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Forest as Place in the Album "Canopy": Culturalising Nature or Naturalising Culture?

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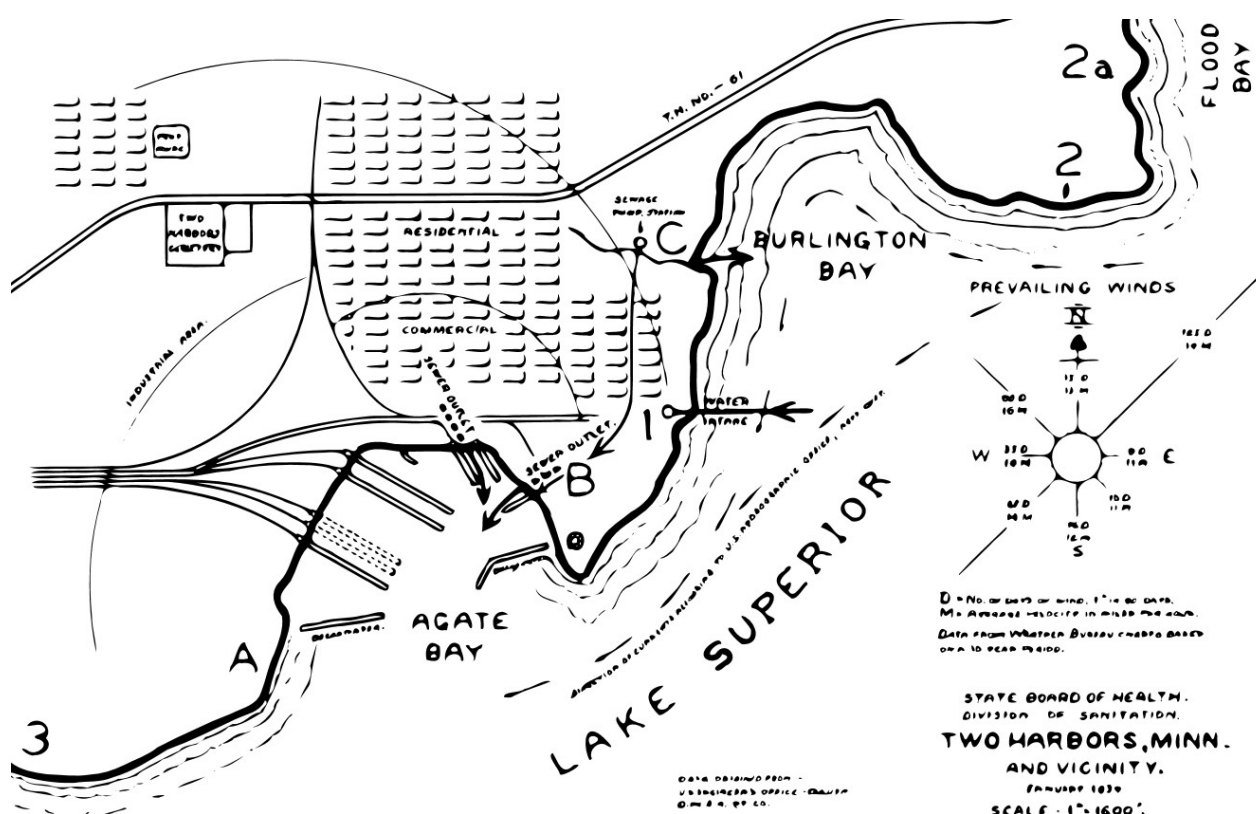
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Articles

Every act of art is able to reveal, balance and revive the relations between a territory and its inhabitants

(François Davin, Southern Forest Sculpture Walk Catalogue)

Introducing the Understory Art in Nature Trail

In February 2015, a colossal wildfire destroyed 98,300 hectares of farm and bushland surrounding the town of Northcliffe, located 365 km south of Perth, Western Australia (WA). As the largest fire in the recorded history of the

southwest region (Southern Forest Arts, *After the Burn* 8), the disaster attracted national attention however the extraordinary contribution of local knowledge in saving a town considered by authorities to be “undefendable” (Kennedy) is yet to be widely appreciated. In accounting for a creative scene that survived the conflagration, this case study sees culture mobilised as a socioeconomic resource for conservation and the healing of community spirit.

