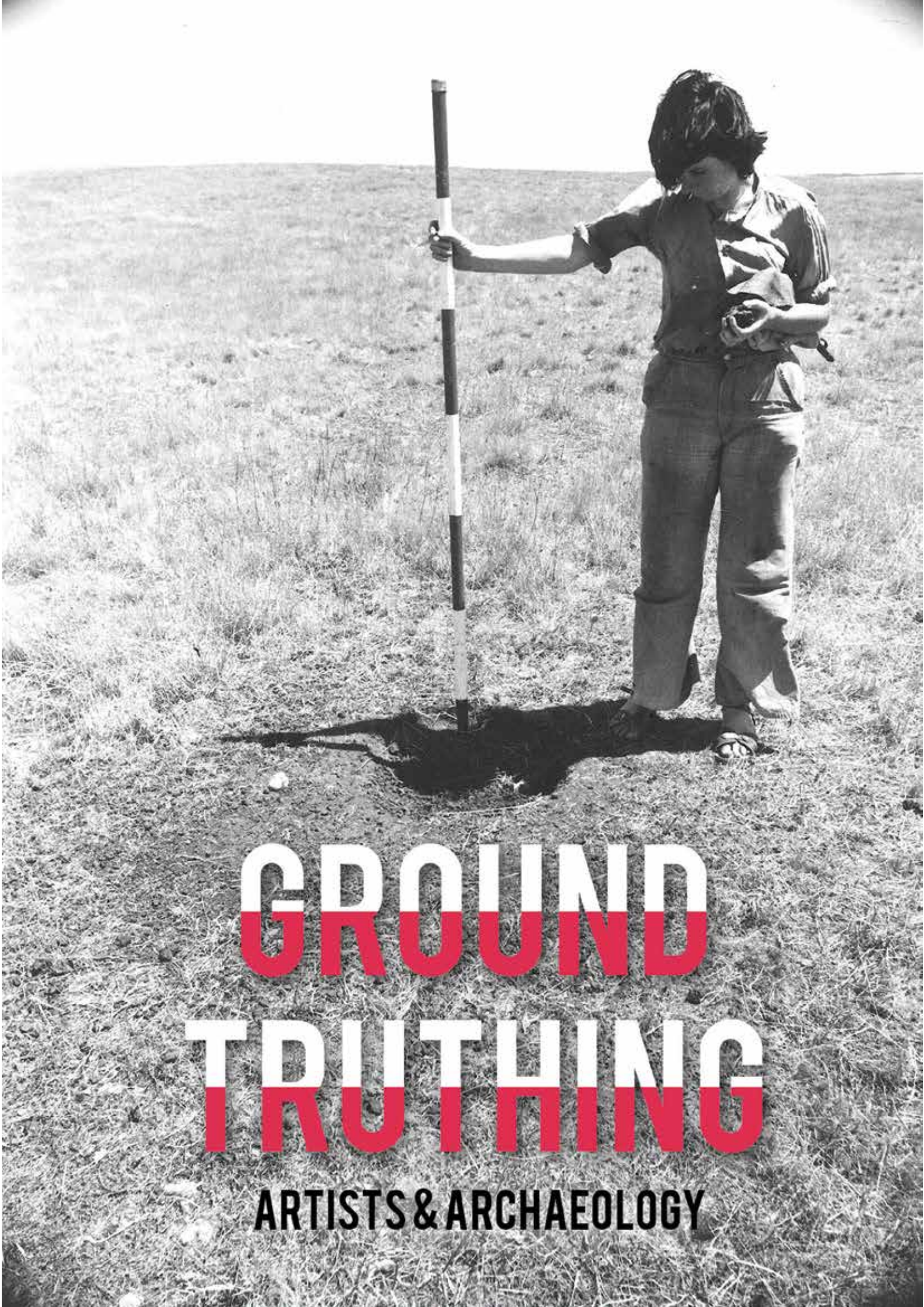

GROUND TRUTHING

ARTISTS & ARCHAEOLOGY

‘For archaeology, being a science, is neither good nor bad, but a fact simply. Its value depends entirely on how it is used, and only an artist can use it. We look to the archaeologist for the materials, to the artist for the method. … Indeed archaeology is only really delightful when transfused into some form of art.’

