



MURRAY DARLING PALIMPSEST 2006

# Palimpsest: writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been erased and written over

The Murray Darling Palimpsest is a unique visual art event which engages issues of ecological and social sustainability through out the Murray Darling Basin, Australia's food bowl. It has evolved out of the Mildura Palimpsest, an art and environment event and the successor to the Mildura Sculpture Triennials of the 1970s and 80s. The Murray Darling Palimpsest involves nearly 100 artists working with fourteen host organisations in four states and the A.C.T. The works and ideas come together through a web site, a three day symposium hosted by La Trobe University in Mildura, 1 - 3 September, and a book planned for 2007. (See [www.mwaf.com.au/palimpsest/index.html](http://www.mwaf.com.au/palimpsest/index.html))

The Palmer Project, a long term ecological rehabilitation and art exhibition synthesis at Greg John's 400 acre property, is pleased to participate as a host. It is part of contributing to the art and ecology discourse, Palmer being a place to promote ideas, discussions and outcomes. This exhibition further complements the Palmer Sculpture Biennial held in March this year.

We would like to thank all participating artists and support organisations for their contribution. In particular we thank Ian Hamilton, Palimpsest Project Manager for his untiring work, encouragement and vision.

**Greg Johns and Gavin Malone**

A black and white photograph of a rugged, rocky hillside. The foreground is dominated by large, dark, craggy rocks interspersed with clumps of tall, thin grasses. The middle ground shows a steep slope covered in a dense carpet of low-lying vegetation and smaller rocks. The background features a prominent, rocky ridge line against a pale, overcast sky. The overall scene conveys a sense of a cold, desolate, and natural landscape.

PALMER PROJECT WINTER LANDSCAPE

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# INTIMATE TOPOGRAPHIES AND GLOBAL CATASTROPHES

In his 1995 book *The Future Eaters Flannery*<sup>1</sup>, Australian scientist Tim Flannery discusses the concept of 'cultural maladaptation' in Australia. That is, our colonising cultural practices have not sufficiently adapted to suit the indigenous ecological capacity. He proposes that it is essential Australians evolve a culture that will help us survive long term on this continent, and in doing so we adopt laws, values, artefacts and ceremonies to both symbolise and facilitate this. In 2003 he further said<sup>2</sup>

Australia still has so much to offer, and so much can be done to ensure that the country provides the very best of life to its people. This, however, cannot happen while we imagine that we are people from another place. A series of changes needs to occur both in government policy and in the hearts and minds of all Australians, before we can think of ourselves as having a secure future here.

It is opportune to reflect upon some of our cultural practices and values, and the role of the arts, within the context of the Palimpsest's ecological and social sustainability / art and science discourse.

Compounding the problem of cultural maladaptation in Australia is global climate change. Science has made it abundantly clear that humanity faces an enormous challenge in realigning its ecological relationships. Whilst a few sceptics linger, the debate is over.

Flannery's recent book 'The Weather Makers'<sup>3</sup> succinctly sets out the global science and some of the ominous scenarios of the very near future. Coupled with increasing global ecological and population pressures, all human activity, including the arts or 'arts industry', must now be measured against the critical issues of sustainability, ecological and social.

Since the early 1990's we have had the tool of Ecological Footprint Accounting, created at the University of British Columbia, Canada, by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, to 'measure the extent to which the ecological demand of human economies stays within or exceeds the capacity of the bio sphere to supply goods and services'.<sup>4</sup> The Footprint of a population is 'the total amount of biologically productive land and water area that the population needs to produce the resources it consumes and absorb the waste it generates, using current technology'.<sup>5</sup> It is a far more appropriate way of understanding human activity and impacts than conventional financial accounting, the Gross National Product etc. It is an 'ecological currency' that enables supply and demand comparisons possible on a global scale.

