

( GOING ) OUT THERE

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**Ivan Dougherty Gallery**

**20 October - 26 November 2005**

The Imaging the Land International Research Institute (ILIRI) is an initiative of the School of Art at the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts. ILIRI aims to open a dialogue across a wide spectrum of contemporary approaches to landscape art - indigenous and non-indigenous, local and international. It is an initiative of Ian Grant, Joe Frost, Idris Murphy, Louise Fowler-Smith and Peter Sharp.

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# INTRODUCTION

IAN GRANT

*(Going) Out There* shows the work of artists who have visited and experienced an area of land loosely bounded by Broken Hill, University of New South Wales Fowlers Gap research station, Lake Mungo and Mutawintji National Park. For most of these city-based artists this was their first experience of this site and this environment - and their first challenge to find adequate means of visual communication of their experience.

This broad site has been used for research and field projects by College of Fine Arts staff, research students and visiting artists since 1990 and it is from this extended group that participating artists were drawn. Each artist was invited to include work which best represents either, or both, their immediate experience of the area or their considered and lasting reflection on this experience with its subsequent filtering through into their work in a broad sense.

The area is part of a temperate arid zone and is, by conventional standards, largely devoid of features which could be seen as significant elements or landmarks. There is, however, a remarkable sense of place which emanates from holistic, rather than particularised, experience of the land and which challenges conventions of visual representation. Experience of the site evokes, for many, a sense of the meditative, the sublime and the spiritual as well as sensations of both strangeness and alienation, which curiously lead to an odd sense of bonding or belonging.

All of these sensations can, of course, be experienced without needing to be articulated in visual form - without needing to result in the making of an artwork. To make an artwork from this experience can involve a complete rethinking of conventions or strategies which are appropriate elsewhere, but which can seem to have no application here. The system of working with realistic observation from a single station point can seem pointless, where there are few significant elements to form pictorial focus or represent the understood picturesque in landscape. For many artists the patterning of the land and a sense of atmospheric space formed the basis for work less particularised or more abstracted in its imaging. For others the focusing in on unremarkable yet repeated elements was a means of visual response in either two or three-dimensional forms. In all cases the experience required thought, possible revision and deep critical reflection in order to formulate a visual response through a considered application of conventional processes.

It was often observed that the Aboriginal system of schematic representation or 'mapping' suddenly made sense - that most Western systems of representation were struggling to adequately articulate visual experiences at Fowlers Gap or Mutawintji. For most of these city-based artists, though, these Western systems were what they had experience in working with and what they had to manipulate, revise and adapt in order to respond to profoundly new experience.

Sometimes the response was relatively quick, sometimes the experience sat with them for years before its adequate realisation - and sometimes it just drifted into their work and only in hindsight was able to be acknowledged.

*(Going) Out There* is about these artists finding a means of responding to this new and strange environment - and their works are the material outcomes of their experience 'out there'.

September 2005.

# ARTISTS' STATEMENTS

**CRAIG BENNETT:** Venturing out in the middle of winter, to stay in a tent in freezing conditions for two weeks seemed insane at the time. Ten years later it still seems just as insane. I was constantly astonished by the beauty of the landscape and the wildlife. It was perfect. How could I as a mere artist improve nature?

This trip to Fowlers Gap made it unquestionably clear that my art practice was not inspired by nature at all. I focused on the use of found objects that are clearly manufactured and disregarded as urban waste. I felt quite misplaced among the other artists. With few exceptions, they seemed to be ecstatic about this opportunity to be with their beloved Australian landscape. I had no idea what I was doing there. Everyone else seemed to return with sketchbooks overflowing with ideas, plans just waiting to be put down on canvas, and at least one sheep's skull each. I came back with just as much, but of a totally different character.

It did not take me long to find the legendary junkyard at Fowlers Gap. It was one of the best I've ever seen. Full of skeleton-like remains of farm machinery, it was a beautiful site that occupied me for ages. I kept the best junk to take home and discarded the rest. It was heartbreaking. However, it demonstrates that wherever modern civilisation goes, it creates a throw away society, an idea which I hate, but also depend upon.



**PAUL CONNOR:** The desert is one huge studio. There is good light, always a place to paint and no interruptions. The arid region of far western New South Wales is the most accessible desert to my home in Sydney - a couple of easy days drive through the unfolding story of the Australian landscape and you are there.