Oscar Wilde, ‘The Truth of Masks’ (1891)

GROUND TRUTHING

ARTISTS & ARCHAEOLOGY

April 7-18, 2015

School of Art Foyer Gallery

Australian National University

Australian National University

Foreword

The Department of Archaeology and Natural History has a strong record of interdisciplinary research and actively engages with new approaches to the study of prehistory. An important aspect of the work we do is to consider the implications of our investigations of the past, in the contemporary world. Involving visual artists in the work that we do is one way of recognising the relevance of the past in the present, and in recent years the Department has supported a number of artists in residence.

Over the last year, the Department has facilitated the creative collaboration of Dr Ursula Frederick and Dr Sally Brockwell, as recipients of the prestigious Vice-Chancellor's College Visiting Artist Fellows Scheme (VCCAFS). By facilitating cross-college partnerships the VCCAFS fosters the production of experimental and innovative approaches in scholarly work and promotes a better understanding of practice-based research. As part of their collaboration, Sally and Ursula have investigated the role of photography, and other traditions of visualisation, within Australian archaeology. Presentations at the Royal Anthropological Institute annual conference in London (British Museum) and the 2014 Australian Archaeological Association annual conference (Cairns) are direct outcomes of this research. In keeping with the aims of the project, Ursula also developed a body of artwork based on her Fellowship which was exhibited earlier this year at the School of Art, ANU.

The exhibition *Ground Truthing* is the latest collaboration in this productive partnership. Here Sally and Ursula have taken on the role of curatorial researchers, bringing together artworks that can be seen to offer an indirect engagement with the materials, practices, tools and aesthetics of archaeology. It is hoped that this diverse collection of media, incorporating sculpture, printmaking, painting, video and photography, will bring fresh insight into how archaeology is viewed.

I congratulate the artists and the curators in bringing *Ground Truthing* to light and trust that it will inspire future intersections in archaeology and art.

A/Prof. Geoffrey Clark
Archaeology and Natural History
School of Culture, History and Language
College of Asia and the Pacific
Australian National University

The Archaeological Eye

Archaeologists spend their lives learning to see differently to normal people – soil stains, lumps and bumps on the ground, the hand of different potters at work. Like many other professions – doctors, car mechanics, farmers among them – seeing what is important but invisible to most has to be learned over time; it can't be learned from a book or watching television. It can take years and years of not just deliberate practice, but just being with other archaeologists and trying to see what they can that builds up our professional sight, our 'archaeological eye'. We can think of it as a muscle that develops with the right training, and without training it can eventually also wither away.

With our archaeological eye we read the landscape, and the clues it contains to reconstruct the past. We dig and try to make sense of layers of soil, clumps of clay and scatters of stones to pull together historical stories. We stare intently at bones and pots and pieces of brick to try to understand what people were thinking and doing all that time ago. It is a powerful skill [I was going to say trick, but there is nothing tricky about it]. The vast human story is opened to archaeologists in a way that remains closed to just about everyone else, because they can't see the way we do. That seems unfair, but there is a way around it.

The power of art is that it can shortcut those years of training and practice and professional acculturation. Rather than the lottery of real landscapes and buried artefacts, artists can use their myriad technical skills to highlight and accentuate different parts of this strange way of seeing. Whether it is central to their work or an incidental outcome of production, art can draw attention to something in the image that gives that same sense of revelation as archaeology can.

It may be a palimpsest. The word comes from the incomplete erasures of earlier work on a page or parchment, leaving some peeping through. Every day I pass a building where the faded and peeling paint from a closed-down video shop, shows beneath it more and more of earlier signage. A pharmacy? Ladies fashion? The immediate temptation is to explore, to search back through old newspapers and photos, to solve the puzzle. Or it might be a murder mystery. One of my favourite 'archaeological' artworks is *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Deaths*, a series of dollhouses created by Frances Glessner Lee. These dollhouses recreate real murder scenes and were used to train detectives in the art of forensic observation.

