LORRAINE CONNELLY-NORTHEY
PAMELA KOUWENHOVEN
EVA FERNANDEZ

Where lies the Land

1 – 29 MARCH 2014

It has been 227 years since the First Fleet set sail from Portsmouth, England and 226 years since it landed in Botany Bay, NSW. Nothing could have prepared the convicts and crew for what lay ahead, for Australia was a land far beyond most people’s experience, her waters unfamiliar, and the landscape unimaginable.

The title of this exhibition is taken from William Wordsworth’s poem *Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?*. Romantic in style, the poem describes a journey by sea to an unknown land; it is a metaphor for the journey of the soul to the afterlife. It expresses the mixed emotions that accompany a trajectory that is unidirectional and irreversible. In the Romantic sense, the First Fleet’s journey from England to Australia was to the ‘afterlife’: they were leaving behind forever a certain life in the old world for a new and completely unpredictable world far from familiar shores.

And what of Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants at this point in history? While visits from foreign seafarers were not uncommon in coastal areas, none had stayed for any period of time, nor in any great number. On that portentous day in May 1787, the Indigenous peoples throughout the country could never have anticipated how irrevocably their lives were about to change, as boat loads of people from an alien land and culture sailed their way. Their ancient world was about to clash with a new world.

The story of colonial and federal Australia is primarily one of struggles and divisions, possession and dispossession. From the moment the First Fleet landed, the relationship between the colonisers, the Indigenous peoples and the land has been fraught: agrarian versus hunter-gatherer modes of subsistence; civic versus nomadic living habits; proprietary versus custodial notions of land ownership; imperial versus ancestral constructs of knowledge and law.
This exhibition examines contemporary views of Australia's relationship to the land, and to each other. Through the theories and family histories that inform the work of Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Pamela Kouwenhoven and Eva Fernández, we are given an insight into the complex nature of Australia's 21st century identity and the importance of land in the formation of a personal and national sense of self.

The insights proffered by the three artists are enlightening. In some regards, Australia is coming of age; relations among the trinity of Indigenous people, the land and non-Indigenous people are improving and becoming more honest. In other ways, however, the colonial past continues to cast a long and chilling shadow.

Lorraine Connelly-Northey's series of Narbongs are intimately personal sculptures that give form to her cultural heritage. Of Waradgerie and Irish descent, Connelly-Northey grew up on a farm in Victoria. Her childhood was spent alongside her now-retired father, watching the way he farmed the land. He impressed on her the importance of working with the land, of listening to and respecting its needs. Along with her mother, he taught Connelly-Northey about her Waradgerie heritage, its meaning within their family unit and how it connected her culturally to the land. The duality of her ancestry is important to her, and is an integral part of who she is.

Connelly-Northey's Narbong sculptures are, in essence, the physical manifestation of her life and heritage. Made from discarded farming and rural materials such as rusted fencing wire, wire mesh, gauze, saw blades, bed springs and a chaff filter – remnants of past agricultural activity and rural life. The materials connect her to her father and the farm; the narbongs to her mother and the river. The narbongs are vessels that carry her heritage and memories. She explains that the Waradgerie word narbong translates to "pouch of the marsupial" – the safe haven where the mother raises her young. Nurturing is a recurring theme in her work.

Womb-like, her narbongs also speak of birth and death. For Connelly-Northey, these objects mirror every person's fate: we have come from the earth, and we shall return to it, as eventually will her narbongs. In that regard, they are objects about loss and grief. Connelly-Northey says that she has had to research the missing pieces of her Waradgerie culture that her own mother was unable to pass on to her. As with many of her mother's generation and the generations before her, access to traditional practices and language was limited as a result of government policies that destroyed family units and dispossessed people of their lands, language and culture.

While Connelly-Northey's narbongs touch on death and decay, they are also about renewal. Her very act of art making has saved these materials from rotting in a local tip, while her research into Waradgerie culture strengthens her knowledge and understanding.

Pamela Kouwenhoven grew up in the dry farm land of the Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. She observed her father tending the same large tract of land as his father before him; Kouwenhoven's grandfather had cleared the land in the 1920s. Father and son developed an intimate and humble relationship with what Kouwenhoven describes as marginal land on the far north coast of Streaky Bay and beyond.