The Aboriginal town of Wilcannia, the subject of my assemblages, is the main town of the region. Over the years I have established close friendships there during both my painting trips and architectural commissions. These friendships have nurtured an appreciation of the extremes of the human experience that exists in places like Wilcannia.


The assemblages are built in miniature to challenge their worth in the scheme of all things, in much the same way as the grand scale of the desert challenges an individual's sense of worth.



**CHARLIE COOPER:** Going out there has had a major influence on my studio work for over two decades. Based in the suburban iconography of weathered road markings around the Sydney fringe, my paintings nonetheless recall textures, micro and macro, in the landscapes of inland and northern Australia. They also echo the forms, and ideas, of paintings by artists indigenous to these regions.



**CHERINE FAHD:** Going out to Fowlers Gap was the most memorable experience of being a painting student at the College of Fine Arts. For this exhibition I was able to revisit our adventures through the hundreds of photographs I took. What I remember most was the day when I found a junkyard close to the station. It was full of all the junk that an artist would dream of. It was there, whilst searching through the scraps, that I found bits of old television antennas and was able to create these boats on the hill overlooking the junkyard. At the same time, a Big Red kangaroo stood overlooking me. Just watching - probably wondering why I was making two boats in what looked like the middle of the desert.




**LOUISE FOWLER-SMITH:** For the past decade I have focused on symbolic visual languages in relation to the land and to the imaging of trees.


As an environmentally concerned artist, my enquiry has been driven for many years by the universal need to reframe contemporary worldviews and my belief in the role that the artist can play in representing a new philosophical framework around the land. I have researched how other cultures, past and present, describe the land as a sacred place through their myths and stories.

Rather than survey the land from the renaissance model of the fixed point, I became interested in a more schematic view, and how, through the use of signs and symbols, a story could be told about the land. To date my research has included assessment of the narrative and spiritual reference to the land in the art of the Australian Aboriginal, the Celts and more recently in India, made possible through numerous residencies. In Ireland, I discovered the Ogham, or Tree Alphabet, an ancient Irish symbolic language. The symbolic dashes employed in many of my resultant paintings and drawings relate to the Ogham, the earliest known form of written Irish. My current research spans an investigation into the practice of tree worship in the tribal regions of Orissa in India, to the veneration and subsequent decoration of the tree as an aspect of ritual, such as those pertaining to fertility in Hinduism

In Australia, I have specifically been interested in the Mulga Tree that may be found in the arid zone of far western New South Wales, with its umbrella like form and isolated existence. To date the photographs I have taken are always of singular, lone trees, which, through manipulation and placement, I manage to imbue with a poetic resonance.



**JOE FROST:** After two trips to Fowlers Gap I see the desert as a phenomenal subject for drawings and paintings. The space of the desert is completely different to urban space; colour and light are something else in the desert air. I hope that during the next few years I will be able to spend enough time at Fowlers Gap to build a response to its special qualities.



**BARRY GAZZARD:** I have been making long trips to the remote far western region of New South Wales for over fifteen years. A profound affinity with this particular landscape, which in a sense I discovered, causes me to pause and return to it again and again. Although it is not the landscape as such that interests me but rather the experience of being there.

It is a very, very special place because it is one of those places where certain things we carry inside us become visible. These places are of deep significance for us, and they bring forth ideas, feelings and emotions that are normally imperceptible. Landscape scenes which occur in the mind like this are, I believe, persistent, and preserved by the power and intensity of feeling awoken by them. Different landscapes are, in reality, only different states of existence.

Landscape painting usually has strong connotations of place but in the desert it is more a carrier of meaning and symbolic correspondence. In this environment you are very directly faced with questions about your self and your place in the world. The featureless desert country is hostile and challenging on all levels. All your cultural background is brought into question and you are ultimately faced with yourself and your beliefs.

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**IAN GRANT:** My first response was to walk around - to walk long distances and look at what was around me. I was hypnotised by the silence, the sense of distance and the recurrent patterning in the land. It made me think a lot about what 'landscape' meant. I worked from there.

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**ROCHELLE HALEY:** Drawing whilst moving through the environment, is an embodied and performative approach to the subject of landscape in my work. Drawn marks define and articulate the experiential and spatial aspects of my passage through land, either by foot or vehicle, rather than represent a specific view. The resulting drawings are non-mimetic representations of land, where land is the basis of an experience as opposed to a distant and separate object, seen within a frame at a fixed time and place.