We often forget that print-making, painting and photography were influenced by the desire to depict the ancient and ruinous, to capture a sense of the passage of time on paper. They have all taken their turn in depicting some of the great archaeological discoveries over the centuries, from early excavations in Pompeii and ancient Egypt to the jungle-wrapped cities of the Maya. And they became tools of archaeological documentation, providing a 'true' record of what was found. Another important role of art, demonstrated in this exhibition, is to remind us that 'true' records can be constructed and manipulated in their composition.

What do people see when they visit an archaeological dig? Usually what captures their attention and what they immediately fix upon is not the old stuff, but what the archaeologists have done – square pits, string lines, trays of dirty, broken crockery, bums waving in the air. Yes, this is all fascinating stuff, and it's the process of discovery unfolding. If you can talk to the archaeologists it begins to make sense, if you find out why a trench was located in that spot, and not ten metres to the left, and why sometimes we are digging with a little trowel and other times with a backhoe.

Television shows like *Time Team* are good at explaining why sites are being dug the way they are, but they are not so effective when it comes to seeing what was found. Archaeologists therefore seek to use the creative skills of artists but they conceive of

this in a limited way. The work of Victor Ambrus, an artist on *Time Team* is an example. Because of the disjunction between what archaeologists can see in the dirt of a trench, and what the rest of us can make out, to make good explanatory television, the archaeological discoveries have to be translated into pictures of real people living in whatever houses and with whatever objects that have been found. Other solutions they have found are post-production colouring to highlight which bit of grey-brown dirt is the Roman villa. No amount of questioning by the host can really explain to a lay audience what they are seeing. Artists in this context are a critical intermediary in the process of explaining what archaeologists have found and what it means.

A more complex rendering of art practice has been demonstrated on other archaeological projects, such as excavations at the site of Old Marulan, NSW. Here, an artist in residence and community artists were given the opportunity to work on the site and invited to create whatever they wanted. Perhaps unsurprisingly, like members of the public, most of their work dealt with the dig, the most recent 'layer' of the landscape. The work emphasised precise trenches plonked in the middle of paddocks, string lines, the red and white checkerboard of photo scales. But they did get beyond this surface, and start to see the site as it was. Interestingly they began to think in layers, a bit like archaeologists, and could see the site as a sequence, a palimpsest of occupation and abandonment, from Indigenous occupation through to the colonial presence.

Archaeologists create objectivity through the way they depict their record-keeping, collecting and cataloguing, all of which have been pulled apart by artist Mark Dion, who has undertaken a number of exhibitions and performance pieces based around the idea of deconstructing what it is that archaeologists actually do. Whether it is having an archaeological 'dig' along the banks of the Thames, or creating sumptuously ordered and classified displays of junk found lying around, he makes the point that archaeology can be a performance, aimed at convincing people it is anything but performative.

Geraldine Berkemeier, one of the artists involved in the Marulan excavation project, was fascinated by the process of sieving soil to recover small finds. Inspired by the sieving station she constructed her own, to my mind a kind of creepy, ant-like line of worker sieves. Each one had a different kind of mesh, so it could pick and choose what was to be left behind. To an archaeologist this is a menacing idea – that a passive tool has somehow come to life and begun to exercise its own control over what it keeps and what falls through. No longer is the sieve in the service of the archaeologist.

One of the major trends in archaeology over the past two decades has been an attempt to democratise and de-mystify it, creating a more 'public' archaeology. The reasons why this has happened are still debated – is it the discipline loosening its grip, recognising that the experts don't necessarily have all the answers, or a clever conspiracy to make the public believe that is what we are doing, but without giving up real control. Regardless, more and more people visit archaeological digs, follow blogs, and watch telegenic archaeologists on television every year. The past, often their very personal past, continues to fascinate, and the discoveries made are sometimes only a bit more interesting than the story of the detective work that goes into making them.