Northcliffe (population 850) sits on a coastal plain that hosts majestic old-growth forest and lush bushland. In 2006, Southern Forest Arts (SFA) dedicated a Southern Forest Sculpture Walk for creative professionals to develop artworks along a 1.2 km walk trail through pristine native forest. It was re-branded “Understory—Art in Nature” in 2009; then “Understory Art in Nature Trail” in 2015, the *understory* vegetation layer beneath the canopy being symbolic of Northcliffe’s deeply layered caché of memories, including “the awe, love, fear, and even the hatred that these trees have provoked among the settlers” (Davin in SFA *Catalogue*). In the words of the SFA *Trailguide*, “Every place (no matter how small) has ‘understories’—secrets, songs, dreams—that help us connect with the spirit of place.”

In the view of forest arts ecologist Kumi Kato, “It is a sense of place that underlies the commitment to a place’s conservation by its community, broadly embracing those who identify with the place for various reasons, both geographical and conceptual” (149). In bioregional terms such communities form a *terrain of consciousness* (Berg and Dasmann 218), extending responsibility for conservation across cultures, time and space (Kato 150). A sustainable thematic of place must also include *livelihood* as the third party between culture and nature that establishes the relationship between them (Giblett 240). With these concepts in mind I gauge creative impact on forest as place, and, in turn, (altered) forest’s impact on people.

My abstraction of physical place is inclusive of humankind moving in dialogic engagement with forest. A mapping of Understory’s creative activities sheds light on how artists express physical environments in situated creative practices, clusters, and networks. These, it is argued, constitute unique types of community operating within (and beyond) a foundational scene of inspiration and mystification that is metaphorically “rising from the ashes.” In transcending disconnectedness between humankind and landscape, Understory may be understood to both *culturalise nature* (as an aesthetic system), and *naturalise culture* (as an ecologically modelled system), to build on a trope introduced by Feld (199). Arguably when the bush is cultured in this way it attracts consumers who may otherwise disconnect from nature.

The trail (henceforth Understory) broaches the histories of human relations with Northcliffe’s natural systems of place. Sub-groups of the Noongar nation have inhabited the southwest for an estimated 50,000 years and their association with the Northcliffe region extends back at least 6,000 years (SFA *Catalogue*; see also Crawford and Crawford). An indigenous sense of the spirit of forest is manifest in

Understory sculpture, literature, and—for the purpose of this article—the compilation CD *Canopy: Songs for the Southern Forests* (henceforth *Canopy*, Figure 1).

As a cultural and environmental construction of place, *Canopy* sustains the land with acts of seeing, listening to, and interpreting nature; of remembering indigenous people in the forest; and of recalling the hardships of the early settlers. I acknowledge SFA coordinator and Understory custodian Fiona Sinclair for authorising this investigation; Peter Hill for conservation conversations; Robyn Johnston for her *Canopy* CD sleeve notes; Della Rae Morrison for permissions; and David Pye for discussions.

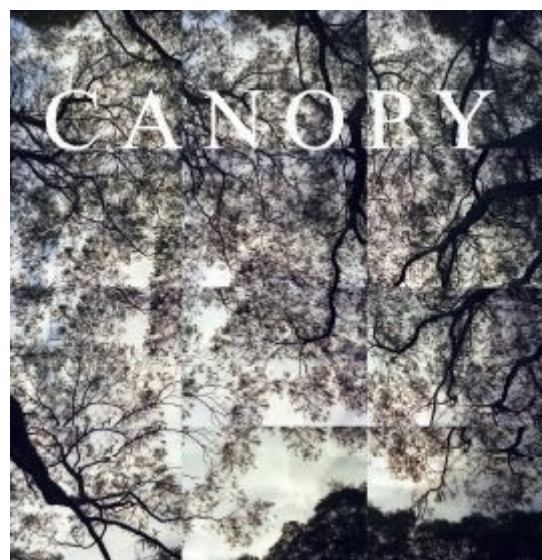


Figure 1. *Canopy: Songs for the Southern Forests* (CD, 2006). Cover image by Raku Pitt, 2002. Courtesy Southern Forest Arts, Northcliffe, WA.

