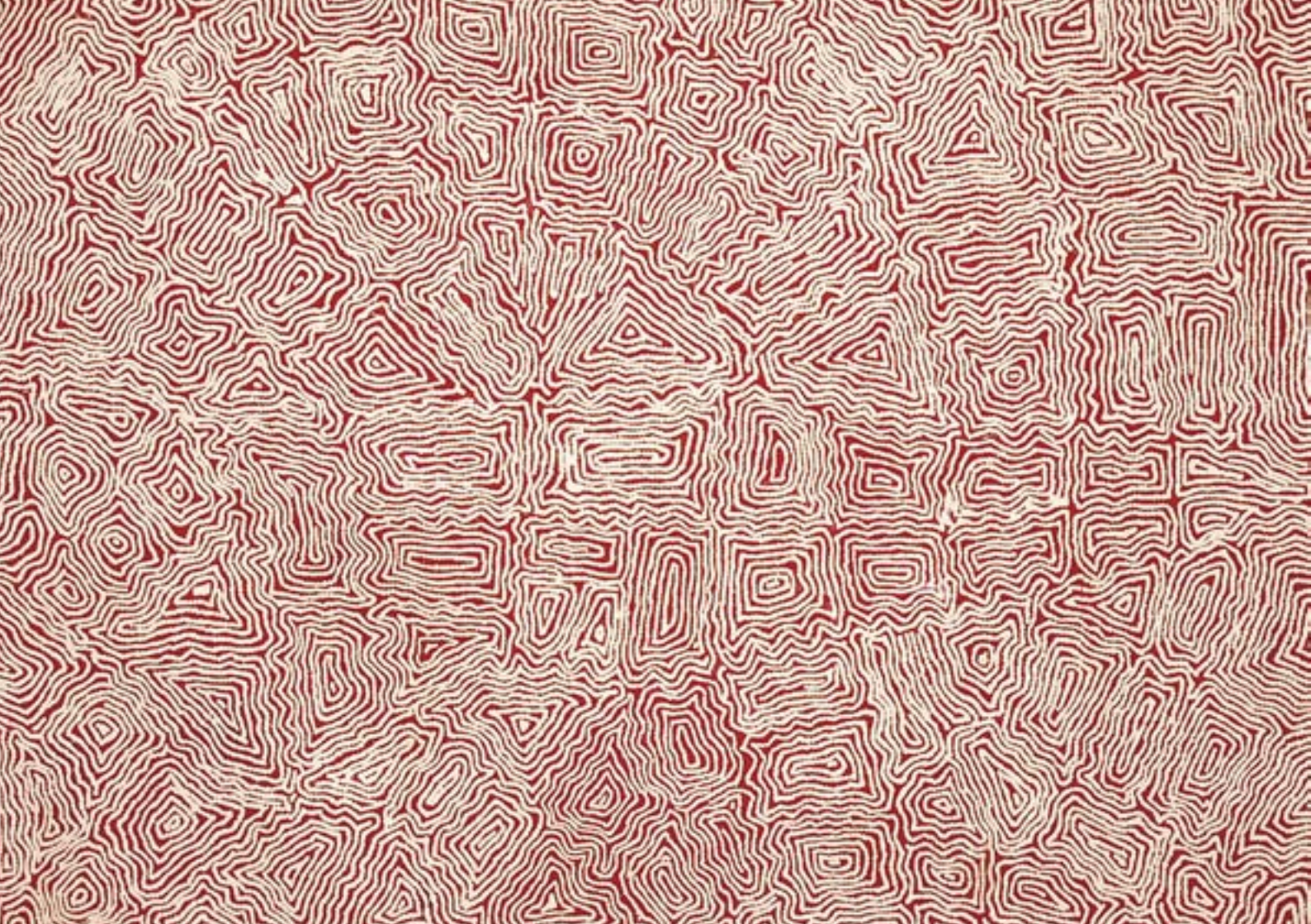




HOME
GROUND



**IVAN
DOUGHERTY
GALLERY**

COFA
UNSW



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FRONT IMAGE Ahlam Shibli, *Dream*, from the series *Unrecognised*, 2000, colour photograph, 80 x 70 cm © the artist

LEFT Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 107 cm (detail)
© the artist licensed by the Aboriginal Artists Agency 2006