Rendering graphic relations between things, in a process similar to mapping, underpins my drawings and later studio work. This mode of enquiry or 'study' of landscape infers visual representations of land used in disciplines outside of art. Imaging of the land in cartography, geography and landscape architecture involves particular visual languages that encode interests and values placed on the land as a resource and substance to be analysed aesthetically, culturally, scientifically and anthropologically.

Glass and mirror are significant materials in my body of work, conveying literal and referential notions of environmental fragility. The transparent and reflective qualities of glass expose the partial knowledge systems of art and science for what they are: subjective and selective bodies of knowledge. The glass is displayed linearly to suggest a sense of passage or pathway where different 'views' of the land converge, separate and converge again. The viewers' experience is a reflective and interpretative view of the land, where a singular definitive account is avoided and a relationship between the human subject and the environment eventuates.

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**PATRICK HARTIGAN:** I remember being very affected by a different sense of space (in the desert). When it came to drawing it, I was confronted by a refusal; it refused my attempts to contain it.

I enjoyed wandering around (alone), and feeling the threat of being swallowed by its endlessness. On one such occasion I came across some wild sheep and felt really scared; it wasn't the sheep that scared me but the 'something' suddenly intercepting my gaze. On other occasions I fell asleep. During the two weeks I spent a lot of time looking at rocks and for a whole day I drew insects from the drawers in the Fowlers Gap Entomological Research Station.

I found the experience of being out there very weird and I think about it often.



**HOBART HUGHES:** *The Wind Calls Your Name* is an open narrative, a collage of landscape and objects, a weave of places, a curling up of memory, a rediscovery of moments, a loop across terrain, falling into a surface, a reflection of past, an emotional arch, an insight into weakness, a track through desire, an arrival at a mound of dust, a return to sender and, a reinvention of self.

Removed reflects moments of a shadowy self. It is a parody of the ego and its destructive vengeance when cornered.

I describe *Stationary* as simply a secular hymn. Over and above this though, it is a reflection of a possible personal politic of a Christ. Perhaps not the only one but one of many in a long line of test prophets that fill a vacuum in our collective expectation of some potential self. This Christ is doing a dance with his own icon.



**JENNIFER KEELER-MILNE:** I went out to the desert to paint in September 1998. The study of clouds and the sky had captured my imagination in my art practice in the studio, using traditional painting techniques of glazing and scumbling to bring this subject matter alive. The experience of being in the desert was one of being enveloped by nature and to articulate it within the language of painting was overwhelming and difficult. The colours were saturated, the scale was vast, the atmosphere, still and silent. These elements encapsulated such beauty, but also held the challenge of representation within the tradition of landscape. In response I made daily sky studies working in an 'alla prima' (in situ) method, striving to express in paint, one aspect of this incredible landscape, that being the sky.



**ROSS LAURIE:** The country around Broken Hill is older, time feels all slower, the space is bigger but so is the intimacy, the awareness of a different self is more acute, and this other self swings as the country unravels and changes.









**GENEVIEVE McCREA:** Experiments with sand have provided me with a way to both explore and embody the self-organising capacity of nature.

The freshness and expressive power of marks made by the dynamic processes of the earth is a strong motivating factor in this ongoing exploration. The land is a continuum of dynamic systems that build up and wear down in an interactive whole, layer upon layer creating the forms we see.

In drawing, the hand follows a single grain of sand through the landscape as it journeys in both ordered and incalculable pathways.

The absence of trees meant that these journeys could be followed more closely across the surface of earth. They also reveal not just the surface but also a deeper understanding of the subterranean structure.

I want to work more closely towards the way nature itself actually works and, renew a sense of awe at the subtlety and genuine novelty of nature's marks and processes.

Without trees and grass about, the stones and soil are free to interact with each other harmonising and contrasting optically, at a distance like pointillist brush marks.

I was also surprised by the richness of the ground under my feet, which after millennia of weathering provides such variety, novelty, contrast and harmony in just one square metre.



**STEPHANIE MONTEITH:** *Limbo Girl* went to the far west and practiced by the lakes. She felt invigorated, as well as awed by Kinchega National Park.



**IDRIS MURPHY:** Going out there has been an important part of my being and thinking for the last fourteen years

In my 2005 catalogue *Equilibrium of Contradictions*, I quoted from Burnum Burnum:

It's not the colour of your skin that makes you Aboriginal,  
it's the way you see the land.

This conversation with Burnum was both a challenge and permission as to how to consider looking at land; my painting and going out there has been a continuous response.