Forest Ecology, Emotion, and Action

Established in 1924, Northcliffe's ill-founded Group Settlement Scheme resulted in frontier hardship and heartbreak, and deforestation of the southwest region for little economic return. An historic forest controversy (1992-2001) attracted media to Northcliffe when protesters attempting to disrupt logging chained themselves to tree trunks and suspended themselves from branches. The signing of the Western Australian Regional Forest Agreement in 1999 was followed, in 2001, by deregulation of the dairy industry and a sharp decline in area population.

Moved by the gravity of this situation, Fiona Sinclair won her pitch to the Manjimup Council for a sound alternative industry for Northcliffe with projections of jobs: a forest where artists could work collectively and sustainably to reveal the beauty of natural dimensions. A 12-acre pocket of allocated Crown Land adjacent to the town was leased as an A-Class Reserve vested for Education and Recreation, for which SFA secured unified community ownership and grants. Conservation protocols stipulated that no biomass could be removed from the forest and that predominantly raw, natural materials were to be used (F. Sinclair

and P. Hill, personal interview, 26 Sep. 2014).

With *forest* as prescribed image (wider than the bounded chunk of earth), Sinclair invited the artists to consider the themes of *spirituality*, *creativity*, *history*, *dichotomy*, and *sensory* as a basis for work that was to be "fresh, intimate, and grounded in place." Her brief encouraged artists to work with humanity and imagination to counteract residual community divisiveness and resentment. Sinclair describes this form of implicit environmentalism as an "around the back" approach that avoids lapsing into political commentary or judgement: "The trail is a love letter from those of us who live here to our visitors, to connect with grace" (F. Sinclair, telephone interview, 6 Apr. 2014).

Renewing community connections to local place is essential if our lives and societies are to become more sustainable (Pedelty 128). To define Northcliffe's new community phase, artists respected differing associations between people and forest. A structure on a karri tree by Indigenous artist Norma MacDonald presents an Aboriginal man standing tall and proud on a rock to become *one* with the tree and the forest: as it was for thousands of years before European settlement (MacDonald in SFA *Catalogue*). As Feld observes, "It is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability" (201).

Adhering to the philosophy that nature should not be used or abused for the sake of art, the works resonate with the biorhythms of the forest, e.g. functional seats and shelters and a cascading retainer that directs rainwater back to the resident fauna. Some sculptures function as receivers for picking up wavelengths of ancient forest. *Forest Folk* lurk around the understory, while mysterious stone art represents a life-shaping force of planet history. To represent the reality of bushfire, Natalie Williamson's sculpture wraps itself around a burnt-out stump. The work plays with scale as small native sundew flowers are enlarged and a subtle beauty, easily overlooked, becomes apparent (Figure 2). The sculptor hopes that "spiders will spin their webs about it, incorporating it into the landscape" (SFA *Catalogue*).



Figure 2. *Sundew*. Sculpture by Natalie Williamson, 2006. Understory Art in Nature Trail, Northcliffe, WA. Image by the author, 2014.

Memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported (Feld 201). *Topaesthesia* (sense of place) denotes movement that connects our biography with our route. This is resonant for the experience of regional character, including the tactile, olfactory, gustatory, visual, and auditory qualities of a place (Ryan 307). By walking, we are in a dialogue with the environment; both literally and figuratively, we re-situate ourselves into our story (Schine 100). For example, during a summer exploration of the trail (5 Jan. 2014), I intuited a personal attachment based on my grandfather's small bush home being razed by fire, and his struggle to support seven children.

