Riverland
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Cover artwork by Paul Mosig
Engaging Visions Research Project

Chief Investigators: Mr John Reid and Dr Rod Lomberts
Partner Investigator: Mr Vic Martin
Partner Consultant: Mr Lawrie Kirk
Project Researchers: Mr Charles Tambiah and Ms Carolyn Young
Project Documentation: Mr Dean Sewell
Project Web Design: Studio Racket / Mr Paul Mosig and Ms Rachel Peachey
Catalogue Design: Studio Racket / Mr Paul Mosig and Ms Rachel Peachey

Field Studies Environment Studio School of Art
College of Arts and Social Sciences
The Australian National University.

Riverland: An Exhibition of Visual Art

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Riverland: An Exhibition of Visual Art

Jane Wilcox

Sue Kesteven

Dorothy Noble

Fran Ifould

Dooley Lovegrove

John Reid

Jess Surplice

Pauline Baulderstone

Vida Sumner

Charles Tambiah

Clint and Liz Frankel

Carolyn Young

Robyn Banks

AG Stokes

Judith Fuller

Sarah Ryan

Dean Sewell

Alexandra de Blas

Tim Baulderstone

Yvette Fran

Madeleine Dornan

Garry Duncan
Riverland: An Exhibition of Visual Art

The visual images in this catalogue vary in their intent. Some of them, such as the photographs in this introduction, record significant moments in the foray of artists from the School of Art, Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, into the Riverland of South Australia. This fieldwork took place in the latter half of 2008 and the aim was to seek information and inspiration to make art about the environment. The generic procedure of this type is called a 'Field Study' and is founded on the provision of academic and logistic assistance for the School’s artists to conduct research beyond the studio.

However the main body of visual material in these pages documents the artwork arising from the Riverland Field Study. The work was resolved back in the institutional workshops and personal studios, and most of it (together with additional artwork) can be seen in exhibition, 'Riverland', in every dimension. The group of ANU artists includes students at various levels in their courses as well as School of Art alumni, visiting artists, and academic and research project staff. Also, images in this category have been submitted from several Riverland artists (with whom the Canberra group engaged) and who draw their insights from a much longer regional heritage.

There are images that have been made for presentation in the catalogue only. The cover collage by Studio Racket (Paul Mosig and Rachel Peachey who have designed this catalogue) is an example, as is the photograph of sculptor Dorothy Noble’s hands holding salt crystals destined for a work that will come together in the eleventh hour.

There are pictorial references too, to 'Engaging Visions’ (EV), the name of the over arching research project of which the Riverland Field Study is a quarter of its scope. Two Engaging Visions Field Studies have been completed at St George, Qld, and Tumut, NSW, and the forth and final Study will be in Benalla, Vic, later this year.

To round off the account there are images conjured bright and shining for the mind’s eye by Jane Wilcox, a Sydney writer and journalist who joined the artists in July 2008, whose words working their magic with just black ink.

A more detailed examination of the catalogue reveals that there is also a variety of media to be encountered in the exhibition it serves. Glass, paint, photography, and found objects and materials dominate the market for making tangible personal statements, grand ideas, feelings and emotions that would otherwise float about in intellectual purgatory.
Members of the Engaging Visions research team kicked-off the Study. It was Lawrie Kirk, the research project’s original Partner Investigator (PI), who on behalf of the EV Project’s Collaborating Organisation - now the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) - identified the Riverland as a worthy research site. He said it was full of produce, environmental issues and inspiration for artists - he was right.

This was confirmed by Viv Martin, MDBA and current PI, who is informed by an art background and who has access to a considerable archive of aerial photographs. This fueled an on-the-ground / in-your-face survey of the Riverland in June 2008 by EV research team members John Reid, Charles Tambiah and Dean Sewell just prior to the launch of the Riverland Field Study. Contacts were established with members of the Riverland 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.

An all-important field base was located. The Australian Landscape Trust’s (ALT) Calperum Station just north of Renmark was perfect. The Station’s landscape is a ready stage for contemplating dramas of human impact and Dr Grant Whiteman, ALT’s
Manager of Riverland Operations, kindly agreed to host the artists at Calperum and provide the intelligence and resources for a variety of creative approaches within its precincts.

