Balonne
An Exhibition of Visual Art
Environment Studio, School of Art
The Australian National University
in collaboration with the
Murray-Darling Basin Commission.
Financially supported by the
Australian Research Council

23 - 28 November 2007

Old Webster’s Building
110 Victoria St
St George Qld
Balonne
Photograph John Reid  Balonne River from Beardmore Dam  2007
Participants in the 2007 St George Field Studies program would like to acknowledge the support and generosity of the following:

• Murray-Darling Basin Commission
• Balonne Shire Council
• ANUPhotography / ANUPrinting

In particular we wish to thank (in order of appearance):
Samantha O’Toole, Sue Bunyan, Tess Dimond, Robert Buchanan, Rosie Jones, Robert Lacey, John Schnier, Steve Westcott and colleagues at Jones Air, Veronica Chapman, Steve Glen, Ken Moore, Liz Hill, Robert Lindores, Liz Otto, Tyson House, Dana Gluzde, Dorothy Clews, Tara Vincent, Carol Harwood and colleagues at Myall Park Botanic Gardens, Desley Buchan, Raelene McKinnon, David Blacket, Stuart Hay @ ANU Photography, Darren Vincent @ ANUPrinting

The visual artwork presented in the exhibition Balonne was inspired by field research conducted in St George and the Balonne Shire in June and September, 2007.

Catalogue Design: John Reid

The Environment Studio, ANU School of Art, provides academic supervision and logistic assistance for sustained field research on environmental issues in conjunction with any of the School’s Workshops:

• Painting • Textiles • Sculpture
• Gold/Silversmithing • Wood • Glass
• Photomedia and Drawing
• Printmedia • Ceramics • Art Theory

• Imagine your research proposal unfolding beyond the studio in locations that are inspirational for your topic
• Mix field work with studio development and critical appraisal by practicing artists back in the School’s Workshops
• Access internationally renowned environmental experts in the University’s own Institute for Environment
• Contribute as an exhibiting visual artist to national agencies that are helping communities to live sustainably

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Photograph Dean Sewell
Local artists meet ANU Field Studies group at the Cobb & Co Hotel 30 June, 2007

Art for Earth’s Sake

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Photograph Field Studies Photographic Archive
Bore just prior to capping near Weengallon, Queensland 2007
Field Studies is a program that provides academic and logistic assistance to visual artists at the Australian National University (ANU) School of Art to undertake field research. It has been offered every semester without fail since 1996.

In 2000, the Environment Studio was established at the School and Field Studies programs were offered with a focus on environmental issues. At this time, a partnership was developing between Field Studies and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC). With these collaborations, the 'field' became river catchments in the Murray Darling Basin.

Although Field Studies continued to take place in coastal and urban precincts close to Canberra, the Commission linked programs developed real momentum and social purpose in communities in outback New South Wales and northern Victoria. In 2001 the Basin field location was Corowa; in 2002 the Macquarie Marshes; 2003 Grenfell; 2004 Gunnedah; 2005 Wentworth and 2006 Shepparton. This year the Field Studies program has been based in the northern part of the Basin - in St George, Balonne Shire, Southern Queensland.

This year also saw a strengthening of the relationship with the MDBC and the formation of new ones. Under the aegis of an Australian Research Council Linkage grant, the ANU Centre for Public Awareness of Science (CPAS) joined with the Environment Studio and, with the Commission as Industry Partner, instigated the Engaging Visions Research Project.

The Project will evaluate four Field Studies focusing on visual artist deployment in the field and their engagement with community. St George Field Study is the first procedure. Programs in Tumut, Renmark and Kiewa Valley will follow. 

The Project objective is to configure a model procedure for cultural production and distribution. It is hoped that the implementation of such a procedural model will assist basin catchment communities to maintain and enhance a responsive, culturally supportive management of natural resources and provide innovative professional opportunities for emerging artists.

