



# ISLAND TO OUTBACK

IMAGE | Photography by Quentin Chester

**12 March – 9 April 2020**

Ria Byass, Quentin Chester, Gethin Creagh, Prue Coulls, David Foreman, Ruth de la Lande, Wendy Haylock, Janine Mackintosh, Nicholas Burness Pike, Deborah Sleeman, Maggie Welz, Kenita Williamson | Curated by Eleanor Scicchitano

## *In time*

At Coward Springs it seems that you can see forever.

The Kangaroo Island artists who ventured to that campground 829 km north from the tip of the island at Penneshaw all saw something new, in the landscape, in their artistic companions and in themselves.

Here is a landscape vast and open and dry and endless and beyond words. It sits over the continent's largest inland sea which perforates the land through mound springs. These founts of water, each one unique, bubble, seep and run with ancient water endowing life to this land. It is a place of deep weathering time, of beauty and brutal conditions.

For Prue, this desert place is her home for half the year; for Wendy, Deb and Ria it is a very familiar place where they have visited their friend over many years; for the rest it was new. Yet everyone who came together for ten days in July-August 2018 yielded to an adventurousness, born of the time and permission to devote to art practice, and a place apart from 'normal life'. That was what they were there for, a serious purpose, no distractions. As a place of deep time, it forced artists to go a bit deeper. For some, their artwork in this exhibition is entirely new practice, after years of sticking to a tried and true approach.

There was plenty of time to be on your own and work your own way – to touch and feel the landscape, to absorb it and to express it in art. The pottery bench was a place to learn about ceramics and also about each other – chatting while moulding and forming. The front verandah of the house was a place of respite from the wind, but only if you had a fly net; in the museum the net could also go. Bliss. The night camp fires were a warm and friendly wind down after a rewarding day. The storm – well that was just bloody rude.

At Lake Eyre you can see forever.

Arabunna elder Reg Dodd shared the precious gift of Lake Eyre, once the ocean bed, once a lush forest, now after a long drying time a white, shiny, crusty, salty, awesome vastness. This exposure to one of the world's most magnificent sights was the heart of the experience. It brought a new mood, a more thoughtful, contemplative, overawed need to somehow process what we had seen. How is salt, the scourge of agriculture on Kangaroo Island, such a delicious thing in this setting?

On Kangaroo Island in 2013 the low-lying lagoons of Magillivray and Haines joined into inland seas when a massive downpour ran down to that lowest point. Without an outlet, the water sat and salinated for almost two years. Now, after two drought years it is a salty dry barren wasteland. There is little beauty, yet this area might become a lake of joy and wonder. If it gets there the process will be much more rapid than the 30,000 years for Lake Eyre. Mankind is seeing to that.

At Kangaroo Island you can now see what forever could be.

On 9 January 2020, islanders were brutally reminded of what an island means, as the fires swept from the west. The coast that had always been an avenue to a rich marine world became a barrier to escape. Half of a landscape that has always been notable for its vegetation is now black sticks and ash. Mallee, she-oak, sugar gum and river red gum hundreds of years old – many now gone, burnt or slaughtered in the aftermath. The field of vision has expanded alarmingly. Now the tourists who complain that they can't see the view blocked by roadside vegetation have their wish. And those who wish to be rid of that 'ugly scrub' have an argument.

Islanders, born or made, are different. They are individuals, often excessively so. They are windswept yet hugged by the sea. They are torn between being independent and demanding to be helped, often at perverse times. People in the outback are similar, creating a world within a world.

The people of Kangaroo Island arrived in different waves over the last 200 years. The soldier settlers, after World War II, established houses and farms in a foreign place with skills hastily acquired. Once that was done, the women got together to build an inner and more social life. They took themselves off to art camps at scenic places on the island – spoilt for choice of course – for a long weekend or a week.

The artists camp at Coward Springs was built on such attributes and traditions but it was more. Taking off for a world apart where so many things were different, yet so many things were not-so-gentle reminders of home. Take the wind, please.

At Coward Springs the sea is underneath everything, on Kangaroo Island it surrounds. But in both cases there are limits. We know the Great Artesian Basin and its mound springs are inexorably losing their life force, seeping into extractors' pockets. We know our marine waters are being depleted of life.

Some might hanker for simpler times but they are gone. The world is a very complicated place and our artists have a place in telling this complicated story of life. They can show the present and ponder the future. Will our grey, heartbreakingly dry lagoons become white wonderlands? Will our recovery from the fires bring more rapacious development to our island?

In the centre, there were no straight lines until the railway, fences and roads pushed straight through, and bores went down and water towers went up. We, people, changed the landscape forever.

We should know now the world is not infinite. And this is on our watch.

We are all different because of the Coward Springs artists camp. And we are all different because of the fires that raged across half the island and threatened it all. But we all, more than ever, know Kangaroo Island is our home.

Kathie Stove

February 2020



IMAGE | David Foreman, *On Land*, 2020, HD video and projection, 50min, Installation view, Praxis Artspace. Photo courtesy the gallery.

praxis ARTSPACE  
68-72 Gibson Street,  
Bowden, 5007  
t | 08 7231 1974  
e | [praxisartspace@gmail.com](mailto:praxisartspace@gmail.com)

