

2006

Judith Dinham: an artistic journey

Judith Dinham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks>

Dinham, J. (2006). *Judith Dinham : an artistic journey*. Perth, Australia: Edith Cowan University.
This Book is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/7121>

Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author's moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).
- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.



JUDITH DINHAM

AN ARTISTIC JOURNEY



Cover: (cropped)

Unfurling 2004

62 x 180 cm

Oil on board

Collection: ECU

Evolving Places 2001

20 x 105 cm

Acrylic and technologically
manipulated media on board

Private collection, Bunbury

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

JUDITH DINHAM



AN ARTISTIC JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION PROFESSOR ROBYN QUIN

Hybrid Carpet 1999

122 x 140 cm

Acrylic and technologically
manipulated media on board

Private collection, Sydney

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS of secondary and tertiary visual arts studies will find this book of immense value. It is a unique resource in that it brings together, in a single work, a wide variety of primary texts focused on a single artist. To gather such a diverse range of material on any single artist would require months of research. The book serves multiple functions: it is at one level a history of a very fine artist, Judith Dinham, in another sense it is a history of a period of the development of a specific research trajectory. It maps the artist's attachment to certain places which stimulate new conceptions of space and its representation. It explores how this particular individual has given form and meaning to ideas and expressed her own experience of place, space and gender. Then again, it is not a history so much as a snapshot of an artist's world – her practice and its positioning within all that goes along with successful art practice – exhibitions, publicity, catalogues and reviews.

It will be a useful tool to assist students in achieving outcomes that require them to respond and critically evaluate the artworks of others, reflect on the thinking underpinning the creative process and understand the evolution of an artist's practice within its social and cultural context.

The varied range of types and sources of material included in the book offer a rich resource for the student seeking to understand the development of the artist over time. The author explores her development in such contrasting contexts as Tuscany and the

Western Australian desert, over a period stretching more than twenty years. Along with her own reflections on her work the views of outsiders and critics are also offered. In this way the reader is invited to reflect on the differences and intersections between an artist's self-perception and the perception of others.

Aspiring artists should follow this artist's lead and treat themselves, their practice and other's reflection on their work as a research work in progress. One day you might choose to publish a book as rich and rewarding as this one.

Professor Robyn Quin

Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Engagement and Development
Executive Dean, Faculty of Education & Arts, Edith Cowan University



