



# You Are Here

21 March – 10 May 2020

# Here I Am

The landscape has played a central role in forming how colonial Australia sees the country and their place within it. Romantic notions of sweeping plains and a sunburnt country have evolved into contemporary panoramic images of a wide, empty land of red dirt and blue coastlines that fill our airports and tourism ads. These ideas of a vacant and untouched landscape have been perpetuated by photographers in Australia since the mid-nineteenth century, employing European conventions of the picturesque and the sublime to portray a vision of the uninhabited landscape as ripe for settlement. Impressionist painters later added a layer of hostility to the land, populating the bush with swagmen and pastoralists, battling forces of drought, fire and flooding rains in the name of farming and development.

This narrative of a valiantly tamed wilderness is predicated on a national mythology of the Australian landscape being pristine and untouched; with minimal reference to more than 60,000 years of habitation and

management of the land by Aboriginal people. As academic Marcia Langton has argued, "there is no such thing as a 'natural landscape'", all land has a history of human interaction<sup>1</sup>. This distorted image of a land without human presence has lingered in the Australian psyche and has become a topical subject for artists investigating their connection and disconnection to the landscape today informed by personal, cultural and historical narratives.

For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, to interrogate their relationship with the Australian landscape remains a complex undertaking. To authentically locate oneself within the land, to say 'Here I Am', is to take on the layered history of the landscape, defined by both its beauty and its terror. Through photograph and film, the artists in *You Are Here* have reinserted themselves into the landscape, attempting to define a place for the self between belonging and displacement in a country continuing to be impacted by cultural and environmental change.



Barkandji artist Nici Cumpston has been capturing images of the riverland in the Murray Darling Basin and its waterways in her country since 2000. At first glance, *Oh my Murray Darling!* (2019) offers an experience of the sublime, but it is beauty with an underlying terror. The perfect symmetry of the expansive image creates an unquiet as the lifeless river gums reach both upwards towards the sky and down below. The image is haunted by the devastating environmental reality caused by alterations to the waterways, choking the supply of water to many of the surrounding rivers and tributaries. The title is an attempt

the lake, and the perceived economic profit used to justify the loss of the river's ecosystems. Tylor has said of his works that as an "Indigenous person I practise culture not art."<sup>2</sup> His photographs are intended to create a window into which the viewer can look and not only see culture, but allow it to move beyond the photograph. As the gold spreads onto the mount, across the frame and in some installations, out onto the gallery walls; the works provide an immersive Indigenous perspective on the perception of land as art in the gallery context.



to humanise the river, and in her 2019 artist statement Cumpston likens her Barka (the Darling River) to a trusted relative who is suffering, imploring action to be taken before it is too late.

Nunga (Kaurna), Māori (Te Arawa) and European artist James Tylor's *Economics of Water series* (2018) also highlights the environmental damage sustained by the Murray Darling River system. Tylor's photographs of the drought-affected Menindee Lakes have been overlaid with gold painted geometric shapes, symbolising his impression of human intervention on

As the daughter of Central European migrants who came to Australia as refugees after the Second World War, artist Anne Zahalka has spent her career subverting colonial ideas of an Australian pristine landscape. In a commissioned work for this exhibition, Zahalka has selected landscapes that she has a personal history and connection to, which are featured in early Australian paintings. In the photographs these paintings are re-staged to include herself and other contemporary interventions on the landscape within the frame. In *You Are on Dharawal Land!* (2020), Zahalka crouches in the foreground of the Illawarra undergrowth as both observer,



stranger and witness to the landscape populated by introduced species, including a group of tourists. A haze of smoke can also be seen towards the tops of the trees, referencing the ongoing bushfire smoke that covered the rainforest at the time of the making of the work. Acknowledging the first occupiers of the land in the title, *Zahalka* has combined the familiar and the alien in this constructed and yet very real landscape, seeking to understand her place in this country today.

