An Asialink/ Devonport Regional Gallery Touring Exhibition

AN ISLAND SOUTH
FOREWORD

From an island south is presented in partnership by Devonport Regional Gallery and the Asialink Centre of The University of Melbourne.

This marks the first partnership between Devonport Regional Gallery and Asialink and is the only exhibition dedicated to Tasmania and its landscape that has been toured by Asialink in its 16 year history.

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The University of Melbourne dbn and Devonport Regional Gallery director and curator Jane Stewart has selected works by prominent Tasmanian artists, Julie Gough, David Keeling, Jonathan Kimberley {collaborating with poet Jim Everett}, Bea Maddock, David Stephenson and Philip Wolfhagen.

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www.devonportgallery.com

Catalogue
Jointly published by the Asialink Centre of The University of Melbourne and Devonport Regional Gallery
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Cover image: David Keeling, Hazards Forest 1, 2006.
Oil on linen, 137.5 x 122 cm
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Program Manager: Sarah Bond
Curator: Jane Stewart

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Asialink is delighted to tour this exhibition through Asia and engage new audiences with some of Tasmania’s most revered landscape artists.

Sarah Bond
Visual Arts Program
Asialink
AN ISLAND SOUTH

Tasmania is an island of extraordinary beauty which rests beneath the south eastern tip of mainland Australia. Vast tracts of the coastline remain wild and undeveloped, while the highland reaches are still eerily uninhabited. Headlands have been battered into shape by ferocious westerlies whose sheer relentlessness has stunted trees, suppressed grasses, and wrecked ships in terrifying numbers. The main cities are small and nestled in picturesque valleys with generous glimpses of mountains, rivers, and beaches. Bushland is just beyond the suburbs and some of the world’s oldest surviving forests and most isolated beaches are barely an hour away by car. There is a sense of escape, exploration, and solitariness. Winter fog softens mountain peaks while low lying light casts long shadows from ancient trees. Stars shine crisply from the sky’s undisturbed blackness and, in summer, the Aurora Australis can be seen sweeping its pink, majestic pathway across the universe.

There is no doubt that this raw beauty has lured, inspired, entrapped, and obsessed artists since European occupation. However, the work of Tasmania’s contemporary landscape artists does not represent the sublime alone. As the artists in From an island south have immersed themselves within Tasmania, they have stumbled across the complexities underlying the island’s culture. Inevitably the artists have begun to breathe the politics, history and traditions of the island, aspects which have unavoidably found a way into their artwork. Each artist’s career has been a way into their artwork. Each artist’s career has been of the island, aspects which have unavoidably found works of extreme physicality. Although usually grand in execution, the paintings also exist as an intimate document between artist and land. Their textural surfaces are constructed as if Wolfhagen has tenderly remodelled the landscape, adjusting vital elements ever so slightly to create a world that is a small step from reality. The world he depicts is not bucolic, but neither is it quite as harsh as the actual toiled farmland or barren highlands. Instead, Wolfhagen’s landscapes are gentle and a fraction hazey, as if a faithful but subtly altered memory of a unique place.

Study for high ground (2002) and Study for Augusta drift (2002) are painted as if the artist is positioned close to the ground, nestled amongst the native grasses and low lying scrub. In Study for high ground, the viewer’s elevated position is further isolated by the plains below which appear to extend forever, their uninterrupted flatness much like the sea surrounding an island. In Study for Augusta drift the height and angle of the inland sand dune creates the sense that one is protected by their surroundings. In each work, the viewer feels part of the scene and despite the coldness and exposure one would experience if really visiting a Tasmanian place of this altitude, one is warmly, almost snugly, encapsulated by the immediate landscape.

Interestingly for paintings of this scale, there is an absence of a significant or overpowering land form.

Instead, Wolfhagen has invested a quietly beautiful but relatively inconsequential aspect of the environment with the same attention Romantic painters might have attributed a mountain range. The artist’s closeness to the landscape is evidenced by this choice of modest subject which he has discovered by traversing the highlands on foot. But it is also his uncanny ability to mimic the earthily colours and southern light unique to this area which underlines the artist’s understanding of the nature of this place. When united with the low perspective and large-scale of each painting, Wolfhagen’s precise distillation of colour imbues his work with particular intensity, creating within the viewer a sense that they are actually in the landscape experiencing the shifting weather and light patterns.

