



## Wildflowers and Other Landscapes

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Abstract: "Wildflowers and Other Landscapes" explores, issues of difference, gender, the field of vision, the body, the landscape in Australia, and the way we write, mark and imagine the land. The piece begins from my own bodily experience of living in this country. Along with other non-Indigenous Australians I carry with me many questions about belonging: where do I belong?; where are my people?; what is my place? As a white woman where do I have the right to go? I am an urban dweller: what is my relationship with country? The paper is presented as a meditation on these questions, attempting to link and move between associated experiences and ideas. The challenging painting on found tarpaulin, entitled "Wildflower", by Western Australian artist Jo Darbyshire, provides a touchstone for this discussion.

Key terms: gender, landscape, place, belonging.

I take as my subject, for this discussion, issues of difference, gender, the field of vision, the body, the landscape in Australia, and the way we write, mark and imagine the land. I wanted to write something that was not just framed within academic discourse, but could be written out of my own bodily experience of living in this land. For me this has been a rather unsettled experience. I've moved cities, suburbs, homes many times. And I carry with me many questions about belonging: where do I belong?; where are my people?; what is my place? As a white woman where do I have the right to go? I am an urban dweller: what is my relationship with country? The controversial painting on found tarpaulin, *Wildflowers*, by Western Australian artist Jo Darbyshire, provides a focus for my discussion, encapsulating visual expression and personal engagement with these questions.



I begin with an extract from words spoken by Aboriginal women at a meeting with non-Indigenous women during the Pine Gap Womens' Peace Protest in central Australia in 1983. These words were noted down at the meeting by Margaret Somerville and later cited in *Body/Landscape Journals*. They have a strong personal resonance for me.<sup>1</sup>

We want this land. We want to look after it well. We want to smell the good winds, not like at Maralinga when we smelt the black dust coming from there. Lots of our relatives died at Maralinga from black dust. We want all these hard thinking people to go away. We're not rich people like these people. Not strong people, we don't have power but we want to be heard. We want our children to be protected to look after our law. Old people have given us this land to look after and it's not for the war. People want to live here quietly. The Americans should fight the war in their own country. We understand that they drop one bomb and the enemy retaliates and it keeps on going on and on. The whitefellers' country is overseas, ours is the dry country in the middle of all that water. Our dreamtime stories extend to the north, south, east and west. The whole country is sacred. (Somerville, 1999, p. 38)

I didn't go to Pine Gap myself that year but I was one of the women on the Canberra organising committee, and along with a group of others from Canberra who could not make the journey I camped for 2 weeks outside the Commonwealth Defence Department offices on Russell Hill, for the duration of the Pine Gap action. At the time it seemed to me important that we did so. We missed the drama and intensity of being one of several hundred women to converge on the Pine Gap facility, but we gave the issue local colour and kept hammering away at the media from our National Capital headquarters.

In many ways we had it easy. Russell Hill was pleasant place to camp. There were no bathrooms of course, but the grass was soft under our tents, we had a panoramic view along the national capital's central axis over the original Parliament House toward the Brindabella mountains, police and defence departmental personnel stared at us occasionally but largely left us alone, and if we had a few night scares, in the bright spring mornings friends came with flasks of coffee and croissants to keep us going.

Then I saw a direct line between Canberra and Pine Gap connecting the two places in a way that was to me both symbolic and real: a line of power between the American and Australian governments and other lines written on the land, in the form of a network of modern highways and desert roads running from town to town from the east coast to the Centre.

Paul Carter writes that: "there is a direct connection between the clearing of the land and the erasure of its natural histories, and the identification of knowledge with semiosis, the language of signs" (Carter, 2). This erasure was made powerfully evident for me by the vast concrete monolith, crowned with the figure of the American eagle, which stood a few feet away from our tents, a gift of the US government to mark the bond of Australian/US military relations. This monument seemed to say much about what I would then have termed the imperialism of American foreign policy, but which now seems to me an integral part of the tension in attitudes between invitation and resistance with which Australians regard newcomers or outsiders.