Put simply there are 11.2 billion global hectares or 1.8 hectares of bio capacity per person to support us. And this assumes that no capacity is set aside for wild species. It is alarming to note that in 2002 (the latest figures) humanity's footprint

1. Tim (1994) *The Future Eaters: An ecological history of the Australasian lands and people* Reed Books, Sydney

2. Flannery, Tim (2003) in Vizard, S., Martin, H. J., & Watts, T. (Editors) *Australia's Population Challenge: the Australian Population Summit* Penguin Books, Camberwell p.171

3. Flannery, Tim (2005) *The Weather Makers* Text Publishing, Melbourne

4. *The Ecological Footprint: A resource accounting framework for measuring human demand on the biosphere.* (Accessed 20.07.06)

5. *Ibid*

exceeded bio-capacity by approximately 25%.<sup>6</sup> Put bluntly we are living well beyond our ecological means. Worse still is the grossly inequitable distribution of production and consumption, and social outcomes.

Whilst there has been much recent debate about ecological sustainability little has been said about the notion of sustainable societies. South Australian social scientist Stephen McKenzie outlines that

Social sustainability discourse begins with the basic premise that our current social mode of action is flawed, witnessed by large imbalances in the distribution of wealth and

power and by the extent of social exclusion. Our notion of social sustainability is currently determined by our perception of its absence; indeed, if we lived in a sustainable society, we would probably have no need for the concept of one.<sup>7</sup>

In essence our cultural tradition, our society, in its present form, is unsustainable. This is a sombre, if not frightening thought.

It is broadly accepted that the arts reflect the culture or society from which they emanate and as such, much contemporary art practice or the 'arts industry' can be said to be unsustainable to the extent it reflects an ailing, if not failing, paradigm. However, a process of change is under way at many levels but whether our cultural practices and values are evolving at a sufficient pace and are sufficiently of this place, remains to be tested. One concern is that all too often Australian visual arts practice is merely a 'miniaturisation' of what is happening in Europe and the United States. The same as the local Coca Cola factory is a miniaturisation of the American original, we produce mere copies. By mimicking the 'dominant' cultural centres of the Euro-American axis we effectively exclude ourselves from more intimately engaging our own backyard, our own particular issues and relationships, and in particular our own ecologies. Enough of French theory as the dominant intellectual paradigm and frame of reference!

Whilst we cannot dismiss our European cultural DNA, the embodied beliefs and values again require critical scrutiny in terms of sustainability. A moot point is that no former European colonising nation, nor the United States, can now exist within its own landmass or bio capacity. Our 'mother country', the United Kingdom, with a E.F. of 5.6 ha per person has a deficit of 237 million hectares, two and a half times more than its own bio capacity of 95 million hectares. France, Portugal, Germany, Italy, Spain, Holland

and Belgium have deficits ranging in order from 2.4 to 3.9 hectares per person. The United States, our current cultural (and political) overlord, with a E.F of 9.7 ha per person has a whopping 1455 million hectare deficit, as much again as its own capacity of 1368 million hectares.<sup>8</sup>

The ecological footprints of these countries extend over the planet. They have taken and continue to take bio capacity (and human and other bio physical) resources from elsewhere, having moved from overt colonisation and slavery to surrogate colonisation through global trade in order to support their cultures and their deficits. And we seek to emulate their examples and values? It does not seem logical nor wise. This is not parochialism, nor nationalism, it is simply that global resource exchange and consumption patterns, as have occurred to date and still continue, are not only grossly inequitable but are unsustainable at both social and ecological levels. The cultural values that facilitated them in the past and support them now are also unsustainable.

6. Ibid

7. McKenzie, Stephen (2005) Social Sustainability. Religious Belief and Global Ethics: Outline for Research Hawke Institute Working Paper Series, No 30, University of South Australia p.2,3

See also McKenzie, Stephen (2004) Social Sustainability: Towards Some Definitions Hawke Institute Working Paper Series, No 27, University of South Australia

8. Global Footprint Network: [www.footprintnetwork.org/gfn\\_sub.php?content=footprint\\_hectares](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/gfn_sub.php?content=footprint_hectares) (Accessed 20.07.06) Author's calculations from site information.

But we don't live in 'Saint Australia', our footprint is up there with the 'best' at 7 ha per person in a global range of 0.1 (Afghanistan) to 10.5 (United Arab Emirates). We do though have a small bio-capacity surplus.