JUDITH DINHAM



Left: Artist's sketch book

Below: Artist sketching at Meeline Station, Western Australia

Opposite: Artist in the studio, Verdaccio Studios, Italy

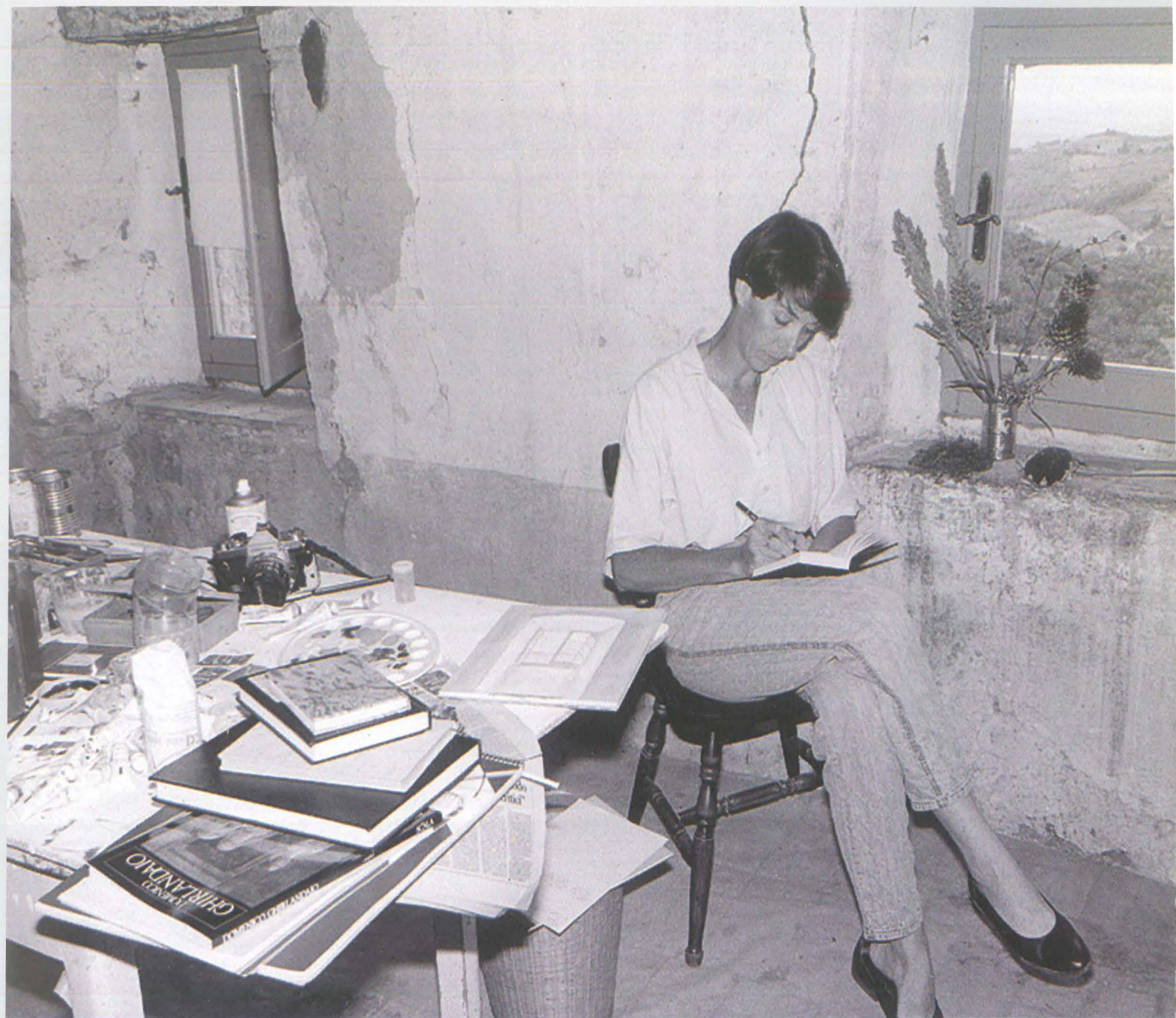
JUDITH DINHAM is a mid-career artist whose art and research interest centres on the experience of place, as expressed through a relationship with land. The desert from a feminine perspective and the role of travel are of particular interest. To this end she has worked in the Australian desert region over many years, (primarily at Meeline Station in Western Australia where her sister and family live) and had residencies in the USA and Italy. Her doctorate centres on this creative work in which the concept of a hybrid space as a conception of her experience of being and belonging, is developed.

Judith's paintings and drawings have been exhibited in Australia and overseas in both solo and invitation group exhibitions. Her work is represented in public, corporate and private collections in Australia and a number of overseas countries. She has won awards for her work and grants to assist in the development of her art practice. Her artworks are reproduced in art books, calendars and journals. Australian television programs have also provided insights to the artist and her work.

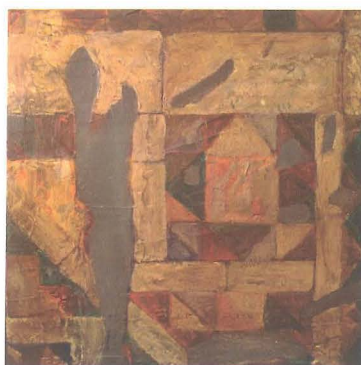
Judith Dinham combines an art practice with her position as Senior Lecturer at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia where she has been an academic leader in visual arts education and where previously, as Curator of Artworks, she established Curatorial Services to manage and develop the University's extensive art collection. She holds a Fellowship for Excellence in Teaching and her art and education background includes experience in curriculum development, arts administration, curatorship and research.