Venues for exhibition were identified: both for the Showcase exhibition that would introduce the Riverland Field Study to the community through artwork produced on previous Field Studies; and for the exhibition that would culminate the Riverland Study in 2009. In both these instances the ALT’s educational facility in Renmark, the McCormick Centre for the Environment, met the bill. Poppy Papageorgiou and Mathew Humphrey, joint McCormick Co-ordinators, generously extended their assistance. Poppy, through her extensive community contacts, would later introduce Andrew Eleftheriadias, the owner of ‘Jeenaz’, a commercial premises in Murray Avenue, Renmark. Andrew kindly consented to Jeenaz being used as an Open Studio (occupied in September last year by larger-than-life painters Robin Banks and Kevin Whitta) and as a second in-town venue for the final show.

Media contacts were established and the impending artist field trips were extensively covered by ‘The Riverland Weekly’, ‘The Murray Pioneer’ and ABC Local Radio. Coverage on ABC Radio continued throughout. Alexandra de Blas, from de Blas Communications, produced a half-hour feature for ABC Radio National’s ‘Artworks’. <www.abc.net.au/rn/artworks/stories/2008/2413024.htm>
In addition to expressing thoughts and feelings in their chosen medium, artists would have to face discerning journalists keen to solicit first impressions about earth, air and water in this extraordinary part of the country.

Artists from the ANU School of Art made two ten-day field trips to the Riverland. The first, in July, exposed the group to a broad range of experiences; the second, in September, allowed more focused, personal research. The field experiences included 4WD cross-sections of Calperum Station; aerial perspectives of the cultivated landscape and fading backwaters; River Murray cruising with tea and scones; anabranch excursions in aluminum dinghies; visits to artists’ studios (Gary Duncan, Liz and Clint Frankel, Tim and Pauline Baulderstone, and Yvette Frahn); and meetings with orchardist, John Chigros, beside his incinerated orange grove; dryland farmers, with dryland farmers, Gary and Yvette Frahn, in the midst of their wheat crop; and with Walkandi Woni Ranger, Vida Sumner, on the receding edges of Lake Bonney. There was also time for contemplation – pondering the bubble in a water level between the needs of the natural environment and the horticultural industry.

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

Carolyn Young, Charles Tambiah, Dean Sewell, Rachel Peachey, Paul Mosig and John Reid are members of the EV research 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 is finally assessed and evaluated by Dr Rod Lamberts from the ANU Centre for Public Awareness of Science. The evaluation outcomes from the St. George, Tumut and Riverland Field Studies will shape the procedure for the final EV 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 EV Field Studies.

Dean 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).

‘Riverland. An Exhibition of Visual Art’ is an aesthetic visual response from 25 artists to South Australia’s Riverland. For those who live in the Riverland, especially, I hope there is something in this plurality of visual statements that helps to affirm a value pertaining to the River and to the Land that is worth sustaining.

John Reid
2nd March, 2009
Convenor, Riverland Field Studies
Engaging Visions Research Project
ANU Fenner School for Environment and Society
One of my favourite things is from Renmark. It’s a gourd. You’ll think its ugly but that doesn’t change what I see. Memory is like that. Actually I’ve never thought of it as a gourd, it was always an Ornamental Gourd because that was what my grandfather called it. Poppa always had the time to say everything in full. I don’t think mum thought much of her father’s practice of painting Ornamental Gourds in a dense mouldy green colour. But she gave me this one after Poppa died to go with one of Nana’s China-painted dishes. Every now and then I am a little disappointed that the paint is flaking and suspicious that Poppa chose a leftover colour. This was a man who built a barbeque from bits of wire and found a use for every empty food tin. But I can forgive the OG its vulnerable skin. You can’t stay disappointed in it for long, with the cocky jokey bend in its long neck, the ridiculous dimple in its voluptuous body. There’s something of Poppa in it. Ostensibly he was a thoughtful man but he had this side, this gourdy side, this OG part to his personality. Everything else he grew in his nursery was functional, you ate it, you sold it, and you kept clippings for the neighbours. The OG was pure whimsy. I’ve never come across OGs again in my life and while I am sure there are farmers and enthusiasts out there I want to keep my silly dried vegetable to myself. That’s its magic; it carries no other history or knowledge. It is the perfect memory, fixing a place and a time.
My skin knows the Murray River has changed. It flows out of the taps and leaves a mark, eczema behind my knees and elbows, puckering under my eyes and peeling on my shoulders. Mum won’t drink it. She tells me to go and ask the caravan park attendant whether it is safe. I tell her she can go; I am drinking it anyway. She lives in Adelaide where they are used to not drinking the water. I live in Sydney where we are not. I’m in Renmark to research a book and mum came along for the drive. I’m supposed to be exploring the 1890s but my own stories are getting in the way.

