

## 2006 Issue No. 13 — Making Badlands

### Places Past Disappearance

By Ross Gibson

In Stoicism everything exists in the present, even the past.  
Bernard Cache

For more than twenty years now, I've been publishing in a variety of media. But it's only recently that I've realized how the projects almost always start with caches of evidence that are in shards or disarray. It's the absences, the negative spaces, that prompt the work. For example, working with a team of collaborators I've spent several years responding to a pictorial archive. In a series of computer-activated artworks known collectively as *Life After Wartime*, viewers are encouraged to figure how to account for a salvaged batch of crime scene photographs that no longer have any official, conclusive documents attached to them. [1] Another example of this "vestige work" is my book *Seven Versions Of An Australian Badland*, which is a literary meditation on a fraught and fragmented tract of failed profiteer scrub in tropical Queensland. [2]

Always, I encounter the following kinds of questions: what's gone missing here? ... how to imagine functional coherence here? ... what if these dumb portions could get some eloquence?

Now, I don't expect anyone to care much about my arcane contemplations. Except, I see hundreds of other Australian artists and writers working in the same way, examining aftermaths and discontinuities, trying to re-build systematic comprehension in response to fragments. And while I dare not speak for so many others, I've been getting a hunch that it might be useful to try to understand, in public, what it means when one gets so *attached* to these untethered things, what's in this compulsion to know the negative space?

Well, here goes.

Rummaging in Australia's aftermath cultures, I try to re-dress the disintegration in our story-systems, in our traditional knowledge caches, our landscapes and ecologies. My job is to investigate and recuperate scenes and collections of artifacts that have been torn apart somehow, torn by landgrabbing, let's say, or by accidents, or exploitation that ignores rituals of preservation and restoration. Typically, the scenes and systems I investigate were once a good deal more coherent, but now they are ailing or out of balance. I've come to understand that most of Australia is like this, that the place we inhabit is our best evidence about our unbalanced selves and that this place has so much raggedness in it because it is patterned to the society that has used it so roughly.

The situation is not entirely bleak. Even in the aftermath of neglect or abuse, systems usually retain tendencies and traces from their previous cogency. These traces offer chances for re-formatting, even though it's pointless to dream of retrieving some pristine, pre-lapsarian world. Plainly such a world is a simplistic fantasy.

I think the work we have to do is a re-animation process. It's nothing mysterious. Maybe it's best to think of it as a reiterative application of meanings to places over time. Or to borrow Morris Berman's technical phrase, such work is the secular "re-enchantment of the world". [3] It's an attempt to chant some patterned significance back into places that have long been denied custodial care. It's the first step in imagining how a new, relatively cohesive present might evolve from adjustments and activations of vestiges from the past.

Our Australian part of the world is strewn with vestiges of cultural and natural systems. Consider the vulnerable skeins of indigenous dreamings; the remnants of endemic ecologies; consider also the myriad systems of work and belief that have been refined elsewhere in the world and partially transplanted here. The good news is that in some cases, despite two hundred years of colonial disturbance, we have managed to avoid terminal damage, either by getting out of the way of resurgent nature or by applying design and labour attentively and adaptively. But in many instances our places are teetering with a minimal degree of systematic cohesion, and they will be made sensible only if we act promptly and boldly, so that our aesthetic and civic patterns might help us project our thinking across everything that's missing or ailing. In other words, we need to IMAGINE very boldly.

So here's a proposition, offered promptly if not boldly. Our parlous states need imagination. We need to propose "what if" scenarios that help us account for what has happened in our habitat so that we can then better envisage what might happen. We need to apprehend the past. Otherwise, we won't be able to align ourselves to historical momentum. Without doing this we won't be able to divine the continuous tendencies that are making us as they persist out of the past into the present. (There'll be more about this tendentious term "divination" before too long.) By synchronising ourselves to the inherent, historically configured tendencies that flow through a place in time, we stand a chance of avoiding exhaustion as we try to change the current state of things, as we try to understand how to alter the world and ourselves. To put it too simply perhaps, it's a question of understanding what's at play in our place right now, no matter how latent, and then going to work on it.

