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» The Engaging Visions Research Project
» The Australian National University
» Murray-Darling Basin Authority
» Benalla Rural City
» Benalla Art Gallery
» Department of Sustainability and Environment, Benalla
» Regent Honeyeater Project
» Indigenous Community Garden
» Mokoan Yacht Club: Goulburn-Murray Water
» ANU Insurance, Photography, and Printing

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Engaging Visions Research Project
Chief Investigators: Mr John Reid and Dr Rod Lamberts
Partner Investigator: Mr Will Iven
Partner Consultant: Mr Lawrie Kirk
Project Researchers: Mr Charles Samboch and Ms Carolyn Young
Project Documentation: Mr Dean Sewell
Project Web Design: Racket / Mr Paul Moig and Ms Rachel Peache
Catalogue Design: Racket / Mr Paul Moig and Ms Rachel Peache

The Engaging Visions Research Project is an initiative of The Australian National University in collaboration with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Financially supported by the Australian Research Council. http://www.engagingvisions.com.au
Engaging Visions a Benalla Field Study

Benalla is the final of four Field Studies being run under the Engaging Visions Research Project.

Field Studies was founded to provide visual artists from The Australian National University (ANU) School of Art with the academic and logistical support needed to conduct research beyond the studio.

The Benalla Field Studies brought together artists from Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney, Albury and Benalla. The objective was to seek information and inspiration to make art about the environment. This catalogue provides a guide to the culminating exhibition, the artists’ intentions and their artwork. Other photographs within the catalogue give an insight into what the artists saw and did while in Benalla. The Engaging Visions web site gives a comprehensive visual account.

It was the Murray-Darling Basin Authority that identified Benalla as an appropriate research site. In June 2009 Engaging Visions Research Project team members John Reid, Charles Tambiah and Dean Sewell headed to Benalla on a survey field trip to prepare the way for the artists. Contacts were established with members of the Benalla community. Arrangements were made with those who indicated that they would be willing to meet with the artists when they arrived, and to help them understand and interpret what they saw. Locations of environmental significance were visited and photographed so that potential student participants could be visually briefed and recruited back in Canberra.
participating were ANU School of Music musicians, ANU School of Art alumni, visiting artists, and academics, research project staff as well as several Benalla artists.

The artists made three five-day field trips to Benalla. The first, in July 2009, focused on an orientation of the Benalla region and its physical and social environment. Members of the Benalla community briefed artists at Lake Mokoan, local Regent Honeyeater Project sites, at State Forests and National Parks throughout the Broken catchment and Strathbogie Range, a nearby rural property, and in the Indigenous Community Garden. Benalla Mayor, Cr Bill Hill, hosted a morning tea and a discussion with the artists. The group also met the Benalla Art Gallery Director, Simon Klose, and Ursula Kulling in preparation for the exhibition. Some artists initiated creative processes in the field and work-in-progress began to appear on the Engaging Visions web site.

During a Field Studies procedure, the second and third field trip itineraries are deliberately left open-ended. This allows the artists to return to places that captured their imagination, and deepen their relationships with the land and local people.

A venue for the art exhibition was identified and confirmed. Ursula Kulling, Benalla Art Gallery Curator and Public Programs Officer, tells the story of John Reid, Field Studies Convenor, arriving at the Gallery just two hours after the Galleries had received a cancellation for their originally scheduled October 2009 exhibition. The timing, on all accounts, was near perfect and John grabbed the opportunity.

For the first time, the Engaging Visions Research Project team held a community meeting to find out more about the people of Benalla and preferred ways that the artists can engage with the community. ‘Passion’ seemed to be the word for the evening. ‘Bring us your passion, and we’ll show you ours’, a Benalla artist responded. Feedback from the meeting was provided to the artists during a briefing before their first field trip. To help communicate the Field Studies on-going activities to the local people, media contacts were established especially with the local paper ‘Ensign’.

The artist participants included painters, sculptors, photographers, printmakers, a glass artist, multimedia artists and performers. Not all the artists were students from the ANU School of Art. Also...
gave presentations on their art practice to final year art students at Mansfield Secondary College.

On Monday evening, October 26, the ANU School of Music Contemporary Music Ensemble, under the direction of Tor Fromyhr, will be performing seven new works composed for this exhibition by the members of the ensemble in response to, or inspired by, their experiences of the historical, social, cultural and environmental issues that have influenced the Benalla region. One of the works to be performed will be created during the performance as a direct response to the actual art works in the Gallery at the time of the performance.

Artists have also responded to community requests for engaging with the local school children. During the exhibition, artists will conduct Gallery floor talks about their art and participate in art workshops in collaboration with the Benalla Art Gallery.

