



THE CENTRE

WORKS ON PAPER BY

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS

ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

1984

THE CENTRE

Introduction

Across the interior of the Continent, in the maps of our childhood, damnation is written in four words – “The Great Australian Desert” wrote Ernestine Hill in her influential *The Great Australian Loneliness* published in 1937.¹ It has taken nearly one hundred years for this refrain to begin, now, to abate. The work in this exhibition is part of this process.

All works have been made in recent years by artists who live or have lived in Australia and who have responded to this ‘great Australian desert’ – the area commonly known as the Centre.²

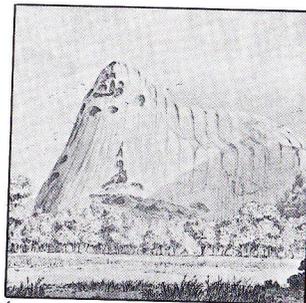
The exhibition has been drawn together as one part of the 1984 Adelaide Festival of Arts, at a time of increasing awareness of the visual arts made currently by the Aboriginals of the central deserts. It complements another Festival exhibition, at the Royal Society of Arts gallery, which is devoted to paintings by Aboriginal artists living at Papunya near Alice Springs.

Ernestine Hill’s perception of the desert is that of a white European living on the edge of the continent. The following paragraphs attempt to put the development of that perception into a context relevant to the work shown in this exhibition.

The white explorers, for their many reasons and with their varying successes, criss-crossed the central deserts of Australia from the 1840s with the little-known W.C. Gosse reaching and ‘naming’ Ayers Rock in the 1870s. Most left from Adelaide which governed the area from the Bight through to Darwin (or Palmerston as it was) for fifty years until 1911. Many wrote accounts of their journeys which were frequently published at the time, the tenor of which has been well known to all generations of Australians since. Typical were Edward John Eyre’s early concluding remarks in his *Journals of Expeditions* that ‘all has been arid and barren in the extreme’.³

None of the leaders of the expeditions was trained as an artist yet on almost all of these journeys someone, including often the leader, made sketches of the area over which they passed. The main reason was to record the landscape as part of their surveying, and most of the results have the awkwardness of untrained, amateur topographers. Some, however, including the Surveyors General of South Australia, Light and Frome in particular, made highly developed, personal interpretations of the land before them.

The most important explorer of the early Surveyors General was Charles Sturt who made an attempt to find the mysterious inland sea, leaving Adelaide in 1844 – a mere eight years after the founding of the colony. He made sketches on that journey which are now lost. However, in the 1860s J.M. Skipper in Adelaide decorated the margins of a book on South Australia with drawings



of ‘the interior’ probably taken from Sturt’s sketches.⁴ He shows a strange land formed of flat topped mountains, barren lines of hills, and unending plains dissolving into a hazy horizon. One of his drawings has the typical figure of the explorer in the foreground, telescope to his eye.

Two major developments in views of the edges of the desert appeared in the 1840s: those of a professional artist and by circumstance exploration team member, S.T. Gill, and of a professional surveyor, and by inclination and circumstance artist, E.C. Frome. Frome made two northern journeys, in 1842 and 1843, and Gill accompanied John Horrocks on his journey of exploration in 1846. Both travelled in the desert region north of, now, Port Augusta, and the Flinders Ranges. Frome, the surveyor, drew the landscape itself; however at times he exaggerated it into threatening mountain ranges, overpowering to any visitor. He, unconsciously we suppose, translates the Romantic view of the terribleness of nature into stark, bare forms. S.T. Gill’s central interest, on the other hand, is of the human condition, obvious in his work with Horrocks, which emphasizes the European’s fragile existence in the isolation of the desert. It is the poignancy of his drawing of himself staying with the mortally wounded Horrocks awaiting help which is memorable, despite the view of the landscape behind being a masterful capturing of the dry desert colour, light and distance.⁵

After Gill, an image of the European in the desert developed which appeared throughout the century: the walking man leading his tired, thin horse discovering a skeleton (of his predecessor in these parts is the implication), often surrounded by dead trees or birds of prey. George Hamilton, Skipper, E.C. May and others used this image.

The 1850s saw numerous expeditions leaving from Adelaide, mostly attempting to find the way across the salt lakes to the still unknown centre. Among these explorers were B.H. Babbage and G.W. Goyder, both of whose drawings of the landscape are still extant.⁶

The other important artist to accompany the explorers was Ludwig Becker, who travelled and perished with Burke and Wills’ expedition of 1860-61. Among Becker’s work is the wonderful watercolour, graphically titled *Border of the Mud Desert near Desolation Camp, March 1861*, of the procession filing into the blazing yellow landscape, like souls into hell, conjuring up both the particular place and also the idea of the continual, seemingly universal battle of human beings with their environment.

