LANDSCAPES

Intimate

and Distant

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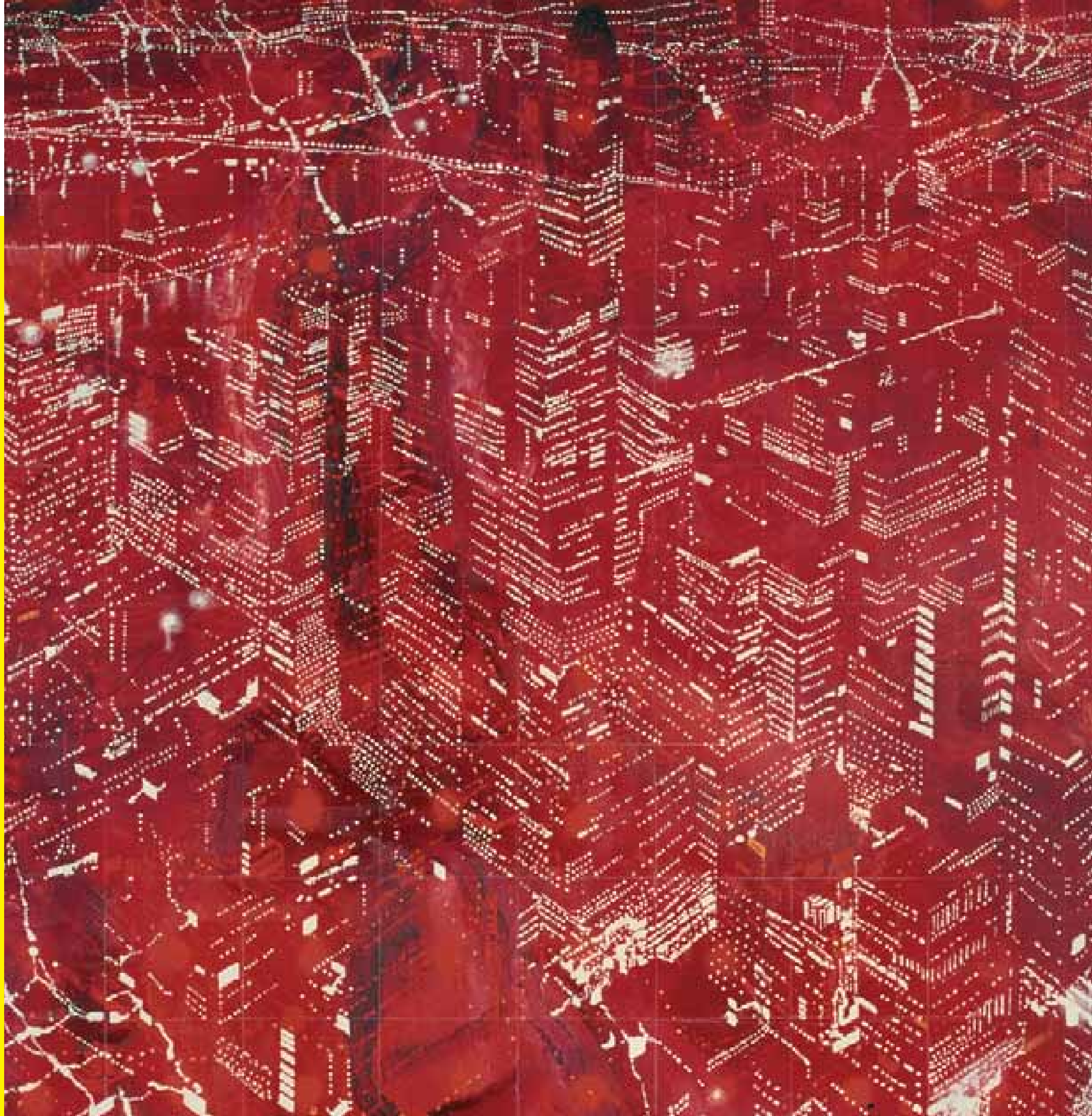
Intimate and Distant Landscapes

DEVONPORT
REGIONAL
GALLERY

Devonport Art Gallery 17 March -15 April 2007



Jon Cattapan Red system no.3 (The third deadly system) [detail]

Curator: Dr Anne Morrison

Introduction

The environments we inhabit, whether they are densely populated urban centres, or more remote inland or coastal regions, are not fixed or static places. They are fluid; shifting and changing, in a continuous process of transition and transformation.

Intimate and Distant Landscapes presents the work of several artists for whom the process of painting emerges as a primary metaphor in exploring the nature of geographic experience, how a place is known, remembered, understood and engaged with. Meaning becomes embedded within the graphic and fluid nature of the language the artists' employ.

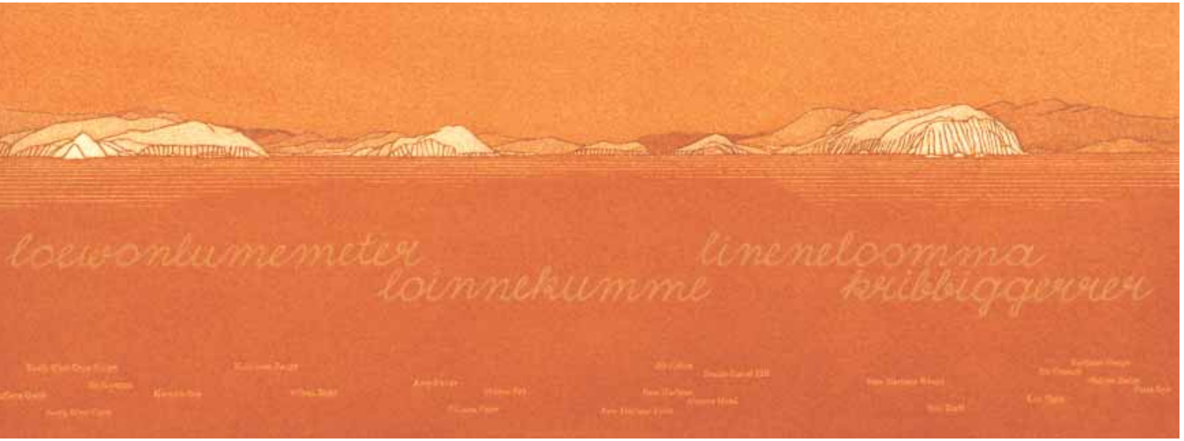
Whether from a personal, cultural, or historical perspective, a strong sense of place is evoked in each of the artists' work. Such an approach to painting reveals an intimate sensory awareness of the environment, visible within the tangible archaeology of the paintings surface. The works evoke sensitivities that can only be conveyed through a deeply personal and poetic engagement – of creating, placing, and unearthing unique and often subtle relationships with the landscape.

From these intimate and distant perspectives, forms, patterns and rhythms are suggested which seem to either emerge from or dissolve into fluid and ambiguous terrains. The dynamic layering of pigment invites the viewer to consider 'landscape' as a process or medium existing in a perpetual state of flux-living, breathing, and pulsating with life.

