



Sometime around nineteen ninety I sat down and thought about what were the challenges for me as a sculptor in Australia. I have told this story before on a number of occasions. I chose, after lengthy consideration, to engage two areas of input which I believed were and still are significant shape formers in relation to this place. One was the influence of the landscape and the second, the impact of technological change. The “reading” of landscape has influenced my sculpture to a greater extent since that time, but there has also been commentary within my sculpture on technological change. There has also been, importantly I believe, a dialogue established between aspects of connection to land and technological change. The connections between the old and the new, between the perennial and the contemporary is one conceptual issue of central importance to my work.

Within Australia there has to this point in time been very little sculpture produced which reflects this place. This amazes me and is perhaps an indication of the incoming cultures lack of understanding of the new land they have taken over. I am interested in both a symbolic and physical reading of landscape. I was fortunate to study and work with the anthropologist Margaret King — Boyes in the nineteen seventies, her understanding of Aboriginal cultures from the inside out, through understanding their mythic/symbolic perception, in relation to cultural practices and the land, assisted in my “reading” of the land beyond the visual alone. Jung too was and is important, as is the Australian writer David Tacey. Recently my fellow exhibitor Gavin Malone has also provided valuable and different input through his reading of the physical and cultural changes in the landscape as you move through it.

GREG JOHNS
TOWARDS THE LAND

In December 2001 I acquired four hundred acres of land at Palmer in the wonderful rain shadow country of the Adelaide Hills. It is I believe an extraordinary place, most of the stones on the property remain, the presence of story is still very strong there. I wanted to engage this archetypal place with my sculpture. I have carefully placed fourteen works there so far and this will continue in the years to come. These are sculptures which come out of my culture’s history of object making, but works which also engage I hope the underbelly, the sensibilities of this place. As such I believe they are hybrid, they engage two stories, of the old culture which was here and the new fellas, the incoming culture. At the same time respect for the land and for the spirit of place comes from Aboriginal culture. As I said too, Georgina Williams, Nganke burka, Kurna, one day, “I would be too scared to deliberately damage the land at Palmer”. She said in reply, “You better be”. Exactly – we all need to learn that. There is much to be learnt. This is a very exciting and challenging place to work as a sculptor. Perhaps we need to learn to sit quietly to engage it in a meaningful way. I hope this exhibition reflects my engagement of this place and provides some insights into understanding and respecting it.

Towards the Land

GREG JOHNS
AND
GAVIN MALONE

*A ‘felt’ response to land
or country through
notions of spirit and
myth, and a sense of
inter-connectedness
with the indigenous
nature of place.*

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GAVIN MALONE
TOWARDS THE LAND

This survey of my recent work reflects a process of engaging with the indigenous nature of place in physical, psychological and mythical ways. I don’t believe that we as a colonising, settler culture have adapted our cultural practices to the ecological capacity and indigenous nature of place. Nor do I believe we have evolved the deep psychic connection that makes us care beyond selfish interests. I’m not advocating we abandon our cultural DNA, we can’t, but we do need some ‘hybrid breeding’. I suggest that if we don’t rapidly evolve as individuals and communities, there will be ‘genetic engineering’ by political and power processes attempting to respond to the enforced social changes we face through possibly calamitous circumstances. To date, our political leadership has been uninspiring and inadequate.

I’m not a believer in a god, in fact I believe that the notion of god has disempowered many and led to ignorance on many issues, particularly those that matter to me. I do though believe in the human spirit and how that can be reinforced, invigorated, by expressing connectedness to the bio physical stuff that we are part of, call it country, wilderness, place or home. I don’t see my spirit figures though as supernatural; rather they are a form of expressing human connectedness with the biophysical. Many cultures express the spirit world though human hybrid forms; that is what we are familiar with, the human body defines our very existence.

For me arts practice can be both critical and inspiring, engage the political and the cultural, express that which is impossible by other means, add to our understanding and challenge our being. Importantly, it can be one small contributor to sustainable human cultures. There are too few of them now.

My work is a rally against the disconnectedness with ecologies and ecological capacity that has occurred in arts practice, and broader cultural activities, particularly in the later half of the twentieth century. In Australia, as our interior areas have been de-populated (except for mining activities) we have become increasingly ‘ignorant’ of production capacities and ecological impacts. No longer it seems have we the uncle, aunty or cousin on the land to engage with, the farm to visit, the stories to hear. City dweller lives are becoming more virtual, the ‘outback’ is unduly romanticised for consumption as a tourist, the productive hinterland is an abstract notion disconnected from the supermarket.

I’m not advocating that arts practice be wholly concerned with ecological issues but it certainly has a responsibility, like all cultural practices from agriculture to high culture, to contribute to a paradigm of sustainability. After all we are part of our ecologies, not separate from, but we are the animal with the greatest impact. Engagement involves a connectedness with, and understanding of, the biophysical stuff; nature, land, country, wilderness; whatever we define it as. Since I was at art school fifteen years ago my practice has been primarily concerned with ecological and cultural sustainability. Don’t particularly know why, something in my blood and bones, something in my upbringing, something in my distaste for profligate consumption and ostentatious displays of wealth, something in the fact that I have children.





GREG JOHNS

TOWARDS THE LAND

GAVIN MALONE

TOWARDS THE LAND

Greg has been working as a full-time sculptor for 31 years exhibiting annually in solo and major group shows in Australia, New York, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. In 2006/07 retrospective exhibitions were held at McClelland Museum, Melbourne and the Drill Hall Gallery of the Australian National University. In 2002 a major monograph 'Horizon, Greg Johns Sculptures, 1977 – 2002' was published. Major commissions include 'Remembered Figures', Ibiza, Spain, 2005; 'Pattern III' Pocheon, Korea, ", 2005; 'Guardian Figure', Central Green, Singapore, 1993 – 95; 'Returning Column', Palmerston, N.Z. 2007; 'Origin', Melbourne, 1999; 'Swirling Mandala', Melbourne, 2007 and 'Land Mandala', Sydney, 2008. In 2001 he acquired 400 acres of land at Palmer, South Australia to establish an independent sculpture landscape and address environmental issues. A further major monograph will be published in 2008 and he is currently working on an autobiographical book, 'Against The Grain – With the Flow'.

Gavin is an Adelaide artist, teacher and writer who has maintained a practice related to ecological and cultural sustainability since the early 1990s. His recent work explores this through connections to the indigenous nature of place, particularly by the use of indigenous materials. He has participated in over seventy exhibitions throughout Australia much of the work being in non-gallery spaces: the streets, the bush, the cliffs, the natural history museum, the cultural centre. His practice incorporates public space art and design and he has been involved in several innovative projects, permanent and temporary. He has worked extensively with the Kaurna community and has travelled throughout Australia, particularly remote and desert regions, to assist in developing an understanding of the Australian landscape, ecologies, psyche and stories of place. He is currently a Doctoral candidate at Flinders University.



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