

## **THE WILSONS RIVER: PERSONAL AND PUBLIC REFLECTIONS**

### **Investigations of 'Place' with Visual Arts and Community Arts Outcomes**

#### **Biography:**

**Leonie Lane** is a graphic designer/visual artist who teaches the Digital Art and Design units in the Visual Arts Program at Southern Cross University. Her research interests and current art practice deals with notions of 'place', personal narrative and social identity via digital imaging and installation. These themes are evident in her MA research project, '(un)folding landscape and identity' as well as the large community art project, 'Wilsons River Experience Walk' in Lismore. Her work references her upbringing in this area seen through experience and technologies gained elsewhere. In Sydney, she was an active partner in Redback Graphix and worked as a freelance designer and with the Antart studio, Sydney. Commissions have ranged from public awareness campaigns (Literacy, Amnesty International, Aboriginal Health, Occupational Health and Safety) to music, film and theatre promotions.

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#### **Overview**

'Place' and 'reinventions of place' are recognised as contemporary developments in visual arts practice in the traditional genre of 'landscape' art-making. Ideas about the development of personal and cultural identity are tied into notions of 'place'. (Schama 1996)

I am investigating a site that is common to both my childhood and my present: the Wilsons River on the Northern Rivers of NSW. This investigation is represented in two very different projects. One is a large-scale community art project while the other describes a more personal response to 'place' (Carter, E. 1993). The latter is also subject of my MA. Both projects acknowledge other 'belongings' and prior ownership. They employ a qualitative process where layers of acquired information are processed and reproduced via digital media.

Rivers are evocative places, powerful metaphors - a stage for action as well as reverie. They provide both a parallel to narrative flow and reveal a 'place' beyond civic control at the same time as a space that promotes settlement and social engagement. A river can evoke multi-layered investigations (Lambert 2000).

Our river systems, more than any other aspect of our landscape, display the interplay between people and the environment. Not only do they describe the state of health of our environment, they display the culture, identity and histories of our communities. The river's identity is a composite of shifting environmental influences and cultural associations. As they carve their way through various terrains, they inscribe both subtle and sudden change to place at specific moments in time. Simultaneously, a river can convey a sense of timelessness. (Bachelard 1942)

#### **The Site**

The Wilsons River is a major tributary of the Richmond River, which, along with the Tweed and the Clarence Rivers, irrigates, nourishes and occasionally floods the lush sub-tropical Northern Rivers region of NSW.

I grew up on the banks of the Wilsons River in a small village called Eltham. I left in 1973 and spent a couple of decades living in cities. I returned in 1993 to live on an ex dairy farm near Booyong, a few kilometres upstream from Eltham. This relocation and re-engagement informs my recent art practice.

The Northern Rivers of NSW is an unusual and beautiful place where idealism rubs up against traditional attitudes in curious ways. It contains the site of the original Big Scrub, a large tract of sub-topical rainforest situated within the caldera of the volcano whose core is now the iconic Wollumbin or Mt Warning. It is the traditional home of the Widjabal people of the Bundjalung nation whose language Wiyabal is recorded and still spoken in some parts today.

1973 - the year of my HSC – saw significant changes. A rural recession meant the end of dairy farming as the major local industry and the power-base of the conservative Country Party. 1973 also saw the Nimbin-based Aquarius Festival signal a huge shift in the regions demographic makeup.

Like so many other white Australians, my upbringing taught me little about Aboriginal culture. Stumbling over stone axes in corn paddocks aroused a curiosity that received few answers outside the display cases at the local Historical Society. It wasn't until I was at art school (1975 -1977 PIT, Melbourne), when issues of belonging and identity were raised and explored, that I really started to appreciate the importance of knowing about indigenous culture. In a theory class, with the ever-inspiring Ann Stephan, our complex and shared histories were discussed. We were to use a holiday period to return 'home' and find out about the local Aboriginal people. In a long and heavily punctuated way, I feel like I am still doing that project.

The Wilsons River flows through Lismore not far from the main campus of Southern Cross University where I teach the Digital Art and Design units in the School of Arts. Discussions of our different experiences of 'place', is manifest in project work within our course material. Regional engagement is encouraged in many course related projects. One example is the Café and Culture Trail postcards - a project initiated by both Southern Cross University Regional Gateway and Lismore City Council.

My studio practice is a blend of graphic design, digital imaging and community arts. Theoretical, creative and technological information gained in these areas inform my current art-making as well as teaching practice in the design and digital arenas. I enjoy the way digital technology has helped dissolve a traditional delineation between graphic design and visual arts practice. By its very nature and the interface with industry, broader outcomes become possible.