At the same time as Burke and Wills’ disastrous epic, John McDouall Stuart travelled across the continent along what became

the line of the Overland Telegraph from Adelaide to Darwin, passing through what is now Alice Springs. Stephen King, one of his party, made the first sketches of the 'centre' proper on this journey, which are important historically, but of much less skill and innate power or poignancy than those of Gill or Frome or Becker.⁷

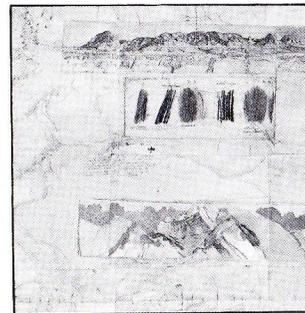
The Overland Telegraph, opened in 1872, allowed much greater ease of travel and thereby depiction of the desert, via its depots and the continuous access to communication facilities. The official photographer for the building of the line was Captain Samuel Sweet, whose work is now in the Adelaide Archives, as are a number of drawings done of the terrain – like those of one W. Fisher made in the 1870s around Alice Springs subsequently reproduced and published by S. Solomon of Rundle Street, Adelaide.⁸

Of particular interest in the context of this exhibition is the history of the depiction by Europeans of Ayers Rock or Uluru. One of Gosse's party, which left from Alice Springs a year after the Telegraph was opened, must have been responsible for a number of extraordinary drawings of the Rock, showing a high monstrous form literally rearing out of the desert floor. An improved version of one of these was reproduced with Gosse's report to the South Australian Government in 1874, inscribed with the initials F.M.N.: presumably Frederick Miller Needham, an Adelaide artist whose other work shows similar devices of trees, foreground and handling of the pencil. As was the practice, he would have been commissioned to 'improve' the amateur work for publication. This view in turn was interpreted in wood engraving by one J. Bruer for the published inaugural address, by Sir Samuel Davenport, of the Geographical Society of Australasia, S.A. Branch, in its *Proceedings* of 1885-86.⁹

The other explorer of the central monoliths, Ernest Giles, who named Mt Olga also in 1873, did, as he says, sketches of his journey, subsequently interpreted by artists in Melbourne and Perth, and again in London for publication. The results, published in his book *Australia Twice Traversed* of 1889, of the Petermann Ranges and the Olgas are, like he says of the rocks, 'wonderful and grotesque'. He described the Olgas as like 'five or six enormous pink haystacks, leaning for support against one another ... like the backs of several monstrous kneeling pink elephants.'¹⁰

In the 1880s and on, after this flurry of exploration and the common acceptance of little exploitable wealth as well as of the difficult physical conditions of central Australia, interest in the area flagged. Indeed, in the most practical terms as far as the Government in Adelaide was concerned, the Northern Territory was costing £130,000 per annum to maintain at the turn of the century, with one Minister J.C.F. Johnson moved to say 'It is a bad job that we have had anything to do with the Territory – a bad thing for South Australia and a bad thing for the Territory. We should get rid of it.'¹¹ Johnson said this in 1888. For nearly three decades after the inland deserts were far from the nation's mind.

The late 1920s saw the beginning of the change of attitude, focused on the Flinders Ranges. In 1926 Hans Heysen first visited the Flinders and found there a landscape which was 'the very



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thing' he wrote 'you moderns are trying to paint. Fine big simple forms against clear transparent skies – and a sense of spaciousness everywhere'. He found a subject which challenged him in an environment a long way from the 'cursed noises of civilisation and so-called progress'.¹² His importance here is that he as an artist, for the first time, treated the desert consciously as an object of beauty. Other image makers who knew Heysen and worked in the Flinders were the photographers F.A. Joyner, Heysen's companion in the 1920s, and Harold Cazneaux, an acquaintance of Heysen who visited the Flinders in the mid 1930s and produced from there what

he called his most Australian pictures the heroic, romantically named images of the great gum 'The Spirit of Endurance'. Horace Trener made an important visit to the Flinders in 1930 which forced him to open up his paintings in response to the large scale of the forms and distance. It is indicative of Heysen's great influence, however, that few artists until recently have interpreted the Flinders Ranges in any different way.