Two signature works of landscape art in Australia were created by Bea Maddock in the 1990s: *Trouwerner… The white ships came from the West and the Sea of Darkness* [1992-93] and *Terra Spiritus… with a darker shade of pale* [1993-98], both of which were strongly influenced by her voyage to Antarctica in January-February, 1987. *Trouwerner*, a four piece encaustic painting with pigment, wash and cord (130.6 x 184.5 x 5.2cm each canvas; Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery) was created from drawings made as the Antarctic Division's ship *Icebird* came within sight of the south coast of Tasmania on the voyagers' return to Hobart. This evocative painting depicts the coastal profile of southern Tasmania from South West Cape across to the bottom end of Bruny Island. The slim profile spreads across the canvases except for a small gap of open sea on the far left of the first work – the 'sea of darkness' from whence voyagers from 1642 onwards began to visit the island. Trouwerner was the name given to the island by the indigenous tribes who populated the south-eastern part of the country and the indigenous presence is clearly marked by two signifiers: plumes of smoke that can be discerned inland; and the five hundred and twenty-four hand-written traditional place names that Bea Maddock has scribed onto the paintings above and below the coastal profile.

Maddock deliberately utilises a long-standing pictorial convention – the depiction of coastal views as seen from the sea. They were fundamental to the process of chart creation from the sixteenth century onwards, being used early on to calculate in relatively crude terms the contour lines applied to the maps; they were also, in their own right, a ready reference guide to the coastlines of the land masses being explored by Europeans.

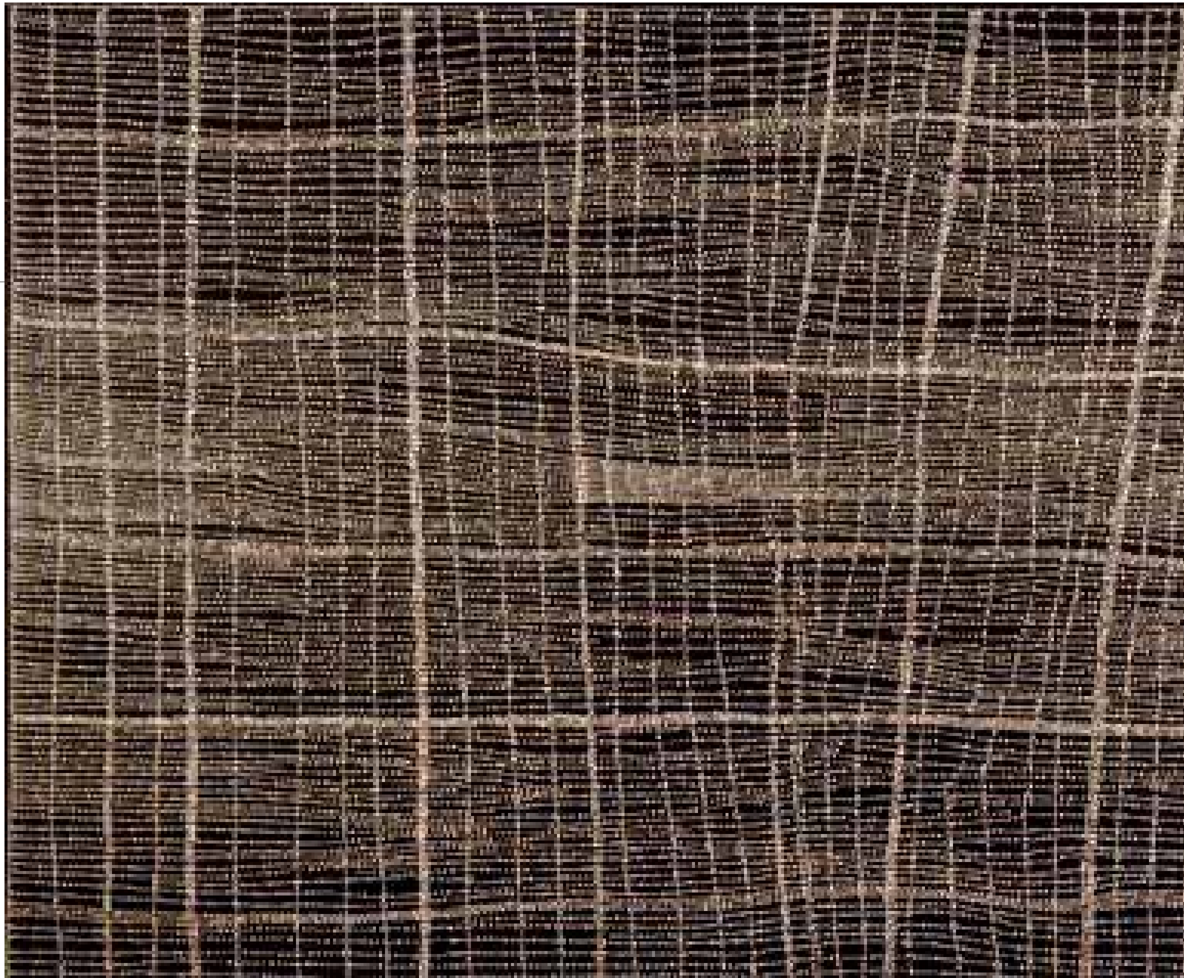
Terra Spiritus…
with a darker shade of pale,
1993-98
Sheet 1 (detail)
stencil print, printed on
hand-ground Launceston
ochre on 51 sheets of paper
28.4 x 76cm
Collection:
Tasmanian Museum and
Art Gallery



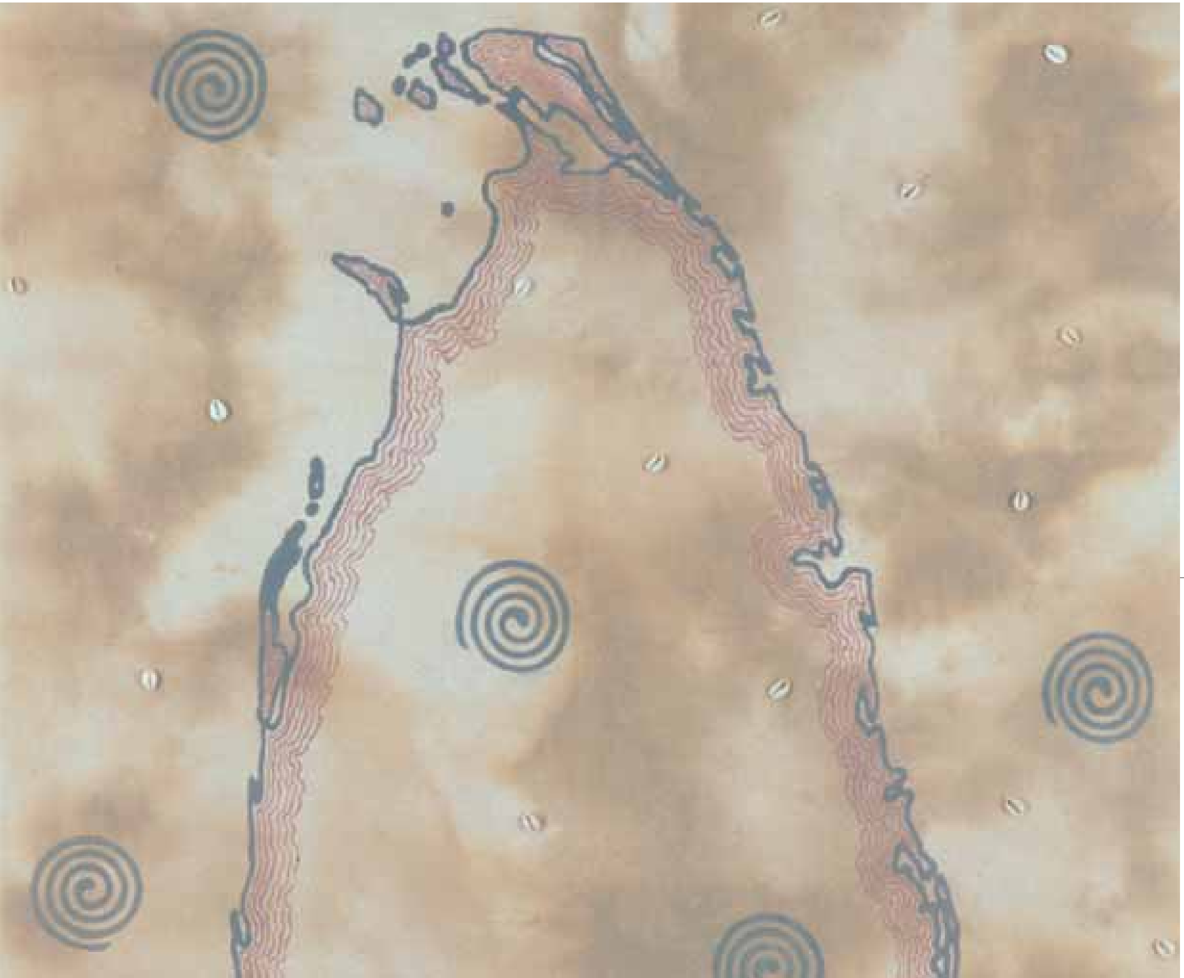
Generally speaking, the coastal profiles are straight depictions of the lie of the land and the viewer is given little sense of land being populated. Indeed the English viewed Australia as a *terra nullius* – land that was occupied but in their minds not owned. In Maddock's painting these lands were not only occupied but the indigenous peoples of the island had also *named* Tasmania and had given place names to the numerous sites that had ceremonial or hunter-gatherer significance to them – a sure sign of their emplacement.