She created the highly successful touring exhibition, *Drawing Out: contemporary drawing practice in Western Australia* and later, with her colleagues, Glen Phillips and George Karpathakis, the 12 episode, award winning, *Landscape & You* series that was broadcast on SBS and ABC National Television. She is an International Baccalaureate examiner and most recently has been a member of the national research team completing *The National Review of Education in Visual Arts, Craft, Design and Visual Communications* for the Australian Government. She represented the team by making a presentation at UNESCO's first *World Conference on Arts Education: Building creative capacities for the 21st century* in Portugal in 2006.





HOW THINGS HAPPEN



Mosaic Tiles 1,3 1995

29 x 29 cm

Oil on board

Opposite Page:

Curtained Encounter 1995

90 x 60 cm

Oil on board

The trajectory of an artist's practice is probably best understood as an accretion of experiences. Investigations, events or activities that may at the time have seemed inconsequential or only tangentially relevant, can prove to be profoundly significant in the longer term.

AN EXHIBITION of computer generated images completed by Judith Dinham's art students at Edith Cowan University (ECU) a decade ago, led to her first collaboration with poet and ECU colleague, Glen Phillips on a boxed book project. The establishment of this partnership marks a significant stage in the development of the artist's current artwork.

Their next collaboration was an artistic research project about 'landscape learning' that led to a collaborative exhibition at Perth Galleries with the support of the director, Norah Orht. This was at the time when the creative arts were just beginning to establish a research profile in universities and the next stage of the project attracted a major research grant from ECU. It was a large project that involved a period of work at Verdaccio Studios in Italy, so the Australia Council for the Arts provided an International Promotions grant to assist in the presentation of the project at a conference in Switzerland. Along with their collaborative exhibitions in Florence and Castellina in Chianti, the presentation represented an early expression of a fruitful and exciting scholarly investigation that was lodged firmly in the creative explorations of both poet and artist.

The first of Judith's exhibitions after her return from Italy was *Lo Spazio – The Space* with Melbourne-based artist, Julia Ciccarone and Perth artist, Rina Franz at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). This exhibition, which Art on the Move subsequently toured to regional galleries, explored the different relationships each artist had with Italy. It was in this body of work that Judith began to evolve the notion of a hybrid space, the concept that has underscored the trajectory of her work over subsequent years.