Understory's survival depends on vigilant controlled (cool) burns around its perimeter (Figure 3), organised by volunteer Peter Hill. These burns also hone the forest. On 27 Sept. 2014, the charred vegetation spoke a spring language of opportunity for nature to reassert itself as seedpods burst and continue the cycle; while an autumn walk (17 Mar. 2016) yielded a fresh view of forest colour, patterning, light, shade, and sound.

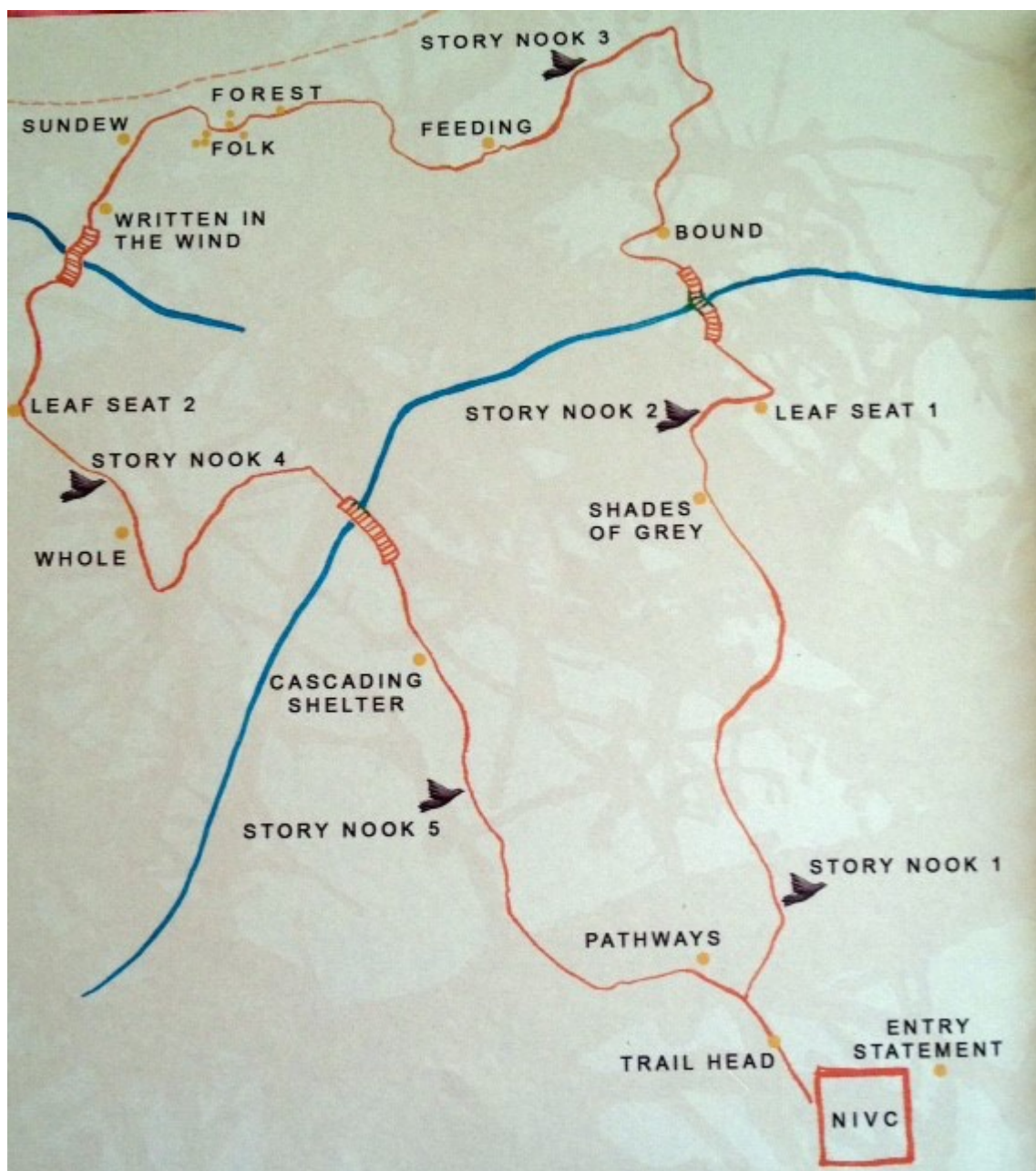


Figure 3. Understory Art in Nature Trail. Map Created by Fiona Sinclair for *Southern Forest Sculpture Walk Catalogue* (2006). Courtesy Southern Forest Arts, Northcliffe, WA.

Understory and the Melody of Canopy

Forest resilience is celebrated in five MP3 audio tours produced for visitors to dialogue with the trail in sensory contexts of music, poetry, sculptures and stories that name or interpret the setting. The trail starts in heathland and includes three creek crossings. A zone of acacias gives way to stands of the southwest signature trees karri (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*), jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*), and marri (*Corymbia calophylla*). Following a sheoak grove, a riverine environment re-enters heathland. Birds, insects, mammals, and reptiles reside around and between the sculptures, rendering the earth-embedded art a fusion of human and natural orders (concept after Relph 141).

On Audio Tour 3, *Songs for the Southern Forests*, the musician-composers reflect on their regionally focused items, each having been birthed according to a personal *musical concept* (the manner in which an individual artist holds the totality of a composition in cultural context). Arguably the music in question, its composers, performers, audiences, and settings, all have a role to play in defining the processes and effects of forest arts ecology.