Current work recalls my previous experiences as a community artist and graphic designer working with a wide range of cultural groups and outcomes in Sydney, Melbourne and Wollongong through the Redback and Antart studios.

### **My Masters Project**

My MA project investigates a small section of the Wilsons River via a canoe. This obsessive documentation, mapping and reinvention of the journey represent a personal investigation.

The site of this investigation is a thirteen-kilometre stretch of river. It begins near Booyong - at the rapids (an old ford from early settlement days) below a frighteningly dilapidated wooden road bridge on the edge of a nature reserve (a remnant of the Big Scrub). It meanders through expired dairy farming pastures, past small gully entrances, recently cultivated eucalypt forest plantations, sporadic herds of grazing beef cattle and a disused railway line. It is lined with native and introduced vegetation (in and out of the water) and all manner of visiting and resident fauna. Denuded earth banks interrupt fledgling rainforest regrowth and persistent camphor laurels. The colours are rich and intense – red, green and blue – like the additive colour mode, which drives most digital imagery. The thirteen kilometres ends where I spent my childhood and adolescence – Eltham. At Eltham the river features two bridges. The sadly now disused rusted railway bridge crosses the river next to a brand new concrete road bridge – an installation in itself describing the changing nature of transport and communities.

*The canoe trip is documented by recording sound and image on digital video and still digital cameras. The creeks were, and in some places still are, used as garbage dumps. Ephemera are collected from the river bottom and banks. This collection is recorded on my visual 'map'.*

In the project's early stages, folded images and paper forms were used. The metaphorical and physical use of the fold in this text offers an array of random and fixed connections. The recurring metaphor of the 'fold' becomes evident within the presence of themes, rhythms and activities prevalent in this work – the leaving and returning, the folding and un-folding – the repetitive action of the canoe's paddles and the lapping of the water at the canoe's side.

The metaphor of the canoe is a powerful one. It is a vehicle of communication between the colonial and landscape interfaces and narratives. Its curvilinear path traces those connections. Paul Carter in 'About Canoes', from his book 'The Lie of the Land' describes 'curvilinear' and anti-Cartesian strategies as a possible way to understand the nature of our place in time, history and landscape. (Carter, P. 1996).

Numerous artists involved in land or environmental art have been sources of inspiration. A few notable ones are mentioned below.

In terms of wishing the 'primacy of physical experience' to be at this project's core, I have taken a cue from Hamish Fulton's 'Walking Journeys'. (Tufnell and Wilson 2002)

Bea Maddock's work '*Terra Spiritus ... with a darker shade of pale*' (1993–98 40m, 51 sheet panoramic drawing) uses an extended panorama travelling throughout the entire exhibition space. It is an ochre-coloured coastal profile of the entire outward edge of her native island

Tasmania which acknowledges pre-settler presence. Large rows of aboriginal place names float like smoke from the islands interior to greet the European fleets. (Thomas 2002)

John Wolseley's delicate, obsessive land representations observe all manner of experience on location. His work is ecological, concerned with systems, relationships and change from minute insect and plant life to the largest geological processes of continental drift that relate Australian nature to Indonesia, South America and Antarctica. The 1995 installation of drawings, photographs and plant specimens is extravagantly titled *'The great tectonic arc: concerning the moving apart of Gondwana and the present position of Australia and Patagonia and how the great tree families Araucaria and Nothofagus evolved and were named and celebrated followed by their radical depletion.* (Thomas 2002)

My MA project, an installation of digital prints, projection and found objects, is due for completion at the end of this year. It is to be installed in the large boat like rooms of an old school site (recently reappointed as a village common or community space) in Clunes near where I live.

### **Wilson River Experience Walk (WREW)**

*'Who is telling whose story? This is the question which must be asked of most colonial and noncolonial representation.'* (Langton, 1996)

This Wilson River Experience Walk project is the other investigation of the Wilsons River as a spatial location where settlement has occurred. It acknowledges the various histories and occupations along the river that flows through a diverse community.

The WREW project is an ongoing large-scale public art project based in Lismore where I am engaged as designer and consultant. It involves local history research, community liaison and the design of six different sites positioned along a five-kilometre walkway along the banks of the Wilsons River. With funding from the Heritage Incentives Program and the Department of Transport and Regional Services, production of the first stage began in November/ December 2004. Southern Cross University Office of Regional Engagement was commissioned by Lismore City Council to deliver the first site, 'Gathering Place – Burbang Mah' and its completed panels. I worked closely with writer/historian, Jo Kijas to produce the text, visual content and overall design of the site. We have followed each other's process – words needing images, imagery suggesting more words...