Heysen's attitude was nineteenth century in its pioneering depiction of the country. At the same time (in 1928) as his Flinders work was receiving attention in *Art in Australia*, the companion magazine *The*

Home ran an article 'Charting the Heart of Australia' by Donald MacKay which highlights how unknown, literally, was the central desert still. It is an explorer's tale, of a journey to 'fill in a blank that remained in the South West corner of the map of the Northern Territory' but with a number of aerial photographs of Ayers Rock included.¹³

This awakening interest in the desert turned directly to the centre in the 1930s. In 1929 the railway from Adelaide (which had been through to Marree since 1884, and Oodnadatta since 1891) finally reached Alice Springs. It opened the country emotionally as well as physically to a new influx of travellers.

Among them were a number of artists: Rex Battarbee and John A. Gardner caravanned in central Australia in 1932 and 1934, with Battarbee returning in 1936. Arthur Murch was there in 1933 and 1934, showing work at Hermannsburg with Battarbee and Gardner. William Rowell also was there in the 30s. Like Heysen they realised the natural splendour of the landscape before them. Murch showed paintings and drawings in Sydney after his journeys with both his and Rowell's aboriginal portraits reproduced in *Art in Australia*. Battarbee's work won a major prize in Melbourne in 1934 and in turn the Hermannsburg 'school', notably the work of Albert Namatjira, was shown to great popular success in Melbourne and Adelaide in the late 1930s.

Similarly, traveller-writers visited the centre in greater numbers in this time. Ernestine Hill began her journey in 1930. H.H. Finlayson's authoritative book *The Red Centre*, including photographs of Ayers Rock and the Olgas, was published in 1935, the year Charles Mountford, the anthropologist, first visited the area. Cecil Thomas Madigan crossed the Simpson desert on camels in 1939, leading to a book *Crossing the Dead Heart*, published after the War in 1946.

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experiences, were part of, and in turn stimulated, the growth of interest in Australian things which, equally but remarkably differently, was seen in the emergence of the concept of the 'symbolic' desert, the land of desolation and alienation created by writers and artists living in the cities who often had never been near the actual area. The poems of the Jindyworobaks, which flowered in the 1930s, exemplify this, the word itself coined to 'express something of the Australian place spirit'.¹⁴ It is this romantic ideal which Heysen prefigured in his rejection of encroaching industrial life and which moved Cazneau to his 'spirit of endurance'. The desert, at this stage of Australia's history, seemed the last frontier.

The best known artistic interpretations of this symbolic desert are those of Russell Drysdale which he developed from the early 1940s. They succinctly capture by choice of a few strong motifs and heightened colour a generalised view of Eyre's 'arid and barren' land peopled with archetypes of the mythical pioneer. They remain in popular imagination still the most evocative images of life in the desert. Typically, Drysdale's work was inspired by drought stricken areas of NSW rather than the desert itself (though he did travel to the central deserts in the 1950s taking some fine photographs of Ayers Rock).

The post war years saw the gradual increase of accessibility to the wider central desert, with air travel (the first flight to land at Ayers Rock being in the 1950s), improved roads and also some admission to Aboriginal Reserves (for example, white visitors needed permission to go to Ayers Rock into the 1960s). It is still memorable to read, however, that even in 1946:

the only safe approach to Ayers Rock is by camel.
From time to time it has beckoned as a lodestar to a few adventurous geographers and scientists – it drew a young Victorian school teacher ... who sought to reach it on a motor cycle but perished in the attempt.¹⁵

The major artistic contribution of this time came from Sidney Nolan who made his first paintings of the central deserts after flights over the terrain in 1949 and 1950 – a seeming acknowledgement of the beginning of modern times. He showed forty-seven central Australian landscape paintings in Sydney in 1950 and from then on has returned to the theme from time to time – notably in the early 1960s, with the explorer paintings made outside Australia, and again in the late 1970s. Nolan has intertwined the old topographic tradition with the new symbolism, overlaying for example mystical, floating white explorers on a very tactile landscape, exploiting the 'natural' tension of the relationship.

Other artists, like Lawrence Daws, also have developed the symbolic desert theme. Daws, employed by a mining company in 1953, from the mid 1950s and again in the mid 1960s produced series of work based on the extreme life of the mining men of the desert.

In the 1950s the conditions of travel and expectations of artists like Daws meant time in the outback was extended. He, Nolan and Drysdale to a degree all, at this time, acknowledged the life of the

white inhabitants of both town and mining settlements. Nolan's painting of Tennant Creek, now in the Darwin Gallery, is, in its reduction of form, an eloquent summation of life in that little Territory mining community.