Interesting emotive responses to the landscape are present in the photographs of David Stephenson who, since arriving in Tasmania from the United States in the early 1980s, has explored the island’s inner and coastal regions seeking greater meaning behind the term ‘wilderness’. Tasmania is ideal to this endeavour for it is an island whose population is caught between wanting to preserve the natural environment and developing these areas for industrial or tourism purposes. Stephenson writes:

‘Is wilderness a place devoid of the presence of humans? Does such a place any longer exist on Earth? Once the wilderness was furtive for human survival, and was foisted out to create the ordained garden, where nature could be controlled in the service of humankind. Now we are placing the garden into a wilderness, and the terrains of wilderness are embattled and enclosed, to be protected from encroaching human impact. Once the wilderness was a fearful, awesome, sublime place – does such a wilderness still exist?...’

The Drowned Series (2001–02) capture the lakes in Tasmania’s central and western districts which were dammed during the mid to late 1900s by the Hydro Electric Corporation. These lakes are primary examples of a wilderness which has been tamed and reshaped by humankind. They exist in an area little visited by locals or tourists despite the uniqueness of the surrounding world heritage listed forest and river systems for the terrain is steep, densely treed, damp and notoriously difficult to access.

Ironically, these ‘wilderness’ characteristics create the perfect place to establish controversial, large scale industrial projects. Stephenson’s imagery is sophisticated in its ability to polarise the viewer’s emotional response to the dammed lakes and their surroundings. As a fundamental level, the images depict these man made lakes in their naked reality – as irreparably altered expanses of water. The skeletons of trees rise from the water’s still surface, islands float where mountains once stood, and there is no naturally formed gradient, sand, or scrub to separate the water’s edge from the shore. In this sense, these landscapes appear barren, drowned, dead.

However, Stephenson brings a complex and paradoxical reading to this imagery. Although he does not deny the lifesless atmosphere of these environments, his treatment of each image stirs a sense of wonder in such unearthly places. ‘The silverly surface of each lake is enchanting, mist shrouds the horizon, and clouds hover dramatically above each lagoon. These are supreme sublime elements which cast a breathtaking atmosphere over the artificial environments. It is as if the viewer has stumbled across a new wilderness which is, in Stephenson’s own words, ‘devoid of the presence of humans’... ‘fearful, awesome and sublime’.

Man’s manipulation of the natural environment is also the impetus behind Richard Wastell’s paintings, his recent imagery drawing from lakes similar to those visited by Stephenson, and the logged coupes of old growth forest. Not far from here, Buxton massacre and firebombed forest. Styx Valley (2005) exposes the charred stumps of large manfests, their once upright posture twisted to suggest agony, emphasising the naked absurdity of the blunt, froundless trunks. Yellow sunlight bakes the exposed ground for possibly the first time ever and
fire blazes on the horizon creating ominous plumes of smoke. The scene is reminiscent of a moonscape and one senses Wastell is both bewildered and perversely fascinated by the transformed environment. The artist insists that this is not a political painting, but a raw and honest interpretation of the denuded forest – the newly emerging Tasmanian landscape. It is as Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan observes of Wastell’s latest work: “Though they will have forever after in Tasmania an undeniably political dimension, these are anything but political paintings. They are intensely spiritual paintings by a painter whose close technique becomes ever more capable of conveying an enormous emotion.”

In Not far from here the forest is devastated. The colours are hot and hyper-real – a world away from the gentle greens, greens and browns in Wastell’s other painting Last night I dreamed an island gentle... (2003). In dramatic contrast, this image transports the viewer deep into the Tasmanian forest’s interior. The large trees emanate silent grandeur. One feels safely enveloped within the unseen canopy, cocooned amongst the trees, and encouraged to look closely at the colours, forms and patterns of trunks and branches which one might typically disregard when moving through the bush. Although exquisite, this section of native forest would usually make up part of a track leading to a celebrated location or vista. But here the forest is the focus and the allusion to the viewer’s presence within it is heightened by the artist’s detailed attention to an otherwise inconspicuous scene.

However, Keeling’s images are as much about absence as they are about presence. By referencing the generally blind and distracted states with which we pass through the natural environment, he emphasises the rift that is developing between contemporary culture and nature. Unlike the other artists in From an island south, he refers to sites which are often visited, or populated, by humans. Hence, the scenarios depicted are familiar but when captured in a painting they cause one to stop and question their relationship with nature.