Consultation has been with Lismore City Council, Widjabal elders, an historic reference group (based at the Richmond River Historical Society) and the Wilsons River Landcare Group. From the outset there were differences in priorities between these reference groups. Common ground determined that the overall idea was to produce a visually stunning, multi-layered representation of Lismore's social history inclusive of the many perspectives of such a diverse place.

Valuable experience has been gained through listening and negotiating with the interest groups, who came to the table with their own needs, baggage and, in some cases, grudges. Trust in some cases was hard earned through much listening, patience and persistence.

Despite all, strong relationships with community members have developed over the past nine months, ensuring a positive momentum for future work.

The experience gained has been a mutually rich and challenging experience across all of these groups but no more so than with the Widjabal people. The process involved and the outcome has given me an extremely rewarding yet demanding, creative experience. For me, the challenge of imaging Widjabal lore has caused me to question my own preconceptions of image representation and a 'white fellas' design process. My role as designer became one of translator when engaging with these themes. (Langton, 1996)

The initial visual concept for the first site, 'Gathering Place – Burbang Mah', addressed the aims of the project. Jo and I worked on five panels covering a broad social history of Lismore, while Roy Gordon Jr (Widjabal historian and linguist), Sheldon Harrington (Widjabal artist) and I worked in collaboration on the 'Gudjam Na - Bush Food' panel. Roy was to work with concepts and the words while Sheldon drew the featured animals. This panel was about the Widjabal use of bush food and its relationship to the river via cautionary tales and seasonal connections. The river is very important to the Widjabal people – as Roy says 'it is our friend'. (Gordon 2005). Traditionally, the information presented was learned through daily living and family connections, from generation to generation. It was Roy's priority that Widjabal understanding, history and knowledge were communicated clearly to the general public and in particular to the local indigenous youth.

The use of early white contact photos carried the weight of indigenous stereotype while white interpretations of language area maps described static boundaries that didn't necessarily equate with how Widjabal people saw their boundaries. It became apparent that the photomontage strategy employed in the design of the other panels was not appropriate to the Widjabal panel. Maintaining the site's stylistic theme was essential to the project as a whole to impress the inclusive theme.

Roy mapped his ideas as systematic diagrams of seasonal flow and climactic change and its relation to the river and its animals. Appropriate totemic plants and animals were selected and drawn by Sheldon. I reworked these in Illustrator very conscious of how different they were from any indigenous drawing I had seen in other parts of Australia. Roy and I discussed spatial representation and how the Widjabal narrative could look. Paramount to the success of this story telling was in the use of language and drawing styles. It was imperative to describe their world as it was and as it is. Many drafts were created with much consultation, questioning and reworking...

A final design was realised with great relief and delight. We all express pride in having the opportunity to have shared cultures and certainly have learnt a lot about how to approach some of the issues described for the future sites.

All six panels - each measuring 3.6 metres by 1.2 metres are now complete and installed at the Gathering Place in Riverside Park. The sheer magnitude of the task has been far greater than anyone had first anticipated and has turned into a labour of love for many.

The story concepts and text for the remaining five sites have been written. It is anticipated that it will take between 5 and 15 years to complete! In all the sites, there will be a constant reminder that we are always making history, highlighting the importance of listening, recording and collecting stories and visual information.

### **Mutual Outcomes**

The two projects described work in tandem, providing rich textual information for each other. Both have developed through referencing the region and contemporary art practice and new media. The WREW project prioritises community response and historic interpretation but takes many references and design strategies developed in my MA project. This, in turn, is given extra veracity to its narrative via knowledge of the regions people and landscape.

The engagement with community, technology and various design strategies on both these projects provides a wealth of experience for my teaching practice. Not only does it build course content, enhance delivery but it also, with community trust in place, provides opportunities for students to participate in very real local projects about 'place'.

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Figure 1 *'Eltham Bridges'*  
 digital print on 90gsm mapping paper  
 installation included a grid of folded paper objects - 300cms x 90cms – 2003  
 From *Feedback Phenomenon* Lismore Regional Gallery 2003



Figure 2 *'Passage'* installation  
 from *'Flood: stories from a city under water'*  
 Lismore Regional Gallery 2003  
 This print was also selected for the Fremantle Art Prize in 2004



Figure 3 *'Bush Food - Gudjam Na'*  
 Panel from Story Site *'Gathering Place/ Burbang Mah'*  
 Wilson River Experience Walk – public art project Lismore NSW 2005