Our cabin has river frontage, brown and opaque. The water looks like it’s moving but it’s just the wind. It’s not going anywhere. Not now. The coots sprint like emus along the shoreline and as the wood ducks disappear underwater I am transported 40 years by the diving of a bird. A seven year old waiting for it to resurface, wanting to see if it caught something, scanning the waves. Mum says the sun on the water is ‘sparkling diamonds’. She could see clear to the bottom of the river when she was a schoolgirl, trawling a fishing line from the back of a rowing boat. I don’t ever remember being able to see the bottom; I only remember the murky waters.

We didn’t swim in the river. We’d row on it, walk beside it and endlessly fish in it. There might not be ocean waves but there were snags. They’d lie in wait, ready to catch you and hold you under. We swam in Lake Bonney once and it felt naughty. We were allowed because the Prices were doing it. They always did it. If you opened your eyes under water you couldn’t see anything at all. If you put your hand in front of your face you wouldn’t know it was there. Mum bit her tongue about what else we couldn’t see. The water felt thick from the mud and strangely unsatisfying. We sat on our towels on the bank, on the sand that wasn’t really sand. We knew that the real stuff was white because every Christmas we went to the beach. Every other school holiday we’d come up the river to stay with Nana and Poppa. We’d count down the sleeps and then the miles to Renmark.

I know the flood bank in front of Nana and Poppa’s house is long gone; that the road out front has been bituminised, that the nursery is lawn (or dirt from the drought) and the pond is gravel. Another lot of new people are moving in we drive past and each has left their mark. I am ready for massive changes but I have forgotten to erase one detail. I expect to see a row of painted Ornamental Gourds on the low wall of the front porch.
So don’t look. The house is just a starting point and you’re on your way out anyway. There’s the shell of an Easter egg, just the foil wrapper, hidden in one of the many hidey-holes in the front fence. The ants ate the chocolate. It’s been there since God knows or maybe every Easter there’s a new one that wasn’t found in the egg hunt. The white paint is peeling off the ironwork and the gate makes a low wail before it gives up that satisfying latch-catch sound behind you. You’ve reached the road. Take off your shoes and feel the smooth coarse sand between your toes. Insects scream, a bird moans. Catch your breath in the still heat. You’ll need a run up for this next bit – the floodbank on the other side; a huge red wave twenty, thirty feet high.

Run or you’ll be surfing back down to where you started on the little chunks of clay. Oh, and put your shoes back on.

The top of the floodbank is the top of the world. I can see the river from here, clear out to Jane Eliza Landing and Goat Island. Grab a stick like Poppa does, banging this side and that to let the snakes know you’re coming, so they don’t get startled and bite. Look really carefully at the stick though, one lady picked one up and didn’t look hard enough. She missed the scorpion that climbed all the way up the stick, all the way up her arm, across her chest and bit her right over the heart. She died. At least I think she died, I don’t remember. The stick is more for show than for snakes anyway, there is nothing around. I dance up here; no one sees me. They’re having a nap. Poppa is lying flat on his back in the lounge room with his hands folded over his chest. Mum is reading in bed. They’ll all be up soon; there’ll be a trip somewhere, up the river. So I won’t go too far from the view of the Ornamental Gourds lined up on the porch. I’ll sing a song while I’m waiting.

*Brown paper packages tied up with string,*  
*These are a few of my favourite things.*
Sue Kesteven

Anything contains the elements or structures which connect it to everything else. We need to know this to know that everything we do has an impact somewhere.

Web v(detail)
Sue Kesteven, Dimensions variable; diameter of dishes: 18.5 cms, Glass, soil, salt, crystals, 2008
I was captivated by the colours and textures of the earth around Calperum Station.

From Rotten Lake I collected salt crystals left after the evaporation of salty flood waters.

From the drought-dry Murphy’s dam near Yubalia Hut I collected vibrant red and brown sands.

From the Bookpurnong cliffs I collected soft white and grey/green sediments deposited over eons.