I hadn't thought about that period in my life for many years, until recently when I read Somerville's book, which was extraordinarily well-timed, offering me a

personally meaningful preamble for the writing I am now undertaking. Although I still hold many of the ideas that I exercised through my involvement in the Pine Gap Womens' Peace camp and other protest actions, I look at the lines of power written on the earth differently now. And what I see isn't so much the cultural, economic and environmental predation of outsiders, of those others who dwell outside my own neighbourhood or those are more globally powerful than myself, what I see - only a little more clearly - are the differences within: the ambiguities within my own relation to this land as a woman and as a white Australian.

The line between Canberra and Pine Gap, the line of command, the line between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians cuts both ways, between and within, across self and other. The lines of power can cut in more than one direction, doubling and redoubling the surface, the skin of the earth we inhabit. But the line itself, although a mark of division, separation, is also a linking place, a barely liminal connection between cultures, fields of knowledge, between purpose and understanding.

In elaborating the ways in which the self encounters experience as other, Elspeth Probyn recalls how for Foucault, 'the processes of subjectification are the ways in which the exterior line of force is bent and folded upon itself so that the inside and the outside are rearticulated' (Probyn, 1993, 5; in Somerville, 50). As a country, I think we are greatly in need of this rearticulation.

The long quotation I began with from Somerville's *Body/Landscape Journal* talks about why the local Aboriginal women supported the Pine Gap protest. Later during the protest came some disapproval of how the white women acted at the camp which highlighted the differences between the groups. The white women performed or spoke their notion of right-action, of protest, but for the Aboriginal women this performance was encroaching and disrespectful: it spoke too loud. This disagreement isn't something I want to address at any length. I touch on it here, rather, as a way of anticipating some of the elements I do want to explore. These include differences in the meanings of ownership and place, notably white culture's need to appropriate, and of what it might mean to say with the Pitjantjatjara and Aranda women of 1983:

*We want this land. We want to look after it well*

and how it feels, as well as what it might mean to say

*We want all these hard thinking people to go away.*

Up to what point, we might ask with reference to Gilles Deleuze, can we unfold the exclusionary line between our own meaning and the non-sense of the other without falling into the void of in-difference (Deleuze, 1990, 20-22)? For me this is a visual metaphor as much as it is a conceptual one. If we look we can see ritual traces on the land where Indigenous people moved in their daily lives, we can also see the waves of white settlement, land acquisition, farming and roads, square suburban markings, and the lines of global power and attrition made evident again now in war.

How far can we fold back the lines between us and still be who we are? Maybe there are other things to be?

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I remember in my teens, living in a very ordinary suburb in outer suburban Melbourne. Sometimes in summer I lay on the grass in the back yard. The grass was prickly, in brown and green patches beneath my limbs, and smelled like burning incense. I lay with my head in the shade of a massive old gum tree, since cut down

by nervous neighbours. I've felt the gap every time I've gone back there, a space on my horizon of home. Then I longed to escape from my back yard with its grey paling fences. Staring up at the sky I made a window with my hands and watched the clouds moving past this frame. I imagined myself becoming a cloud, loosened, constantly remade. In that form I could go anywhere. I wondered even then if I would ever find anywhere to belong.

Many of us live with this sense of ambiguity about place. Those who have come from elsewhere - even when this elsewhere is now beyond family memory - non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians who have been displaced by force from their ancestral lands, even those who've remained all their lives in their home cities and towns: we live with a unsettled sense of belonging. Yet leaving the city limits many people also feel a sense of heart and spirit connection with the land, as Jo Darbyshire did when she made the journey that resulted in her landscape painting *Wildflowers* which I address a little further on in this essay.