HOME
GROUND

JENNY BELL Australia

JUAN MANUEL ECHAVARRÍA Colombia

YUKULTJI NAPANGATI Australia

AHLAM SHIBLI Palestine

Curator Felicity Fenner

FOREWORD

In the foyer of the gallery is an early drawing by Jenny Bell and a recent painting by Yukultji Napangati. Their juxtaposition introduces the exhibition's premise that the concept of home ground is equivocal, entirely dependent on cultural context and personal experience. Upon seeing these same two pictures together last year, Jenny Bell was struck by the symbolism of the black and white lines in both, commenting that while "both works speak of the same place, they seem to represent the collision of cultures... we are the children of this collision and we are still working through its ramifications."

I was introduced to the work of Ahlam Shibli through Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, which staged a survey exhibition of her photographs in late 2003. Seeing *Unrecognised* again at last year's Istanbul Biennale, I was struck by how this understated work was clearly heard above the visual noise of large and more overtly political statements. Similarly, Juan Manuel Echavarría's video work in the Latin American pavilion of the 2005 Venice Biennale was one of the more modestly presented yet most poignant, moving works in the entire biennale.

Thanks to Sommer Contemporary Art in Tel-Aviv for facilitating the exhibition of Ahlam Shibli's work here in Sydney; to Utopia Art Sydney and the generous private lenders of Yukultji Napangati's work; and to Mori Gallery for its support of Jenny Bell's participation.

Many thanks to Nick Waterlow and Ivan Dougherty staff for their assistance and support, and to Tanya Plibersek for officially opening the exhibition. As always, especial thanks to the artists, who have collaborated wholeheartedly and from whom I have learnt much during the course of this project.

Felicity Fenner

April 2006

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

The work of the four artists in this exhibition relates to each one's intimate knowledge of place, specifically the area in which they were born and continue to live in or nearby. Each of the artists has left their home ground at some stage and each has returned on a regular or permanent basis. This distance they've experienced, even if only temporary, however, has equipped them with a sharpened insight to home in its global context often not shared by those that never leave.

In sport as in life, home is the goal, the end point where, in an ideal world, players are free from attack. Yet the home regions of some of these artists are not ideal and, some more blatantly than others, are under constant attack by issues of land rights and usage, racial injustice, abject poverty and, in the case of Colombia, the illegal drug trade. Despite this, the work here is neither angry nor bitter. It invokes empathy rather than incites revenge, revealing in its imagery the strength of spirit that's to be found in the simplest of life's gestures and the most ordinary of circumstance and place.

These places, the artists' home ground, inform the nature of their artistic practice today. Though their experience of home covers four very different parts of the world – from Palestine's Galilee region to central Australia's Gibson Desert, from the



Ahlam Shibli, *Coffee*, from the series *Unrecognised*, 2000, colour photograph, 50 x 70 cm © the artist

urban chaos of Bogotá to the rural austerity of Breadalbane – the artists are linked by an employment of home in their art as an actual and metaphorical starting point from which to reflect on the broader human experience.

Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli and Colombian Juan Manuel Echavarría undertake their practice at the coalface of political oppression and violence, Shibli in occupied Palestine, Echavarría in war ravaged Colombia. These two artists' work is photo-based, a medium that facilitates maximum spontaneity in the most intimate of settings. Both eschew digital manipulation and neither artist's work belongs to the genres of photojournalism or documentary film-making. What they present is an insider's view of the home ground, one that is inextricably bound to each artist's own history and sense of identity.

In contrast to these artists' focus on the individual, the two Australian artists here – one black, one white – paint a land in which the human presence is all pervasive but not necessarily articulated in figurative form. We see social beliefs and stories about the land in Napangati's work and monuments to specific people having passed through a place in Jenny Bell's grave sites, but neither include portrayals of the people who today inhabit this land to which the artists' lives are so closely tied, only traces of a past that echo across the contemporary experience.

In its most literal reading, Jenny Bell's work explores the structures – both buildings and beliefs – that support life on the Australian land. The little church at Breadalbane, constantly threatened with closure because of its diminishing congregation, weathered farm buildings and rural equipment, and the cemetery at Collector, resting place of local farming families for over two centuries, are recurrent subject matter. Like the work of other artists in this exhibition, Bell's oeuvre, though exhibited nationally and beyond, takes as its beginning the land she has always called home.