The second work, *Terra Spiritus*, also follows the convention of the coastal profile, although in this highly complex work Maddock has created a profile *circumscription* of Tasmania by laboriously translating the contour lines on ordinance survey maps of Tasmania into a 'realistic' representation of the topography of the coastline seen from a couple of kilometres out to sea. It is an extraordinary work both in scale (its 51 stencil prints, printed in hand-ground ochre with letterpress text, make up a work which is 39.95 metres long) and also in complexity.

Bernard Smith argues in *Imagining the Pacific* that an artist like William Hodges who produced many elegant coastal profiles on Captain James Cook's second voyage to the Pacific (1772-75) were at the forefront of the development of empirical naturalism as well as *plein-airism* in the late eighteenth century, a form of representation that would lead eventually to the great experiments of Impressionism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[1] Maddock, on the other hand, even though she employs the coastal profile, brings to the subject a conceptual way of seeing that is fundamentally different; it is one that comes in the aftermath of the invention of collage and can be characterised by the term, the 'flatbed picture plane', employed by the American author, Leo Steinberg. His hypothesis is based upon the view that since the Renaissance two-dimensional works of art affirm a strong sense of verticality: 'a picture [he writes] that harks back to the natural world evokes sense data which are experienced in the normal erect posture'. Steinberg goes on to say that this remained the essential condition of two-dimensional works of art until the early 1950s.[2] And then:



Dorothy Napangardi Salt on Mina Mina [detail]



Judy Watson swallowing culture tiger brand 1 [detail]

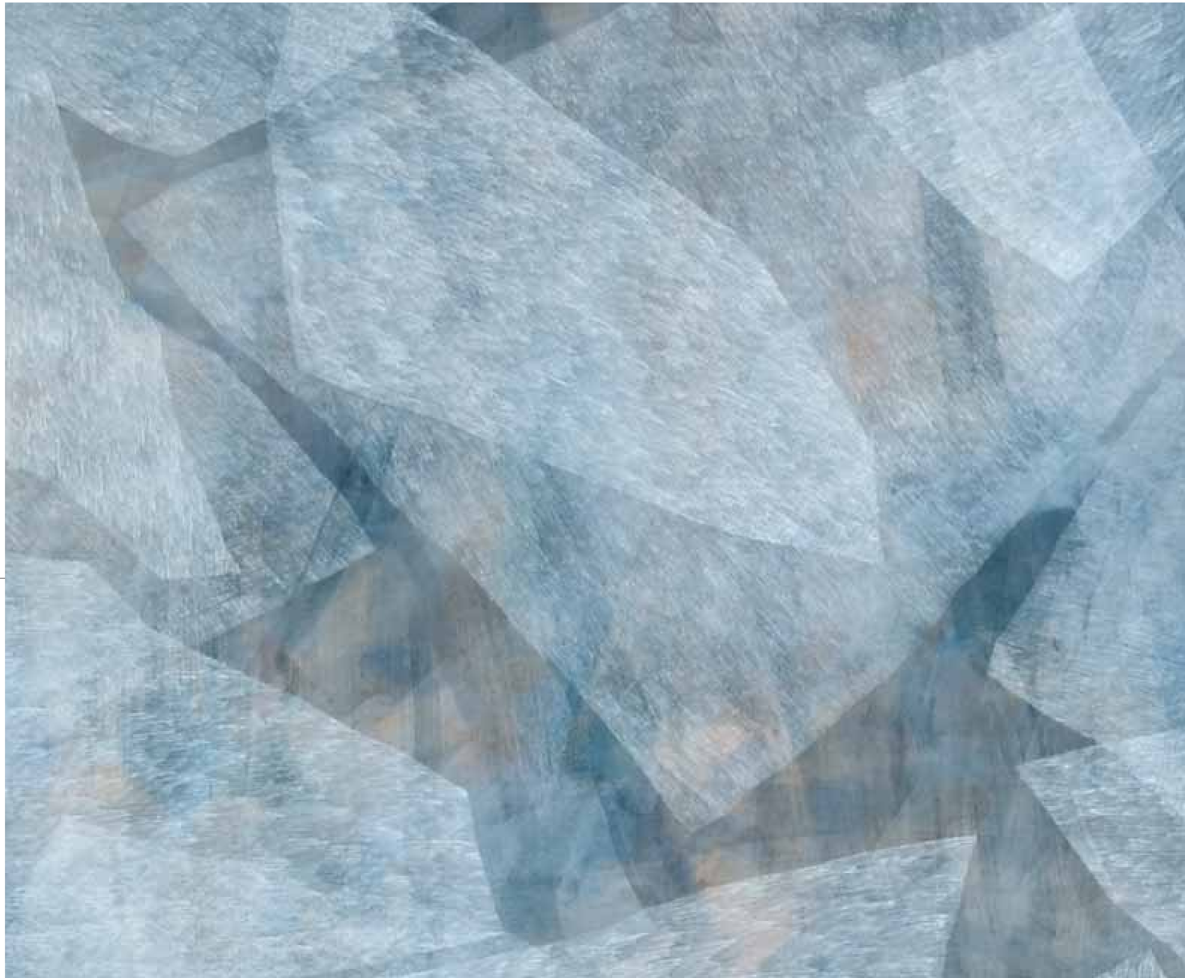
> ***… [S]omething happened in painting around 1950 – most conspicuously… in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Dubuffet. We can still hang their pictures – just as we tack up maps and architectural plans, or nail a horseshoe to the wall for good luck. Yet these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards – any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed – whether coherently or in confusion***.[3]

In keeping with this hypothesis Maddock's *Terra Spiritus* might best be imagined as if it was suspended on the outside of a drum – not a panorama (where the viewer is presumed to be inside looking out at a 360^0 view) but a circumscription (where the viewer is presumed to be *outside* looking in). Furthermore, although *Terra Spiritus* is usually hung quite conventionally, conceptually this magnificent work's orientation seems to align itself more closely to the flatbed and the mode of looking is more akin to the way we read texts or charts than the way we view works of art.