How may Australian art respond? The primary concern is our relationship with the bio-physical stuff, 'nature, mineral resource, wilderness' and so forth, however we classify it.

We create 'landscapes', they are the outcome of the interaction between 'culture' and 'nature', a landscape is a cultural artefact as much as a

sculpture.  
All bio physical stuff is manipulated either physically or meta physically to provide meaning. Artists are concerned with artefacts, so why not work with the biggest artefact of them all, work with the land itself in providing a positive bio-physical outcome. This though requires a shift in the Western tradition from art not only as 'reflection and mediation' within a culture but also to art as 'remediation'.

Part of this is moving away from obsession with the artefact (part of global consumption); away

from enclosure, both as a process and a space (contained within a closed arts discourse and the gallery imprimatur); and moving towards the decolonisation of space, people and resources (an overarching Western problem). It is thinking and acting with regard to the relationships within integrated and interconnected living systems. It is developing an intimate understanding of place, the physical and metaphysical, the cultural landscapes. It is curious that as cultural practitioners, to be seen as intimately engaging our own place is somehow considered as deficient. We are often seen as not being 'complete' without the (often repeat) pilgrimage to the 'global' cultural centres.

The greenhouse gas emissions from two people on a return flight from Australia to London or New York is nearly three times, yes three times, as great as two people driving around Australia in a 4WD getting to know their own place. But who gets the bad press? Our relationship to land is what sustains our species and ultimately our culture.

Traditional Australian Indigenous art provides pointers. It reflects a different economy and value system, an integrated living system, it embeds art in place or country.

Representation is an acknowledgment of reciprocal relationships, care of country in a physical and spiritual sense. The Western tradition can learn from this as it evolves and adapts its own art. This requires imagining a new situation that does not now exist, new values and artefacts, including active participation in ecological remediation and Footprint reduction.

The Murray Darling Palimpsest and the Palmer Project are part of a process of change. At Palmer the visitor's exposure to the ecological landscape, the degraded eastern escarpment of the Mt Lofty Ranges, is as important as the engagement with the artworks, they are symbiotic. It is engaging the edge of the dry country, that vast hinterland of our coastal fringe occupation. The twenty year revegetation project is what I consider to be a holistic 'artwork', providing a carbon sink and a new cultural artefact. As I wrote in 1998 Malone, Gavin (1998) *The Ecology of Art or Art as Ecology* Broadsheet, Vol 27, No 4, Contemporary Art Centre of S.A. p.5 'It is easy to consider a sculptural form to be a river valley, paint strokes to be the planting of trees, shrubs and grasses, the grubbing of fennel and poisoning of blackberry to be the editing of superfluous content'.

The MDP artists are providing frameworks to reflect upon our cultural legacy and to assist the re imagining of our values and myths. Part of that is re-imagining landscape not just as economic resource but as life force.

**Gavin Malone** August 2006

## Nici Cumpston

Title of Work: Around The Bend, Katarapko Creek, Murray River National Park  
Materials: Archival Giclee prints on canvas.  
Dimensions: 100 cm x 30cm(4 works)

Katarapko Creek, is a popular fishing and camping spot. Whenever I get the chance I love to escape and wander along the creek. It is a peaceful place. Listening to the birds. Trying to catch a glimpse of fish jumping out of the water. Watching the clouds. Looking out for snakes. I love the creek.

Title of Work: Mighty River Red Gum, Katarapko Creek, Murray River National Park  
Materials: Archival Giclee print on canvas. Dimensions: 160 cm x 60cm

I enjoy spending time wandering along the backwaters of the River Murray. There are scar trees scattered all along Katarapko Creek, showing that this has been the home to Aboriginal people for a very long time. The strength of our ancestors is exemplified in the majesty of the mighty River Red Gum.

Biography  
Nici is a photographic artist and teacher of Aboriginal, Afghan, Irish and English descent whose family comes from Broken Hill and Menindee in NSW. She has also spent time in the S.A Riverland. Having seen significant changes to our river systems over the past 30 years she is concerned about the damage being done and has been creating and exhibiting photographic work centred on the Murray Darling Basin for the past six years.