There is a notable lack of interest today in depicting the life of the desert towns, explained by both the increasing conformity of these settlements now on the threshold of television, and also by the ease and potential fleetingness of the artists' visits.

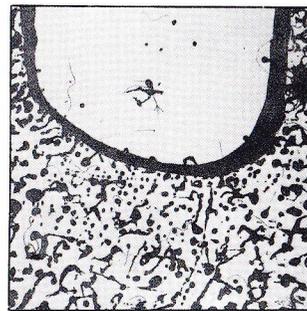
Today, we have a mixture of attitude about the central deserts, partly based on this history and partly on our own experience. The symbolism of desolation and conflict with the desert itself is breaking down, as Harry Butler shows us its animal life, as we better understand Aboriginal culture, as boy scouts walk across Lake Eyre, and as a hundred newspaper reporters stalk around Ayers Rock on a story about a missing child.

An anachronism however is that the symbolism to do with Ayers Rock itself has accelerated. Largely because of the increased physical access we have become extremely conscious of the Rock – helped by both its own exceptional form and its placement in the literal centre of the continent, with all the connotations of 'centrality' at the 'heart' of the country. The old 'red heart' tag, with this phrase's emotive overlay, has also become associated with it.

The Rock is now bound up in politics, as a 'national resource' on which a recent election was staged, used by the advertising industry as a symbol of solidity, as well as being part of the Australiana fashion: the Harbour Bridge, Opera House and Ayers Rock versus the koala, kangaroo and kookaburra items for sweater fronts or plastic earrings.¹⁶ A number of images in this exhibition are specifically of Ayers Rock: reinterpreting the importance of the symbol, with some artists responding humorously to this rather than to the actual object. Jayne Amble, John Chown and Michael McMillen all do this.

The greater ease of access and better communication has broken down old barriers, but it is this with the need to escape the confines of city life into that huge, beautiful and singular landscape which has beckoned artists in ever increasing numbers. The process of travelling to the centre and exploring what qualities seem important in this strange and physically exacting environment is a clarifying and purifying experience. Heysen was seduced by this in the 1920s but, as Barrie Goddard points out in his statement about his work in the exhibition, this has been a universal experience from Biblical times – Christ himself found wisdom wandering in similar surroundings.

There are two major shifts of focus today for artists concerned with the central desert. The first, coming from real experience of the terrain, is the development of an attitude explaining or interpreting aspects of the desert as closely, at times, as had the explorers. Indeed John Wolseley documents the desert using the methods of the early naturalists and topographers, plotting a journey and recording his finds – but with a consciousness of the finished larger piece at the end. Sally Robinson chooses aspects of the desert scene and its life, again from a scientific basis. Barrie Goddard charts



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intellectually, and develops thereby an emotional response to, time in the so-called unchanging desert around him. Douglas Holleley also works with changing perception but from his own perspective. In his work the land moves around him defying 'real' horizons, encouraging us to experience the hugeness of the place. Lynn Silverman literally contrasts the microcosm of the earth beneath her feet with the related macrocosm of the sky. Lloyd Rees responds to the desert's light and colour. Jorg Schmeisser here reduces his often intricate work in homage to the great simplicity of form of Ayers Rock. Peter Bond uses the Rock's extraordinary shape and Leonie Reisberg uses its quality of mysticism. Other people, like Marr Grounds, and Virginia Coventry particularly, respond to the cutting up of the surface of the desert, with all the political connotations of such action. Mary Macqueen's subtle and ephemeral desert is sliced by the rigid lines of the Nullarbor railway. For others it is the unlikely which has attracted them: the soft delicacy of the Flinders Range oasis of Ed Douglas and the extraordinary filling with water of Lake Eyre of John Olsen.

The second change of emphasis, again following colonial times, is the re-emergence of interest in the local Aboriginal people; specifically in how they perceive and relate to the terrain. Gary Willis here most overtly only sees the landscape in terms of the Aboriginal situation. Most of the artists included, as their words in

the catalogue emphasize, are aware of the spiritual power of the desert landscape. It enforces a respect for larger forces and inevitably encourages respect for a culture which has long acknowledged and incorporated this in its art.

Most of the artists in the exhibition have been willing to write about their work made in response to the Centre. Their words are as diverse in attitude as their images and are a fitting continuance to this introduction.