The artists in *Ground Truthing* bring a sense of archaeology to their work. It's not simple representation, or a quick fascination with the old or quirky. What they do is to make clever use of the ways that archaeologists have trained themselves to see, bringing it out into the open and demystifying it. If archaeology is going to continue to pursue its program of becoming more public and democratic, then not only does it have to share its findings and ways of working with the public, but also those special techniques that privilege it.

In his book *The Night Country,* poet and archaeologist Loren Eisely wrote

> A man who has once looked with the archaeological eye will never see quite normally. He will be wounded by what other men call trifles. It is possible to refine the sense of time until an old shoe in the bunch grass or a pile of nineteenth-century beer bottles in an abandoned mining town tolls in one's head like a hall clock.

The challenge for archaeologists is to give up the secret of the archaeological eye, to stop it being used to exclude people from a full understanding of the past. Looking at the art you will see in this exhibition will help you to find and exercise your own archaeological eye, and one day, you might begin to see the landscape resonate the way it does to an archaeologist.

Denis Gojak
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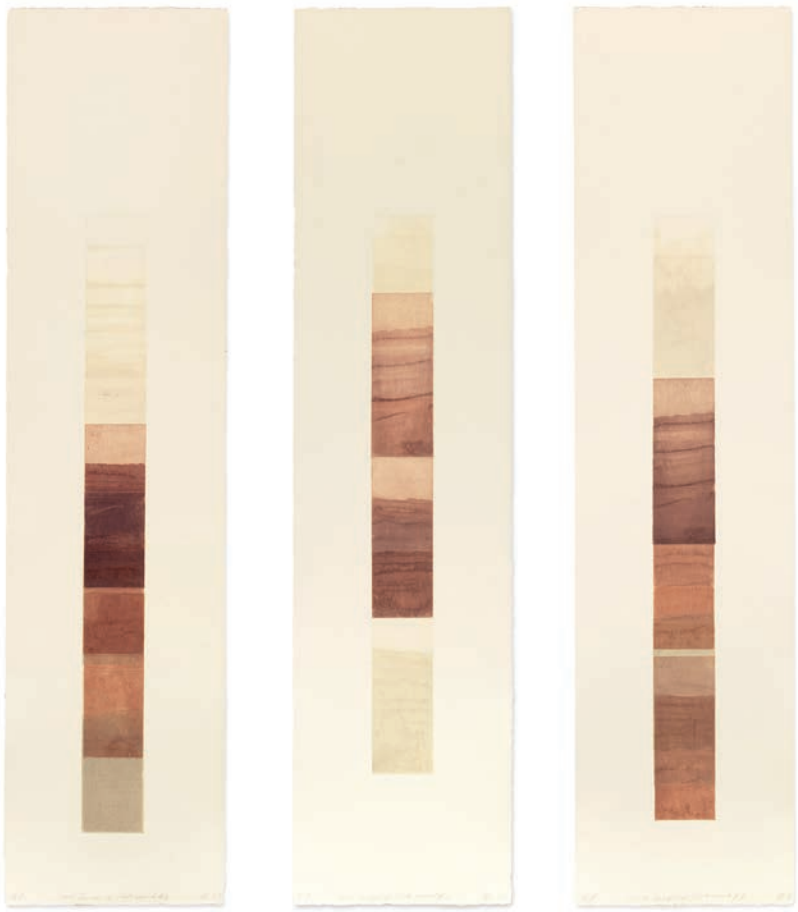
Artist Statements

