

Sculpture on the Cliffs, Elliston 2009

Agriculture, Culture, Sculpture

Exhibition Essay by Gavin Malone

Readers familiar with this event will recall that its genesis was in the 2002 bicentennial celebrations of the Flinders and Baudin encounter on the south coast of South Australia during their respective explorations, mapping and naming of the southern coastline. The impact of these explorations on Indigenous peoples was a theme of the Bicentennial and some in the Elliston community did not want this overlooked locally. This was a profound and heartfelt step for a small, notionally conservative, rural community. The recognition and inclusion of Indigenous people, cross-cultural reconciliation, and reconciliation with our colonising history have been sub themes in all four exhibitions.

But it is not only reconciliation with Indigenous peoples that is now being engaged, it is also a reconciliation with the indigenous nature of place, or our indigenous ecologies. As a colonising, farmer/city dweller culture we introduced cultural practices, including agriculture and sculpture, from another place, another landscape. Ecologically we have been slowly learning, or adapting, to what is sustainable here in our place for the long term; multi generational time; great, great grandchildren time. And this has become paramount over the last few decades, underpinned by the challenges of climate change. Arts practice is neither separate nor immune from this and sculpture too is evolving to be of this place, moving away from, not conforming to, the European paradigms.

As a city dweller I am totally reliant on the farmer for my sustenance. The small veggie patch, fruit trees and chooks at home cannot, and do not, support my food and other needs. They are more so a connection, or a reminder, of the process of production, rather than my livelihood. It can be seen as a pleasant hobby. But that is not the case for those in the Elliston region; they see, feel and live daily with the capacities and vagaries of the land and sea. Sculpture on the Cliffs brings together, albeit fleetingly, the urban and the rural, the farmer and the city dweller, the local and the regional, and over the duration of the four events camaraderie is building, views are being discussed, opinions being exchanged and argued, and this is not just arts practice. The forums held as part of the event may be directed towards the creative aspects of the community, but discussions on the weather, climate change, the state of the land, and the long dry are always hovering. I avoid the word drought; it seems to make the lack of rain an 'act of God', rather than part of ongoing seasonal variations, now being exacerbated by climate change.

Agriculture, the growing and storage of grain, enabled our culture. Only when the belly is full can one direct attention to developing culture and cultural artefacts. The two are integrated and symbiotic, they are also symbolic of who we are. Elliston and Sculpture on the Cliffs, because of the unique location with the coastal cliffs and the agricultural hinterland, the aquaculture and the harvesting of the sea, contributes to this literally and to the sense of the primal relationship between our species and the land. There is the visceral, tactile experience of the cliffs, the ocean, the wind, the sun, the smells, the land, for both artist and audience.

Ecology is not the preoccupation but it is another reconciliatory theme that underpins this community event. Art practice and sculpture engage and mediate on all aspects of the human condition, prevailing social themes tend to get a voice, but this is not to overlook every aspect of everyday life; the whimsical, the humorous, the tragic, the inane, the joyful, the profound, the aesthetic, and the formal qualities of sculpture. These too are also what it is about.

The event also brings together an eclectic range of artists, urban and regional, from those who dabble as part of other obligations in their lives, to those who are professional full time artists. The viewer though wouldn't necessarily know and probably doesn't care. Does someone from North Queensland travelling through on the around Australia pilgrimage recognise any of the 'names'. No indeed. It is the personal engagement with, and response to what is before their eyes, the artworks, that is of import, the artist is in many ways anonymous. As with the artists the audience too is diverse, mainly travellers from far and wide and this is one of the interesting facets of the exhibition, not knowing who may engage the work and how that experience may disseminate throughout the land as the travellers travel on.

The local organising committee beavers away, making it all happen. It requires stamina. What are their rewards? Part of it is to know that the artists and the audience appreciate the event and their efforts which contribute not only to the regional but also to the 'central', it contributes to a more vibrant artistic expression and a sense of inclusivity. We in Adelaide talk about it and Elliston. Have you noticed that many weather forecasts say 'south of Elliston, the weather will be such and such.'? For

me there is now a sense of knowing, a familiarity as to how 20-knot winds would whip the waves, would the surfers be out at Blacks?

The richness of the community activities associated with the sculpture is an integral part of the attraction; the workshops, the forums, the school events, the town party and music, the regional crafts and produce to partake of. All these facets combined make Sculpture on the Cliffs such a unique and valuable event. It brings together the disparate; it is a means of sharing with each other and the stranger. It is about giving and receiving. It is about humanity and community.

As a participating artist for the third time I thank and congratulate the community of Elliston for their initiative and their hospitality. I'm sure somewhere in north Queensland around a caravan park table or a campfire, the wonder of Elliston and its sculpture event is on the lips of a traveller, sharing or reflecting on their experience; and whether the cliff top drive was before or after partaking of the fine produce of the Elliston Bakery. Sculpture on the Cliffs is another aspect of identity for Elliston and regional South Australia. May it continue to be so.