2001

Judith Dinham: hybrid space

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JUDITH DINHAM

Hybrid Space

catalogue essay by Dr Chris Sharkey
Parakeelya Carpet 2000, oil on board, three panels, each panel 60.5 x 65cm
Fine Carpet Ground 1989, oil and technologically manipulated media on board, 122 x 140cm
Judith Dinham is a mid-career artist who combines an art practice with her position as Senior Lecturer in Visual Art Education at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia.

Her art and research interest centres on conceptions of landscape. The desert from a feminine perspective and the role of travel are of particular interest. To this end she has worked in the Australian desert over many years (primarily Meeline Station, near Mt Magnet where her sister and family live) and had residencies in the USA and Italy. She has been the recipient of a number of prizes and awards including an Australia Council International Promotions grant and a Fellowship for Teaching Excellence.

Judith's paintings and drawings have been exhibited in Australia and overseas in both solo and invitation group exhibitions. Her work is represented in public, corporate and private collections in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the USA. She has had her artwork reproduced in artbooks, calendars and journals; and Australian television documentaries have provided insights to the artist and her work.

Her background includes experience in arts administration and curatorship, including the major touring exhibition Drawing Out: contemporary drawing practice in Western Australia. She and her colleagues produced the 12 episode open-learning video series Landscape & You: a research approach to creative arts practice that is broadcast in Australia on ABC National Television. The series won a national award for the high quality of its design and production. Judith also publishes in art and research journals.
Hybrid Space

Where is my dwelling place? Where I can never stand
Where is my final goal, towards which I should ascend?
It is beyond all place. What could my quest then be?
I must, transcending God, into the desert flee.

Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) Cherubinischer Wandersmann, 1657

The desert as a site of abundance and transcendence, rather than aridity, has a long, distinguished history in the western psyche. It’s central place in the negative theology of Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross and in the poetry of Angelus Silesius were considered in 1992 by Jacques Derrida, the founder/father of what has come to be called ‘deconstruction’. Typological features shared in the thought patterning of negative theology and Derrida’s notion of difference, for example, are the deferral or postponement of any final closure on ultimate meaning; the absolute cannot be grasped and neatly boxed or packaged for consumption.

What distinguishes Judith Dinham’s paintings in this exhibition, Hybrid Space, is a sense of the desert as a site of abundance and the conceptual clarity of her work which is combined with a resistance to closure, readily apparent in the structure of her imagery. She allows for nuances of meaning by creating spatial options for transference, elision, change, or exchange. Her images celebrate difference as a cross-fertilisation or hybridity of cultures that enriches and enhances, rather than diminishes, and which shifts notions of place, home, and land from the proprietorial (tightly bounded) to a site blessed with many layers of experience, memory and meaning over a long period. While escaping the (paradoxical) boundedness of ungrounded sensation in the very structure of her work, she resists those aspects of postmodern aesthetics that assume being is nothing but fleeting sensations, or quotations or historicisms from the past truncated from present existence. While very aware of the ever-shifting nature of surfaces, (just as human emotions fluctuate), Dinham points to an underlying stability that grounds constant surface fluctuations in nature. She suggests that desert sands, while constituted by an eternally moving surface, nonetheless simultaneously maintains its fundamental structure. The point is an important one in understanding both her work and creativity. For shifting the analogy to the human level, we can assuredly say that the ‘inner’ person remains stable despite the emotions of
Flower Well 1999, acrylic and technologically manipulated media on board, 82 x 234cm
sister, Karen, moved into the homestead the character of the inside was influenced by the exotic, Persian carpet flowers bringing a sense of luxury and comfort that contrasted with the sparsity of a vernacular Westralian homestead: verandahed, tin-walled and tin-roofed. The patterned luxuriance of the carpets' flowers both extend and contrast with the simultaneous, a-typical burgeoning of an autumnal external carpet of everlastings after unseasonable rains. Red dust and heat are relieved only by brief intervals of more moderate sun; rains settle the red earth for only short periods.

Comfortable with such cultural hybridity, the Persian carpet signifies the many strands of the domestic microcosm. Here the nitty-gritty of family relations, of intimacy and togetherness, of fun and difference are worked through. It is also a site of sociability, of preparation for pleasurable family or wider gatherings as well as of domestic work and chores such as attending business accounts. The myriad of threads that structure the lives and existence of family members and narratives are symbolically held together, in all their variety, repetitions, colour and form in the patterning of the carpet. Both order and abundance are integrated in the very ground of existence. Then too, carpets are made to step on. Stepping out, even one stride particularly when the next step is uncertain, signifies daily choice. Stepping on, and out, is inseparable from earthing or grounding. Lives unfold just so, in a pattern as complex and rich as that echoed in the carpet.