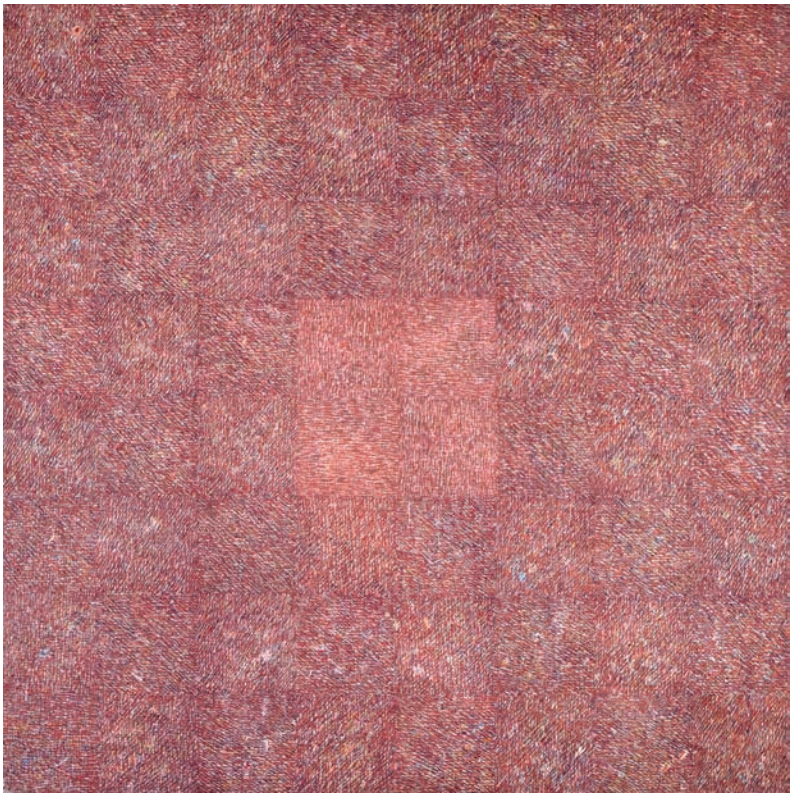
Heather Burness

Core Samplings / salt wound



Heather Burness, *Core Samplings / salt wound #4, #2, #5*, 2008, Unique multi-plate colour etching from plates immersed in the hypersaline water of the Wimmera River near Dimboola, each 108 x 26.5 cm.

The suite, *Core Samplings / salt wound* was made as part of a body of work which culminated from my exploration of the beleaguered environment of the Wimmera Region of Victoria, undertaken in 2007/8. Across the cropped rolling sands of the Wimmera any shallow depression was devoid of plant life. Salty groundwater less than a metre below ground level caused a white crust upon the land; a salt wound. Post colonial clearing of the Mallee, that marvelously deep rooted resilient tree, created the opportunity for saline waters to rise and flow through the land into the Wimmera River, fouling the deeper strata of the river.



Liz Coats, *Kore #6*, 1980, acrylic on linen, 91 x 91 cm.

Liz Coats

Kore #6

During the summer of 1974/5, I joined archaeologists to excavate a cluster of 'mound' camp-sites in the Western District of Victoria. I was allocated a one-metre square outlined in string, under the supervision of archaeologist Denis Byrne. I began to systematically scrape burnt soil and fragmentary evidence of habitation across the whole surface of the square, to a depth of one centimeter at a time, and I recorded on graph paper, details in the surfaces exposed. Over many weeks, I found this activity to be intensely satisfying, both the concentrated labour and the analysis of findings.

Back in Melbourne, I was thinking about how to build resonant depth in abstract colour fields. I was aware of paintings by Agnes Martin and others who were organising their paintings in grid formations, while I wanted to build colour fields that would express how I see colours in depth and transparency. I began to apply semi-transparent paint with tiny, spaced brush marks, one colour at a time across the whole surface of a square canvas, leaving gaps for colours beneath to show through. It took several years, and three groups of paintings – the *Chameleons*, *Gardens*, and *Kores* – to realise how much that early archaeological experience has influenced my understanding of embodied constructive purpose, both perceptually and physically, for all the paintings to the present time.

Jacob England, *Lay*, 2014, found rocks, 200 x 200 x 10 cm approx.