To reiterate: our parlous states need imagination. I might define imagination these ways:

it's an ability to venture in one's mind out past  
a comfortable, known limit;

it's an ability to discern feasible relationships where they  
are not obvious, to see how portions, clues or details might  
be put into relationships that generate forceful meanings or  
pulses of feeling;

imagination is a readiness to incorporate the unknown,  
embodied in psychological or aesthetic form, so that we  
might be emboldened to alter, so that we might let ourselves  
into otherness and to let it into ourselves.

Imagination is needed when one encounters evidence that's in smithereens. I try to keep this in mind when I'm confronted with the disheveled scenes and collections that are so representative of contemporary Australia, when I'm confronted with so many systems that have vestiges of coherence but are not entire, not conclusive or composed. I try to remember not only that these are systems where imagination is needed, but also that imagination can be strengthened here, that these systems offer great opportunities.

A specific example? *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. The book examines a landscape where colonial landgrabbing and monocultural farming have plundered the environment to the extent that it now appears like a defiled and exhausted thing. Over the past three decades I've crossed

this broken country many times, with a growing conviction it is a disintegrated scree of evidence that bears witness to the conflicting historical forces that have built it and continue to shape it. In the book, I call this stretch of country “a vast, historical crime scene”. In such landscapes – and they’re everywhere in Australia – we have to ask ourselves, what can be made of this place now? What can we know about its piecemeal ecology, its choppy geomorphics and scarified townscapes? How can we overhear the pertinent gossip – the attempts at truth and the self-serving lies – that buzz about it? What of the journey-patterns, the shuttling rhythms stitching it together in time, now and in the past? What can we make of the documents that have been generated in response to this country? And what of the absences – when are they meaningful, when are they nothing?

In the Central Queensland hinterland, my historically informed imagination has produced a book in which I try to make manifest some forces that are usually only latent within this somewhat systematic tract of country. In the case of *Life After Wartime*, the imaginative response is a story-engine that proffers restless, plausible patterns of speculation regarding the enigmatic scenes in the archive. In each case I try to connect something persuasive across the partial array of evidence, to show how even these riddled things can get better integrated and can help us know more fully the forces and flows that make the world they came from.

It’s the *restlessness* that’s crucial, the way the artwork – be it a book, a database, a building, a park or a garden – prompts the imagination by artful imbalances and implied possibilities for completion or patterning. So, I’m not advocating the pastiches and remnant-kitsch retrievals that characterised so much 1990s postmodernism. Rather, for me the supreme example of the aesthetic of generative incompleteness can be found in Zen temples and gardens, where the visitor experiences an environment that’s “charged” with a powerful “urge”, a flowing potentiality that’s implied rather than shown. Or maybe the urge arises in the visitor; maybe it doesn’t reside in the environment. Such ambiguity – verging on ineffability – is an essential part of a wonderfully generative aesthetic. In a Zen environment the visitor often feels an urge to imagine a pattern cohering even though such a pattern is not explicitly present in the artfully “unresolved” space. And the urge often helps one feel inseparable from the environment, attuned to some flowing integrity in it. (There’s some Shinto pantheism in this sensation, no doubt.) [4]

The literary side of Zen is instructive too. What you get from a haiku, for example, is a compulsion to imagine out from the detail, to get an inkling in the poem’s intense fragment so that you can envisage a larger world connected to that intensified portion, a larger world of interconnections made instantaneously and intuitively comprehensible by the tiny shock that a good haiku produces. As Thomas Hoover has explained it so well, “the mind is struck as with a hammer, bringing the senses up short and releasing a flood of associations”. [5]

Floods, flows, urges, surges, continuities: such words bring us close to what I’m seeking when exercising the historically informed imagination.