Discussion of the tensions of alienation and ownership in Australia's cultural history is hardly new and is frequently centred on constructions of landscape. Delys Bird, for example, refers to a "preoccupation with the landscape" that characterises representations of Australia, and finds its inception in early white settlers' "Arcadian longings" for the picturesque (Bird, 1989, 1). The frame of the landscape imposes the idea of order upon nature. The frame of the landscape speaks of separation from nature, of difference, and yet appears to bring nature into the room. This difference is not only the split between nature and civilisation, for difference itself can also be a strange set of mirrorings: the points at which recognition of self begins to occur.

Because, so far amongst human cultural practices, nature has never been wholly lost from sight, it is only in the act of performing the windowed view that landscape enters the civilised dwelling place and becomes the last imagined vestige of the soul. Romantic conceptions of the land have powerfully shaped painterly visions of Australia from Eugene Von Guerard to William Robinson. Drawing on Freud's concept of *unheimlich* Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs write of the 'uncanny' space of Australia, alien home to convicts and immigrants alike and to the dark romanticism through which discourses of belonging and difference are often inflected in mainstream Australian culture. The Australian film *Lantana*, first released during 2001, is no exception to this.

The sense of ambiguity I'm reaching for here is not only the experience of white Australians. In her poetry, most famously in the poem *We are Going*, the Australian writer Oodgeroo Nunnuccal also wrote of her people made strange in their own land by white strangers.<sup>2</sup> The process of acknowledging violence and enabling resettlement is something we necessarily share.

I want now to look a little more closely at the politics of connectedness and rupture in the light of Jo Darbyshire's painting *Wildflowers*, and attempt to contextualise some of the ideas, memories and experiences I am working with here. *Wildflowers* is partly about the power of male violence to become 'the law of the land'. As a landscape painting *Wildflowers* offers a place from which to critique a key aspect of the Australian popular imaginary - the scopic desire that gets replayed in numerous forms from commercial tourist brochures to art house cinema through visual tropes of desert panoramas, ancient earth-red mountains, bright skies - the moving eye that penetrates the sacred dwelling places within open terrain.

*Wildflowers* has been shown several times in Perth. It is owned by the Murdoch University Art Collection and was first exhibited at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at

UWA in 1995 as part of an exhibition called *bu-ran-gur ang (Court out): Women and the Law*, curated by Annette Pedersen and Katharine Trees, organised to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of International Women's Day.

In September 2001 I included *Wildflowers* as part of an exhibition called *Wide Open* also held at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, which dealt with historical and contemporary, urban and rural views of Australia as 'open terrain'. In terms of this notion *Wildflowers* offered a highly valuable way of exploring the politics of gender, landscape and belonging.

During the *Wide Open* exhibition Jo Darbyshire generously agreed to speak about the work for a series of lectures and discussions I was organising around the show. As part of her talk she recalled the experience that inspired her painting. She spoke of being terrified at night while camped in the bush with a former girlfriend as a group of vehicles entered the campsite and, roaring their engines, drove in circles around the womens' panel van. After a few minutes the vehicles left the campsite, possibly, Darbyshire speculates, because their own vehicle - the panel van - is usually seen as a signifier of heterosexual masculinity.

Jo's story taps into an archetypal terror: woman's fear of men in packs. This fear is handed down from mother to daughter and is part of the story of woman's bodily life upon this planet: the memories of women, says Trinh Minh-ha, are "transmitted from mouth to mouth, body to body, hand to hand" (1989, 121)

I once had a similar experience, alone in a tent in the Victorian highlands. I had just begun menstruating and wanted to be in a space of my own away from the noise and clutter of my parents and brother. Late one night two cars drove hard and fast toward me in the dark, flashed their headlights onto full beam, braked suddenly and revved their engines. Nothing more than that. After a few moments the noise of the engines stopped and the cars went away. I felt the experience belonged to my new condition as woman. I had been warned.