Members of the Project research team, Carolyn Young (MDBC PhD Scholarship holder), and Dean Sewell (Project Documentary Photographer) joined John Reid as Field Studies Co-ordinator (and Project Chief Investigator jointly with Dr Rod Lamberts, CPAS) in a seven day survey of St George and the surrounding region in May/June. The survey was in preparation for two upcoming Field Studies research trips in June and September by sculptors, printmakers, photographers, painters, found object and textile artists.

Two local artists joined the group in orientation activities including light aircraft flights, community consultations and the inevitable fire-side discussions about art and life. Environment Studio Visiting Artists from Toowoomba and Sydney also participated in the field experience. All of these artists have contributed work to this
exhibition. As images for the catalogue arrive on disk it is clear that there is an undeniable emphasis on the landscape and its human occupation.

The nature of artist/community interaction on the St George field trip was dynamic. Scientists, indigenous leaders, landholders, Shire officials, members of various organisations and community groups, businesses and artists all extended generous hospitality and shared their knowledge with the Field Study group. The artist visual orientation was well supported by local insight and interpretation.

Just as the intellect and senses require field catering so does the rest of the body. The intensive focus on subject matter that is possible with fieldwork is dependant on strategic accommodation from both logistic and aesthetic perspectives. Robert and Desley Buchan deserve special mention and thanks. The use of their well appointed premises as the program accommodation base was very generous and greatly appreciated. There the group was – by the Balonne River, not far from a large proportion of the community, close to a variety of landscapes, and a few steps from bed/kitchen into studio/working spaces.

The artwork in the exhibition ‘Balonne’ is the result of this interplay between field experience and studio development back in the Art School’s workshops with their expert staff. For the artists involved in the program it has been a rich and rewarding experience.

The inclusion of his article in this fine art catalogue is a small step in elevating the registration of public health on the creative arts agenda.

Climate change is worry enough. An important research paper, published late October this year, reported an increase in the annual global rate of carbon dioxide emissions and a declining capacity of the world’s vegetation and oceans to absorb them. Hence, the atmospheric concentration is now rising faster than in the 1990s. Meanwhile, on a broader front, the United Nations Environment Program issued its most severe warning yet about the accelerating changes in many of the world’s natural systems, as the size and intensity of the human enterprise pushes them beyond limits. The program’s report, *Global Environmental Outlook-4*, draws together what other more specialised scientific reports are telling us with increasing urgency. Our actions are weakening Earth’s life-support systems. These systems are fundamental to the health and survival of all species including Homo sapiens.

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This recognition of the risks to health
holds promise, at last, of our getting the full measure of the likely impacts of these human-induced environmental changes.

The report’s assessment, an imminent summary report on climate change impacts on the world’s climate, oceans, fresh water supplies, soil fertility, nitrogen cycle and biodiversity are not just disturbing the economy, reducing farm yields, extirpating species, endangering infrastructure and impairing tourism. They are weakening the natural foundations of population health and survival.

This week Research Australia launched its annual Thank You Day campaign, to thank the nation’s health and medical researchers for their ongoing work. The national campaign began in Sydney on Monday, followed by the local Canberra launch today. Of great significance, the campaign theme this year is Healthy Planet, Places and People.

The science reviewed in the campaign report focuses mainly on incipient research of the front end of climate change in this part of the world and many of those regions or places are now thought likely to experience longterm stresses as rainfall systems are displaced southwards. "People" is preferred to "Persons". The latter word invokes ideas of individual behaviour, responsibility and risk, whereas people is a collective noun with overtones of community. It is the right word here: it refers to scale, it alludes to community structures and relations. - The campaign report also throws a much-needed, more ecological, light on the rising prevalence of obesity a "Place" issue.