I now understand that such work is a kind of divination, which is a secular activity, something technical. For me, divination is a process whereby you help fragments adhere and integrate so that the dis-membered elements of a scene might share some sensible connection, some remembering. With divination, there is an urge to connect. In water divining, for example, absence bullies the system – a clear channel is missing between the water and the quester. The diviner has to ponder the possible links between the self and the water, thus filling in the missing conduits of a severed circuitry and vaulting over the absences to form cogency where once there was dishevelment. In this way the diviner is a kind of ‘ammeter’, measuring potentiality or energy, tracking its flows and blockages and engineering ways to marshal the current back to connectivity. It’s the way much indigenous traveling proceeds – figuring when and where to move according to a sense of the most amenable flow of connection in the place at the time. And it’s very like the energy-sensing described by David Mowaldjarlai when he used to talk of the guiding forces that “swing” through him in the Kimberley country. [6] Also it resembles the

responsive wayfinding detailed by Will Kyselka in his study of Polynesian navigation, *An Ocean in Mind*. [7]

I'm sure these are all processes requiring intuition. Intuition is a faculty that can be learned and refined. Sportspeople know this. They devote most of their training to the development of intuition. It's the same for improvising musicians and actors. When intuition ignites, sudden, holistic understanding arises. In modern parlance, it's sometimes called a "systems view". It's a little like trying to feel the sensations of a 'phantom limb': this awareness of something palpably present and convincing where the explicit matter is actually missing.

This term, "phantom", it's uncomfortably close to "fantasy". Which brings me to a cautionary moment! I want to emphasise that when responding to fragments of historical evidence, I am on the side of history. Without claiming to be an historian, I find myself in agreement with a very good one, Greg Dening, when he says that the important historical writing occurs when scholars apply imagination to the evidence. IMAGINATION, not FANTASY, he stresses. What Dening is asserting, I think, is that one needs to retain an allegiance to the evidence. A fiction writer is not obliged to do this, making a different contract with the reader. But to be historically aligned, one must bear witness to traces that have been touched by the world. [8]

This leads to the most important point as far as I'm concerned: the conditions of living and working in the aftermath-culture of Australia are such that a great deal of the vital evidence is either missing or non-textual. And the evidence that we do have is often partial, broken or sometimes obscured by denials. Which means that conventional historiographical protocols come up short when we try to get the fullest possible comprehension of the past that has whelped our present. In Australia we need to imagine across gaps and quandaries in the evidence; we need to venture out past what is known, what is familiar, what is authorised in disciplines founded elsewhere.

I trust it's clear that I'm not declaring conventional history to be insular or useless. I'm just saying it's only partly useful. Just as imaginative speculation is only partly useful. Together, though, they might be productive, if we found ways to loosen and interlace the borders of historiography and speculation, if we found ways to narrate across everything that's missing in our modes of envisaging and understanding.

In a radio interview about *Seven Versions* a while ago, a journalist asked me: "What is this thing, this odd book? Where does it fit in our categories of culture? It doesn't have the certitude of history. So, isn't it just imaginative? Isn't it just tricky fiction?"

Responding a little absent-mindedly – a little intuitively – I had a sudden insight. "Backfill", I quipped, "basically what I do is historical backfill". Perhaps I could have said "re-enchantment", but I'm glad I didn't. As I tried to haul myself out of the sudden ditch, I realised this term "backfill" was a useful enough idea. I explained how you can uncover fragments that you know have been discarded by the world. Real evidence. You find it lying around in jagged form, as we all do every day, and you ask yourself, "how can I account for this material?" Quite literally, "what are some of the accounts I might offer so that we can make provocative sense with these fragments?"

So, "backfill" happens when you offer an historically informed set of 'maybe' propositions:

Maybe this story accounts well for these bits of evidence that we've uncovered?

How does this sound as a way to account for the somewhat systematic yet somewhat broken shape of the evidence?

Maybe this version of experience can help us understand the mysterious form of our particular midden heap?

Backfill is what we have to enact when conventional historical techniques fail us, as happens often in this place that's been formed by so much purposeful disappearance and dispersal. Backfill is work performed after one has done some divination, after one has attempted to intuit feasible and defensible but admittedly inconclusive accounts connecting the fragments. Backfill is necessarily an imaginative and speculative procedure. But it needs to be authoritative as well as imaginative. And I think it's the only response, opposed to silence or denial, that helps us keep on investigating when we encounter the definitive quality of post-1788 Australian history, when we encounter the fact that despite the settlers' overwhelming attention to some types of bureaucratic minutiae, many of the truly important events of our past – particularly the cross-cultural encounters that took place on frontiers, away from the administrative centres, in situations where writing would not net what occurred – many of these crucial events have not made it into the textual archives.