In two video works, artists Duha Ali and Justine Youssef contemplate the practising of migrant rituals brought to Australia, and what it means to bring displaced traditions onto another land. In *Body/Cartography* (2018), the artists perform a matrilineal cleansing ritual. Usually undertaken with their mothers, sisters and aunts in suburban driveways, the artists scrubbed salvaged carpets in a durational performance over three days at the colonial sandstone courtyard of the Old Darlinghurst Gaol in Sydney. As the footage pans upwards, the patterned lines of the carpets begin to take on the appearance of aerial landscapes or cartographical maps, referencing both the act of colonial map-making in Australia, and the dividing up of country by foreign

powers in the artists' own ancestral lands in Kurdistan and Lebanon. The works confront the problematic search for a sense of place by migrants in a land already layered with its own history of ownership and dispossession.

Also exploring displacement from country is Yanyuwa Garrwa photographer Miriam Charlie of Borroloola in the Gulf of Carpentaria. For *You Are Here*, Charlie was commissioned to create a new series of photographs capturing her own fractured sense of place. The series narrates her current circumstances, removed from her home, while living in Darwin at the Daisy Yarmirr Hostel for dialysis treatment. Using a polaroid camera she captures an honest and unfiltered account of her three-times a week journey with other community members, to the Royal Darwin Hospital for treatment. Charlie describes her situation away from her beloved homeland as "a life sentence".

Informed by her own experiences as an Asian Australian, Tammy Law's photographic series *Away From Home* (2017), captures similar feelings of statelessness, documenting the experiences of Burma refugees also living away from their homeland. The photographs are of a conjoined reality, as landscape images of the countryside in Burma have been projected onto the suburban homes

of the community living in Brisbane. Taken at twilight, these psychological depictions of country comment on the shifting understanding of home and belonging for a displaced community.

*I am Ophelia* (2019) by Ophelia Bakowski is less an expression of the artist's relationship with the land, than an attempt to embody the fluid and ever-changing nature of the landscape itself as an expression of gender and identity. In a two-channel video work combining aerial drone footage, the artist becomes the character of Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet, alternating between wading upstream against the tide of the Yarra river, and floating downstream shrouded in an antique wedding dress, both struggling against and embracing the strong and gentle currents of the water. While Shakespeare's Hamlet drowns, in Bakowski's performance, rather than drowning, Ophelia is instead forever in a state of transformation, enacting a transcendental marriage-like ceremony with nature.

In another embodiment of nature, Filipino/Australian interdisciplinary artist Bhenji Ra as part of Club Ate (with Justin Shoulder), in collaboration with Tristan Jallah, has reimaged a spiritual 'mother earth' figure. *INAY FUTURO (Future Mother)* (2020), was commissioned for this exhibition, and is an extension of the artist collective's

investigations into creating a 'future folklore'. Using as reference a variety of 20th century Filipino artistic representations of mother earth, Ra manifests the hyperfeminine, posing within a digitally constructed landscape. In this futuristic vision, Ra uses a queer framework, questioning existing definitions of nature, the natural and the feminine, and the relationship between the two, allowing for a new hybrid identity to emerge.

Through film and photographic works, the group of artists in *You Are Here* have located themselves within the Australian landscape, both real and imagined. Using their own personal and cultural frameworks they acknowledge the multi-layered history of the land, and also begin to define new relationships with the natural world. In an act of artistic placemaking, each of the artists have simultaneously proclaimed 'Here I Am' while also revealing to the viewer, 'You Are Here' with me.

- 1 Langton, Marcia 1996, 'What do we mean by wilderness?: wilderness and terra nullius in Australian art [Address to The Sydney Institute on 12 October 1995.]' Sydney Papers, The, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 11.
- 2 Millar-Baker, Hayley & Tylor, James 2018-10, 'Returning the gaze: Hayley Millar-Baker and James Tylor in conversation' Art Monthly Australasia, no. 311, pp. 30-35.

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*Cover:*

James TYLOR, *Economics of water #7 (Levee)* (2018), Gold paint on Photograph, 100x100cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery.

*Centre spread:*

Justine YOUSSEF & Duha ALI, *Kohl* (2018), still from three channel video work, 4 minutes. Image courtesy of the artists.

Nici CUMPSTON, *Oh my Murray Darling!* (2019), archival pigment print on hahn mule photo rag paper, 75 x 175cm.

Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Reid Gallery.

Ophelia BAKOWSKI, *I am Ophelia* (2019), still from three channel video work. Image courtesy of the artist.

*Back cover:*

Anne ZAHALKA, *You Are On Dharawal Land!* (2020), Archival pigment print, 150 x 210cm. Image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.



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