

Malcolm McKinnon: Article for Artlink, Vol 24 No1, 2004.

ISOLATED INTERVENTIONS – STRANGE TREASURES IN THE WILDERNESS

Here's one of my fondest recollections from my first foray into the wide open spaces of outback South Australia. Looking a bit woolly and feral in the pub at Lyndhurst, I'm wandering over to check out the jukebox when the publican snarls in my direction: "You won't find any fuckin' Bob Marley on there, mate." (Call me perverse, but in this current era of obsequious scrambling for the tourist dollar I do sometimes miss this kind of old-fashioned approach to dealing with foreign customers.) Anyhow, the publican was correct. There certainly wasn't any reggae to be found on that jukebox but there was a hell a lot of Slim Dusty, including a song from Slim's trucking period in the mid-seventies called *Kilometres Are Still Miles To Me*. On the face of it, it's a song about the way a truckie measures his progress along the routine highways. Really though, it's a song about retaining your sanity in the face of the mind-numbing monotony of endless roads through empty country where it's a long way between pubs or roadhouses. It evokes one of the great myths about the Australian landscape; the notion that there are great stretches of empty, monotonous landscape all over the place that you can just drive through for hours, working hard to stay awake at the wheel.

South Australia has one of the most centralised economies and demographic profiles in the country. There are less than 400,000 people living outside of Adelaide, and almost three-quarters of that number reside in the south-eastern corner of the state. The remaining portion, comprising the huge arid and semi-arid regions spanning the entire north and west of the state, an area three times the size of Victoria, is home to only 130,000 people. That's a population density of bugger-all, and it's getting even thinner with the ongoing decline of dry-land farming and regionally based heavy industries.

Actually, there's something very seductive and exotic about this arid country of big horizons and thinly spread urban infrastructure. There's plenty of room to breath and to reflect and, ultimately, to do a lot of things that are somehow more difficult on the more verdant, crowded east coast. For example, it's almost impossible in this part of the country to fall comfortably into an insular bohemian or intellectual milieu, so there's always the unpredictable stimulus of heterogenous social interactions. In contrast to sections of the major metropoli, it's difficult if not impossible to have a sense of living in a significant arts community or arts sub-culture in any part of rural South Australia (outside of, maybe, the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, which is a distinct world in itself). There's enough professional isolation here to reminds us that we're living in a world where art is not a self-evident virtue. Any overview of visual arts practice in this part of South Australia is therefore destined to be an episodic litany of isolated achievements, as opposed to a linear, developmental narrative. There is a certain amount of arts infrastructure, both government funded and community run, but there isn't the critical mass to create a consistent, nurturing environment (1). Artists require considerable ingenuity, flexibility and lateral thinking in order to sustain a viable practice, in both a social and an economic sense.

Still, there are a surprisingly large number of serious artists out here, working away in the geographic margins. Some would say that they're working on the cultural margins too, but dispute this view. There are distinct, convincing and entirely valid contexts for

artistic practice all over the place, and I reckon that some of the most interesting work anywhere comes from far-flung and relatively isolated locations. (I'm thinking of a diverse bunch of artists that includes, by way of example, Ian Abdulla, Sam Byrne, Colin McCahon, Iris Frame and Ginger Riley.) In most instances, artists are working here precisely because of the inspiration and stimulus they draw from life in this part of the country. A lot of them come here from somewhere else, attracted by the remoteness or the landscape or some aspect of the lifestyle.

It is my experience that there is always interesting art to be found out here in the back blocks, quite often in unlikely places. It's this unlikeliness that really interests me, the way that strange treasures seem to materialise, often without warning, in far-flung places. By way of example, I'd like to present a random litany of such treasures, an illustrated sample of things witnessed.

There's a peculiar concentration of these unlikely artefacts to be found along the Oodnadatta Track, an unsealed road stretching some 600 kilometres between the small town of Marree and the Stuart Highway in the far north of South Australia. It's an extreme kind of landscape, characterised by huge horizons spanning gibber plain, sandhills, salt lakes and low lying, sparse vegetation. The annual rainfall is less than six inches a year. To my eye, it's a phenomenally rich landscape, animated by countless features that become more evident the longer one looks. I've spoken though with many travellers who, upon emerging from their air-conditioned four-wheel-drives, deride the landscape as being monotonous and featureless. Even these people, however, are likely to be struck by the surreal aesthetic manifest in the apparitions listed below:

Specimen no. 1: We're back in Lyndhurst, site of the aforementioned Slim Dusty jukebox, some 300 kilometres north of Port Augusta. Cornelius John Alferink (known commonly as Talc Alf) is a prolific, eccentric and highly skilled producer of carved talc stone sculpture, and his works are on permanent exhibition near the railway siding. Talc Alf collects his regular supply of stone from a site some 130 kilometres east of Lyndhurst where he passes by in the course of weekly mail run to outback pastoral properties. The sculptures range from small carvings made for ready sale to passing travellers to monumental works that encapsulate the artist's peculiar philosophies. Talc Alf includes amongst his major concerns the origins and symbolic meanings of letters in the alphabet, and the recognition of a "true Australian identity." An outspoken advocate for the elusive goal of an Australian republic, he also contends that the boomerang should be recognised as humankind's first achievement in space technology. White and pristine, these sculptures at Lyndhurst are, sometimes quite literally, the word in talc.