Even so, traces get registered otherwise – in bodies, in family tale-telling, in songs, in landscapes, in sketches – traces that don't work so well for conventional history. For me the supreme example is the aesthetic, transformative power of Archie Roach's ballad, "Took the Children Away". To hear that song is to sense a compelling proposition about the way the past has produced the present. You sense all this in the musical patterns of the song, in the lyrics and the glissando of the voice from its palpable pain through to the exultation of survival. You sense all this and feel yourself altered by it. The song is not an anthem affirming an established creed; rather it is a three-minute transit through comprehension, a transit through structured feelings that produce a compelling effect of truth, of validity. Therefore, in situations where the textual records do not net the events, other types of representation need to arrive after the event, to accrete around the non-textual clues.

I'm convinced we can perform these other types of representation productively and responsibly, conjuring "maybe" propositions that are not history but are historically informed and might be sometimes more important than history because of the way they make manifest an urge to account for the disconnected fragments. Such historically informed speculations are vital because they vault over silence, denial and absence. And they change hearts and minds. These speculations draw on our capability to imagine otherness, to think past the endorsed limits, to undergo alteration. And this is crucial because if we continue to close our imaginations to the aberrations and insufficiencies in our historical records, we run the risk of slipping into an insular melancholy, fearful of the power of the interpretations we refuse to consider. It's likely we won't dwell in the joy till we get real about the darkness. For the joy will always be shadowed, and the background of gloom and denial will get heavier and more worrying because we'll sense it persisting and amplifying outside of our ability to turn and face it.

But I digress a little and sermonise a bit much. I was discussing "backfill". Let me conclude with a summation.

When performing historical backfill, one needs to assay every testimony, every mark and song and clue available so that you can propose something compelling, something that is historically advised, persuasive and authoritative but admittedly speculative. Instead of being *conclusively* convincing, you have to cajole people into consulting their own faculties of judgement so they might match your proffered model of possibility against their received beliefs. You have to encourage them to wonder, "what do I know?", rather than to demand, "confirm what I know". You need to conjure a worldview that helps readers judge – yes, no or maybe – whether your proposition feels plausible, whether it helps them confront something true but previously occulted in their world. If you do this well, the reader is no longer a recipient of your supposed truths. Instead the reader becomes a forensic subject, an investigator and formulator of contentious systems of meaning. When an investigation is open like this, as opposed to foregone in its conclusions, then the investigator is an imaginer, someone who declines to accept common sense automatically.

Finally, to accept inconclusiveness is different from deciding that nothing compelling can be offered. The imaginative investigator keeps on speculating and testing, speculating and testing, always proposing possible worlds that are tethered to the actual world, the world of evidence. This can happen restlessly, skeptically, but with a venturesome spirit, not with desperation. The imaginative investigator works with evidence, vaults over absence and refuses silence. Such a quest, such imagination is our most urgent political task right now.

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**Ross Gibson** makes books, essays and films. He also produces multimedia environments and IT systems for museums and public spaces. His published works include the books *South of the West* and *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* and the museum exhibition *Remembrance + the Moving Image*. He is Professor of New Media & Digital Culture at the University of Technology, Sydney.

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## Endnotes

[1] See projects by Ross Gibson and Kate Richards et al, listed at <http://www.lifeafterwartime.com>.

[2] See *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. Brisbane: UQP, 2002.

[3] Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

[4] See for example, Norman Carver. *Form and Space of Japanese Architecture*. Tokyo: Shokokusha, 1955. Carver explains that in Zen architecture, "all relationships are abbreviated and subtle, encouraging the exercise of the imagination in grasping the whole". p. 156.

See also Noel Burch. *To the Distant Observer: form and meaning in the Japanese cinema*. London: Scholar Press, 1979.

[5] Thomas Hoover. *Zen Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. p. 205.

[6] See Jutta Malnic and David Mowaljarlai. *Yorro Yorro: everything standing up alive*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1993.

[7] See Will Kyeselka. *An Ocean in Mind*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987.

[8] See the transcript of Greg Denning's speech to the National Library of Australia: [http://www.nla.gov.au/events/history/papers/Greg\\_Denning.inc](http://www.nla.gov.au/events/history/papers/Greg_Denning.inc) .