The relationship between artist and place also underpins Leaving a Mountain (1992–93), a painting in which Bea Maddock has captured her feelings for a location she knew well. When considering this work prior to making it, she wrote in her journal:

Now I’m close up to the mountain I feel wrapped around by it... If I want to do anything with it I will have to be on the spot – observe its moods and changes over a series of days.

The sheer six metre length of the completed work re-establishes Maddock’s sense of being ‘wrapped around’ by the mountain. This perception is heightened by the artist’s panoramic approach to capturing the land form. Maddock has divided the view into eight panels, each one recording a successive aspect of the mountain. Strong calligraphic lines move across the panels to construct the landscape and gradients of colour denote the layers of distance. She has recreated the landscape with even emphasis, focusing on its every aspect in an approach which is as much about embodiment as it is about observation.

Over a period of eleven years, Maddock developed this emphatic but technical approach to establish a series of works relating to the Tasmanian landscape and the island’s Aboriginal tribal languages, particularly indigenous place names. These works sought to reinvest the land with its own largely forgotten history and culminated in the much celebrated Terra Spiritus – a darker shade of pale (1993–1998).

Although not featured in From an island south, Terra Spiritus arose from Maddock’s belief that she ‘needed to make a statement about the whole of Tasmania’. It is a strong account of the relationship between Tasmanian people and the landscape. Spanning more than 40 metres, the work documents the entire circumference of Tasmania’s coastline as it appears from the sea.

Aboriginal place names are scribbled beneath their relevant landmark and the European equivalent appears in smaller print at the bottom of each drawing. The panorama is a means of encapsulation. The coastline defines the edge, encompassing everything within. The text signifies the disturbing ease with which contemporary Tasmanian place names have usurped their indigenous counterpart. Ultimately, Terra Spiritus is a powerful statement about Tasmania. It is the zenith of Maddock’s successful artistic career, and the combination of precise drawing and referential place names captures Tasmania’s history and geography in a deeply moving visual document of extraordinary succinctness.

Reclamation of indigenous language and relationship to place also underlies the collaboration between Aboriginal poet Jim Everett and artist Jonathan Kimberley. During the past eighteen months, the two have made regular visits to Everett’s country in north east Tasmania where they have observed the environment while camping. Each responds to the natural landscape with a combination of immediacy and contemplation. While in the bush, Everett records the thoughts that occur in response to the surrounding land and Kimberley paints directly onto the canvas. They rework the text and images on returning to the studio.
Everett and Kimberley refer to the outdoor aspect of the work as ‘bush painting’. They understand this process to be a collaboration with country, therefore investing the land with an interactive persona of its own. Everett’s presence is critical to Kimberley’s visual interpretation, and the indigenous approach to understanding the environment causes the painter to question western cultural perspectives. By employing a candid process reminiscent of the European tradition of plein air painting, Kimberley combines Aboriginal and Western approaches to landscape to engender a uniquely personal response to place.

Everett’s poetry evokes visual responses related to his connection to this country. Ria-warrawah is the deep water spirit and the phrase ‘respecting moon water moving along coastal veins’ alludes evocatively to the visceral interchange between body and land, blood and water. His ancestral connection to this part of Tasmania is vital to the work produced in the collaboration with Kimberley. His words are warm and welcoming, inviting one to the work produced in the collaboration with Kimberley.

Indigenous artist Julie Gough has also established a substantial body of work about the relationship between Tasmanian Aboriginal people and the environment. Although presently living in Northern Queensland in what she terms ‘self imposed exile’, Gough still feels strongly that Tasmania is home. She is a descendant of Tasmanian Aboriginal elder Manarlargenna {c1770–1835} and uses her art work as means of preserving and understanding her connection to her homeland.

