wild nature
a different way of seeing

Margot Osborne argues for a more subtle and more inclusive way of relating to the natural world

Opposite page: Lola Greeno, Necklace 2001, Maireener shells, 206cm circumference, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Rhianon Vernon-Roberts Collection. Photo: Clayton Glen.

"...there are so many species that are unique to Australia, that along with New Guinea and a few nearby islands, it forms one of the world's great zoogeographic realms."

Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters*, Reed Books Australia, 1994

In conceiving the exhibition *Wild Nature in Contemporary Australian Art and Craft* I was intrigued by the paradox that the introduced rose is so familiar, yet the Indigenous bush banana (which grows over huge tracts of Australia) still appears so strange and exotic to most non-Indigenous Australians. Although national emblems like the kangaroo and koala, the waratah and wattle, have become visual clichés as souvenir kitsch, where, I wondered, was contemporary art attesting to the wondrous diversity of native plants and animals beyond the confines of suburbia?

The great majority of Australians live in urban centres hugging the coast, where we turn our collective back to the interior, absorbing global cultural influences through multinational communications media, distanced both psychologically and physically from the natural environment beyond the city fringes. Nature is experienced compartmentalised and culturally mediated as gardens, parks, nature reserves or cultivated agricultural land. It can even be theorised in post-modern sophistry as no longer existing, thanks to the pervasiveness of human technological intervention in the way we experience physical reality.

An image of the great Australian emptiness has been imprinted on the national psyche. This *terra nullius* of the Australian imagination has been perpetuated in literature and landscape art traditions. It is reinforced by a utilitarian view of country, inherited from the pioneers of white settlement, that if land is not good for crops, or grazing, or tourism, or some other form of economic exploitation, it is wasteland. "Yet tracts of the Never Never will remain useless and inaccessible to miners and tourists for a long time yet, and it is precisely these attributes of uselessness and inaccessibility which characterise the ultimate image of the Australian landscape."[1]

Yolgnu artist Wandjuk Marika, however, has a different perspective: "The land is not empty, the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. Earth is our mother, the land is not empty".[2]

Art works selected for *Wild Nature* attest to the diversity, meaning and beauty of Australia's wild nature and to our responsibility for its care and management. In general, the work in the exhibition falls outside the genres of both landscape and botanic art. Whereas botanic art documents its subject with forensic attention to naturalistic detail, many of the artworks in the exhibition take a more subjective and abstract approach—observed with an intimate gaze, they focus on the wild beauty of patterns, textures and tones of Indigenous flora and fauna. This is the gaze of the craftsperson, attuned to discern inherent pattern and design in natural materials and forms. It is the gaze of the Indigenous artist who sees the intimate relation between the observer and observed, between nature as microcosm and macrocosm, between seasonal patterns of flora and fauna and encoded signs and meanings attesting to certain belief systems.

My conceptual approach draws on a wide range of writing about nature, from scientific, philosophical, naturalist, anthropological and aesthetic viewpoints. I was particularly influenced by Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters*, in which he expounds the case for a national identity based on understanding the value of Australia's bio-diversity and a shift to a more ecologically sustainable management of our natural resources. Acknowledging Flannery as one of his influences, Peter Timms in *Making Nature*[3] writes eloquently about his own relationship with wild and introduced flora and fauna and of the need for white Australians to re-think their approach to land use. The most recent philosophical strain of thinking about nature I pursued is the feminist eco-political perspective epitomised in Susan Hawthorne's *Wild Politics*[4], where she argues for a new politics founded on principles of bio-diversity. Then there is a whole lineage of scientific philosophers such as EO Wilson and Gregory Bateson who write from a biological perspective on the cultural/genetic co-evolution of the human mind. Human consciousness, they argue, discerns order and pattern and holistic inter-connections at a micro and macroscopic level within a chaotic, immensely complex natural world. An awareness of the interconnections between humanity and the natural environment accords with recent biological and neurological research findings that suggest we are influenced both by inherited archetypal genetic programming from our cave-dweller origins and by a culturally evolving consciousness that is able to shape nature to suit our purposes. Another significant influence on my approach is Djon Mundine, who in his various writings on the indigenous art of Arnhem Land argues that it should be viewed as a taxonomy of the natural environment: "Aboriginal bark paintings are more than just ochres on bark: they represent a social history, an encyclopedia of the environment; a place; a site; a season; a being; a song; a dance; a ritual; an ancestral story and a personal history."[5]