**JULIANA O'DEAN:** The elements of duality, contrast, dichotomy, structure, chaos, and symbolism are evident in my current body of work. They provide a framework that enables me to express the continual transformations and apparent stillness of nature and its real and symbolic significance in human existence.

Working around Fowlers Gap and adjacent sites in the New South Wales arid zone, induces, for me, an intense experience with the inner self that occurs when alone for periods of time in the enormity of these landscapes. In that clarity of atmosphere, nothing comes between, no distractions, just the essential, out of which new visions become possible.

Stone, for example, is one of the three universal symbols appearing in all human cultures and its primary meaning is that of the Self. I am interested in expressing the dichotomy of this apparently lifeless and unchanging object symbolising the unseen, indefinable spirit or core of a human being.

By working in contrasting images and materials, I seek to explore this and other connections between nature and man in order to elucidate a relationship of fundamental importance to our existence.

**TERENCE O'DONNELL:** For some years now I have been going to remote areas in Australia to paint and draw.

The vast space and extraordinary colours of the landscape in these places fascinate and enthrall me.

The outback offers its own discomforts and difficulties but I find that I am drawn back regularly, to experience the great satisfaction of just being there. The visual characteristics of a place are my prime stimulation along with a deep appreciation of their geography, history and great age that develops for places that are visited often. Places that attract me are most often wild, without any trace of human intervention.

My images are often about the joys of solitude.

I do find that I connect to the deep and contemplative side of my nature out there.

**Yaeli Ohana:** Fowlers Gap, a quiet wasteland once traversed by many, had an otherworldliness about it. Walking alone for hours I could sense the terrain shift, from a kind of earthly paradise by day to an ominous lunar landscape at dusk. I recently visited the Prado where I spent much time in front of Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights' and nearby Brueghel's scene of destruction. I carry these two images around with me and they have somehow found their way into the structure of this series of work.

**Daniel Pata:** Several excursions into the outback inspired the idea of perceiving the landscape through the influence of Cézanne's pictorial construction. This pictorial language seemed appropriate as I was reminded constantly of Cézanne during my visits to Mutawintji. The rock formations, especially of Wana Karnu (Boomerang Rock), a special place reminiscent of Mont Saint Victoire, held me in awe. The series of my Wana Karnu paintings, twelve in all, were exhibited in a travelling exhibition last year in the south of France, appropriately in close proximity to Mont Saint Victoire. Seven years earlier they had formed part of my Masters of Fine Arts exhibition at the College of Fine Arts. The north-west interior of New South Wales holds a special significance for my work, as Mutawintji, Fowlers Gap and Kinchega continue to unfold their layers in an ever changing drama of place.

**PETER SHARP:** The desert was and is a place of discovery for me.

I first travelled to the arid zone of New South Wales in 1991 and since that time have been back many times.

The desert gave me the space and time to work out what I wanted to say as artist and how to do it.

The way I draw came directly from trying to visualise and make drawings about nature which incorporated an aboriginal way of experiencing the world, no foreground, mid-ground or background, just the idea of being immersed in the landscape.



**SUE SOLIMAN:** The Australian desert, a metaphorical landscape of awe provoking beauty, a place where tremendous creative possibilities exist. In this unique environment, the mind can freely wander and ponder, reinventing images, narratives and mythologies.

Although my work is spontaneous, relying mostly on intuition, it is never rushed. It must grow at its own pace. Long exploratory, reflective walks in the wilderness of the outback are an integral part in preparing for my work. During these solitary walks, the mind is finally free, uncluttered, and a journey between the inner and outer world begins to take place. It is a question of going deep down into the pathways of the desert, to find the harmony between these two worlds and to hopefully reveal this harmony in my art:

It seems that the human mind, in dreams, daydreams, or even in waking hours is endowed with the faculty of autonomous creation, and that it freely imagines fables, figures, images in which the deep emotional life of the self is projected. This spontaneous symbolism is restrained among civilised men by the various organs of censorship, but it functions almost uninhibited among so-called primitive peoples, or in the dreams of the sophisticated. Thus arise the myths and other fabulous constructions which common-sense denounces as unreal, but which are true psychologically (and can also be true otherwise) because on the level of the imagination they correspond to the feelings and thoughts which engendered them.

- Marcel Raymond in  
*From Baudelaire to Surrealism*



**KATE TURNER:** This series of paintings is based on a field trip taken early in 2003, which encompassed the areas around Perth, from Jurien Bay in the north, Grass Valley on The Great Eastern Highway and then south, to Shannon National Park and the Margaret River region of Western Australia.