The canvas buoys that make up Love (2006) are an imaginary means of transport between Gough’s present home in Queensland and her ultimate home in Tasmania. They are each embroidered with the name of various craft used to her and her people to the island: ‘DJ 376’ was the number of her latest flight to Tasmania in August 2006, ‘Taroona’ is the name of the passenger ship that brought her mother to the island in the 1950s, and ‘Hunter’ was a sealing vessel on which Gough’s ancestor Woretemoeteyerner worked for two years in the 1820s. The buoys embody the artist’s yearning for Tasmania, and are a metaphorical means of remaining aboot while moving from place to place. The rope of hair suggests the power of ancestral lineage and the traits that link women to and from Tasmania since the late 1790s, and the hair and the canvas also ‘relate to the journeys of Aboriginal women to and from Tasmania since the late 1790s, and the late/resonance of the island bringing them (usually) home’. She concludes:

I prefer them (the suspended buoys) to wear as hair – my own personal life preservers, enabling me and my mother’s return to Tasmania through time.

Through their connection to boats and planes, the buoys might also be potential means of contact with other places to which her past is connected such as Melbourne, where she was brought up, and other ancestral homes in Europe. Love represents the complex nature of place and belonging, and are the artist’s means of reconciling the many paths travelled prior to and during one’s lifetime.

The work poignantly traces Gough’s own connection to Tasmania through her family’s history. While a strong reminders of the tragedy inflicted upon Tasmanian Aboriginal people, it is also invested with the remarkable continuation of a people overcoming the travesty of near-genocide.

In From an island south, the turbulent story of Tasmania’s European occupation is woven into images of the island’s highlands, forests, suburbs, bush, lakes, clouds, and coast. Collectively, these artists illustrate aspects of the island’s way of life such as the fine line between city and bushland, the prominent position landscape holds in Tasmania’s contemporary art movement, the affinity these artists have with the landscape, the effects of industrial development, and the past and present relationship Tasmanian Aboriginal people hold with the land and its inhabitants.

The seven artists in the exhibition engage with the Tasmanian landscape to glean greater understanding of their homeland. Their work reveals that although Tasmania is a place of natural wonder, it is also an island steeped in issues about ownership and control of the land. The island boundary creates a sense of isolation, providing those who live here with a clear identity unique to people from small, geographically defined places. It is also this small scale which makes it possible for artists to live as part of the city’s cultural community while maintaining closeness to the natural environment.

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Although each artist in From an island south is passionate about the Tasmanian landscape, their works are more than representational depictions of a beautiful place. These artists have immersed themselves within the landscape for many years. They live, breathe and work their subject matter, forever analysing and interpreting their surroundings. Although Tasmania is the source upon which each artist’s work thrives, it might also be considered that the environment lives on in their work. Most importantly, it is a strong sense of place which compels each artist to make work about their homeland.

They capture elements of a contemporaneous Tasmania and fix it in time, collectively creating a prism of responses from this unique southern island.

Jane Stewart
Director, Devonport Regional Gallery

1 Supplemen, David, Artist Statement’, August, Nature (ex cat), ed. HAY, Peter, Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1996.
4 Maddock, Bea, Interview with Diane Dunbar, Taroona Spirit, with a darker shade of pale (ex cat), Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Bea Maddock, Launceston, 1998.
5 Gough, Julie, Email correspondence, August 2006.
JULIE GOUGH

Born Melbourne 1965
Lives and works in Townsville


Group Exhibitions include: *Zones of Contact, Habitus-Habitat*, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, 2005; *Cross Currents*, Linden Centre for the Arts, St Kilda, 2005; *On Island*, Devonport Regional Gallery, Devonport, 2005; *120 Degrees of Separation*, Linden Centre for the Arts, St Kilda, 2004; *Outside Inside: Fragments of Place*, Brigham University Museum of Art, Utah, 2003; *What’s Love got to do with it?*, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 2001; *Driving Black Home*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2001; *Biennale of Contemporary Art, Festival of Pacific Arts*, Noumea, 2000; *Trace*, Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Liverpool, 1999.
DAVID KEELING

Born Launceston 1951
Lives and works in Hobart

Selected Solo Exhibitions include:

Group Exhibitions include:
David Keeling

The Diminishing Paradise II 1995

Oil on wood, overall 38 x 70 cm

(individually 4.3 x 8.2 cm)

Collection of Devonport City Council
JONATHAN KIMBERLEY

Born Melbourne 1969
Lives and works between Hobart and Kununurra, Western Australia

Selected Solo Exhibitions include:

Group Exhibitions include:

Jonathan Kimberley
Shift: Cloudglyph 2005
Acrylic and charcoal on linen
182 x 182 cm
(four panels each 91 x 91 cm)
Collection of Devonport City Council
**Jonathan Kimberley & Jim Everett**