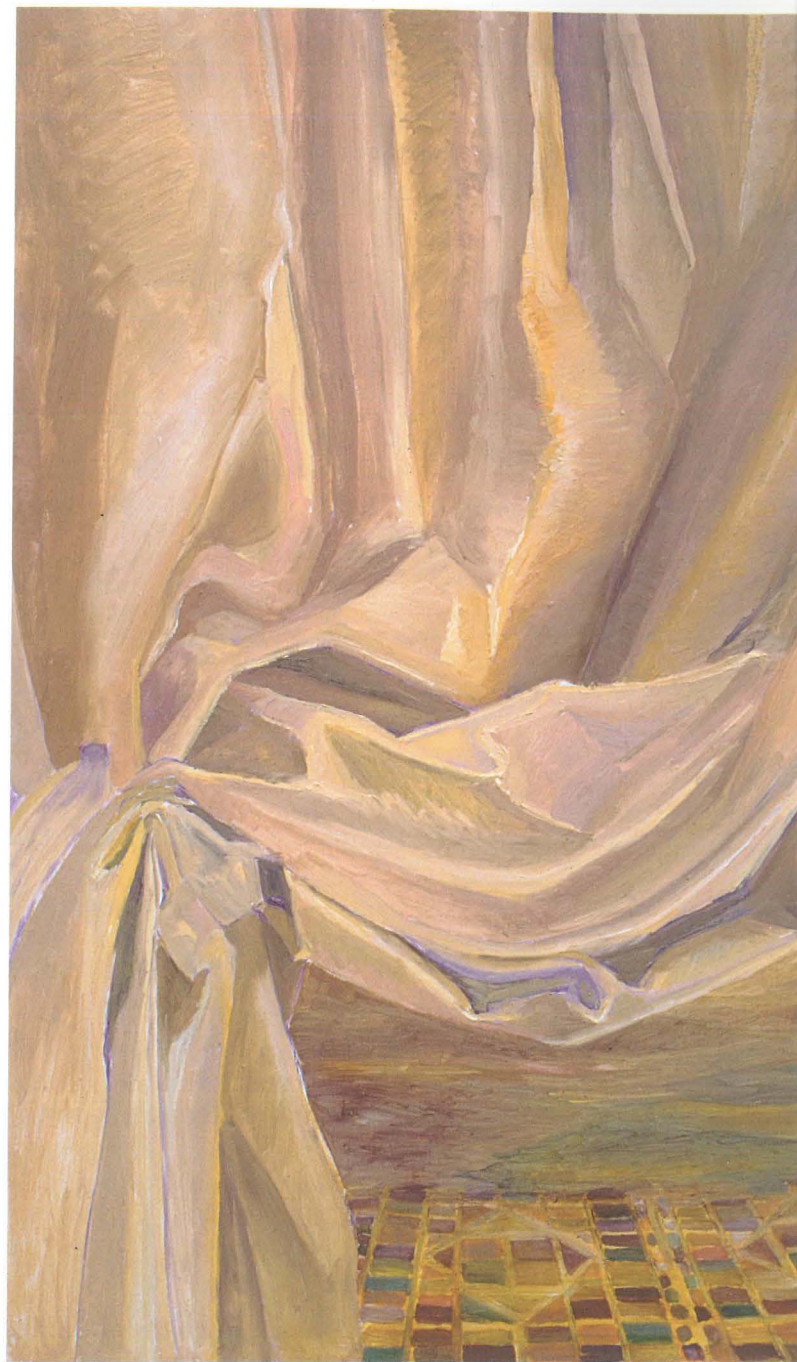
The new research climate that embraced the creative arts saw the first doctoral programs for arts practice being developed in two universities in Australia. Propelled by the work done on their Landscape Learning project, Judith enrolled at Wollongong University in NSW under the supervision of the renowned sculptor, Bert Flugelman and later Dr Sue Rowley who was subsequently Executive Director for Humanities and Creative Arts at the Australian Research Council and is Pro-Vice-Chancellor at UTS. During her candidature she researched and formalised the notion of a 'hybrid space'. Professor Rowley's departure from the university led Judith Dinham to complete her doctorate at University of Western

Sydney with Associate Professor David Hull. During this time, she had solo exhibitions in Australia and New Zealand whilst also accepting invitations to exhibit in international and Australian group exhibitions.

Timing is everything! At the time that Judith Dinham and Glen Phillips were beginning their Landscape Learning project, ECU was branching into the television-based open-learning market. Associate Professor Mike Grant, then Head of Media Productions at ECU, approached the researchers to see if their project, with its strong visual orientation, could be the basis for a video series. With the support of the relevant Faculty Deans – Dr Geoff Gibbs AM, Director of WAAPA¹ and Professor Robyn Quin, now Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean Faculty of Education & Arts, the *Landscape & You* series was created with the valued engagement of ECU's TV producer and director, George Karpathakis.

Landscape & You was designed as a twelve-episode, stand-alone, video series for general public viewing and education, supported by additional educational materials for enrolled students. Developing the video program opened up a whole new field of activity with artists, writers, musicians and scholars who were recognised for their engagement with the concept of a creative relationship to place. Important contributions to the video episodes were made by John Kinsella, Judith Watson, Ross Gibson, Brian Blanchflower, Pat Hoffie, Geoffrey Bolton, Elizabeth Jolley, Sue Rowley, Veronica Brady, John Scott, Doris Gingingara, Robert Juniper, Michael O'Ferrall, Margaret Moore, Kay Schaffer, Maggie Baxter, Roger Smalley and many others from around the country, including an adventurous group of ECU creative arts students who participated in the interdisciplinary arts camp at Dryandra Forest that later became the subject of one of the episodes. Access to the art collections at the Art Gallery of Western Australia as well as ECU's extensive collection provided valuable visual reference material.