In what our politicians call 'the bush', by which they mean the network of farms and towns that serve Australia's rural economy, the codes of gender and national identity that have long occupied colonial and late-colonial discourse can magnify this fear. It isn't hard to find evidence of white Australia as a culture that mythologises gendered traits of male adventurism, acquisitiveness, larrikinism and aggression as key elements of national self-recognition. Amongst male painters alone these can be traced from Roberts and McCubbin to Nolan and Dobell. In literature this has been celebrated in frequently quite mystical terms, including by Henry Lawson, Patrick White, D.H. Lawrence and Peter Carey, and is often made more haunting by that irresistible conclusion to the epic narrative, the death of the hero.

Darbyshire's work layers images with text. Lines from Dorothea Mackellar's famous poem *My Country* appear on the right bisection of the canvas. Many of us know them well because we learned them in early childhood. They speak of terror as well as love.<sup>3</sup>

The figures of two unclothed women sporting artificial phalluses or dildoes cavort in the foreground, mocking and challenging the phallic gaze. The gaze in this case comes not only from the viewers who come before this picture and its cross-gendered performers but, suggestively, from the imminent male motorists for whom the woman on the right sticks out her provocative hitchhiker's thumb. Between them is the spooky outline of Botticelli's *Venus*, painted in red and blue against the red and blue fields of colour that stand for land and sky, split along the zippered join of the

canvas – a circumstantial reference, perhaps, to Erica Jong’s 1970s parodic fantasy of the heterosexual zipless fuck.

Darbyshire’s Venus is also split below the waist, along the horizon line, just as the trope of woman in our culture is split by the historical contradictions of gender and desire. This Venus is merely an outline, the faint, unrealised vision of a Feminine Ideal, her potency and fertility cut off by ‘the lie of the land’: a phrase that Paul Carter uses deliberately to refer to the spatial deceptions of modern Australian history and which I use here to suggest related deceptions of gender and landscape.

Flowers float out of this transplanted Venus’s mouth. This might be read as an allusion to the famous wildflower season of Western Australia when tourists and locals pour into the vast countryside north of Perth immersing themselves in the vivid floral colour – the modern inheritance of nineteenth-century botanical exploration which coded British Imperial power in the naming and classification of material and organic objects.

I’m reminded here in passing of the colonial female wildflower artists and naturalists, Margaret Forrest, Georgiana Molloy, Emily Pelloe, Ellis Rowan and the Tasmanian writer and artist Louisa Ann Meredith whose work served to package impressions of Australia abroad. These women artists produced work that was professionally exquisite, scientifically accurate and appeared to be a suitably feminine pastime. Darbyshire’s painting might be seen as both alluding to and breaking with this tradition.<sup>4</sup>

If the Western Australian wild flowers in this work suggest a connection with cultivated archetypes of the feminine they also take form here as an utterance of the beauty that survives locally in harsh cultural and geographical terrain. There are other kinds of utterance going on in this painting, however: most obviously the two female figures who appropriate and ‘wear’ phalluses, claiming the symbolic right to speak their autonomy. I will resist extended discussion here in Lacanian terms, but any viewing of this work makes obvious the determination of these two figures to take and play with, rather than to *be*, the encoded phallus of desire: indeed to turn this phallic body back upon itself, as Alison Rowley notes in her review of this exhibition, published in *Women’s Art* in early 1996.

Darbyshire’s landscape of comedy and terror is partly about the barriers to freedom for women travelling in the bush. In fact the body of the painting itself is a gesture of taking back male-dominated ground. The field of the image is painted in oil on found tarpaulin. Rowley remarks that: “The ‘tarp’ is associated with travel in the bush in at least two ways ... used by itinerant workers to carry bed rolls ... and by long distance truck drivers to secure their loads” (Rowley, 30) who are predominantly male. Rowley’s comment that the tarpaulin is commonly the fabric tool of male workers is of course a generalisation. I’ve used tarps myself on more than one occasion. That this particular piece of tarp was once the property of a man is, however, indicated by the piece of graffiti that was already written there when Darbyshire acquired it: which reads “suck my cock you little sluts” and which Darbyshire has retained on the canvas as a marker of the dialogics of gender that this work performs.