*ria-warrawah within all-life circuitry*

Acrylic, charcoal and pen on linen, 120 x 120 cm

Collection of Jonathan Kimberley & Jim Everett

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**BEA MADDOCK**

Born Hobart 1934, Lives and works in Launceston

Selected Solo Exhibitions include:  
*The Antarctic Suite*, Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, 1990;  

Group Exhibitions include:  
*On the ashes of the stars ...* Stephane Mallarme – a celebration, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 1998;  
*Drawn from Life*, National Gallery of Australia Travelling Exhibition, 1997–98;  
*Black Attack*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1996;  

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*ria-warrawah within all-life circuitry*  

(poem in collaboration with painting of the same title by Jonathan Kimberley)

as clouds of travelling water take their turn for waiting forests of all-life wanting a big drink  
new water coming to rain and flood big rivers  
there are spirits in this country and re deep dark waters  
ria-warrawah, deep water spirit, seen here quietly touching the clouds need rain country so waters the new with  
let the sun bring it warm for the seeds to drink  
a new generation  
fill the streams down deep from across meenamatta  
respecting moon water moving along coastal veins of all-life from light clouds to dark deep waters  

*parula meenamatta*  

(jim everett), 2006
Bea Maddocks
Leaving a Mountain 1992–93
Pigment wash, graphite, oil stick and encaustic on canvas, 128 x 600 cm
Collection of Devonport City Council
Born Washington D.C 1955
Lives and works in Hobart

Selected Solo Exhibitions include:

Group Exhibitions include:
David Stephenson

Drowned No 16

(Lake Gordon, Tasmania) 2001

Toned gelatin silver print
65 x 92 cm (limited edition of 15)

Collection of the Artist

RICHARD WASTELL

Born Hobart 1974
Lives and works in Hobart

Selected Solo Exhibitions include:

We are making a new world, Bett Gallery at fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne, 2006;
Not far from here, Devonport Regional Gallery, Devonport & Bett Gallery Hobart, 2005;
World that I love, Bett Gallery at Depot Gallery, Sydney, 2004;
Fires, Bett Gallery Hobart, 2002;
Vision Machine, Bett Gallery Hobart, 1999;

Group Exhibitions include:

Artists artist, Asia Modern Art, Melbourne, 2005;
Bodysgag, Academy Gallery, Launceston & Carnegie Gallery, Hobart, 2003;
Future Perfect, Bett Gallery Hobart, 2003;
The shape of air [flat], Bett Gallery Hobart, 2002;
Melbourne Artfair 2002, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, 2002;
Poets and Painters, Bett Gallery Hobart, 2002;
Melbourne Artfair 2000, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, 2000;
(painting), Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, 2000;
Below:
Richard Wastell
Last night I dreamed an island
gentle 2004
Acrylic, oil, marble dust on canvas
120 x 360 cm
Collection of Bett Family

Right:
Richard Wastell
Not far from here. Burnt Manferns
and firebombed forest. Styx Valley 2005
Oil and marble dust on linen
152 x 183 cm
Collection of Devonport City Council
PHILIP WOLFHAGEN

Born Launceston 1963
Lives and works in Longford

Selected Solo Exhibitions include:
Night Visions, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2006;
Luminary Trares, Bett Gallery HOBart, 2006; Night
Beacons, Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne,
2005; The Inner Edge, Academy Gallery, Launceston
& Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2004; Noctiluoc, Bett
Gallery Hobart, 2004; Archipelago, Queen Victoria
Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 2003; Shifting
Light, Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne,
2003; High Ground, Sherman Galleries Goodhope,
Sydney, 2002.

Group Exhibitions include:
Australia and Constable, National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra, 2006; Senses of Place: Art in Tasmania, Plimsoll
Gallery, Hobart, 2006; Great Escapes, Lake Macquarie
City Art Gallery, 1, 2004; Depth of Field, Shepparton
Art Gallery, Shepparton & Monash University Museum
of Art, Melbourne, 2003; Painting Tasmanian Landscape,
Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, 2003; Uncommon World:
Aspects of Contemporary Australian Art, National Gallery
Philip Wolhagen

Study for Augusta Dreyf 2002
Oil and beeswax on canvas
100 x 214 cm
Collection of Philip and Catherine Wolhagen