All of the above is grist for the Engaging Visions Research Project. The aim of this project is to determine the most effective procedure for engaging artists with catchment communities in the Murray-Darling Basin in collaboration with the Benalla Art Gallery. The aesthetic material produced by the artists that results from community engagement may in turn help communities to elucidate their values and establish priorities for sustaining them.

John Reid, Carolyn Young, Charles Tambiah, Dean Sewell, Rachel Peachey and Paul Mosig are members of the Engaging Visions Research Project team who are represented in the exhibition.

Both Carolyn and Charles gather data from artists and community respectively concerning their experience of the engagement procedure. The accumulated data are finally assessed and evaluated by Dr Rod Lamberts from the ANU Centre for Public Awareness of Science. The evaluation outcomes from the first three Field Studies in St George, Qld, Tumut, NSW, and Riverland, SA, shaped the procedure for the final Engaging Visions Field Study in Benalla. The Research Project’s results outlining a model procedure will be published in mid-2010 and will coincide with a major exhibition in Canberra of artwork emanating from all four Engaging Visions Field Studies.

Dean Sewell is the Engaging Visions documentary photographer. His work is a feature of the Engaging Visions web site (www.engagingvisions.com.au) designed by Rachel and Paul (Studio Racket). The website also provides an archive, a diary of events as posted by the artists during and post field trips to Benalla.

‘Engaging Visions a Benalla Field Study’ is an aesthetic visual response from visual artists and musicians to Victoria’s Benalla. For those who live in the Benalla Region, especially, we hope there is something in this plurality of visual and musical statements that engages you, and follows you home with thoughts about art and the environment.

Carolyn Young and John Reid
23 September 2009
Engaging Visions Research Project
ANU
The photographs utilise features of the camera to visualise thoughts that come to mind when contemplating industrial and urban locations at night.

“I’ve seen it all
I’ve seen the dark
I’ve seen the brightness
In one little spark”
- Björk
Felicity Green

A.S. The irreversible evidence of the human impact on our landscape has for many years compelled me to respond through art. The further we push away from wild nature the harder I try to find and show what is lasting and beautiful in the jumbled remains.

Scavenging through the debris reveals the transience of all matter and offers up the possibilities for creating new forms in painting from old through the language of abstraction. At Lake Mokoan and in its surrounding rural acreages I found a landscape rich in the kind of imagery which speaks of time passing.

Jess Surplice

These pieces are little sketches, combining my glass-making and drawing practice. I wanted them to look like worn, wrinkled pages torn from a sketchbook, but they are made from glass which has its own special luminosity. I took the moulds for the glass to Lake Mokoan, where I engraved them with drawings of remains of animals which once lived in the lake, fragments of fish skeletons, unidentified bones, and crustacean shells. I was thinking about some of the qualities I like about both paper and glass, their fragility, delicacy, translucency; qualities shared by the objects I was attracted to draw. The raised black line drawings on the surface of the glass are like faint traces of fossils. It’s a funny kind of process to go to a place and try to respond to the environmental issues that are going on there. On the whole I think the decommissioning of the lake and restoration of the wetlands is quite positive. I would have liked to make work celebrating this. However, the work seems to have taken its own course somewhat, and has a starker appearance than I might have intended. I guess it’s the impression of being at Lake Mokoan, as it is at present, quite austere and otherworldly.
The still life photograph provides an alternate view of woodlands, and the habitat components needed for fauna survival. My artwork was inspired primarily by the Regent Honeyeater Project, with material sourced from one of the participating farms.

We are following an unwieldy path aiming for a place where things lie in balance, wounded by bad decisions blinded by lack of perspective, we continue because life compels us to do so and we have faith in the future.
Dean Sewell’s work examines the ecological footprint of introduced fauna on the native landscape.

My intention as an artist is to explore the tensions that arise when domestic and wild animal and human communities co-habit a terrain – specifically within the contemporary Australian landscape and psyche – and to explore questions concerning country, culture and identity.
Aria Stone

This painting acts as a map of memory and experience. Random strokes of red signify a metaphysical reference to the sound of gunshots and the blood of animals that has been shed. Paint is repeatedly brushed and scraped off and added by rubbing into the initial foundations of thinner layered paint. On and off again the materials are worked into the canvas. Each layer is a reminder of times and memories gone by. There are patterned impressions made from pushing a found bullet casing into the soft outer layers of paint. This is a personal response to the environment at Lake Mokoan...a memory and sensation of place.

Beer Bottles, Bullets and Boats

Aria Stone, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 101.6 x 101.6 cm, 2009

Brendan Leigh Taylor

Is rubbish still rubbish when someone’s moved in?