In using *Wild Nature* as the title of the exhibition I have been careful to qualify this with the recognition that wild does not mean pristine, as the Aboriginal people had a significant impact in modifying the landscape through their land management and harvesting practices. Similarly, in using the term to refer to Indigenous flora and fauna, I am aware that there are also introduced or feral species flourishing in the wild and posing a significant threat to these species. But exhibitions are not about academic distinctions in the use of terminology. They are about inspiring the public imagination. *Wild Nature* conjures up the sense of a natural realm that was there before we arrived and that most non-Indigenous people are still to come to terms with. Les Murray has referred to it as "the three quarters of our continent set aside for mystic poetry."[6]

European writing on beauty in nature and art[7] tends to reinforce my own observations that in the antipodes we have a differently nuanced understanding of natural beauty, which is a direct response to the tones, textures, forms of Australian wild nature and the Australian landscape: not for us, the green and pleasant pastures of the English countryside. Rather, we are more likely to find beauty in the smoky greens of the eucalypt, in the ochres of the inland, the lush growth of tropical rainforests. Wild beauty drawn from nature is everywhere evident in the exhibition, though usually not as an end in itself. It is present in Robin Best's delicate engraved and embossed porcelain forms which poetically evoke the fragile marine ecology of South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsular; in Julie Blyfield's finely-worked silver jewellery based on seeds and pods in her garden; and in the elegant patterns of Ruth Hadlow's stitched eucalypt leaves. The fragility and resilience of Australia's indigenous flora and fauna are recurring themes in other artists' work—in Sieglinde Karl's meticulously woven casuarina needle cupped hands, in Shirley Macnamara's container woven from spinifex runners and in Fiona Foley's mangrove pod cast metal wall sculptures.

While acknowledging that it is only possible to barely hint at the continent's astoundingly diverse wild nature, the exhibition does contain depictions of a wide range of indigenous plants and animals—from the far north, including the Torres Strait Islands, from the far south, the arid centre, and the south-eastern temperate zones. Diversity is reflected in modes of representation and artistic media, including ceramics, jewellery, glass, textiles and fibre, painting, works on paper and sculpture. All of this art in *Wild Nature* is evidence of a different way of seeing—of looking closely with an intimate gaze at the living bio-physical environment rather than at the distant vista. It is a hopeful sign of rapport and convergence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists in encapsulating visions of our relationship with this fragile yet resilient land.

Margot Osborne is an independent curator and writer based in Adelaide. She is the curator of *Wild Nature in Contemporary Australian Art and Craft*, a JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design exhibition touring Australia in 2003 – 4 under the Visions of Australia program.

Endnotes

1. Bruce Clunies Ross, *Landscape and the Australian Imagination*, in P.R. Eaden and F. H. Mares (eds) *Mapped But Not Known*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1986
2. Quoted in Jennifer Isaacs, *Spirit Country*, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 1999, p. 15
3. Peter Timms, *Making Nature*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 2001
4. Susan Hawthorne, *Wild Politics, Feminism, Globalisation and Bio/diversity*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, 2002
5. *Saltwater, Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country*, Baku-Larrngay Mulka Centre, 1999
6. Les Murray, *Louvres* 1984, quoted by Bruce Clunies Ross, *Landscape and the Australian Imagination*, in P.R. Eaden and F. H. Mares (eds) *Mapped But Not Known*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1986, p225
7. For instance: S. Kemal and I. Gaskell (eds), *Landscape, natural beauty and the arts*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts, Cambridge University Press, 1993