A final few words about the choice of work: all works in the exhibition are on paper (prints, drawings, photographs, collages) as befits the venue in the Print Gallery of the Art Gallery of South Australia. For this reason numerous works about the centre by overseas artists like Mark Boyle or Marina/Ulay and by Australians working in other media are excluded. Among these works, which can equally be seen in the context of the growth of response to the desert, are the sculptures and installations by David Jones, Elizabeth McKinnon, Antonio d'Alva or Bill Gregory, the videos and films by Mick Glasheen or Paul Winkler, and the paintings by Tim Johnson, Stephen Fox, Brett Whiteley, Reno Simeoni, Tim Storrier or Annette Bezor. It is hoped these other works can be remembered in conjunction with those included here.

DETAILS OF ILLUSTRATIONS FROM INTRODUCTION

1. F.M. Needham
Ayers Rock drawing reproduced in W.C. Gosse's *Explorations* 1873, Adelaide, 1874 (detail).

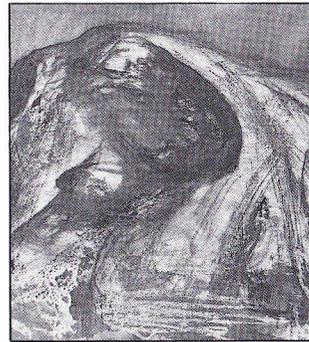
2. John Wolseley
Forty Eight Days in Thorula - Gosse's Bluff 1980 (detail) see exhibition, Wolseley, cat. 1.

3. John Olsen
Life Drawn to the Void 1975 (detail) see exhibition, Olsen, cat. 3.

4. Lloyd Rees
The Great Rock, Study at Evening 1977 (detail) see exhibition, Rees, cat. 4.

NOTES

- Ernestine Hill *The Great Australian Loneliness* (1937) Melbourne, 1942, p.247. John Tregenza first drew my attention to Hill's work - as to a number of other aspects of the history of images referred to in this introduction.
- The 'centre' has, here, been defined broadly: not just the area around Alice Springs but the whole desert mass from below tropical Northern Territory through to the Flinders Ranges area in the south east and the Nullarbor in the south. Other areas like the Pilbara of Western Australia have been excluded.
- Edward John Eyre *Journals of Expeditions into Central Australia 1840-41* London 1845, vol. II, p.113.
- See facsimile edition of a copy of G.B. Wilkinson's *South Australia: Its Advantages and Its Resources*, first published in London in 1848, owned and decorated by J.M. Skipper, pp.151, 161 and 171. The facsimile was published by the Wakefield Press, Adelaide 1983. The supposition of the connection with Sturt is made by John Tregenza referring to the drawing on p.151 in *Notes on Selected Illustrations* pp.19-20.
- Drawings and watercolours by Frome and Gill of the Horrocks journey are held by the Art Gallery of South Australia.
- See South Australian Archives B.1225 and GRG/35/256.
- See S.A. Archives B.486.
- See S.A. Archives B.3674.
- Photographs of the amateur drawings of the Rock are included in the Maurice Albums, vol. I, nos. 265 and 274, S.A. Archives B.639. Bruer's wood engraving is included in the *Proceedings* opposite p.97.



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- Ernest Giles *Australia Twice Traversed, the Romance of Exploration 1872-76*, London, 1889, vol. II, p.11.
- Quoted in Douglas Lockwood *Front Door*, Adelaide 1968, p.138. I am grateful to the staff of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory for this information.
- Letters to Sydney Ure Smith and Lionel Lindsay, quoted in *Hans Heysen Centenary Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of South Australia, 1977, p.104.
- See Donald MacKay 'Charting the Heart of Australia' *The Home*, Jan. 1928, pp.14-62 variously.
- Rex Ingamells quoted in John Tregenza *Australian Little Magazines* Adelaide, 1964, p.49.
- Walkabout* December 1946, p.24.
- An example of the 'solidity' of the Rock is best seen in the huge signs of the United Permanent Building Society. The commercialism of image of the Rock is extensive. It sells cars, wines, is on matchboxes (being red), magazines (*The National Times* summer edition, December 1982) and so on. The nationalistic imagery as well as the pun has led to its association with 'rock' music, like Jayne Amble's work on exhibition, Judi Keneally's poster for the Goanna Band, 1980, or a poster *Rock against Racism* with Uluru in the Aboriginal colours, made for a fund-raising night in Adelaide, March 1982. Barrie Goddard has a large collection of Ayers Rock memorabilia including a horoscope made of the Rock's personality!