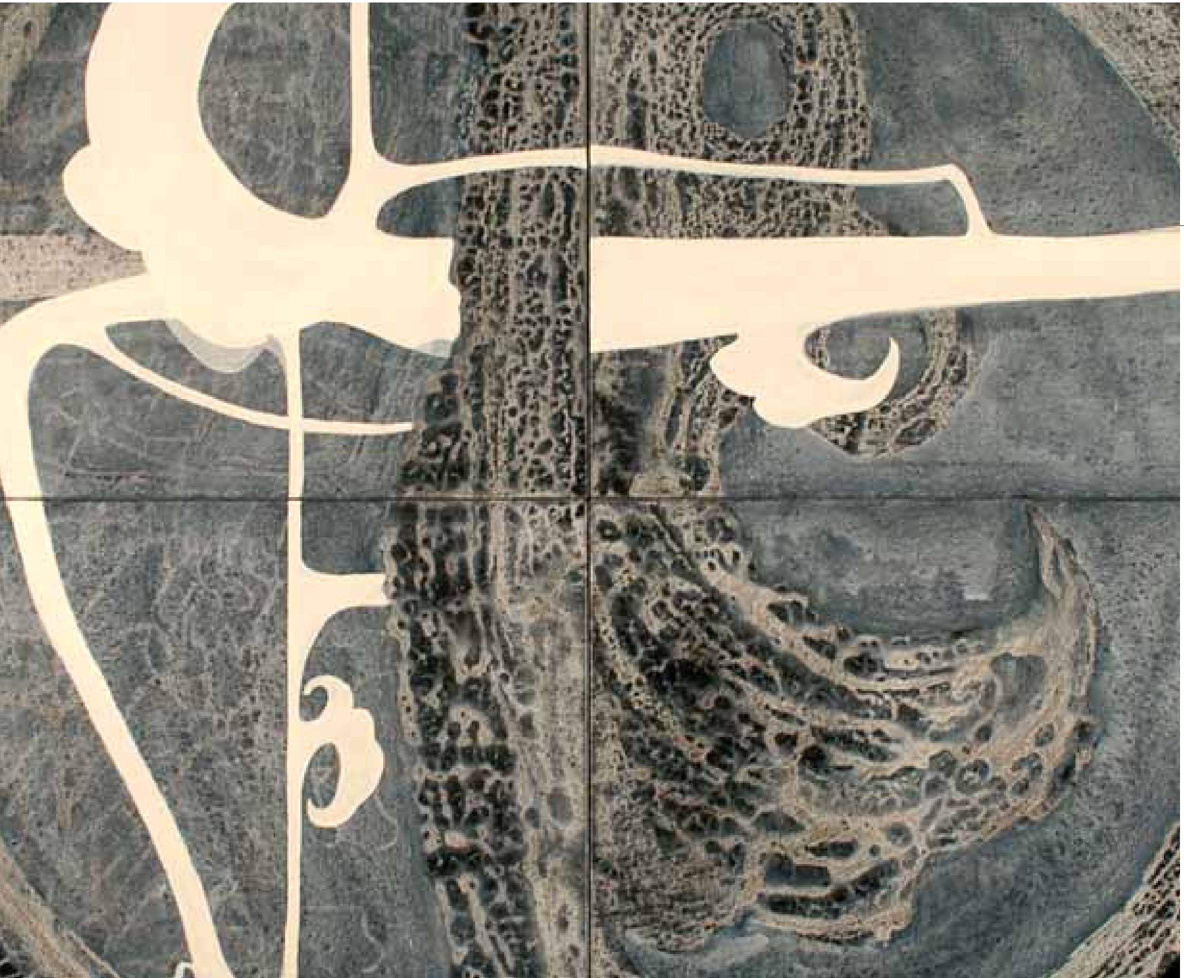
Although this representation of the coastline of Tasmania finally concedes itself to the vertical, both its conceptual framework and the manner of its making seem to be predicated upon a horizontal orientation – it cannot exist without its connection to the ordinance maps that provide its data and even though there is a conventional reference to the spatial organization of landscape painting where foregrounds, middle-grounds and backgrounds are employed, Maddock disrupts the illusion by making the viewer *read* the hand-written and letterpress place names in the foreground.

These two works, then, suggest a way of looking at the landscape that is fundamentally conceptual rather than perceptual in its mode of operation. Interestingly, even though we might see this kind of art practice as a post-collage phenomenon, there are significant links that can be made between this form of representation and that of proto-Renaissance works of art. Sir Ernst Gombrich in his landmark essay, ‘The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape’, argues persuasively that these early landscapes, for him, are ‘not ‘views’ but largely accumulations of individual features and he continues by emphasising that they are ‘conceptual rather than visual’ representations.[4] Following the codifying of the single vanishing point system of perspective by Leon Battista Alberti in 1436, a popular analogy for the illusion of spatial depth that artists were able to achieve with this system was to liken the framed-up scene to a picture seen through a window. As noted earlier, Steinberg sees this as the prevailing metaphor for understanding how western art ‘works’ until the twentieth century and it implies not only a vertical orientation but also an encompassing and reifying gaze that found its perfect expression in the development of empirical naturalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

But, as Gombrich points out, this was not where the origins of landscape painting lay and it is intriguing to observe that some of the most radical manifestations of landscape art in late medieval times should find their most complete expression in a wonderful array of fourteenth and fifteenth centuries manuscripts. Two particular subjects began to give artists opportunities to represent the natural world: the first was the annual calendar of months with their religious festivals that were a popular cycle of illuminations included at the beginning of Books of Hours; and the second were the scenes



Sue Lovegrove Vanishing no. 348 [detail]



Jonathan Kimberley Untitled (Map of Unlandscape) [detail]

from the life of Christ. As Gombrich notes, two particular illustrations were very common: one was an image of the Virgin on a resplendent throne in a walled garden paradise, a *hortus conclusus*, which was understood to symbolise her purity and virginity and the garden as an ideal paradise; the other was of an ideal city, the city of God, which, like the garden paradise, began to take on an increasingly realistic representation as Renaissance art developed.

The self-reflexive nature of these early depictions of the landscape – and their conceptual and textual imperatives – has much in common with the post-collage form of landscape representation that has been the subject of this analysis of Bea Maddock's two works. Whereas the 'picture through the window' implies a 'looking out', the *hortus conclusus* implies a 'looking in' and, indeed, Bea Maddock's *Terra Spiritus* is almost exactly like this. It also suggests a way of thinking about the landscape that is fundamentally different from the framing device of the window, with its particular form of spatial organization.