Despite their proximity to home, however, the paintings here are significant in other contexts. Bell spent her formative years as an artist in Sydney and later London, providing her with that objective insight to home available to those who've lived abroad for any period. Because the artist is able to remove herself conceptually from the land on which she lives – is able to see the wood from the trees – these images that at first might appear specific to place, reveal universal artistic and symbolic references.

The battered cemetery gate, for example, leads neither in nor out. Its purpose, like most barriers erected to divide people and cultures, is symbolic, designating enclosure but also the possibility of escape. Another painting, an image of Mary Magdalene perhaps, or an early pioneer woman entangled in

her carved robes, is crudely painted. This figure on a pedestal stands alone, the worse for wear after a century out in the cold and oblivious to the feminist revolution that's raged around her. She represents at one and the same time a grandmother and a religious icon.

While the artist's experience of place informs Bell's practice on one level, her work is firmly located in a western art historical lineage that is not tied to geographic specificity. Most obviously, there are visual reminders of minimalist painting in the angular gravestones devoid of background. Bell evokes with the barest of detail empty spaces, modest in comparison to the acres of empty canvas of early museum-scaled minimalist painting, but no less evocative of the void.

That these domestic scaled paintings of monuments to an Australian country life can convey echoes of sophisticated art movements and yet reverence for the life represented here, is the strength of Bell's practice. Using a little more paint, two other paintings depict Jesus (or is it God?) with just a hint of the landscape revealed behind. They challenge us to ask how one has shaped the other. For Bell these small rural cemeteries are as good a place as any to pose these perennial, universal questions.

Bell's images might appear simple, but their conception is informed by an acute awareness of the artistic and political

context in which they exist. Because Aboriginal painting is today accepted as the most authentic visual representation of the Australian land, non-indigenous claims to connection with country can be a contentious proposition in Australian art. Complicating the simple acceptance of a non-indigenous empathy with the land is the fact that Aboriginal art is conceived and marketed on its status as evidence of an historic, cultural connection to place, to the point that a non-indigenous assertion of an equally felt connection appears comparatively peripheral, even superficial or, at worst, staged.

This particular group of work not only continues the artist's investigation into the relationship of humans to their environment, but underlines the difficulty and transience of that relationship. If the forms depicted look rigid or gauche against the bleached ground and radiant blue skies, it's because the very nature of white Australia's relationship to the land is an awkward one, perhaps even more so for those whose livelihood is dependent on farming that land. With immense visual clarity despite its apparent hesitancy, Bell describes this awkward alliance that's resulted from the implantation of European traditions into a land whose ancient ways we still know so little about.



Jenny Bell, *Grave #17*, 2005-06, oil on board, 60 x 60 cm © the artist



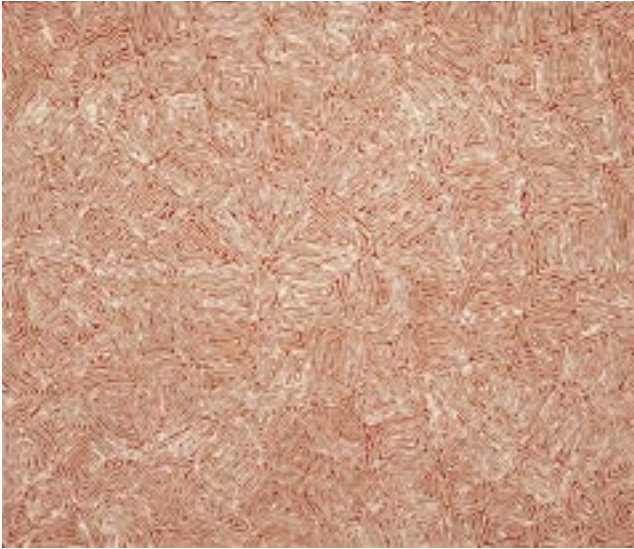
Jenny Bell, *Grave #18*, 2005-06, oil on board, 60 x 60 cm © the artist



Jenny Bell, *Grave #19*, 2005-06, oil on board, 60 x 60 cm © the artist



Jenny Bell, *Grave #20*, 2005-06, oil on board, 60 x 60 cm © the artist



Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 107 cm, © the artist licensed by the Aboriginal Artists Agency 2006

For Yukultji Napangati, the knowledge of her family's culture and its history is based in a childhood not only untouched by, but unaware of white civilisation and the Western world. At the age of fourteen she was in the family group of nine that walked out of the desert region west of Lake Mackay, where they'd been living a traditional lifestyle entirely devoid of contact with the outside world. She and her family were confronted for the first time by white civilisation when they arrived in the town of Kiwirrkura.