Jacob England

Lay

I noticed some of the rocks on site have quartz lines running through them. I began to search for and gather them, returning to my point of origin and placing the rocks in concentric circles radiating outwards. The more stones gathered the scarcer they became, necessitating gathering from further afield. This process focuses the rocks on site while removing them from the surrounding area; the form mimicking my action. Through this ritual I impart my self into the landscape.

U.K. Frederick

Yesterday's Hearth

People have been gathering around fires to cook, sleep, drink and share stories for more than a 100,000 years. The controlled use of fire is considered by some scientists to be a significant cultural turning point that is fundamental to humans becoming human. I don't know about the science of ancient ashes or how other cultures felt about fire but I do know that the hearth continues to be a place where people come together. My photographic series, *Yesterday's Hearth*, is an exploration into the power of the 'camp' fire to generate spaces of reflection, conversation, imagination and intimacy.

U.K. Frederick, *Yesterday's Hearth (Nora Creina, SA)*, 2014, C type photograph, 60 x 60 cm.

Julie Gough

The Lost World (part 2)

The self-filmed work *The Lost World (part 2)* depicts the artist virtually attempting to 'return', to symbolically repatriate, across Tasmania, photographs of thirty-five Tasmanian Aboriginal stone tools held in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge (MAA). The artefacts in the footage were exhibited in the museum in 2013 and projected via live webcam back to Tasmania alongside *The Lost World (part 2)* film in the Contemporary Art Tasmania gallery. The film was also projected during the original exhibition inside MAA, adjacent to the 35 stone tools, probably publicly visible for the first time outside of Tasmania. In this relationship the tools were reunited with place at least through sound, where they could hear the contemporary sounds of proximate places from where they were taken. The film was also projected outdoors, onto the opposite building from the museum, which further layered and emphasised absence, distance, longing and my ongoing exploration of the concept 'the impossible return'. A second surveillance camera sent to the museum the photograph of one artefact, weathering outdoors in Tasmania.

This ongoing project explores the absence of objects from their original people and context. The process of undertaking this form of repatriation and its filmic response to the missing artefacts reconnected me with Country. The work highlights the coloniser's conquest of place and suppression of history by the renaming of her maternal homelands. The work articulates the continued dispossession of Aboriginal people from their territories.

Julie Gough, *The Lost World (part 2)*, 2013, HDMI video, duration 1:15:32, edited by Jemma Rea, artefact photographs by Christoph Balzar

Katie Hayne & U.K. Frederick

Love on the Rocks

Many of us develop deep attachments to rocks; from 'pet rocks' and fossil collections, to precious minerals and stone artefacts. Over millennia people have used rocks to make stone tools, build structures and create commemorative markers. This work explores our deeply engrained cultural connection to the very fabric of our earth; through the inherent beauty in small geological fragments, and our desire to collect and arrange pebbles, through to the romantic sentiments and fetish qualities we assign to stone

Katie Hayne & U.K. Frederick, *Love on the Rocks*, 2015, acrylic on flaked dacite, dimensions variable. Dacite flaked by Tim Maloney and U.K. Frederick.

objects. Do you love me? Is this desire? The flakes we use here are predominantly debitage, or waste left over from knapping; a technique used to create stone tools, knives and spearheads. This particular material, dacite, is an igneous rock formed from volcanic eruptions and it was ordered online from America. Through a mixing of the deep past, recent past and the present, the historical context of these rocks is explicitly disturbed. By writing on the dacite flakes we draw attention to the human hand and its role in the making and unmaking of histories, and urge a deeper consideration of how meaning, emotion, and knowledge becomes attached or ascribed to the things in our world.

Macdonald Nichols

Flatbed Suburbia #2

I photograph the contemporary suburban landscape we all inhabit: not the ordered lawns and smooth asphalt streets but the marginal unregulated zones at the edge of suburbia where the landscape is defined by the human activities that take place in the spaces: private behaviours secretly played out and over time feeding in to the evolution of an anxious random wasteland. "Flatbedding" is a technique I have employed for it's objective anonymity and ignorance of the coded vision that a camera and lens automatically bring to a 'view' of land. The flatbedded image has no horizon or conventional perspective, no reference to time of day and is an exact 1:1 of the ground surface at the specific location. For me the grid assembled scans become pseudo scientific surveys with a clear revealing detail as well as a view of the 'whole' place.