This exhibition *Intimate and Distant Landscapes* provides a range of compelling examples of the way in which landscape practice and discourse in Australia has changed in the past four decades or so and the flatbed metaphor helps us to understand the context in which these works of art have been created. While it may be true that each work has a 'top' and a 'bottom' and a left-hand and right-hand side, the pictorial organization of these 'flatbed' paintings needs to be understood as a form of *image-shaping* and *image-layering* rather than an exercise in vertically oriented spatial illusionism that delivers up an exactly quantifiable slice of time and space.

It is intriguing to think about why so many of the works in this exhibition require one to read the subject matter as if one was looking down: Dorothy Napangardi’s beautiful paintings, for instance, might conjure up images of Walpiri country in Australia’s Central Desert as seen from high up in the sky or they may equally represent, on the micro-scale, the tracks of the Walpiri ancestors or the tracks of the animals the men and women hunt, or the salt pans of one of their country’s landmarks, Lake Mackay, or even the salt crystals themselves.

In the case of Jon Cattapan, his representations of the city at night are often views from above. The architectural structure is shaped out as a ground but what brings the paintings to life is the skein of almost disembodied light that sits on the surface like a spider’s web – at once beautifully articulating the architectural structures of the buildings themselves and seeming to dance like a silk skein, like tracery, on the surface of the picture.

A not dissimilar association with silk can be used to describe Sue Lovegrove’s intricate translucent layered paintings. Where, say, Cezanne might build his paintings from blocks of paint to exemplify the geological structure and solidity of a popular subject such as Mt Saint Victoire, Lovegrove is intent on looking down, reading the surface of things – the transparency of leaves, the way in which light enables us to see through objects and to see into space, the way that the meniscus sets up a watery skin through which light penetrates and reveals what is below. Hers is a world of contingency, of ephemera, of fragility and intimacy where objects are characterised by their delicate relationship to surface and ground.

For Judy Watson, the creation of paintings is linked intimately to her wish to evoke a visceral relationship to the land. Commenting on the work *sacred ground beating heart* now in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, she has stated: when you walk in that country / the earth is beating pulsating / heat, blood, heart / things are hidden / like the bones of the people who / have been there before / you are walking in their footprints.’[5]

Whereas Maddock uses text to emphasise the idea of emplacement, Watson’s paintings uses the very materials themselves to evoke a sense of embodiment with the land. Again, the works rely upon layering and the weaving of forms: the spatial organization of the objects and emblems she chooses to represent sit implacably on the ground. As with Napangardi’s paintings one is taken into a place that might represent the land as seen from up on high or one where the subjects she represents are embedded in the ground itself: this is quintessentially a painting practice which sees an intimate connection between the *land* and the *ground* of the picture plane.

Finally, Jonathan Kimberley affirms again a picturing that relies upon multiple layering and image-shaping. While distance may be evoked through the spatial ordering of the planes and, indeed, the emblems that are selected and arranged on the painting’s surface, gone is the sense of a three-dimensional illusion and the totalising vision that accompanies it: what is replaced as a robust and unequivocal representation of the ‘idea’ of the landscape – one that is intimately known, tracked over, observed and absorbed.

This essay began with the suggestion that Bea Maddock creates a representation of a place, Tasmania, that is self-reflexive and inward-looking and that a way to understand her recent practice is to consider the viewing of it as a form of reading, where one is taken on a journey. The artists in this compelling exhibition provide other instances of this approach to landscape. They offer us ways to understand place not just through eyes trained to observe the natural world empirically, but as place *sensed* both at a distance and on an intimate scale.

Jonathan Holmes

Notes

1 Smith, Bernard ‘William Hodges and English Plein-Air Painting,’ in *Imagining the Pacific: In the of the Cook Voyages* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press,1992,11

2 Steinberg, Leo ‘The Flatbed Picture Plane’ in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 82-91

3 Steinberg [1972], 83

4 Gombrich, Ernst ‘The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape’ in *Norm and Form* London: Phaidon, 1966, 107ff

5 Quote by Judy Watson cited on the Queensland Art Gallery’s website, www.qag.qld.gov.au/collection/indigenous_australian_art/judywatson

Anne Morrison is an artist living and working in Forth, Tasmania. Born in 1966, Scotland. Graduate of Glasgow School of Art, the Royal College of Art, London and the University of Tasmania.

Jonathan Holmes teaches at the Tasmanian School of Art and is also Associate Dean, Teaching and Learning, in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Tasmania.

Jon Cattapan

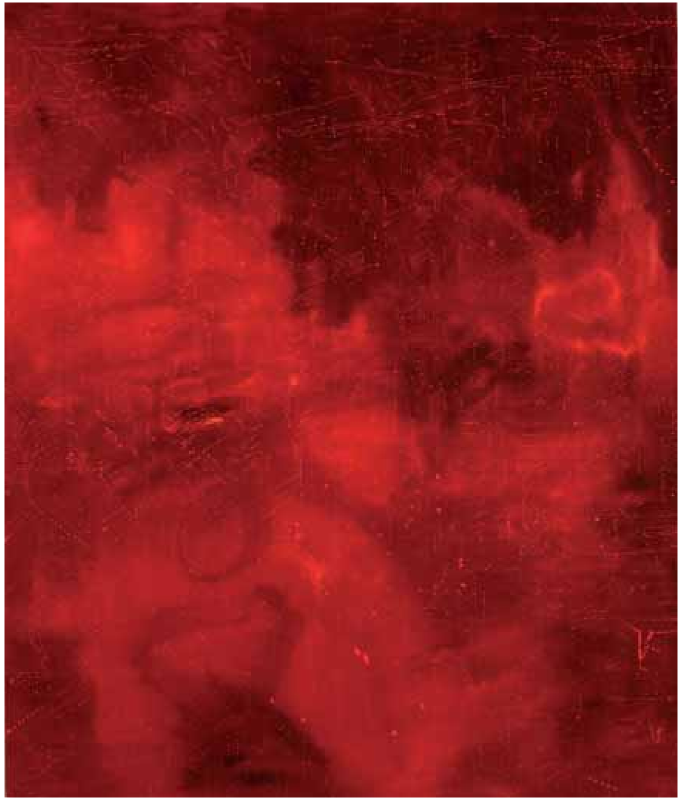
Jon Cattapan

Born 1956, Melbourne. Lives and works in Melbourne. Represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, and Bellas Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

1
Red system no. 1
(The first deadly system)
1997-98
oil on canvas
198 x 167.5cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

2
Red system no. 3
(The third deadly system)
1998-2001
oil on canvas
198 x 167.5cm
Private collection, Melbourne. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

3
Van landscape
2006
oil on linen
190 x 220cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.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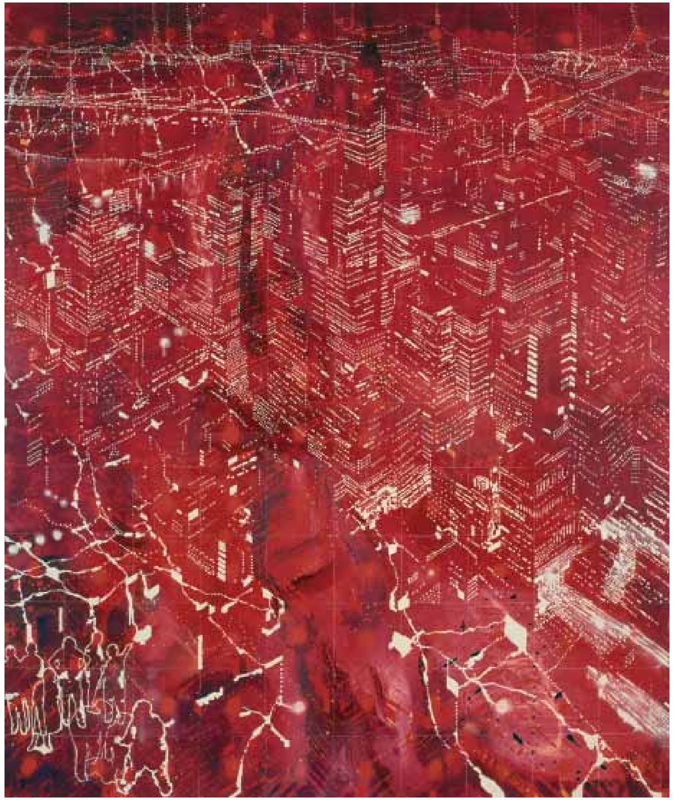