The series went to air on SBS and then ABC national television. It was well received and won an Australian Society for Educational Technology Award for the highest quality design and production. *Landscape & You* also became a unit of study at ECU for the Master of Education (Visual Arts Education), the on-line Master of Education and the on-shore Bachelor of Education course for art teachers from Botswana, making the ideas about landscape available to a wide audience. The video programme was purchased by libraries and was also a regular feature on regional and Access TV for a number of years, attracting many viewers.



1. Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at ECU.

FLORAL CARPETS: AN EXPRESSION OF PLACE

ESSAY BY JUDITH DINHAM

Ground
Meeline Station
Western Australia

This piece was written by the artist in 2001 and provides an explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of the artwork and an insight into how the artist's thinking and imagery evolved.

IN MY ARTWORK, I have been preoccupied with exploring the nature of an experience of place as expressed through a relationship to the land. My interest has been in 'an imagining' of the nature of being and belonging in the Australian context – one that is based on understandings that have emerged and crystallised through my artistic journey. This has included working both in Italy and the Australian desert. This imagining reflects the nature of my embodied experience as a woman and non-Aboriginal Australian.

In this country, Aboriginal rights are being asserted substantially on the basis of relationship to land. As Aboriginal people struggle to dignify their 50,000 years of occupancy, it seems the height of conceit to claim that I too have a special affinity with this land. That I belong. And yet! My cultural roots may link me to other places but five generations and my daily 'lived' experience ties me here. The traditional narratives of identity may tell me this is an inhospitable terrain and yet I rejoice in its particularity and subtle exuberance. History may describe the land as the locale of masculine endeavour and would have me believe I am invisible or irrelevant in this vast, challenging landscape. Yet I know differently.

In imagining a position for myself, what emerges for me as an area for exploration is a border-zone space. Far from being a peripheral place, this space can be seen as a *middle* zone because it exists in the middle, between different states. It is a Janus-like zone – looking both ways. It is a spatially fluid zone, characterised by ambiguity and hybridity, that flexes between here and elsewhere, inside and outside, domestic and public. It allows a way of being – a different way of being – that is conceived spatially.

This concept of a spatially fluid position is grounded in my experience of the desert – a place where the nature of one's presence comes into sharp focus. In the Outback mythology the desert is cast as the quintessential abject and alien place and most definitely - from explorers to drovers to miners to truckies – the arena for masculine heroic action. My experience is a different one. Mine is of the desert as an intimate and inhabited space.

In claiming this, I also want to say that my sense of dwelling in this place is distinguished from, and also respects, an Aboriginal sense of these things.





Tuscan Looking Glass Series

Lo Spazio – The Space exhibition 1995

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA),

Western Australia

Residency at Verdaccio Studios in Tuscany, Italy – Hybrid space

The idea of a hybrid space evolved for me over several years and began when I was working on a joint project with the poet, Glen Phillips. For the project, my work began at Meeline, a sheep station in the semi-desert Outback region of Western Australia and then continued in Tuscany, Italy where I spent seven months working at Verdaccio Studios. A major series of works about the Italian phase was shown in an exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) entitled *Lo Spazio – The Space*, and was described in a catalogue essay as “a quest to negotiate or reconcile sites of ‘belonging’”.¹

The work in this exhibition examined the spatial dynamic of being ‘present’ in a place – viewed from the position of a visitor in Italy who has travelled from an Australian homeland. The exhibition title, *Lo Spazio – The Space* which incorporates the Italian word for space and then, after a hyphen, the English word, is intended to encapsulate the notion of two separate spatial dimensions which are simultaneously connected. In this case, these spaces – or places – are geographically separate and culturally connected. Trinh Minh-ha, when considering the exile/migrant/traveller experience, writes of a ‘hyphenated reality’, which she characterises as an ongoing repercussive process.² As a visitor, I too was located in a place which was, for me, a negotiation of a ‘here’ and an ‘elsewhere’.