Recent public discussion of this issue reveals a mental strait-jacket that prevents us recognising that it is not mainly a problem of how individuals behave, but of how, today, whole communities live, reflecting their wealthier, urbanised, consumer-oriented and energy dependent culture. "Planet" focuses attention on the need to understand and sustain Earth’s natural, life-supporting, processes. "Places" emphasises that many of the causes and manifestations of these health risks occur at community scale. Australia’s rural communities are bearing the brunt of the front end of climate change in this part of the world and many of those regions or places are now thought likely to experience longterm stresses as rainfall systems are displaced southwards. The latter word invokes ideas of individual behaviour, responsibility and risk, whereas people is a collective noun with overtones of community. It is the right word here: it refers to scale, it alludes to community structures and relations. - The campaign report also throws a much-needed, more ecological, light on the rising prevalence of obesity a "Place" issue.

Recent public discussion of this issue reveals a mental strait-jacket that prevents us recognising that it is not mainly a problem of how individuals behave, but of how, today, whole communities live, reflecting their wealthier, urbanised, consumer-oriented and energy dependent culture. Human nature and genes have not changed; ways of living have. The solution in Australia into the current health impacts and longer-term health risks from climate change.

A decade, even five years, ago such a theme would have been unthinkable. After all, is not health and medical research about microbes and molecules, genes and vaccines, medication and meditation? Yes, much of it must be about those things. We seek gains in understanding, diagnosing and treating.

But, in today’s intensifying world of almost seven billion humans, if that is the limit to our research then we risk being penny wise but pound foolish. The Healthy Planet, Places and People theme has important nuances. "Planet" focuses attention on the need to understand and sustain Earth’s natural, life-supporting, processes. "Places" emphasises that many of the causes and manifestations of these health risks occur at community scale. Australia’s rural communities are bearing the brunt to this population-level problem cannot lie in locking the family refrigerator or screening for genetic susceptibility. Obesity and climate change in the same report? Does one cause the other? Well, no although each reflects modern patterns of energy use, consumer behaviour and historically unprecedented levels of wealth. The point is that the resolution of each of these population-level health issues, of place and planet, requires new understanding and far-sighted policy action at larger scale.

This will require an expanded research effort to elucidate these processes, the health risks, and groups at particular risk. That, at least, will facilitate actions to lessen risks. More importantly, it will provide the wider policy discussion with a fuller knowledge of the range, and seriousness, of the risks we are currently engendering. We are at a turning point in our relationship with the natural environment. For the
first time we humans have become so
dominant on this planet that we are chang-
ing the structures and processes of the
biosphere. These changes are beginning to
cast a long and ominous cloud over the
health and survival of future generations.
The sooner we understand and respond
the better.

Tony McMichael has contributed to the work of the
IPCC and is leading the 2007 Research Australia cam-
paign. This article was published in The Canberra
Times on Wednesday 31 October, 2007

I have always been interested in patterns
and systems in the natural environment.
Water moves through our lives, often
unseen, like warp threads in a tapestry.
Disrupt the natural pattern and something
else happens, revealing unseen connec-
tions, threads and patterns.

Out of the earth as a tapestry, spent much
of it time under the soil evolving into
something else, at one time it was under
tree feet of floodwater. Leaf litter and
rootlets were entangled in the threads
when it was dug up. It speaks of water that
flows, changing as it moves from sky to
earth, earth to plant, plant to animal, ani-
mal to human, human to artifact. A chang-
ing, evolving thing that gives an hidden
structure to life.

Dorothy Clews

Dorothy Clews Out of the earth (Detail) 2007 37.0 x 17.0 cm Tapestry of cotton, silk, viscose, banana paper. Decomposition by sun, rain, earth, earth organisms. Stitching
I set out to produce a visual image of the region’s most valued asset.
At present, the largest species extinction since the disappearance of the dinosaurs is taking place. Since 1970, more than one third of all vertebrates have been driven to extinction. Natural habitats are being destroyed faster than ever before. More and more natural habitats are transformed into agricultural zones. Therefore, the largest species extinction since the loss of the dinosaurs is not due to a natural catastrophe but due to human activity.