Local musician Ann Rice billeted a cluster of musicians (mostly from Perth) at her Windy Harbour shack. The energy of the production experience was palpable as all participated in on-site forest workshops, and supported each other's items as a musical collective (A. Rice, telephone interview, 2 Oct. 2014). Collaborating under producer Lee Buddle's direction, they orchestrated rich timbres (tone colours) to evoke different musical atmospheres (Table 1).

Composer/Performer	Title of Track	Instrumentation
1. Ann Rice	<i>My Place</i>	vocals/guitars/accordion
2. David Pye	<i>Cicadan Rhythms</i>	angklung/violin/cello/woodblocks/temple blocks/clarinet/tapes
3. Mel Robinson	<i>Shelter</i>	vocal/cello/double bass
4. Djiva	<i>Ngank Boodjak</i>	vocals/acoustic, electric and slide guitars/drums/percussion
5. Cathie Travers	<i>Lament</i>	accordion/vocals/guitar/piano/violin/drums/programming
6. Brendon Humphries and Kevin Smith	<i>When the Wind First Blew</i>	vocals/guitars/dobro/drums/piano/percussion
7. Libby Hammer	<i>The Glade</i>	vocal/guitar/soprano sax/cello/double bass/drums
8. Pete and Dave Jeavons	<i>Sanctuary</i>	guitars/percussion/talking drum/cowbell/soprano sax

9. Tomás Ford	<i>White Haze</i>	vocal/programming/guitar
10. David Hyams	<i>Awakening / Shaking the Tree / When the Light Comes</i>	guitar/mandolin/dobro/bodhran/ rainstick/cello/accordion/flute
11. Bernard Carney	<i>The Destiny Waltz</i>	vocal/guitar/accordion/drums/ recording of <i>The Destiny Waltz</i>
12. Joel Barker	<i>Something for Everyone</i>	vocal/guitars/percussion

Table 1. Music Composed for *Canopy: Songs for the Southern Forests*.
Source: CD sleeve and <http://www.understory.com.au/art.php>.

Composing out of their own strengths, the musicians transformed the geographic region into a living myth. As Pedelty has observed of similar musicians, “their sounds resonate because they so profoundly reflect our living sense of place” (83-84). The remainder of this essay evidences the capacity of indigenous song, art music, electronica, folk, and jazz-blues to celebrate, historicise, or re-imagine place. Firstly, two items represent the phenomenological approach of site-specific sensitivity to acoustic, biological, and cultural presence/loss, including the materiality of forest as a living process.