Hollow

Brendan Leigh Taylor, Digital prints, Perspex, Lake Mokoan mud, Lake Mokoan rubbish and Audio 2009

(Thanks to Bryan Fox Thompson for his technical support)
Kevin Miller

Recent Fragments found Just under the Surface

Kevin Miller, 9 Paintings, Pigment on Rag, 2009

With this in mind I walk the town to see if I can uncover those recent intangible fragments that lurk just below the surface. Sometimes what people say don’t always match what you see before you. But that is because your own experience and background is different and you need to observe in a different way to uncover the essence of a place. I look everywhere, I squint and while walking try to be aware of elements in the corner of my eye. Sometimes I think I may have caught a glimpse of something nearby but by the time I have turned around it is gone, remaining elusive. Facing forewords I hold the camera to my side and take pictures when I think something is there. When I look at them later there is an essence of something but I’m not sure what it is maybe someone who lives here can tell me?

John Reid

Keeper of the Strathbogies, East Lima

John Reid, Dimensions variable, Framed and mounted digital photograph (78.5 x 94.5 cm), wall mounted perspex document holder with take away printed narrative on A4 paper, 2009

The works in this exhibition are a direct response to walking around the Benalla region with a camera and with the express intention of making art in response to prevailing environmental issues.
Heart wrenching, pushing our environment to the limit through over processing, finally offering a unique possibility of arriving at something completely removed from the starting point, but just as valuable.

The work developed from a curiosity in how sound plays an important role in defining space and locality. Ideas about displacement, when the familiar is taken out of context and how a new perception is formed through sound imagery and sculptural details are an important consideration in my working process. I have combined elements that each have their own narrative, alluding to a number of concerns that have arisen during my brief stay at the edge of the wetland.
I sometimes like to think that my paintings are alive, like little animals or growing things, especially as they come to fruition. I look for animation/vitality in a painting as I work on it, and it comes through the colours. At the same time, my head is busy working through the technical challenges, so that balance, ambiguity, depth and also, may I say beauty, have a chance.

After our first visit to Northern Victoria and Benalla, I’m remembering the different beauty that shows after drought or fire, when the rains come with new growth, and the powerful desire of local people to nourish the environment and assist in returning the land to health. All these impressions being offered, return as memories in the studio.

Humans and their impact on the natural environment has been the focus of my art work. When first moving to the Glenrowan area, we saw this vast body of water in the near distance. We went and found that it was dead. Dead trees. Dead water.

I pine for what the Greens and Winton swamps must have been before the 1972 damming of the Mokoan basin.

May it live again.
This series of works are inspired by the maps and satellite images of the region. They explore the notion of water as a life source that replenishes, cleanses and supports life. It also deals with water as a source of micro and macrocosms (lakes contributing to sustain life within and around them), spiritual concepts of hope thorough regeneration, renewal of life at the waters edge, being submerged in it as a source of restorative power and therefore a community resource that must be protected, cherished, respected and enjoyed.

Black Swans-Broken River.
The family story that I understood of my Great Grandfather, Old Tom. That he was born at Nathalia on the Broken River. When he was 14 years old, his father gave him a horse and saddle and told him he should go. As his step mother had been feeding him stale bread.
Tony Dibley

I hope to show the natural beauty of the lake, with its colours and patterns. I also hope to try and capture the emotion of the landscape, the sadness in the dead trees. I’d like people to realise that the world is a beautiful and fragile place.

Help Us

Tony Dibley, Black & White digital photograph, 49.2 x 73.8 cm, 2009

Sally Simpson

My work generally explores human relationships with the environment and the process of change. Lake Mokoan is a potent symbol of change and transformation, and this work refers to the eternal activity of humans making sense of their environment by creating objects out of materials at hand.

Artifacts (Lake Mokoan)

Sally Simpson, Dimensions variable, max height 57 cm, irrigation pipe, mud and found objects from Lake Mokoan, 2009
Claudia Bottrill

Decommissioning a water storage facility is an act of courage. My work responds to the colours and textures of the landscape’s response to increasing exposure as the water coverage, currently reduced by drought, reduces to a wetland through future water release.

AG Stokes

I am interested in landscape from the point of view of ‘what man has made of nature’, and also for the way it can be used as a metaphor for the human state of mind. My current investigation, of which the Lake Mokoan paintings are part, concentrates attention on anomalies in the landscape, ‘unnatural’ forms which result from the ravages of fire, flood, storm and disease, or which are the consequences of attempts by man to improve life by harnessing or regulating natural forces.
David Suckling

The lack of habitat is becoming crucial for the survival of some species. I was inspired by the revegetation projects in Benalla. This work suggests industrial waste being used to create temporary man-made habitat in the future.