Sometimes the transition from interior to macrocosm is seamless, as in Flower Well. Despite the vast spatial contrast and demands outside the homestead, in terms of area and work, and notwithstanding the ever-fluctuating colours of sky and vegetation with changing weather and seasons, the carpet ground is the work-space nearest Meeline Station. The flowers stretch to the horizon. The flatness of Dinham's rendering of the external carpet of flowers in Late Light Everlasting cancels traditional notions of 'horizon'. There is no horizon to scan or to beckon one into the distance. The only view possible is immediate: down: to the ground. Looking down at the earth and its abundance cannot but trigger, no matter how integral and imbued with memory and significance for Meeline owners, the more ancient, ingrained memory of previous indigenous occupiers. This overlapping of claims is honoured rather than contested or denied. It is a structural feature of Late Light Everlasting. The layered, multiple boundaries typical of much of Dinham's work in this show acknowledges overlaps rather than rigid boundaries. Passages of movement or flow in the design create nuanced, negotiated, sometimes broken borders. Hybrid Carpet, Late Light Everlasting, and Fine Carpet Ground witness to many layers of memory, cultural interaction and mingling. Gentle ruptures: transitional gaps - as distinct from hard-edged, staccato or aggressive lines [foreign to Dinham's painterly repertoire] - permit connections that float from different lives, spaces, and
generations. The transitional, buffer zone between interior and exterior in Late Light Everlasting exemplifies her preference for a more mysterious ‘between’ space, for the metaphysics of flux and darkness before emanation into another, different space. This is a negative, not a nihilistic, space which teems with possibility. It is eternally the site of potential, of waiting to be annunciated, to be fashioned anew. It is the horizon of the unsaid waiting to be given birth. It is a centre or sort of generative non-place.

Dinham’s vision has a metaphysics and a cosmology that’s counter-cultural; much postmodern thought excludes all notions of ground or essence. Characteristically, the aspiration to a clarity that does not ossify into rigidity - that incorporates escape routes, shifting drifts of light, overlapping spaces even in the known symmetry of Persian design - is an ontological as well as a narrative statement.

Dinham’s technical repertoire is remarkably wide, from high-tech scanning and photocopying to oil, from mixed media to the ancient encaustic (burnt wax) technique used in ancient Egyptian and Roman portraiture, and in icon painting in the early Christian era. Encaustic technique was developed and refined in her work with the help of long-standing friend and artist, Elizabeth Ford. Manipulating mixed techniques to simulate layered, fleeting shifts in the surfaces of her work, conveys mutation. A living, organic sense of place and home refuses engagement with a discourse of possession or of the desert as a site of thwarted ambition.

Her understanding of desert space is a world apart from that described by D.H. Lawrence in Kangaroo in 1923. A stranger, Lawrence’s ‘Jaz’, in Kangaroo, declares:

Go into the middle of Australia and see how empty it is. You have to come back and do something to keep from being frightened at your own emptiness, and everything else’s emptiness. It may be empty. But it’s wicked, and it’ll kill you if it can. Something comes out of the emptiness to kill you. You have to come back to do things with mankind, to forget.5

Why such a vast shift in understanding of the ‘outback’? It cannot be just that modern communications have enabled the forging of a sense of fecundity and abundant beauty, community and a deeper sense of adjustment in desert regions.

Thirty-five years later the Scots art and cultural critic, John Douglas Pringle, reflecting on Kangaroo, considered Lawrence had pinpointed some essential features of ‘Australianness’ with uncanny accuracy. Particularly, he points to a life lived on the basis of surface geniality which masked, in Lawrence and Pringle’s view, a deep and impenetrable reserve. ‘Friendly on the surface but you cannot make real friends: they don’t want you.’6
By 2000 this evaluation fails to resonate with Dinham's outback. Against the odds perhaps, a connection with both the far-flung memory, that sustained such a community and the land has been forged. Karen Morrissey, with Lorna Day, co-authored the first published history, - a substantial work, amply illustrated - of the Mount Magnet region. Given the conditions of producing such a work, at Meeline Station, it is a high achievement. Photographic records from the Mount Magnet district colonial days, depicting legendary itinerant rural workers who worked for the pastoral industry, are included. It's very publication defies interpretations of women as neglected and abandoned while their menfolk celebrated the glories of mateship yarning around campfires and the camaraderie of shared rural labour.