## Steve Davidson

Title: Ancient River  
Materials: Oxides and charcoal on rock

The invasive environmental impact of European culture has affected all pre-existing ecologies. Acknowledging what remains and continues to struggle and survive under harsh environmental changes is the inspiration for this artwork. Responding to the pre colonisation environment, I have been drawn to our earliest method of recording species, that which is found on rock, using carving and grounds of oxides, ochres and charcoal. In this work these materials form a narrative of the ancient river, and a context of disparity from the present. The 'European carp' has been used as a symbol for the invasion on indigenous species and all that is unnatural and alien; it represents the colonisation, the hybridised ecology and the brutal changes to an ancient river.

Biography  
Steve is an artist and lecturer in Visual Art and Cultural Theory, currently working in Western Australia for Edith Cowan University and Central West TAFE. His work frequently relates to cultural and environmental issues as a commentary on Australian identity. His artistic practice also extends to performance and music and he is also actively engaged as an organiser in community arts and festivals. He has exhibited widely in Australia and is very pleased to be once again a part of the Palimpsest experience.

## Antony Hamilton

Title: Westernwood Acacia  
Materials: Salted sheepskins. – Salt.

Gidya. – A native name;  
Westernwood Acacia. – Same as Gidya.  
Landsborough's Expedition from Carpentaria 1862

A "Spear - wood." Called "Myall" in Victoria.  
Aboriginal names are as follows: - "Gidya," "Gidia," or "Gidgee"  
The natives of New South Wales formerly employed it for spears.  
In Western New South Wales the wood is considered very durable,  
and is, therefore, used  
for the lining of wells, but then it is said to give the water a bad  
taste for several years.  
abominable,  
I have heard of instances in which men who were employed in  
cutting down a tree of this  
species just before rain became so sick as to be compelled to  
leave the tree.  
J. H. Maiden The Useful Native Plants of Australia 1889

Biography  
Christopher Chapman writes "For over ten years Hamilton has made works of art that dramatise and 'bring to life' events (real and imagined) that symbolise the human experience of a specific kind of landscape... What is striking about Hamilton's work is how seemingly simple and recognisable objects are imbued with a deep sense of feeling. There is nothing haphazard about Hamilton's choice of objects and the way in which they are presented and installed... He is expert at finely gauging very precise experiences of tactility and sensation, while offering a horizon of symbolism, character and narrative"

Antony has exhibited throughout Australia in major exhibitions and galleries including the National Gallery of Australia and the Art Gallery of South Australia.

## Greg Johns

Title: Ghost Sheoaks  
Materials: Solar cells and sound equipment

This work links new technology with questions of sustainability, whilst linking the very old with the new, a theme which runs through much of my sculpture practice. Solar cells attached to a remnant Sheoak power a live microphone picking up the wonderful whistling sound Sheoaks make, coupled with pre-recorded sound on an I-Pod. The sounds are fed to six hidden speakers creating a Sheoak forest which only exists as sound. It evokes both the old Sheoak scrub which once existed on the Palmer hills, and the future return of Sheoak bushland, slowly taking place over a twenty year re-vegetation program. Human voices or presence are also detected and become part of the work.

Biography  
Greg has been working as a full-time sculptor for 30 years exhibiting annually in solo shows in Australia, New York and Asia as well as major group shows. A thirty year retrospective will take place at the McClelland Museum, Melbourne, in September this year. In 2002 a major monograph, "Horizon, Greg Johns Sculptures, 1977-2002" by John Neylon was published. Major commissions include "Guardian Figure", Central Green, Singapore, 1993-95 and a multi work installation in Ibiza, Spain, 2005. In 2001 four hundred acres of land was acquired at Palmer, S.A. to establish both an independent sculpture landscape and address environmental issues.



## David Kerr

Title: Wind Levee  
Materials: Local field stone

I have become aware that archaeology has been a recurring undercurrent of my artwork. I have also become aware of the close links between the creative process of art making and the speculative processes used in archaeology. Then, at a deeper level, the subject of archaeological research, that is humans, the way they thought about the world and the actions they took in manipulating that world – there is a distant and yet intimate connection to art making. The human brain has not changed over all the history of human cultures and the closest contemporary equivalent activity to the earliest humans coming to terms with their material world could be the activities artists undertake when they manipulate materials and ideas. My work explores these links through intersecting the geology and the archaeology of the Palmer site.