Each place spoke to me of the intimate relationships between the land and the water that have gone into forming the Riverlands.
Fran Ifould

The Engaging Visions Field Studies: Riverlands, has offered a wonderful opportunity to investigate the once thriving eco-system of the Murray River wetlands and the remnant Malley country surrounding the Renmark area. The artwork presented offers no solutions, but an artist’s interpretation of the beauty we are rapidly loosing as a result of previous agricultural practices, in the hope future generations will make environmentally sensitive decisions.

Detail of Riverland Tryptych, No. 2
Fran Ifould, 71cm x 41cm, Ink on Hahnemulhe paper, 2008
Dooley Lovegrove – Walkandi Woni Ranger / Nalta Peggararalin (River Dreaming)

Dooley mainly works with natural wood and bark from his Country to recreate and design traditional/contemporary ornamental artefacts the way his ancestors had done for centuries.

His main inspiration is to interpret different dreaming’s in the landscape of Country.

Ponde (Murray Cod) Smoking dish/ Serving Platter

Dooley Lovegrove, 20cm x 66cm, River Red Gum Bark, 2009
The National Environment Bank (NEB) issues a comprehensive denomination set of banknotes to commemorate each Field Study exhibition. A branch of the Bank trades from the gallery floor where its promissory notes are exchanged dollar for dollar for Australian currency. Funds raised from such transactions are invested by the NEB in local community environmental initiatives (usually as direct donations). John Reid is commissioned to design the banknotes which feature his photographic images from the region in which the NEB Branch operates.
The creek is milky, opaque pale blue, the sky low and colourless, the air chill. Red gum, black box, river coobah; trees I don’t know the true names of. I am standing here, on the bank of Ral Ral creek, a branch of the Murray River, on a property called Calperum Station. I look down, and at my feet the earth is almost black, flecked with bleached white fragments of mussel shells. I wonder about the other names this place is called. Decades ago, fishermen came here. One of the huts they built is still standing, hessian walls and linoleum peeling; an official sign provides commentary on its historical significance. Before that it was grazing land, overstocked with sheep, devegetated, eroded, exhausted. As I walk, I notice certain stones, flat and triangular, chipped and sharpened along one edge. I pick one up and hold it in my hand, and I know this stone didn’t come from here. I put it down to be covered with dust, its presence erased. I catch sight from the bus window of a tree with a long elliptical scar, and I know what it means, and I don’t know. The tree is almost leafless, close to dying. We drive out to visit another station, Yubalia, abandoned now; hours driving through endless mallee scrub. The station is piles of handcut timber planks, iron rubble, fragments of broken china and glass. More official signs. One warns of the danger of falling into the well; the only source of water had to be desalinated by evaporation, even then. Now the salt rises, nothing will grow but salt bush, the lake where we are camped holds shallow acid water, ringed by mud, dead trees, grey twisted brambles, dry reeds, turtle shells; no bird calls.
Pauline Baulderstone

"Inspired by the subtle beauty and abundant blossom available in our arid landscape, from local native flora to the invasive escapees of colourful cottage gardens. I combined a variety of blooms and foliage with kitchen scraps to evoke the warm colours of the Riverland. Created is a soft and lush finish that contrasts with the stark harshness of the region."

Gifts from the Garden
Pauline Baulderstone, 155cm x 55cm, Hand-dyed Silk using organic materials, 2008
Vida Sumner - Walkandi Woni Ranger / Nalta Peggararalin (River Dreaming)

The River Murray being her main inspiration, Vida interprets Dreaming Stories into Aboriginal/Contemporary Artwork.

This painting depicts the Two Wives fleeing downstream, running away from Ngurunderi, with the older leading trying to hurry the other as Ngurunderi was near. Ngurunderi had left the upper reaches of the Murray River in search of his Two Wives who were heading south of the River.

Ngurunderi Dreaming is a creation story of the River Murray and interprets his epic journey that continues through the Country and crosses over to Kangaroo Island.
Charles Tambiah

My photographic exploration in the Riverland centred on the passionate politics, entrenched identities and primal survival that surrounded every dialogue, both external and internal. I was challenged to go beyond composing an image as a fleeting moment in time, to incorporate the vast solitude, sensory influx, and “walkabout” story behind the journey that led to the image. My selections for this exhibition compress time and space to reflect lost bones and blood salt that are left “In the Wake of the Grim Reaper,” while discovering intermittent “Capillaries of Life” that keep the Riverland’s “Hope on Fire.”
Clint and Liz Frankel

"Will we look back sadly in the future, and reflect on what we used to have along this mighty river? Will the wonderful plants, fish, birds and animals just be a distant memory? Will we remember when we had vibrant communities, towns and industries that were dependant upon and supported by this river. Will all be lost? Will this exhibition become a reflection of what used to be here? In our greedy western society, do we have the capacity to turn things around by being able to put the river environment first, or will we recall a time when 'once upon a river there was life'?"