At the same time, humans consume more natural resources than our planet has to supply. Along with this over-consumption, we risk a further loss of biodiversity. For example, in Queensland, land clearing kills more than 100 million birds, mammals and reptiles each year. Irrigation for agricultural needs puts a lot of strain on the river systems sucking out large amounts of water. As a result, the landscape becomes too dry and saline to serve as a home for any life.

With this artwork I intend to alert people of our impact on ecosystems. The yowies, acquired in one of St George’s local op-shops, represent the declining biodiversity as well as being the result of a mass consumption of chocolate leaving a pile of ‘waste’ behind.

I have balanced animal parts on pins in order to emphasise how delicate our ecosystems are, and how easily they will be brought out of equilibrium. The conservation of biological diversity, that we are all part of, is a balancing act.
Heike Qualitz

The work contains inspiration and materials gathered from around the St George region. Considerations are my fascination with the land - how it shapes people and how people shape it.

Dorothy Noble

I make sculptural sand candles to express my experience of a place. This candle is made from materials found on the dry bed of the Maranoa River. I wondered down it - cattle tracks, soft sand, tangled trees, a stagnant pool, bird prints. The riverbed engulfed me, its silence broken by a bird-call or the distant murmurs of companions.
For the St George Field Studies program I wanted to address biodiversity on farms in my visual art practice. The result being two photography series – both featuring remnant vegetation on farms.

These farms are currently being monitored under the Biodiversity in Grain and Graze project, where the researchers are trying to understand the relationship between agriculture and biodiversity in the mixed farming zones across Australia.

The remnant vegetation represented in my photographs is a remnant Belah open forest (Casuarina cristata) located near Nindigully; and a remnant Eucalyptus coolabah grassy woodland within the Goondoola Basin, an ancient lakebed near Weengallon.

These woodland communities have been extensively cleared in the local area and are poorly represented (or absent) in nature reserves. Photographing these rarely seen Australian ecosystems provides a record of our heritage as well as a visual tool for promoting the awareness of these woodland communities. The photographs also provide a contrast to the commonly photographed forest communities, even when the drought condition is considered.

I would like to thank the property owners for allowing me to photograph the forest and woodlands on their property and staff from the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Water.

Carolyn Young

Remnant Belah Woodland #2  (Detail)  2007  68.0 x 79.0 cm  Type C photograph
This series *Faces in the Trees*, has developed from observations of trees in the local St George area; walking with Auntie Barbara and discovering shapes and shadows that create the impression of faces. The shapes formed by normal growth, by insect parasites or human agency, give a human or animal likeness.

Various cultures, including the New Zealand Maori, Greek, Celtic and Indian, believe that souls (depending on one’s karma) can become housed in trees. Australian Aborigines are no exception in believing that, whether being buried in or beneath a tree (intentionally or unintentionally), the image of a being of the previous incarnation can in some unforeseen way show as part of the tree. Apart from marking tribal territory, social and sacred gathering and burial sites, the Aboriginal people regularly use these tree forms as a map leading them on their chosen path.

Concern for human environmental responsibility influences the conception of work which also acknowledges the geology of the landscape and agricultural practices.
This work deals with concepts associated with water and irrigation. Water is utilised by agriculture to nourish crops and animals for commerce and human sustenance. In times of low rainfall and poor inflows the meagre resource is carefully rationed and managed by the stakeholders. Everyone laments and times are poor – returns are diminished and the land is barren. But who lobbies for natural environment and its water needs? Many acknowledge that good land management is about holistic practices and that the success and strength of human endeavour goes hand-in-hand with the natural environment. Look after the environment and the environment will look after you. This artists’ book presents an irrigator’s possibility/opportunity for this, most necessary, collaboration.