Colour is crucial to our understanding of Napangati's paintings as expressions of the link between body and land, of the artist's empathic relationship with her home ground. The canvas is first painted earth red, the ground of the painting matching the ground of the desert country which Napangati's ancestors inhabited. This is sometimes overlayed with another, black ground. Thus, the earth and the body become a single, integrated ground.

Fast-drying acrylic paints are used to create a fine, all-over patterning of rotating marks or, in more recent paintings, waves of vertically drawn lines. In a relatively short artistic career (since 1999), Napangati has developed an individual visual lexicon developed from her own stories and unique early cultural experiences.



Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 61 x 183 cm © the artist licensed by the Aboriginal Artists Agency 2006

Napangati paints the land 'from the inside out', conveying through the process of painting her lifetime experience of that place and its stories. She "works under the hot sun, on a desert ground of soil, sand and insects. She traces, to borrow a term from Wittgenstein, 'the rough ground', revealing beneath an apparently even surface a complexity – a depth of tradition and history – that provides the traction to continue, to move forward."¹

Ahlam Shibli and Juan Manuel Echavarría also explore 'the rough ground' of their birth places. Where Bell and Napangati survey the spiritual beliefs and cultural rituals that connect people to place, Shibli and Echavarría turn their cameras' lens to focus on the people themselves that inhabit what are two of the roughest home grounds on earth. Shibli traces "the relation of a village or a house to the landscape; the relation of man-made facilities – such as a road, a fence, or a playground – to the land; the relation of buildings, shelters, and the material make-up of those structures to each other; the relation of objects to rooms and spaces; and, finally, the relation of individuals to the localities where they live."²

Just as Jenny Bell and Yukultji Napangati spent their girlhoods enveloped by the family's land and its activities in rural and outback Australia, Ahlam Shibli's knowledge of ancient Palestine, particularly the northern region west of the Jordan River known as Galilee, is integral to her sense of self, based as it is on first-hand experience from the earliest age.

Yukultji Napangati,
Untitled, 2006,
acrylic on canvas,
61 x 153 cm
© the artist
licensed by the
Aboriginal Artists
Agency 2006





This same geographic region is the setting for *Unrecognised*, a series of 25 photographs taken in 'Arab al-N'aim, a Bedouin village in Palestine settled during the 1930s. When the newly formed state of Israel sent a team from Israel's Lands Administration to map and record the lands in the area, they wrote down only part of the agricultural lands as village lands and did not record the houses. The semi-nomadic villagers were forced to move to a nearby Palestinian Arab town. When they refused to leave their lands, they were, in 1964, forcibly evacuated. Homes and the village water wells were destroyed by the Israeli state and today it is still illegal to erect permanent structures.

Those that continue to live there do so in shanty homes constructed from sheets of tin, plastic and canvas. "Illegal" villages such as 'Arab al-N'aim do not appear on any official state maps, are not signposted and do not have access to public services, such as power, water and sanitation. Children travel miles every day to school, part of it on foot. The villages and their inhabitants are unrecognised by the state of Israel.

Today Shibli lives in the nearby city of Haifa, returning often to her home ground in the Galilee, where she has the understanding and trust of its rural dwellers. John Berger describes her as "a photographer of the hidden, she photographs evidence, traces, places, people, who

have remained in hiding. As a Palestinian photographer she is of course on the side of the hidden and those who hide... Some of them are alive, others have departed".³

Hidden views of human resilience are a recurrent theme in this exhibition. None of these artists depict exotic places, people or events. On the contrary, their focus is on the ordinary and the everyday. What strikes us about Shibli's extraordinary photographs is their candour. Clearly the artist belongs and is able to conjure in visual form not only the resilient spirit of her people, but the everyday beauty of children at play and brilliantly coloured traditional clothes, either worn with pride or hung out to dry on a makeshift clothesline.