Monitor
Clint and Liz Frankel, 42 x 42cm, kiln-fired, slumped glass platter, 2008
This work in progress piece considers the necessary displacement of native ecosystems for the production of food.
On a visit to the ghost town of Yubalia we passed through a remnant of mallee forest and I was so taken by its amazing shapes and colours that I had to paint them against the bright blue Riverland sky. Painting over the frame suggests that the mallee stretches off in all directions.

‘On the Road to Yubalia’
Robyn Banks, 35cm X 70cm, Acrylic on board and found frame, 2008
I made sketches and took photographs from the banks of Ral Ral Creek, thinking how beautiful it was, but in a drying landscape how fragile, vulnerable and fleeting — as if it were a mirage reflecting the past.
The drying lakes of the Renmark riverland region are both a devastating and striking scene. While ecosystems still exist in these lakes like indigenous groups clinging to their devastated homelands, there is still plenty of evidence of what once existed and has since passed. This work is inspired by the drying lakes, cracked, split and revealing a distant past and especially the salt crystals of lake rotten; these have emerged from the dried lake floor. A small collection of crystals are used in the work like fragments of bone on a burial ground.
The time spent at Calperum Station in the Riverland in July 2008 was a mixture of experiences for me. Above all, I felt sadness at the state of the Murray River and its associated creeks and surrounding land. Although I knew about the situation before I went there, meeting some of the local people and seeing the landscape at first hand made it more real. At the same time, the crisp and (at times), sunny winter weather was quite beautiful. I have tried to express these different experiences in my 2 views of Ral Ral Creek as well as in my other artwork.
On 4 October 2008 I walked along a 2.4 km line of dead Black Box perched on the rim of a floodplain near Ral Ral Creek, an anabranch of the Murray River near Renmark in South Australia. Like many other wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin they are quietly dying unseen by the public. Their death here was probably caused by a sudden rush of salty groundwater rather than the long recent gaps between flooding, but both causes of wetland death are due to the ways in which we’ve altered river flows to suit human uses of water.
Dean Sewell

Dean Sewell’s work examines the environmental consequences of prolonged drought combined with over-allocation and regulation of the Murray-Darling river system. This photograph taken down stream from the Riverland highlights the cumulative effect.
Alexandra de Blas

Interviews were recorded and edited by Alexandra de Blas and photographs were taken by Dean Sewell in the Riverland in 2008. The work depicts the environmental and social impacts of the intersection of a changing climate and a legacy of river management.

A Riverland under stress

*Duration: 12mins, Video of interviews and still images, 2009*
Tim Baulderstone

"It can't go on for ever"

Irrigation Made Easy
Tim Baulderstone, 125cm x 120cm, Steel rod and recycled irrigation pipe, 2009
This Mallee region is my heritage. I grew up with the Murray in my backyard, and live as an adult - an artist and farmer, intimately with the land. My work is constantly influenced by my environment - especially the abstract and Equine work. This drawing is part of my 'Leaf Life' series and this drawing in particular has come to represent my relationship with land and river. This work is my interpretation of our codependance and my subconscious melding with this world.
While being interviewed at Pelican Point, Lake Bonney, by Alexandra de Blas for ABC Radio National, Vida Sumner spoke of the Lake’s cultural history and its boundary ring trees. Vida, a descendant of the Walkandi Woni (Northeastern Wind People), picked up an aboriginal rock cutting tool from the sand. Lake Bonnie has been cut off from the Murray River, its source of water. The draw down of water however has revealed past aboriginal occupation when the river was in its natural cycle. Pelican point is also the first undisturbed site that has been surveyed by Aboriginal people. The emotional connection to the land and its history displayed by Vida in the meeting influenced this painting.
"The impending death of a river by the plunder of its resources aided and abetted by human need and greed. Will we in turn become extinct like the fossils found in the cliffs along the Murray?"

Rivercide
Gary Duncan, 114.2 x 143.5 x 3.5 cm, Oils on board, 1997
Controlled spinifex burn, Riverland Mallee