Over fifty years ago out of a passion for Australian plants David Gordon, a grazier and naturalist, created a sanctuary for the natural environment which would eventually become known as Myall Park Botanic Garden. This Garden is situated not far from the headwaters of the Balonne River which is fed by the confluence of the Dogwood and Condamine Rivers. The landscape and the people who live in this region are constantly adapting to the vagaries of floods and drought. It is in this resilient Brigalow landscape that David ‘planted the seeds’for his garden. With David’s marriage to Dorothy Gemmell art also became a strong focus at Myall Park. Dorothy, a botanical artist, brought her creative perspective to the development of this Garden. Foremost in the minds of those connected with Myall Park Botanic Garden is the enduring, sometimes unfashionable or unpopular principles of preservation of natural environment within agricultural areas. As a result of this vision the garden has, and...
There are many clichés to describe a flower’s beauty, some romantic – others aesthetic. Mostly we appreciate the surface of beauty without understanding the underlying truth. A flower appeal is simply a necessity of survival. Australian plants are great survivors of the challenging landscape and the needs for human existence. They are symbols of our national identity. So for a small number of far-sighted individuals the survival of the natural environment equals that of our human environment.

This book presents a visual narrative inspired by the story of Robyn Gordon, the first daughter of David and Dorothy. Although this life was ended at a young age, a new life that was formed in the Garden inherited her name. This natural forming hybrid grevillea now grows across the world as a historically important Australian plant. This story is one of beauty and tragedy, science and art and of the human dedication to preservation of the natural landscape.

One Man’s Whisper (Detail) 2007 Artist book

Victoria Cooper

continues to, provide a unique space for the cross-pollination of ideas and concepts from both art and science.

Eventually this remarkable couple bequeathed their precious legacy to the local and Australian communities. Management and caring for this Garden and its future is now taken on by a formidable group of people. They come from the families of farmers, graziers and related industries, artists, teachers, scientists, naturalists, retailers, councillors and government employees to name a few. Although much of the hard work is carried out by the local members, supporters of the Garden come from many parts of the country and across the world.

More can be found about this Garden and David Gordon by visiting: www.myallparkbotanicgarden.org.au

In making this body of work Doug Spowart and Victoria Cooper would like to acknowledge the support of the Tara Shire Council, Myall Park Botanic Garden Ltd, Carol and Ed McCormack and Les Sheahan.
Victoria Cooper

Doug Spowart

This work is a collaboration by Doug Spowart and Victoria Cooper in which they combine and overlay their perceptions of the landscape. The nature of this work is a site-specific response to place – including its human and natural histories. The photographs presented here are a documentation of the projection of images made in response to the local landscape overlaid on structures on the property of the Garden. Central to this work is the importance of portraying the connection between things: History and present, the personal narratives imbued by a life in the landscape, Man’s land use and the land’s response.

Victoria Cooper

Doug Spowart

This work stems from my empathy with the indigenous people in the Balonne Shire. I was forced to leave my homeland where I was very close to the land. Here, I am still a restless soul. My feelings are expressed as visual image and poem.

If only this long road had an end
And in the track of a hundred thousand years
Out of the heart of dust
Hope sprang again as greenness

This work stems from my empathy with the indigenous people in the Balonne Shire. I was forced to leave my homeland where I was very close to the land. Here, I am still a restless soul. My feelings are expressed as visual image and poem.
This work is about time travel and the recursive nature of memory. This is a story of a man who thought himself back in time.
Since European settlement some 220 years ago mankind has left an unmistakable footprint on the Australian environment.

But nature has its own ability to exact an equally brutal toll on the lives of those who depend upon it on a daily basis. The series of ten photographs documents every-day life and explores the relationship it has with the environment.
Without question, it is people who have the greatest impact on the health of the Murray Darling River system. The main body of my artwork focuses on capturing people of the Balonne and their efforts to conserve this resource on an individual level.
Alex Beeston at work on her Classic Style Quilt sewing machine in her temporary studio at Robert Buchan's premises, St George. Raelene McVinish, Balonne Beacon, photographs the action.