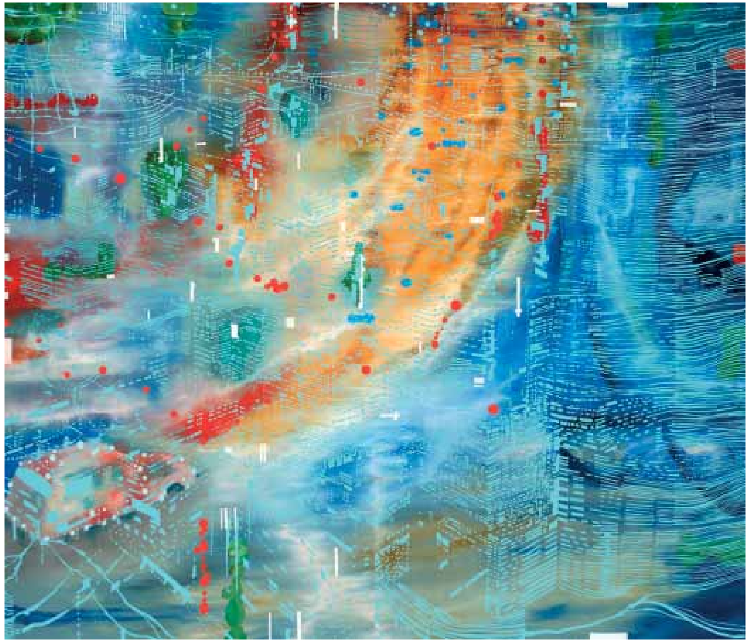

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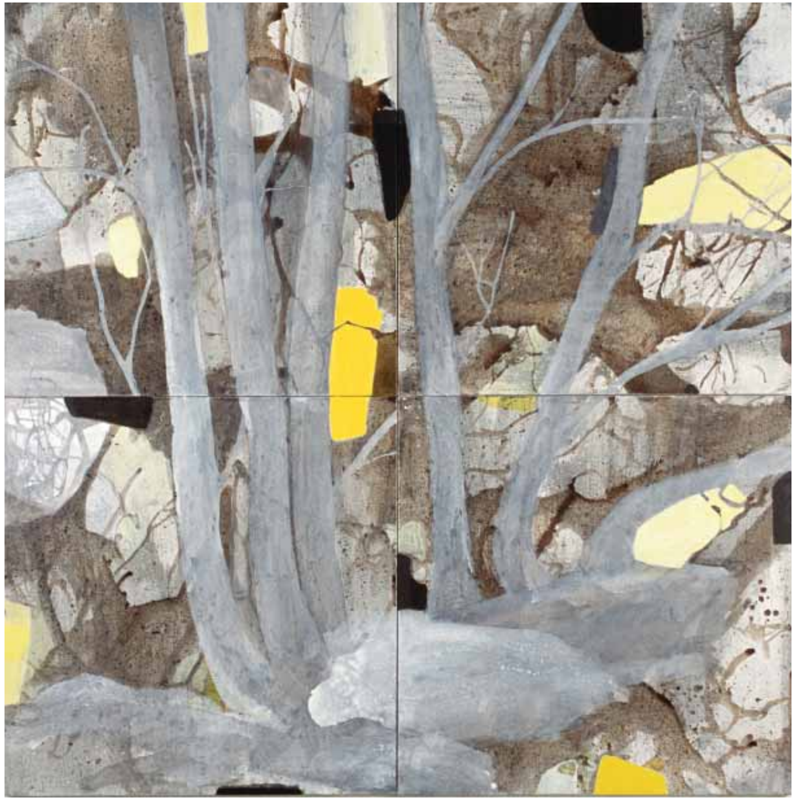


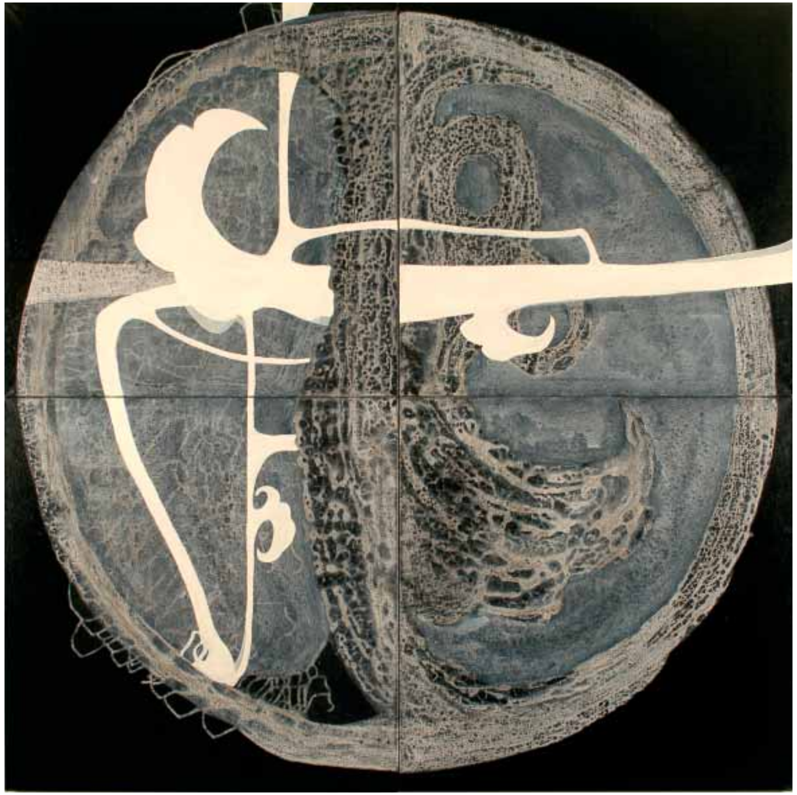
Jonathan Kimberley

Jonathan Kimberley

Born 1969, Melbourne.
Lives and works in Hobart,
Tasmania and Kununurra,
Western Australia.
Represented by
Bett Gallery Hobart.

4
Interstices (Blue Tier) Cloudglyph 116 (Ur-Landscape: Post-Landscape)
2005
acrylic and charcoal on linen
Four panels: 182 x 182cm (overall size)
Courtesy of Mr Howard Bye, Hobart.

5
Untitled (Map of Unlandscape)
2007
acrylic and charcoal on linen
Four panels 182 x 182cm (overall size)
Courtesy of the artist and Bett Gallery Hobart.