“Singing Up the Land”

In Aboriginal Australia “there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation” (Rose 18). *Canopy*’s part-Noongar language song thus repositions the ancient Murrum-Noongar people within their life-sustaining natural habitat and spiritual landscape.

Noongar Yorga woman Della Rae Morrison of the Bibbulmun and Wilman nations co-founded The Western Australian Nuclear Free Alliance to campaign against the uranium mining industry threatening *Ngank Boodjak* (her country, “Mother Earth”) (D.R. Morrison, e-mail, 15 July 2014). In 2004, Morrison formed the duo Djiva (meaning *seed power* or life force) with Jessie Lloyd, a Murri woman of the Guugu Yimidhirr Nation from North Queensland. After discerning the fundamental qualities of the Understory site, Djiva created the song *Ngank Boodjak*: “This was inspired by walking the trail [...] feeling the energy of the land and the beautiful trees and hearing the birds. When I find a spot that I love, I try to feel out the

lay-lines, which feel like vortexes of energy coming out of the ground; it's pretty amazing" (Morrison in SFA *Canopy* sleeve) Stanza 1 points to the possibilities of being more fully "in country":

Ssh!

Ni dabarkarn kooliny, ngank boodja kookoorniny

Listen, walk slowly, beautiful Mother Earth

The inclusion of indigenous language powerfully implements an indigenous interpretation of forest: "My elders believe that when we leave this life from our physical bodies that our spirit is earthbound and is living in the rocks or the trees and if you listen carefully you might hear their voices and maybe you will get some answers to your questions" (Morrison in SFA *Catalogue*).

Cicadan Rhythms, by composer David Pye, echoes forest as a lively "more-than-human" world. Pye took his cue from the ambient pulsing of male cicadas communicating *in plenum* (full assembly) by means of airborne sound. The species were sounding together *in tempo* with individual rhythm patterns that interlocked to create one fantastic rhythm (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Composer David Pye*). The cicada chorus (the loudest known lovesong in the insect world) is the unique summer *soundmark* (term coined by Truax *Handbook*, Website) of the southern forests. Pye chased various cicadas through Understory until he was able to notate the rhythms of some individuals in a patch of low-lying scrub.

To simulate cicada clicking, the composer set pointillist patterns for Indonesian *anklung* (joint bamboo tubes suspended within a frame to produce notes when the frame is shaken or tapped). Using instruments made of wood to enhance the rich forest imagery, Pye created all parts using sampled instrumental sounds placed against layers of pre-recorded ambient sounds (D. Pye, telephone interview, 3 Sept. 2014). He takes the listener through a "geographical linear representation" of the trail: "I walked around it with a stopwatch and noted how long it took to get through each section of the forest, and that became the musical timing of the various parts of the work" (Pye in SFA *Canopy* sleeve). That Understory is a place where reciprocity between nature and culture thrives is, likewise, evident in the remaining tracks.

Musicalising Forest History and Environment

Three tracks distinguish *Canopy* as an integrative site for memory. Bernard Carney's waltz honours the Group Settlers who battled insurmountable terrain without any idea of their destiny, men who, having migrated with a promise of owning their own dairy farms, had to clear trees bare-handedly and build furniture from kerosene tins and gelignite cases. Carney illuminates the culture of Saturday night dancing in the schoolroom to popular tunes like *The Destiny Waltz*

(performed on the *Titanic* in 1912). His original song fades to strains of the Victor Military Band (1914), to "pay tribute to the era where the inspiration of the song came from" (Carney in SFA *Canopy* sleeve). Likewise Cathie Travers's *Lament* is an evocation of remote settler history that creates a "feeling of being in another location, other timezone, almost like an endless loop" (Travers in SFA *Canopy* sleeve).