In the early sixties, Douglas Pike, in Australia: The Quiet Continent, described just such workers as those who pushed back into the 'shrinking outback' as pastoral expansion extended, in near as sad terms as the womenfolk they left. They were "... 'hard cases' ... odd relics of a breed too restless and primitive to fit into any pattern of civilised life." Dinham's paintings do not allude to this aspect of memory which no station could be without, but it is just such memories, as with Aboriginal memories which are consciously and symbolically coded, that are included as potential memories in these layered possibilities. For memory is evoked structurally with the fusion of layers and spaces. Without denying other fragments of memory, such as those described by Lawrence, Pringle, and Pike, distinguishing specific alien or disjunctive elements - again with the exception of Aboriginal displacement - is outside her vision. Effectively, shadows are acknowledged, but not highlighted or dwelt upon.

While an exhibition of 'outback' desert land and its potential to bloom will always raise questions about the validity of possession, the Aboriginal perspective on land is similarly honoured by this structural device. The midnight-blue to blackish areas of paint in Cosmic Flowers dislocates notions of possession. The darkness is the site of deeply-rooted archaic memory and the potential future emergence of cultural and human possibility: the space of an ebullitio, or melting forth in a way that opens up: a true speaking forth, or expression, in Eckhartian terms.

This 'opening up' aspect is transparent on another level, in Hybrid Carpet and Cosmic Flowers. Carpets of flowers double as splendid nocturnal firmaments: another play on the notion of inner and outer space. There are clear affinities [probably unconscious] with Aboriginal cosmic connections between earth, sky and humans.

I am reminded of the structural affinity of these works with Brian Blanchflower's Goddess series of 1985 and his Glimpses of Earth Series of 1986-7. Dinham's firm sense of painting as having ontological dimensions has much in common with Brian Blanchflower. While his probing of existence follows lines of archaeology, (and in this - despite obvious surface differences - both
Roses in my Space 2000, acrylic and technologically manipulated media on board, two panels, each panel 122 x 140cm
are artist-explorers like John Wolseley). Dinham's ontology has much to do with grounding layers of experience at very ordinary levels, such as the space inside and outside the desert home. These artists' assumption of an 'essence' to existence departs radically from the non-essentialist thrust of much late twentieth-century understanding. Blanchflower, Wolseley and Dinham share the optimism of a burgeoning natural world that nonetheless has an unfathomable deep structure that holds in balance the ever-shifting surface layers.

Dinham’s sense of Meeline Station, inside and out, being a site of teeming potentiality and ancient and recent memory similarly has the explorer’s stamp. It’s just that they excavate different things. Blanchflower the night-sky and universe; John Wolseley’s ever-deeper quarrying reveals layers or strata of geological, insect, bird and animal, life.

Their shared, fundamental optimism is quite different in sensibility to Western Australian poet and writer, Randolph Stow’s interpretations of the desert. These are underpinned by a deep vein of pessimism: of the negative romantic sublime, notwithstanding the immeasurable solace found in his solitary meandering in the outback. Faye Zwicky’s diagnosis that much writing about the desert, and she refers particularly to Stow, fails to transcend survival mode is worth reflecting upon. In 1980 Zwicky pointed to the inherent misogyny in this ‘survival’ mode. Stow’s spiritual focus remained firmly planted ‘...where the streets run out and the empty spaces begin...' Despite the ambiguous alienation the desert region offered Europeans, Zwicky suggests, ‘Australia’s desert regions do give us poets who find enrichment and survival; however bleak the conditions’, she adds with little disguised irony, ‘something can always be learnt from survivors.’

It is time Australian reflections on the desert moved beyond survival. Dinham has addressed some of the main critical flaws in regional writing, which for Zwicky remain really ontological ones: failures to address key questions that humans should ask about life and the spirit. Particularly, as Zwicky points out, as Westralian humans live mostly in Perth or other regional centres, not in the outback at all.

So why the desert for Dinham in 2000? After all, she is an urban dweller, almost inner city, and spends most of her time on a university campus, a privileged site. Relevant questions about the significance of the desert and the ‘outback’ have been asked by different writers and artists ever since the late nineteenth forties. However, to ask: ‘Why the desert at all?’, doesn’t seem to me to be a valid question. I suggest no writer or artist needs to justify their choice of subject; their delineation of their field of interest. Energy and inspiration are in the ‘desert’ space for Dinham and both her narrative and ontology contribute significantly not only to a long-standing conversation about the Australian desert, but to a more mature one. If one is really alive, in Eckhartian terms, one
lives without a why. One paints the desert because one paints the desert. What is painted is more an emanation of one's path than a logical construct. This emanation from the ground of the person constitutes an ongoing integrating creativity in its truest sense.