The paintings are horizonless renderings, presented to evoke more a memory of fields and vistas than a literal presentation of a particular scene.

Each painting presents large sweeps of colour with minimal landscape references, to create spatial compositions and indicate an immense feeling of space and light.

The heavily textured surface of oil paint catches the light (similar to woven silks or traditional tapestries), creating different effects depending on the viewers' position in front of nature in the landscape itself.

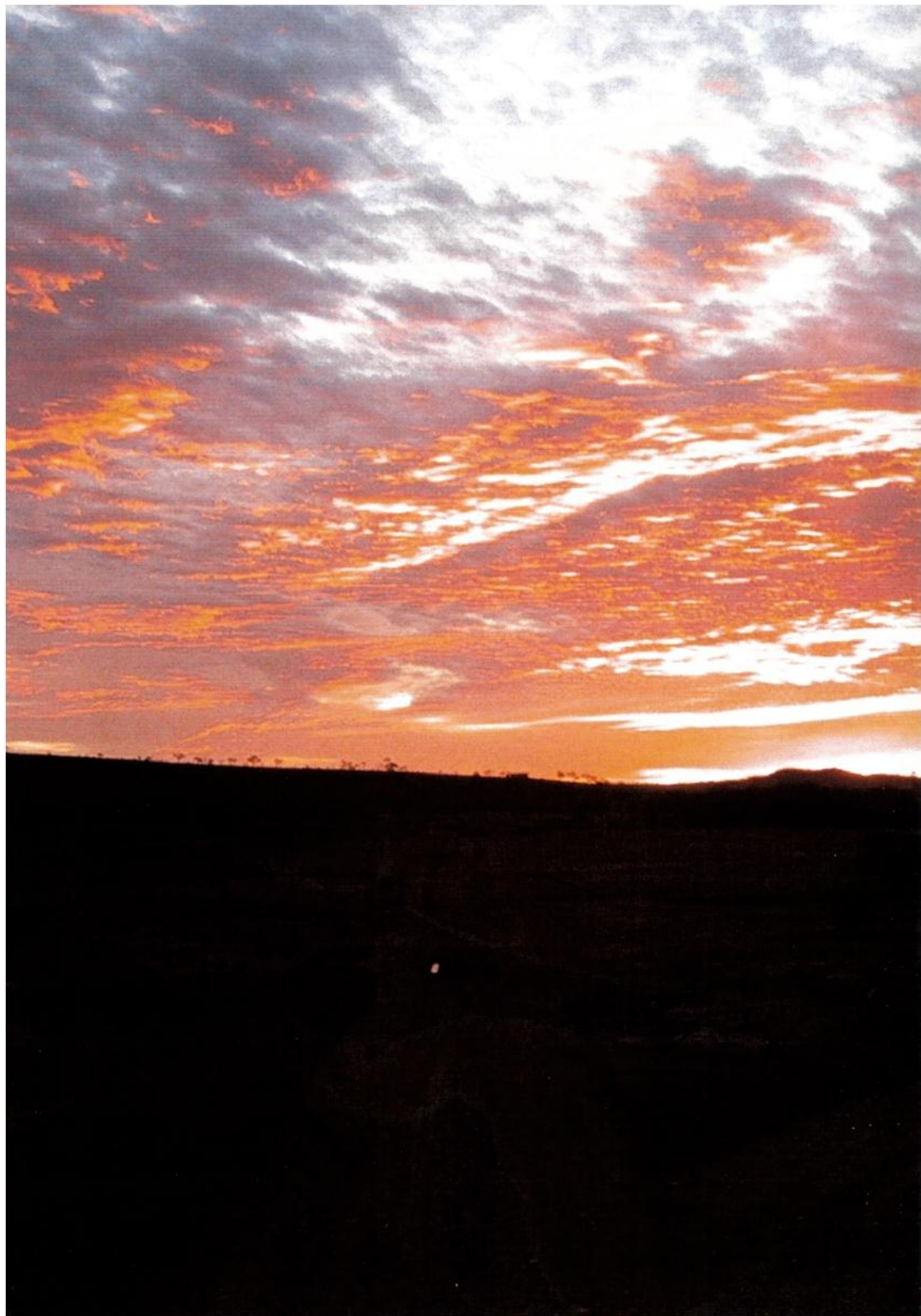
**GUY WARREN:** These were all done in 1992 from a period at Tibooburra, which is in the northwest corner of the state of NSW. I went out there with a group of other artists, including Judy Benjamin, Robert Berlind, Alex Butler, Idris Murphy, Terry O'Donnell, Peter Sharp, Chris Gentle and Gillian Bennett.