Macdonald Nichols, *Flatbed Suburbia #2: South from the Parkway, over the fence and through the native regrowth, following the dry creek bed for 500 meters then just beyond the Acacia grove as the ground begins to rise*, 2013, inket print, 89.3 x 168.5 cm.

Nick Stranks

Work Surface

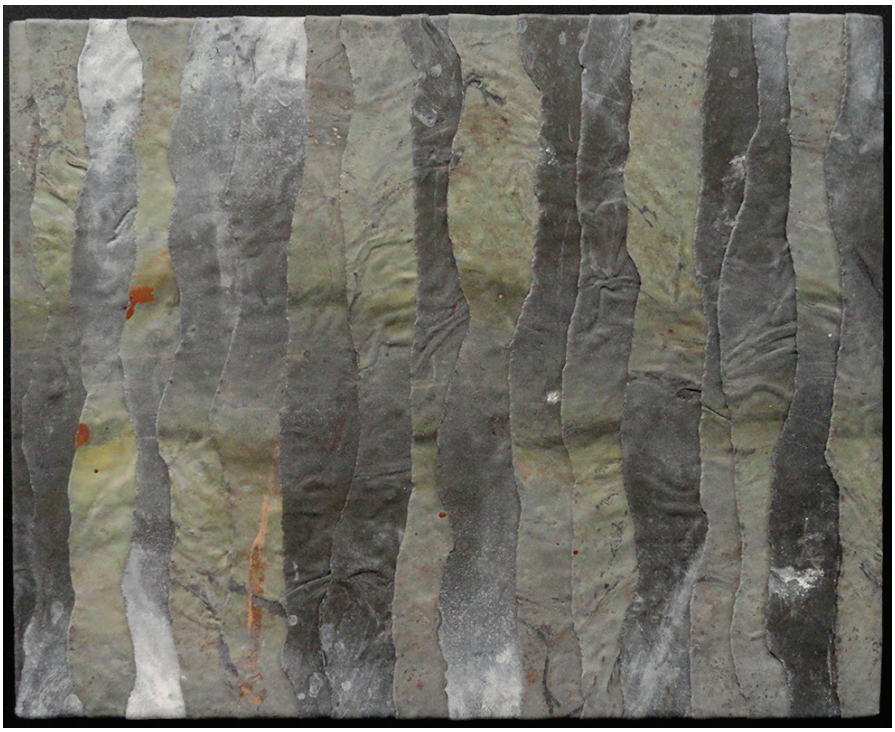
These images are created using an inkjet printer and are printed between layers of architectural film. The images are taken from a collection of sand-casting tools discovered three years ago. These well worn tools were once used daily, and contain evidence and history of this use. I am interested in exploring ways to form an image or portrait of the tradesperson who once used them and in doing so explore my own identity.

Nick Stranks, *Work Surface*, 2014, flow-fill grout, oxide, dimensions variable.

Lars Wetselaar

Yarrabuck

These works are a response to a trip through the Centre and Kimberley in 2011. They're not purely landscapes but emotional evocations of what I had experienced while travelling through that country. The use of lead was serendipitous but I immediately saw the potential in both its material properties and surface qualities by recontexualising it. Essentially, all of my work has been about beauty—that through the tangible there can be an ongoing dialogue between object and onlooker.



Lars Wetselaar, *Yarrabuck*, 2012, lead, masonite, fixative, 31 x 38.5 cm.