Ironically, sometimes the closer one is to one's subject matter, the more problematic it becomes to depict it. A photojournalist with Shibli's access to 'Arab al-N'aim would likely provide a voyeuristic view of the place, one of detached fascination and pity. As Ulrich Loock has proposed in a discussion of Shibli's subsequent series, *Goter* (2003), the artist is careful to circumvent political cliché by not casting her protagonists as victims.⁴

Though the photographs of people inevitably function as portraits, it is the sense of home and family created in the most adverse conditions that is the artist's subject.



Ahlam Shibli, *Other Quartering*, from the series *Unrecognised*, 2000, colour photograph, 60 x 90 cm © the artist



Ahlam Shibli, *Fatoma*, from the series *Unrecognised*, 2000, colour photograph, 60 x 90 cm © the artist



Ahlan Shibli, *Arab al-Na'im*, from the series *Unrecognised*, 2000, colour photograph, 60 x 90 cm © the artist

There is only one face in the *Unrecognised* series that meets our gaze – that of an old woman sitting outdoors. Creating an almost theatrical backdrop is a child’s painting on a tin wall, the outline of a suburban house and garden that is the dream, often the expectation, of children universally. The old woman relays this message of childhood hope with an emphatic stare into Shibli’s lens, her imploring eyes a conduit between the outside world and a new generation of Palestinian children forced to live like refugees on their own home ground.

Similarly, Juan Manuel Echavarría seeks to recover a sense of humanity to our perception of society’s most disadvantaged people, in this case Colombia’s victims of violence. Like Shibli, he deliberately avoids presenting images of violence itself – which would only contribute to the media’s sensationalist picture of their plight – and also avoids presenting his protagonists as victims beyond hope. The entire lifetimes of almost two generations of Colombians have been tainted by daily reports and graphic images of a violent disregard for human life, the result of civil war and the illegal drug trade. People are desensitised to images of violent crime, its ubiquity in this part of the world thus largely normalised. Yet Echavarría’s subjects, in contrast to the anonymous faces portrayed by the media, have individual stories to tell.

Like his compatriot artist Doris Salcedo, Echavarría gathers testimonies from people who have witnessed violence,

specifically in the case of *Two Brothers* and *Mouths of Ash*, massacres in their hometown. Where Salcedo’s practice captures the disembodied silence of trauma and loss, Echavarría’s visceral, close-up depiction of the sweating foreheads, weeping eyes and quavering voices of seven bereaved survivors of massacres leaves little space for metaphorical inference.⁵

“What we see and hear in these videos are songs and performances by survivors of the ongoing conflict that rages in many rural areas of Colombia. Some of those who sing survived massacres perpetrated by paramilitary groups along Colombia’s Caribbean coast, others lived to tell the tale after FARC guerrillas (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) massacred more than one hundred people inside the church of the small town of Bojayá in Chocó. The lyrics were written by those who sing as a form of catharsis that would allow them to move beyond the loss and pain of these events. Most of the singers are Afro-Colombians, among the poorest of all Colombians, who live in municipalities abandoned by the State. The aftermath of these events was that people were forced to abandon everything: their homes, their lands, and their few belongings, and move into shanty towns located in large cities.”⁶

Echavarría rescues displaced victims of violence from the anonymous, forgotten fate of most of Colombia’s sufferers, by confronting viewers with individual war-torn faces, voices and



Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Dos Hermanos / Two Brothers*, video, 4:08 minutes, 2003-04 (detail, Nacer Hernández) © the artist



Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Bocas de Ceniza / Mouths of Ash*, video, 14:32 minutes, 2003-04 (detail, Luzmila Palacio) © the artist

emotions. These simple songs performed by their authors offer an intensity and insight no longer possible in lurid media reportage. Like the other artists in this exhibition, the artist tells the story 'from the inside out', by creating a forum for his courageous yet humble protagonists to do the same.

"I became emotionally attached to those singers I filmed. I am involved in their lives, in their personal projects. We speak on the phone. We see each other. I have met their families and made sure they know where their songs are being heard. I have learned many things about this war through their stories and friendship... They all came [to my exhibition]. I felt it was important for them to see how deeply moved people were by their songs, how genuine their response. I think this allowed them to speak further about their grief, their wounds." ⁷

As if in response to Susan Sontag's recent claim that "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience"⁸, both Shibli and Echavarría draw on their insider knowledge to reveal penetrating home truths, offering a less passive view of today's world than that provided by a detached and subjective media coverage.