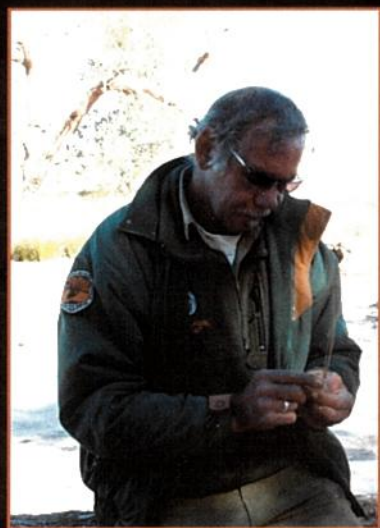
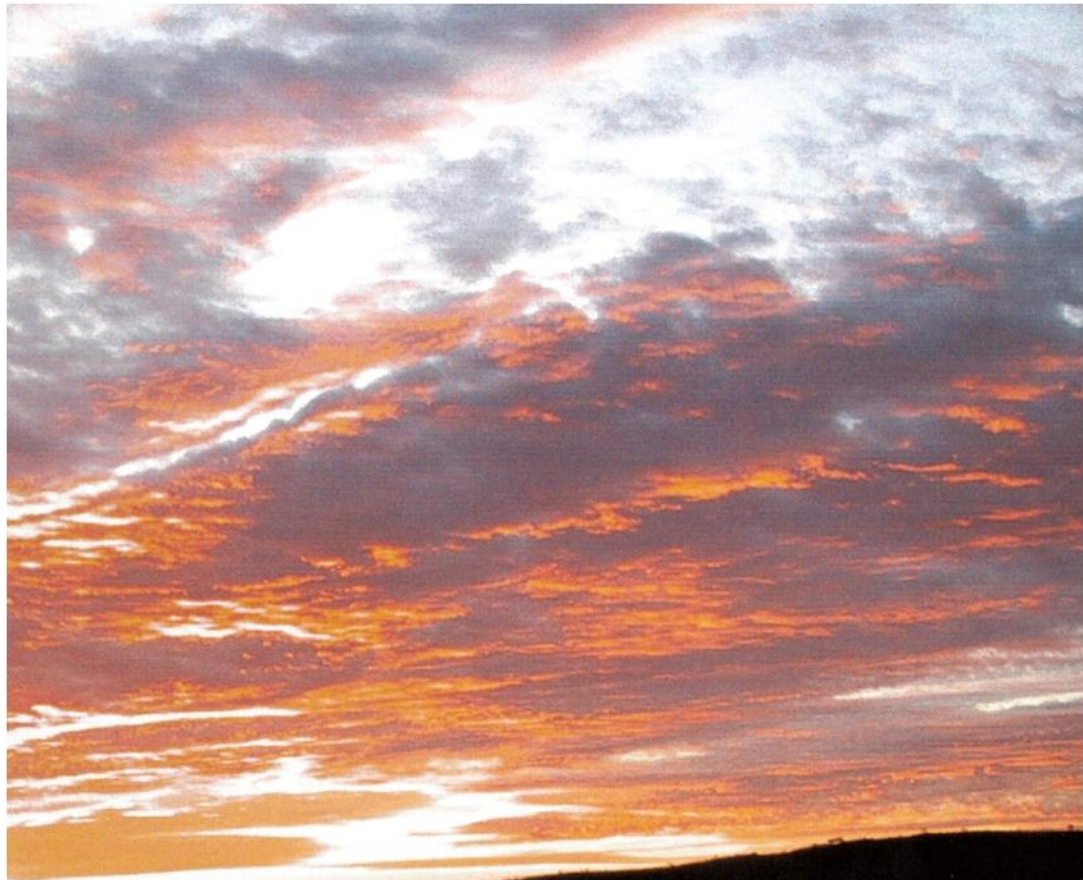
The land is arid, stony, sandy and ultimately very beautiful: full of kangaroos, emus and clear, clear sweet air.

Some of these drawings were done from the back of my old van, while someone else drove for me. The tracks are frequently rough and very bumpy. Inevitably the marks one makes are a very direct response to the contours and surface of the land.

Instead of the artist merely contemplating the landscape and recording it, the land itself makes a vital and important contribution. The vehicle becomes a tool and the voice of the land speaks.







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