Heather Burness' work focuses on the cultural and social connection to the flow of water. She lives and works on the Far South Coast of New South Wales. Website: www.heatherburness.com

Liz Coats completed her PhD in the Painting Workshop of the ANU School of Art in 2012 and holds an MFA-Research (glass) from COFA, University of NSW (1997). Liz has held 40 solo exhibitions in Australia, New Zealand and China and participated in group shows in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Slovenia, Denmark and Peru. During 1975-6 Liz worked on archaeological excavations and field surveys in the Western District, VIC with the Victorian Archaeological Survey. From 1980-1983 she travelled in Greece, visiting archaeological sites and museums with a focus on archaic Greek sculpture and ceramics. In the last five years Liz has been involved in the field research and exhibitions with ANU Environment Studio and in 2015 she became a VCCAFS recipient. Liz Coats is represented by Utopia Art Sydney. Website: www.lizcoats.com.au

Jacob England is an emerging Canberra-based artist and designer who completed his undergraduate studies in Architecture in 2010. In 2014 he completed a Master of Visual Arts from the sculpture workshop of the ANU. Sculpturally, his work draws influence from Arte Povera. He employs found materials, performance and photography to connect to and express his relationship with his surroundings.

U.K. Frederick is an artist inspired by working with ideas, objects, materials and practices that exist in the past and the contemporary world. She works across a range of media, including photography, video, printmaking and installation. In addition to her visual arts practice, Ursula has published her research in a variety of international and Australian publications. She holds a PhD from the ANU School of Art, as well as an MA (Research) from ANU and a BA (Hons) from UWA. Website: www.ukfrederick.com

Julie Gough is an artist, freelance curator and writer who lives in Tasmania. Her research and art practice often involves uncovering and re-presenting often conflicting and subsumed histories, many referring to her own and her family's experiences as Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Current work in installation, sound and video provides the means to explore ephemerality, absence and recurrence. Julie holds a PhD and BA(Hons) in Visual Arts from the University of Tasmania. She has exhibited widely in Australia since 1994 and her work is held in most Australian state and national gallery collections. Julie is represented by Bett Gallery, Hobart. Website: http://juliegough.net

Katie Hayne is an emerging Canberra artist who works in a variety of media including video, photography, artist books and oil painting. She studied a Bachelor of Visual Arts at the University of South Australia and has continued her art training through short courses at the ANU School of Art. Her recent work has explored ideas around everyday materialities, redundant technologies and animal breeding.

Macdonald Nichols is presently undertaking a Master of Visual Arts by coursework in the Photography and Media Arts workshop. His practice-led research has been focussing on the 'bad-lands' of the suburban fringe where the landscape takes on a distinct vision. Mac has been examining car wrecks as icons of the urban fringe and experimenting with a flatbed scanner as a method of creating a view of landscape. Mac has recently begun to explore using text together with his photographic imagery. Email: queanbeyan47@bigpond.com

Nick Stranks has worked in the Sculpture Workshop at the ANU for 20 years and currently teaches and manages the workshop's foundry. He is undertaking a PhD, part-time, in the Printmedia and DrawingWorkshop, ANU. Nick's art practice in the past has dealt with both cast and fabricated metal sculptures. Much of this work has concentrated on the casting in bronze, of obsolete technologies, such as early mobile phones, cameras and tools. Nick's work is exhibited throughout Australia and he regularly collaborates on public commissions and installation projects. Email: nick.stranks@anu.edu.au

Lars Wetselaar was born in Katherine NT in 1956. He studied ceramics at the Canberra School of Art in 1977-79 and 1987-89 and worked in a UK ceramics studio in 1990. Lars ran his own studio ceramic practice from 1991-2003 and is currently working in Visual Art and Design at Canberra Institute of Technology as a techo and teacher working with a range of materials in small-scale sculptures and planar works. Email: lars.wetselaar@cit.edu.au

Archaeological sites, materials and collections have long been a fertile source of inspiration for artists. Yet there are also many contemporary artists whose practice engages with archaeology indirectly, through their process, medium, critical thinking or aesthetic sensibility. This exhibition casts an archaeological eye on the art of several such Australian artists working today.

Ground Truthing: Artists and Archaeology

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