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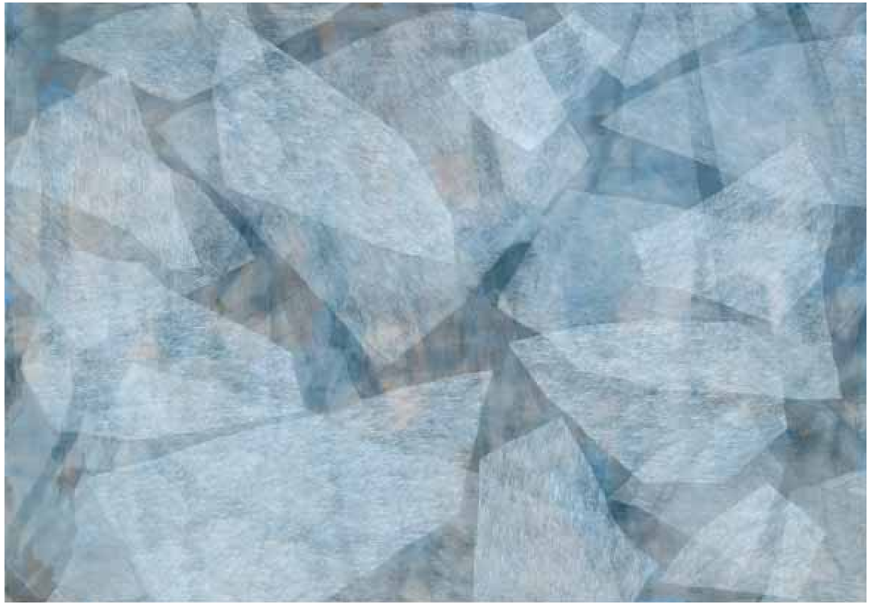


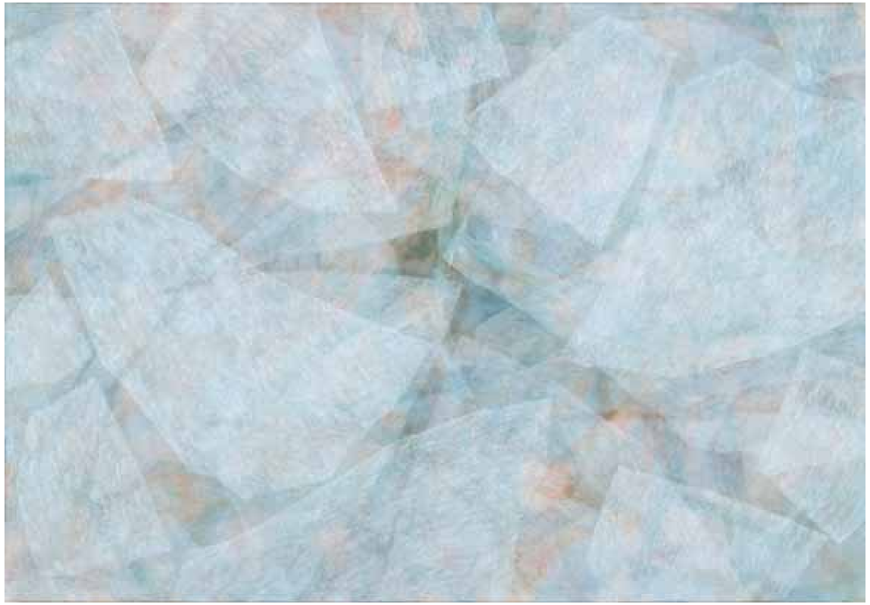
Sue Lovegrove

Sue Lovegrove

Born 1962, Adelaide.
Lives and works in
Pelverata, Tasmania.
Represented by Christine
Abrahams Gallery,
Melbourne, and
Helen Maxwell Gallery,
Canberra.

6
Vanishing no. 348
2006
acrylic and gouache
on canvas
90 x 130cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Helen Maxwell Gallery.

7
Vanishing no. 349
2006
acrylic and gouache
on canvas
90 x 130cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Helen Maxwell Gallery.



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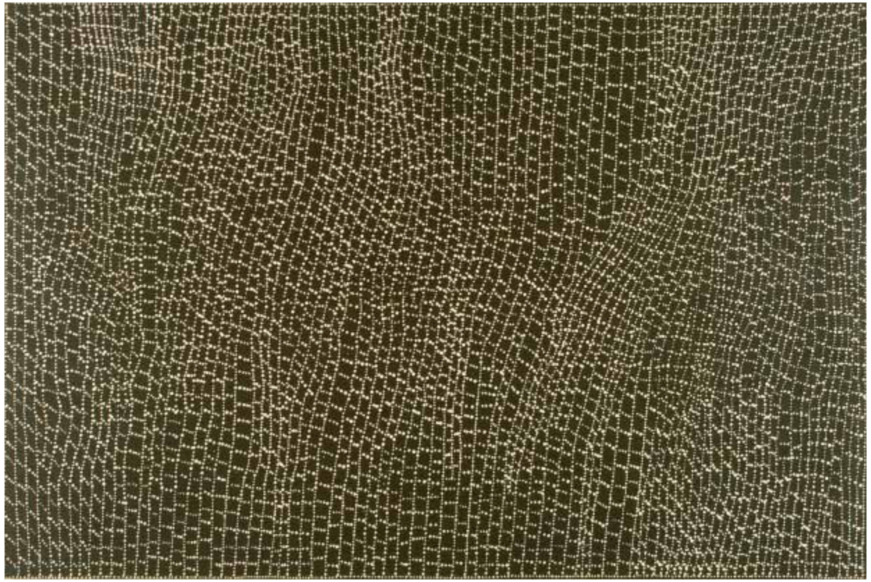


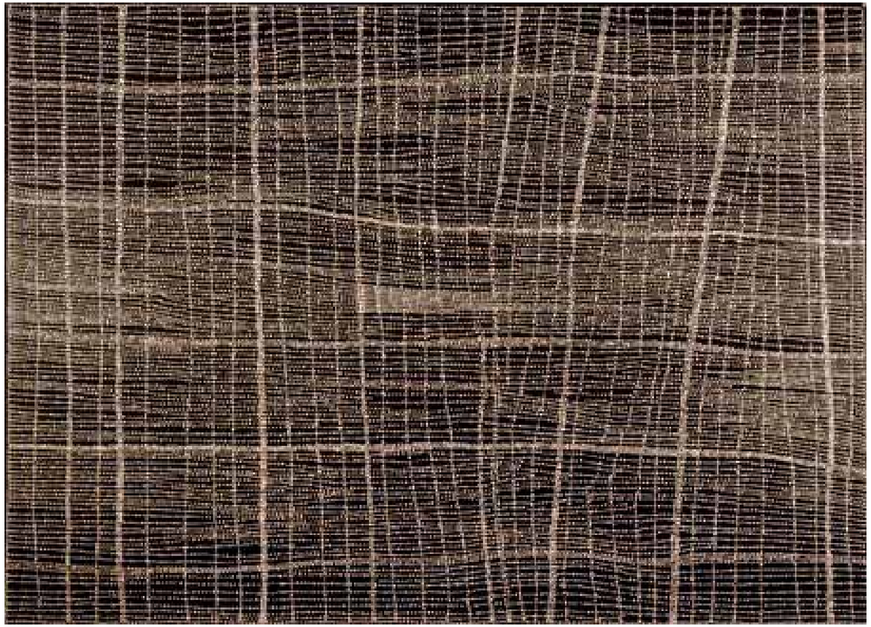
Dorothy Napangardi

Dorothy Napangardi

Born 1958, Mina Mina (Yuendumu, Central Desert).
Lives and works in Alice Springs, Northern Territory.
Represented by gallery gondwana, Sydney and Alice Springs, and Vivian Anderson, Melbourne.