In many ways this exhibition is about resilience, about the strength to overcome trouble and uncertainty, to embrace one's home ground and locate it within a global frame. Within very different geographical contexts, these artists

trace through personal stories the links between people and place. Napangati does this by making marks relating to rituals undertaken in the land, Bell by depicting structures and objects with symbolic resonance beyond the place and time in which they were created. Shibli finds a visual parallel between the harsh geographic and political climates in which her people tenaciously create a stable home life on their traditional lands, while Echavarría introduces and gives voice to the forgotten victims of trauma and violence in his country.

•

The majority of the world's population live and die within a small geographic radius. While the Internet offers free travel in cyberspace, when people physically move regions or countries, it is often because they are forced to do so by political persecution or economic hardship. Those with the liberty and motivation to relocate for professional or romantic reasons, generally retain a strong sense of home as being elsewhere and often make a permanent return later in life. It seems that no matter what is played out on its ground, home has an almost universal magnetic pull.

Felicity Fenner

- ¹ Felicity Fenner, *Views of the Home Ground*, Primavera 2005, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2005, p. 11
- ² Ulrich Loock, *Goter*, Ahlam Shibli: Lost Time, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England, 2003, p. 29
- ³ John Berger, *A Nomadic Discretion*, Ahlam Shibli: Lost Time, op. cit. p. 7
- ⁴ Loock, op. cit. p. 31
- ⁵ See Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, Stanford University Press, California, 2005, pp. 46-49
- ⁶ María Victoria Uribe, *Facing the Violence: The Photographic and Visual Work of Columbian Artist Juan Manuel Echavarría*, Mouths of Ash, Charta, Milano, 2005, p. 46
- ⁷ *A Conversation: Juan Manuel Echavarría and Laurel Reuter*, Mouths of Ash, op. cit. p. 27
- ⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penquin, New York, 2003, p. 16

ARTISTS & WORKS

JENNY BELL

Born 1959, Goulburn, New South Wales; lives and works in Breadalbane, NSW

Grave #17 2005-06

Oil on board
60 x 60 cm

Grave # 18 2005-06

Oil on board
60 x 60 cm

Grave # 19 2005-06

Oil on board
60 x 60 cm

Grave # 20 2005-06

Oil on board
60 x 60 cm

Grave # 21 2005-06

Oil on board
60 x 60 cm

Grave # 22 2005-06

Oil on board
60 x 60 cm

Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney

JUAN MANUEL ECHAVARRÍA

Born 1947, Medellín, Colombia; lives and works in Bogotá, Colombia and New York City

Dos Hermanos / Two Brothers
2003-04

Video, 4:08 minutes
2 songs
edition of 3
Translations Felipe Andres

Bocas de Ceniza / Mouths of Ash
2003-04

Video, 14:32 minutes
5 songs
edition of 3
Translations Felipe Andres

Courtesy the artist

YUKULTJI NAPANGATI

Born 1970, Western Desert, Western Australia, Pintupi people; lives and works in Kiwirrkura, Western Australia and Kintore, Northern Territory

Untitled 1999
Acrylic on linen
168 x 46 cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2004
Acrylic on linen
183 x 153 cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2004
Acrylic on linen
61 x 183 cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2004
Acrylic on linen
153 x 91 cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2004
Acrylic on linen
91 x 107 x cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2005
Acrylic on linen
183 x 153 cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2005
Acrylic on linen
122 x 122 cm
Private Collection

Untitled 2006
Acrylic on linen
61 x 153 cm
Private Collection

AHLAM SHIBLI

Born 1970, 'Arab al-Shibli Village, Galilee; lives and works in Haifa

Unrecognised 1999-2000
25 digital colour photographs, mounted on aluminium
16 @ 50-80 x 70cm;
9 @ 60 x 90 images

Courtesy Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel-Aviv

IMAGE RIGHT Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Bocas de Ceniza / Mouths of Ash*, video, 14:32 minutes, 2003-04 (detail, Domingo Mena) © the artist



**IVAN
DOUGHERTY
GALLERY**

The University of New South Wales • College of Fine Arts

Selwyn St Paddington NSW 2021 Australia Tel +612 9385 0726 Fax +612 9385 0603

Email idg@unsw.edu.au Website www.cofa.unsw.edu.au/idg

Hours Monday to Saturday 10am – 5pm closed Sundays and public holidays

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