Their persistent efforts became the “dreaming” story that lies at the heart of Kouwenhoven's practice. Like Connelly-Northey, her works speak of the cycle of life and death, of the land and its
inhabitants. Using discarded farming materials such as malthoid, she maps out her childhood memories and impressions of the environment. Given that the land did not yield willingly to their agricultural efforts, one must ask the question of why Kouwenhoven's grandfather and father persisted. Kouwenhoven used to watch her father looking out over the farmland and said he knew every rise and fall of its surface. His feelings for his land ran deep, and she likens it to a spiritual connection; it was in his blood, his land defined who he was.

Kouwenhoven's *Dryland* series are constructed from old malthoid scraped from the bases of discarded rainwater tanks. Acting as a membrane between the contained artesian water and the earth, the malthoid resists the water's relentless attempts to return to ground. The malthoid thus becomes a parchment on which the forces of nature and the ravages of time are inscribed. These works are eloquent reminders of the limitations of our technology in harnessing the power of the earth, and the inherent beauty of the land that shaped them.

Coming from such dry country, Kouwenhoven is acutely aware of the importance of water. During times of drought, the land is particularly prone to bushfire. Passage, an installation of up-ended automotive exhaust pipes, symbolises the dual nature of fire: devastation and regeneration. For pastoralists, bushfires destroy crops, livestock and livelihoods. But in nature, bushfires clear undergrowth, thereby allowing the environment to regenerate itself.

Kouwenhoven's use of exhaust pipes hints at our complicity in the devastation: agricultural activity can destabilise the environment as introduced plants and animals compete for precious resources, and vehicles criss-cross fragile topsoils, hastening their erosion. The environmental damage caused by insensitive human activity troubles Kouwenhoven deeply, and she believes that balance needs to be restored if we are to survive.

Eva Fernández offers an immigrant's perspective on connecting to Australian land. Born in Canada of Spanish parents, Fernández arrived in Australia twenty years ago. In this time she has lived on the east and west coasts, and is now based in Perth. Despite twenty years here, she claims she is still an ‘outsider’ who continually sees her environment anew. To her eyes, the native plants, animals and light are an enigma, and the stains of colonialism are apparent.

Fernández's series of eight photographic works document her observations of contemporary Australia against the backdrop of Indigenous and non-Indigenous connections to the land. However, the primary subject – land – is absent from her images. Instead, she presents a catalogue of suspended objects that have been imported from the Home country: *Holy Bible, Chair, Clippers, Photo album, Pitchfork, Suitcase, Trumpet and Teapot*.

These objects symbolise Western cultivation and agriculture, the trappings of middle-class England. From an Indigenous perspective, they are symbols of oppression, destruction and dispossession. Contemporary Australia has been built upon the back of this marred history. The images themselves are sparsely beautiful – much like the Australian outback – but at the same time, they are darkly sinister despite their bright white backgrounds. The objects stand out in stark relief. There is nowhere for them to hide, nor a background to soften their impact.

Suspending the objects from strings refers to the colonisers’ attempts to retain their own culture as they tried to shape Australia in the image of the Homeland. Fernández subtly draws on her own cultural roots, citing the influence of Juan Sánchez Cotán, a Spanish Baroque painter (1560-
1627). Sánchez Cotán depicted still lives of fruit and vegetables suspended above the ground from string. This practice was used to prevent food from rotting. Fernández’s use of this ancient Spanish custom becomes a metaphor for non-Indigenous Australia’s continued practice of being bound to and by ancestral cultures from far off lands, at the expense of the aboriginal.

The string lends an eerie air to the works by alluding to the widespread acts of hanging Indigenous people out bush without a proper trial. In more recent times, it is a reminder of Indigenous deaths in custody.

Fernández’s works suggest that the relationship to the land and between its peoples is still troubled by past injustices and the vestiges of colonial aspirations. Without the depiction of any physical land in her images, it becomes difficult to get one’s bearings. There is a pervasive sense of dislocation.

How then is the viewer to orientate themself towards the future?

Karen Zadra, February 2014
Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?

Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?
Festively she puts forth in trim array;
As vigorous as a Lark at break of day:
Is she for tropic suns, or polar snow:
What boots the enquiry? Neither friend nor foe
She cares for; let her travel where she may,
She finds familiar names, a beaten way
Ever before her, and a wind to blow.
Yet still I ask, what Haven is her mark?
And, almost as it was when ships were rare,
From time to time, like Pilgrims, here and there
Crossing the waters; doubt, and something dark,
Of the old Sea some reverential fear,
Is with me at thy farewell, joyous Bark!!

– William Wordsworth

† boot – v., advantages (archaic). What boots the enquiry?: What is to be gained by asking?

†† Bark – (poetic) any boat, esp a small sailing vessel