I once travelled with a man in central Australia who told me that he saw that landscape as feminine, ‘yielding’. In his eyes, the body of the land was also the body of woman. Travelling with him was the closest I could then come to being alone in that burning country.

*Wildflowers* reminds me of a short story by the late 19th century Belgian/Australian writer Tasma, entitled *Monsieur Calouche*, in which an educated Belgian immigrant

fails to survive in the harsh and abusive working conditions of the Australian outback. After he is found dead in the bush Monsieur Calouche is discovered to be a woman, breasts bound to her body in the effort to appear as a man.<sup>5</sup>

Tasma's story was just one attempt to critique the romance of white male violence in a space which can seem at times unmediated by other modes of communication, knowledge and identification. What does this romance of Australian masculinity mean for the young men, particularly of white rural Australia, for whom recklessness, transience, alcohol, limited education and under-employment is a way of life?

I wondered more than once how Jo Darbyshire knew that the drivers of the roaring cars were all men? When I finally asked her she said that she heard their voices. I understood from this that their voices spoke to her through, under and above the revving engines of their trucks and cars. As I heard Jo retell her story at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery the space in which she and her then girlfriend camped began to take on a life of its own. I imagined this space as a local male meeting ground –a place to which young men from local farms rallied together on a regular basis, a kind of modern battleground for the clash of roaring turbines, the furious driving through, around and over the traces of other kinds of frustration, isolation and disempowerment.

My brother was a shearer. He has a story too.

At the time of the *Wide Open* exhibition Jo wrote some notes for me about *Wildflowers*, commenting that:

“this painting holds memories and symbols of many things to me, my fury at being contained, my response to the fear of violence and my love of the country....I now see that what I missed at this time was how my anger at not being free to be in the land blinded me to my own arrogance as a white person expecting 'free' access to the land anyway” (Darbyshire, 2001).

This work emerges from a feeling of gendered denial to female pleasure, to freedom to travel and camp in safety and to a connectedness with country. The artist suggests in her statement an understanding that as a non-Indigenous Australian she now sees that she has no prior claim to landscape even though this was an attitude that shaped the creation of *Wildflowers*.

In acknowledging that none of us white Australians (what we call gubbas where I come from) have a prior claim of any kind and in acknowledging the brutal history of our peoples here, I think the questions remain. How can we belong? What is home? I don't think it is enough to endow our non-urban landscape or Indigenous Australia with the burden of being what David Tacey refers to reservedly as 'the soul' of Australia. Nor is this the special responsibility of women either. Those of us who were involved in the Pine Gap Peace Protest I believe did see ourselves as having a special role to play, as women, in the context of a discourse of violence that even now underpins relationships between men and women in our culture. However, I think that the archetypal identification of women as the carers, nurturers, soil-tillers and bringers of life can also encapsulate other kinds of appropriation. White culture has rewritten much of this country, marked out the sites of property, applied new signs, made new readings of ancient geological texts. It is self-evident that these are by no means the only stories that are important to tell.

Margaret Somerville reflects at length on the liminal position many non-Indigenous people still occupy in Australia: neither in or out of country. To extend this tension in a useful way, she explores the idea of the improper house, the temporary or the

open habitation. For Somerville this is partly the 'undoing of mother – unstitching, unsettlement, displacement' (Somerville, 182). Somerville's elaboration of the discursive properties of her own improvised dwelling - the cottage in which she writes - in turn encourages me to extend my own thinking and writing along these lines.