8
Minyha Mina, Inland Sea
2002
acrylic on linen
122 x 182cm
Private collection, courtesy of Bett Gallery Hobart.

9
Salt on Mina Mina
2003
acrylic on linen
153.5 x 212.5cm
Private collection, New Zealand.



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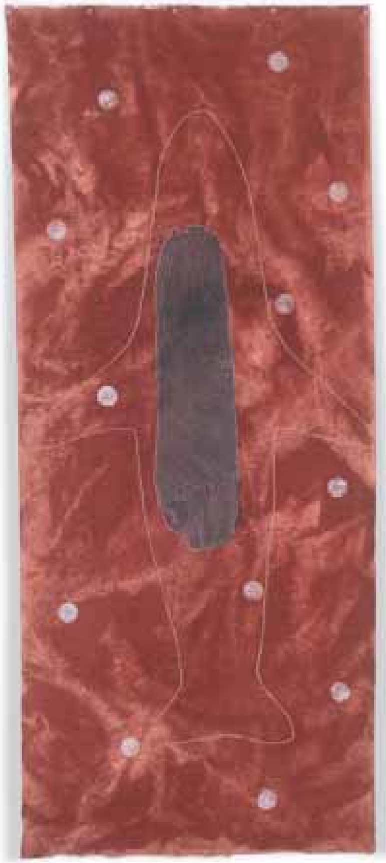


Judy Watson

Judy Watson

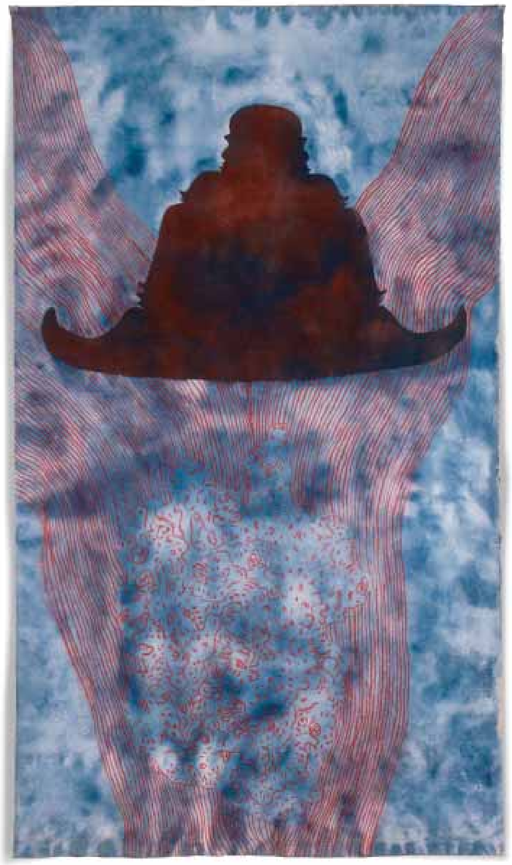
Born 1959, Mundubbera.
Lives and works in
Brisbane, Queensland.
Represented by
GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney;
Bellas Milani Gallery,
Brisbane; Tolarno Galleries,
Melbourne and
Helen Maxwell Gallery,
Canberra.

10
found 10 inches under
2004
pigment, acrylic,
chinagraph pencil and
pastel on canvas
193 x 103cm
Courtesy of the artist and
GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney.

11
lunugunga bell with heart sponge
2004
pigment, carbon ink and
pastel on canvas
193 x 112.5cm
Courtesy of the artist and
GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney.

12
swallowing culture: tiger brand 1
2004
pigment, acrylic, carbon
ink, netting, cowrie shells
and cotton thread on
canvas
194 x 114cm
Courtesy of the artist and
GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney.

13
headhunter
2006
pigment, pastel and
aquarelle pencil on canvas
192 x 103cm
Private collection, Brisbane.



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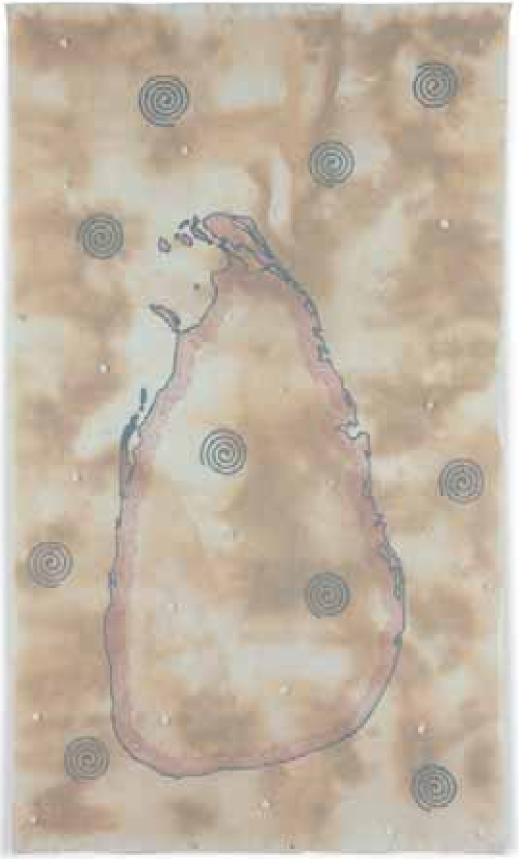

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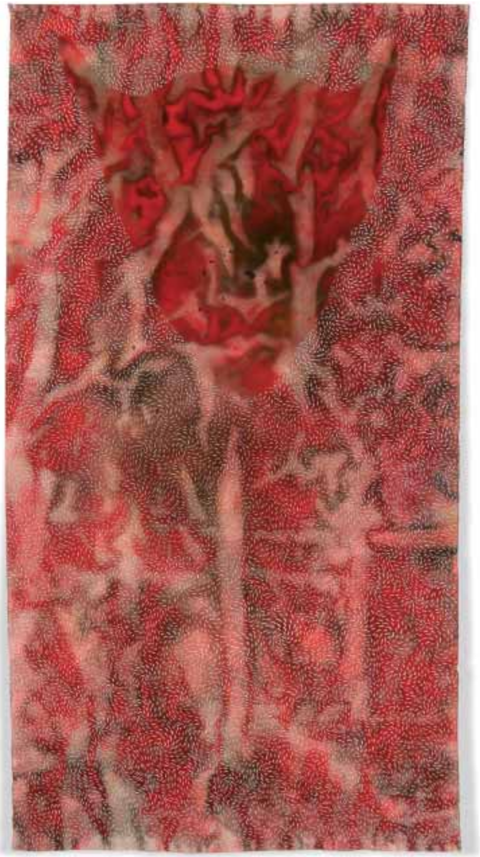

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Devonport Regional Gallery
45-47 Stewart Street
PO Box 604, Devonport, Tasmania 7310
Australia
Telephone: +61 (0)3 6424 8296
Facsimile: +61 (0)3 6423 5305
Email: artgallery@dcc.tas.gov.au
www.devonportgallery.com