Charles Tambiah

The inspiration for the series Benalla Passion came from the notion expressed by many living in Benalla that it is a passionate place where residents are passionate about the issues and environments that define them. Using photographic montages a visitor’s tango with Benalla Passion is explored, to illustrate some of the diverse voices and perspectives that colour this special place. These works aim to reflect the positivism, activism, vibrancy and hidden gems of Benalla. Sincere thanks to the many Benalla residents who shared their sacred places and ways of seeing.
After talking to local people and doing a bit of research I began to see the complexity of the Lake Mokoan story. I decided it was important to gather together the differing aspects of this story into one artwork so in this work I have brought together some images from the past, the present and what is planned for the lake’s future.

Inspired by the burnt remains of a once proud tree, piercing the land like a tossed and forgotten sword. Memories of what the land has lost. Cernunnos wakes again, transforming and restoring the lands to a new and unrevealed future.

Ahead of his time, my Grandfather, on an annual basis would always give to the land before planting the main crop. Thereby never over exhausting the soil.

This painting is a site-specific response to the desperation of the land, tree and wild life that once was, still is and is to be.
River redgums are impressive trees whose association with water in a dry continent has special significance to Australians. It takes 200 years to replace a 200 year old redgum that we deliberately or inadvertently kill as we satisfy today’s human desires for water, land, timber and non-renewable energy. One or a few more trees killed in one location seems insignificant, but everyone thinks the same everywhere else.

Right across the Murray-Darling Basin as well as in creekbeds across inland Australia, river redgums are declining in number and many that remain are in very stressed condition. No-one set out to make war on river redgums, but the list of ways in which we have killed them reveals the lengths we have gone to alter their environment or to use them for our benefit, without adequate thought for the consequences.

The song ‘Corridors’ was inspired by the work of Ray Thomas and Nigel Lacey and their Regent Honeyeater Project. I was impressed by their labour of love and devotion to the organisation of planting habitat corridors. I was also amazed at the number of volunteers and schools that were involved in the project. The words of Ray Thomas “we need positive stories” ran through my mind and as Tony and I drove back home after our first Benalla field trip, the lyrics and the idea of the song started coming to me. It took a couple of weeks before I set down and attempted to write but once I began the song took shape quickly. I wanted to inspire others to contribute to the creation of a beautiful environment simply because we can all make a difference as to how the future unfolds. A healthy environment that supports quality of life for all life forms will support us in our human physical, mental and spiritual health.

The recording of ‘Corridors’ is my first home recording on my Boss BR-1600. I would like to thank Tony Dibley for playing bass. Vocals and acoustic guitar were played by yours truly. I hope you enjoy the song.

www.myspace.com/ariastone
ANU Contemporary Music Ensemble

ANU School of Music’s Contemporary Music Ensemble will be performing 7 new works composed for this exhibition by the members of the ensemble in response to or inspired by their experiences of the historical, social, cultural and environmental issues that have influenced the Benalla region. One of the works to be performed will be created during the performance as a direct response to the actual Art works in the Gallery at the time of the performance.

Performance:
Monday October 26
Performers:
Tor Fromyhr                  Violin/Composer
Hayley Bullock               Violin/Composer
Courtney Pelkowitz        Violin/Composer
James Larsen                  Cello/Composer
Justin Bullock                 Bass/Composer
Alex Johnson                  Bass/Composer
Daniel Brinsmead           Voice/Composer

Bridget Mackey

Performance Title: ‘Remember Ophelia’

When we first visited the Benalla region the extreme contradictions of death/ renewal and the epic proportions of the landscape evoked the stories and characters of the work of William Shakespeare. I have taken the character of OPHELIA from Shakespeare’s Hamlet and developed my own version of OPHELIA.

My work is an exploration that uses the body/mind/soul as a metaphor for the environmental changes, which have occurred during the stages of Lake Mokoana’s transition from wetland, to lake to wetland. My OPHELIA has embodied these environmental changes physically and psychologically through events which have occurred in her life. These events will be documented in an installation to be housed at the exhibition. My work consists of an installation of artefacts to be presented during the exhibition. The artefacts are to support a performance that will also take place on LAKE MOKOAN.

Performance time:
I will attend the Exhibition opening in character as ‘Ophelia’.

Installation component:
Net, Journal, Medical Records on a small table.

Lake Mokoan Performance
Departure:
I will depart with the bus for Lake Mokoan at 5pm for a 5:30 Performance @ Lake Mokoan. The performance will last approximately 10 minutes – half an hour.