Specimen no. 2: The most famous aspect of Marree's heritage relates to the Afghan camel drivers who made the town a major embarkation point for travel and freight into the dry desert country. Hailing in fact from what is now Pakistan, these camel drivers built a corrugated iron shanty town on what, in socio-economic terms, became the wrong side of the railway tracks. They also built a mosque, planted date palms and intermarried with members of the local communities, both black and white. Some of their descendants still live in Marree, and their legacy is also manifest in a peculiar life size camel silhouetted in rusty plate steel at the local school. This sculpture proclaims the fact that we're now well and truly in desert country, and projects the kind of exotic theatricality worthy of a genuine oasis.

Specimen no. 3: Recently destroyed (alas), one my all-time favourite artefacts once nestled beneath the scraggly athel pine trees surrounding a defunct railway fettlers' cottage at Alberrie Creek, some sixty kilometres along the track from Marree. This was a large sculptural rendition of the Australian coat of arms, constructed from concrete and partially buried beer bottles. It's the work of a now forgotten migrant railway cook who apparently made a habit of constructing these concrete testimonies of affection for his new country. The work was unsignposted and difficult to find, having been created for the edification of the cook's immediate work mates and for passengers on trains travelling the old Ghan route to Alice Springs.

Specimen no. 4: Adam and Linnie Plate are local legends and entrepreneurs who operate the Pink Roadhouse in Oodnadatta. The roadhouse functions as a multipurpose cafe, supermarket, motel, garage, radio hub and tourist information centre. A part of their maverick tourism effort has involved the creation and erection of tens of local information signs, hand painted in enamel on any piece of metal that might stand up effectively against the desert winds. These signs are striking artefacts, turning up at irregular intervals all the way up and down the track. The slash of hot pink enamel is particularly impressive, and the crude calligraphy imparts an extensive knowledge of local history and landscape. They're not afraid to touch on contentious political issues either.

Specimen no. 5: Once you hit the Stuart Highway at the northern end of the track it's a fast bitumen road up into the Northern Territory. This is unfenced grazing country, and many a motorist has come to grief in the collision between car and cow. At one stage, a particular pastoralist erected a glorious series of bovine effigies crafted largely from empty petrol drums, star-pickets and other assorted metal objects. A little calf requesting that motorist's DON'T HIT MUM laid on the pathos with an inspired trowel.

Specimen no. 6: For decades now, left-leaning protestors and activists have been lured to this desert region by a succession of political and environmental abominations (note my own feelings here unambiguously signified). The Nurrungar US-Australian joint military facility, the Roxby Downs uranium mine, the Woomera Detention Centre for illegal immigrants: all of these have provoked defiant creative gestures from any number of visiting artists (to apply the term in a broad sense), and there's always evidence on display. I've witnessed large-scale inscriptions on white-crusting salt lakes, errant graffiti on old railway signs, strange roadside sculptural assemblages of salvaged flotsam and jetsam, epic murals painted on the walls of Aboriginal community centres where long terms alliances and friendships have been struck up. Within the broad horizons of the gibber plain, these are all strangely impressive interventions.

There are a whole lot of other artefacts that I'll refrain from describing in any detail. I'm a big fan of the artfully arranged vehicle carcasses dotted at various points along the track (I've seen a few particularly fine burnt-out caravans, the vestige of somebody's vacation gone wrong) and of the car-bonnet signs and old fridge letterboxes that mark the long driveways to various cattle stations. But the specimens outlined above should be sufficient to give a sense of the maverick creativity I'm wanting to celebrate. These are

artworks that exude an undeniable vitality and speak with an apparently unconstrained and authentic voice.

My friend John Turpie is a painter, sculptor and community artist who has lived and worked in the north and west of the state for some twenty years. Recently, he co-founded the Sculpture on the Cliffs event at Elliston, way out west on the Eyre Peninsula, involving and inspiring a diverse group of artists from across the country working in the context of a small rural community (1). He argues that: *Isolation is a phenomenon invented by people in the city who cannot move further than between work and home. For them, to travel more than 200 kms is a rare thing...*

Looking back, it was a brave man who could hold a conversation in an outback pub and announce he was an artist. Up would go the cry - "Oh yeah, I'm an artist too - a bullshit artist!" But, after you've been there a while and people see that you're still there and see the things you do, which are about life and the celebration of "isolation", you become an accepted part of the bush network. (2)

The bush network is a genuine and reassuring phenomenon. Spend ten years in a region like this, vast but thinly populated, and you'll end up knowing (or knowing of, or being known of by) just about everyone. I'd contend that there's a sense of community here (for want of a better term) that is more broadly inclusive and heterogenous than any we're likely to experience living in the big city. There may not be much of an art-world subculture, but there's plenty of real-world cultural context.

- (1) Through the South Australian Country Arts Trust the State Government does support a surprisingly extensive network of regional arts workers and, compared with the more populous and prosperous eastern states, a small amount of built infrastructure. There are only two regional art galleries with a professional director (at Port Pirie and Mount Gambier), although there is a substantial network of volunteer-run spaces across the state.
- (2) *Sculpture on the Cliffs* is a site-specific public art event first staged at Elliston in 2002. Artist involved in the inaugural event created work inspired by local topography and climate and also, in some cases, by the colonial history of this specific part of South Australia. A second *Sculpture on the Cliffs* event is being staged in April-May 2004.
- (3) Quoted from article by John Turpie in *Frontier* magazine, (South Australian Country Arts Trust) Issue No. 5, May 1998.

Author's by-line:

Malcolm McKinnon is an artist and filmmaker working mainly in rural communities. He first travelled through the north and west of South Australia about twenty years ago and has spent regular periods living and working in this part of the country ever since.