2009, *Palimpsest #7*, (unpublished).
- ¹³ Alfred North Whitehead famously described all of western philosophy as "just a series of footnotes to Plato" *Process and Reality*, p.39, Free Press, 1979.
- ¹⁴ I am grateful to Barry Hill for enlightening me about the seed sounds that accompany each of the seven chakras in Hindu mysticism and for his assistance with clarifying Plato's Allegory of the cave.
- ¹⁵ David Mowaljarlai interviewed by Susanna Lobez, The Law Report, ABC Radio National, 31 Oct 1995.