**Biography**  
David has a background in education and visual arts. He has worked as a teacher, a practicing artist, an art lecturer, an arts administrator, an artist/designer with communities, and an exhibition designer. David has held five solo exhibitions and exhibited in over twenty five group exhibitions since 1980. He is represented in public and private collections. He is a past chair of the Public Art and Design Committee with Arts SA and is a current member of the Adelaide City Council's public art advisory committee. He has been the recipient of Australia Council grants for visual art and arts in community, and the Gordon Darling International Travel Award for studying museum interpretive display. He has designed over twenty museum exhibitions and galleries.

## Gavin Malone

Title: Keep Me Wet Baby  
Materials: River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), acrylic sheet

Our bodies are made up of 36 elements, mainly oxygen, hydrogen and carbon, about 70% water and 20% carbon. A sack of water held up by a frame of carbon, powered by the energy of the sun. Our elements are endlessly recycled, our carbon and water perhaps through a tree and vice versa. But we also exist meta physically, establishing profound connections and stories, that give meaning to our lives and the land. Water though is of the essence, water is survival, winter is our water time, renewal for earth, body and soul. To be wet is to be alive.

**Biography**  
Gavin is an Adelaide artist, teacher and writer with a particular interest in ecological and cultural sustainability, and connections to the indigenous nature of place. His practice incorporates both public space and exhibition works and he has exhibited widely throughout Australia, mostly in non gallery spaces: the streets, the bush, the cliffs, the natural history museum, the cultural centre. He has also travelled extensively in Australia, particularly the arid regions and coastline to develop an understanding of the landscape, our psyche and narratives. For several years he has collaborated with the Kaurna community on cultural renewal and interpretation projects. He is currently a Doctoral candidate at Flinders University.

## Deb Sleeman

Title: Gully Landform  
Materials: Corrugated iron, copper, rivets

We are not separate from the landscape, but we have lived as if we are. Our ignorance and indifference has left only skeletal remains of the land that was. The gullies are deep rents in the landscape, the fabric that bound them together long gone. This work sits at the head of a gully, helping the skeleton absorb the onslaught of weathering and random torrents of water, containing the silt, and becoming part of the landscape once more. The materials used in this work, rescued tin and copper are given another life, another chance to work for the country they came from, whilst retaining the memory of their previous selves.

Biography  
Deb lives and works as a sculptor on Kangaroo Island. Her work encompasses both public art works and exhibition work in the mediums of ceramic, bronze, granite, sheet metal and found objects. She grew up on the River Murray, and acknowledges a debt to Jack Seekamp of Renmark for instilling in her as a child a sense of the preciousness of the river system and the connectedness of all living things.

## Evette Sunset

Title: The Cry  
Materials: Cordyline, Red Gum, fencing wire  
Dimensions: 1m wide x 12 m long x 50cms high

A statement hovering in the wind....like wind on the winter grass. In the colours of a summer-dry watercourse, words meander down to treeless and eroded gullies, exposing them. I pour the blood of my longing into the land with this cry....for the trees to grow again, for a future of social acuity to arise.....for the world to wake up from its dark dreams. The heart of the matter is not only what has been done to drain and pollute our water resources, but also what has been done to deaden our capacity for feeling the extent and significance of this damage for all life. Only deeply felt experience can drive one to make the effort for transformation and regeneration.... a way of hope in the midst of stark realisations.

Biography  
Evette is a South Australian environmental sculptor. She works with natural fibres and landscape, expressing her unique style mainly through innovative site specific, large-scale installations. This often involves client or community collaboration and an educative component. Her background is in teaching, ceramics, basketry, biodynamic gardening, energy efficient building and landscape design.

Observing the special characteristics and sensory aesthetics of place itself, she adapts traditional weaving, rural building and craft skills, integrating on-site resources. The social and eco-narrative embedded in materials is an important focus for the exploration of relationships between nature, humans and the built environment. The works are multi form, richly textured and carry multiple layers of meaning.