An instrumental medley by David Hyams opens with *Awakening*: the morning sun streaming through tall trees, and the nostalgic sound of an accordion waltz. *Shaking the Tree*, an Irish jig, recalls humankind's struggle with forest and the forces of nature. A final title, *When the Light Comes*, defers to the saying by conservationist John Muir that "The wrongs done to trees, wrongs of every sort, are done in the darkness of ignorance and unbelief, for when the light comes the heart of the people is always right" (quoted by Hyams in SFA *Canopy* sleeve). Local musician Joel Barker wrote *Something for Everyone* to personify the old-growth karri as a king with a crown, with "wisdom in his bones."

Kevin Smith's father was born in Northcliffe in 1924. He and Brendon Humphries fantasise the untouchability of a maiden (pre-human) moment in a forest in their song, *When the Wind First Blew*. In Libby Hammer's *The Glade* (a lover's lament), instrumental timbres project their own affective languages. The jazz singer intended the accompanying double bass to speak resonantly of old-growth forest; the cello to express suppleness and renewal; a soprano saxophone to impersonate a bird; and the drums to imitate the insect community's polyrhythmic undercurrent (after Hammer in SFA *Canopy* sleeve).

A hybrid aural environment of synthetic and natural forest sounds contrasts collision with harmony in *Sanctuary*. The Jeavons Brothers sampled rustling wind on nearby Mt Chudalup to absorb into the track's opening, and crafted a snare groove for the quirky eco-jazz/trip-hop by banging logs together, and banging rocks against logs. This imaginative use of percussive found objects enhanced their portrayal of forest as "a living, breathing entity."

In dealing with recent history in *My Place*, Ann Rice cameos a happy childhood growing up on a southwest farm, "damming creeks, climbing trees, breaking bones and skinning knees." The rich string harmonies of Mel Robinson's *Shelter* sculpt the shifting environment of a brewing storm, while *White Haze* by Tomás Ford describes a smoky controlled burn as "a kind of metaphor for the beautiful mystical healing nature of Northcliffe":

Someone's burning off the scrub
Someone's making sure it's safe
Someone's whiting out the fear
Someone's letting me breathe clear

As Sinclair illuminates in a post-fire interview with Sharon Kennedy (Website):

When your map, your personal map of life involves a place, and then you think that that place might be gone..." Fiona doesn't finish the sentence. "We all had to face the fact that our little place might disappear." Ultimately, only one house was lost. Pasture and fences, sheds and forest are gone. Yet, says Fiona, "We still have our town."

As part of SFA's ongoing commission, forest rhythm workshops explore different sound properties of potential materials for installing sound sculptures mimicking the surrounding flora and fauna. In 2015, SFA mounted *After the Burn* (a touring photographic exhibition) and *Out of the Ashes* (paintings and woodwork featuring ash, charcoal, and resin) (SFA, *After the Burn* 116). The forthcoming community project *Rising From the Ashes* will commemorate the fire and allow residents to connect and create as they heal and move forward—ten years on from the foundation of Understory.

Conclusion

The Understory Art in Nature Trail stimulates curiosity. It clearly illustrates links between place-based social, economic and material conditions and creative practices and products within a forest that has both given shelter and "done people in." The trail is an experimental field, a transformative locus in which dedicated physical space frees artists to culturalise forest through varied aesthetic modalities. Conversely, forest possesses agency for naturalising art as a symbol of place. Djiva's song *Ngank Boodjak* "sings up the land" to revitalise the timelessness of prior occupation, while David Pye's *Cicadan Rhythms* foregrounds the seasonal cycle of entomological music.

In drawing out the richness and significance of place, the ecologically inspired album *Canopy* suggests that the community identity of a forested place may be informed by cultural, economic, geographical, and historical factors as well as endemic flora and fauna. Finally, the musical representation of place is not contingent upon blatant forms of environmentalism. The portrayals of Northcliffe respectfully associate Western Australian people and forests, yet as a *place*, the town has become an enduring icon for the plight of the Universal Old-growth Forest in all its natural glory, diverse human uses, and (real or perceived) abuses.

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