These thinking lines feel new to me. They are partly the attempted re-writing of my own process of subjectification, the acknowledgement that I possess a privileged position, able to move across certain social, professional and geographical territories and still retain my bounded sense of who I am. At the same time, as a white woman, there are limits to my access. In some cases these are proper limits to how and where I can go. I can be a little wild, I can lock the doors of my house and leave the known markers of my civilisation. I can lose, temporarily, the comforts and confinements of my daily urban life, but in the end I must return to my place in the world. Yet, strangely, this place I return to is not a geographical position, nor a building nor a street, nor is it utterly dependent on my network of family and other relationships. Rather, it seems to me that my place is marked by a sometimes flurried flow of words – verbal, paper and electronic - the knowledge of certain things - for instance the name of an author or artist, how to reach a particular café or shopping mall - and the shifting affinities of profession and conviction. Although daily I walk through my suburb and my town, tracing and retracing my knowledge of place and purpose, I do not yet call my habitation home.

I am not alone in my sense of inadmissible belonging. Surely many urban Indigenous people have been rendered much more inadmissible than this, separated from land and family, by a long history of land appropriation and cultural denial. I cannot fully know that experience. I can only recognise it from a distance and unbend something from my own experience to help me understand. If I stretch the boundaries of my subjectivity, if I let myself try to know or deeply imagine the lives of others, how far is it possible to reach this insight, to bring something of another form of being within myself? I'm not yet sure how far it's possible, as Deleuze says, to 'unfold' the line, to open the boundaries of possession and belonging, to bring the outside within. If I say, alongside the Pitjantjatjara and Aranda women, *I want this land. I want to look after it well*, does this change anything about who I am or how I can live? Does it help me to live in a more open way, to allow the outside air to flow in through the windows of my house, or the one different from myself to pass through open doors? Can these words ease the trace of this openness, can they help me to welcome the change?

In this essay I have begun to explore something of the experience of being both other and at one, powerful and powerless, in this land. In attempting to capture this paradox I have looked for ways to make meaning from my own inadmissible wanderings - imaginary, scholarly and geographical. I conclude with a final image that, for me, offers to encapsulate the fluctuating and overlapping spatial boundaries that lie between land and culture, self and other, ownership and belonging in Australia: an embodied metaphor for the process of transfer between closed and open dwelling.

Every year my parents took us camping. At the beginning, when I was ten years old, they bought a new six-person tent with a sewn-in floor. The tent had a bright blue awning above the entrance and, to give the family more living space, my mother sewed together a screen made of green shade cloth which she attached with elastic around the awning to form an open-air living space protected from mosquitoes and flies. It was a kind of pergola I suppose, neither inside nor outside the tent. We did



our cooking and washing in that area. We sat there on hot nights beside the gas lamp to catch the breeze. We read books beside the stove on rainy days drinking cups of billy tea.

This airy enclosure led on one side to the inner suburban sanctum of the tent, bounded by those four canvas walls, and on the other side to the bushland in which we camped. In our approach to the landscape we thus carried with us our everyday sense of ourselves. However far we went into remote country during daytime, at night this semi-enclosed domestic scene was always our point of return. However reluctant we might be on any dull or rainy day to leave the manufactured membrane of the tent, the space of the awning always drew us out into the open air, inviting our belonging, extending the boundary of home.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pine Gap is a key installation in the US military satellite information, monitoring and control system situated in central Australia north of Alice Springs

<sup>2</sup> See Kath Walker, *My People*, Milton: Jacaranda Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> "I love her far horizons,/I love her jewel-sea,/Her beauty and her terror,/The wide brown land for me!",

Dorothea Mackellar (1982).

<sup>4</sup> Rowan, for example, born in 1848, was an adventurous woman who turned the Victorian passtime of flower painting into an international career, trekking from her home in Melbourne to remote and inhospitable parts of Australia and New Guinea in search of her floral subjects, always dressed in the height of Victorian fashion: as much an expression of Imperial acquisition one might say, as the land-grabbing of miners and pastoralists. For further information on Rowan's life and work see, Margaret Hazzard, *Australia's Most Brilliant Daughter, Ellis Rowan: Artist, Naturalist and Explorer*, Richmond: Greenhouse Publications, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Tasma's work and her multivalent identity see Fiona Giles, "The Softest Disorder: Representing Cultural Indeterminacy", in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, eds Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

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