*Hybrid Space* should be celebrated: it is not just that it is the culmination of years of exploring such themes. Dinham’s painting has both lightness and depth; it celebrates beauty and the darkness and ‘no-place’ of transition. It basks in a sense of home that is wonderfully ordinary yet not exclusive or intolerant of, indeed is warm towards, cultural hybrids and difference. It has a rich maturity; seriousness is balanced by an ebullient joy. Desert talk and painting has come of age.

Chris Sharkey
April-May 2000

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Chris Sharkey, BA PhD is a visual and cultural historian, educator and curator.

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4. Dinham contrasts spatial possession, denoted by the horizon, with the touch implicit when the eye is drawn to the ground, rather than into the distance. See Dinham, op. cit. pp.121-131.
Carpet Crossing 2000, acrylic and technologically manipulated media on board, four panels, each panel 39 x 44.5cm
Emu Girl 2000, acrylic and technologically manipulated media on board, 122 x 140cm
JUDITH DINHAM

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS
Doctor of Creative Arts - Contemporary Arts, UWS.
Master of Education, UWA.
Bachelor of Education (Art), WAIT.
Associateship in Art, WAIT.

EXHIBITIONS

Solo and Collaborative Project Exhibitions
2001 Hybrid Space, Stafford Studios of Fine Art, Perth.
1996 Desert Ground (not deserted ground) Moray Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand.
1995 Ground Carpets, as part of the ‘Women Artists of the Nineties’ series of invitation solo exhibitions, The Door Gallery, Fremantle.
1995 Canguri in Chianti, with poet, Glen Phillips, La Rocca, Castellina in Chianti, Italy.
1991 Landscape Learning, with poet, Glen Phillips, The British Institute, Florence, Italy.
1991 Nothing more real to me, Leaning on images..., with poet, Glen Phillips, Perth Galleries.
1986 Drawing, Fremantle Art Centre.

Selected Invitation Group Exhibitions participation in numerous invitation and curated group exhibitions including:
1999 Transitions, Church Gallery, Perth.
1998 Earth-Woman-Environment, Tap Gallery, Sydney; Auckland, New Zealand.
1997-00 Through Australian Women’s Eyes, ARC Gallery, Chicago; Hera Gallery, Wakefield, Rhode Island, USA. Toured regional NSW galleries in 2000.
1997-00 Local is Global, Personal is Political, St Petersburg, Russia; Sydney; New Zealand;
1996 Works by Judith Dinham, Ju-Lan Huang, Shim Bum-Sik and Fan Liu, Long Gallery, Wollongong, NSW.
1996 Tattersalls Club Invitation Landscape Art Prize, Brisbane.
1995 Looking West: WA Women from the City of Fremantle Collection, Fremantle Arts Centre.
1995 Landscape as Metaphor, Tony Hayes Gallery, Perth.
1991 Landscape Views, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.
1987 Interiors, Six person exhibition, Fremantle Art Centre.
1987 Arks, ARX’87 (Australia and Regions Artist Exchange), Black Swan Gallery, Fremantle.

Selected Commissions
1994 -5 The new Northam Regional Hospital, Public Art Commission as part of the Western Australian Government’s Percent for Art scheme.
1994 Artwork for *Landscapes Two Year Calendar*, Access Press.


**REPRESENTATION IN PERMANENT COLLECTIONS**

Bank West Collection.

Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

City of Fremantle Collection, WA.

Curtin University of Technology Art Collection, WA.

Edith Cowan University Art Collection, WA.

Italian Consulate, WA.

Kalgoorlie College, Kalgoorlie, WA.

Kott Gunning and Associates Corporate Collection, Perth.

Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Collection, Perth.

University of Western Sydney.

**COMMENTARY**

**Essays and Journal Articles**


Mucciarelli, Marco. 'Sul Chianti Ombre Lunghe Dall'Australia. Opera e progetti di Judith Dinham un'artista che lavoro da sei mesi a Castellina'. *Lo Sparviero*, 5, 3.


Baxter, Maggie. 'Learning the Landscape'. *Fremantle Arts Review*, 6, 6, 13-15.


**In Book Publications**


**Videos**

Landscapes and Artists: a painter and a poet's exploration of landscapes in Australia and Italy. Perth: ECU, 1994. Screened on SBS and regional ABC.


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