A place that was both foreign and familiar, mythic and physical.

The Australian writer, David Malouf, captures this experience in a short story entitled *A Place in Tuscany*. Over many years, Malouf regularly lived in Tuscany for extended periods of time and in his story the description of the town and its inhabitants is “seen through the eyes of the Malouf persona who lives there, hovering between outsider/insider”.³ This position *between* being an outsider or an insider is a hybrid position – made up from being partly inside and partly outside. It is a mutable space that is perpetually in a state of flux as the balances shift and change.

In my work, I sought to express a similar experience of being located in this spatial zone with its shifting balances. In *Lo Spazio – The Space* eight painted panels on the wall describe the nature of this hybrid space at different stages of my residency. Underneath this sequence of panels, a parallel sequence of twelve smaller panels replicating fragments of Italian mosaic tiled floors, is placed on the floor. This format links the physical space of the gallery floor where the viewer stands and the mediated space represented in the wall panels.

One wall panel titled *Reflections in a Mirror* depicts an empty Tuscan landscape of rolling hills receding into mist high up on

IL Crete From Here 1995

90 x 60 cm

Oil on board

the picture plane. Suspended in front of it is a round and ornate Italian mirror with a curved reflecting surface. It reflects back to the viewer a stretch of Australian desert landscape. The curve of the mirror distorts this image whilst also strengthening its veracity by creating the curved horizon reminiscent of the same visual effect experienced when standing in flat, open desert country. Another panel, *IL Crete From Here* depicts an Italian landscape stretching to a high horizon. Hanging suspended in front of this scene but only covering the middle third, is a transparent veil or curtain. What place is the 'here' where the invoked 'self' stands and looks across the landscape? The imposition of the veil suggests that the 'here' is outside the landscape. The self, in this case, *myself*, is present, viewing the scene and simultaneously removed – separated and excluded by the veil that covers part of the view.

Being located in a hybrid space that is understood as a mix of a 'here' and an 'elsewhere', means that places are translated through one's experiences of other places. One's perceptions of any region, including foreign ones will bear some impress of the 'first' or 'home' place – "its geography and the customs it fosters, including the customs of the imagination".⁴ For non-Aboriginal Australians, this is also the classic condition of living in Australia. Traditions and stories that are the underpinnings of our family histories come from somewhere else. This is underscored for artists of the Western tradition whose historical references are substantially European.





Desert landscape
Meeline Station
Western Australia

Opposite Page: (cropped)
Flower Field 2002
81 x 96 cm
Acrylic on board

Back to Australia — Nature of belonging

After my time in Italy, the return to Australia was a relocation that brought into focus the nature of belonging – belonging here, being at home. Sue Rowley reflects on a recurring pattern amongst artists who, on returning home from overseas travels “discover roots reaching far deeper into the earth, and far more important to identity and art than they had ever realised”.⁵ Memory Holloway observes that for artists of the Western tradition, the journey towards and through northern countries is “crucial in knowing what one has journeyed away from and what one is returning to”.⁶ And Giovanna Capone, when writing about the intellectual relationship between Australia and Italy, invokes for Australians, the Orphic act of looking back - of tracing the pathways back to the source. The act of review, she suggests, is part of creating the future.⁷

Veronica Brady also invokes Orpheus when reflecting on Australian cultural traditions, and in particular, the disposition to cast a non-Aboriginal relationship to land in terms of a struggle against the inhospitable. Brady recalls Orpheus in his bardic role. “Our cultural hero” she says, “needn’t be Narcissus. It can be Orpheus ... going down into the Underworld and ... singing, instead of ... carrying on with a stiff upper lip.”⁸ Brady is proposing a different way of ‘being’ for non-indigenous Australians. There is, she is suggesting, an alternative to the Outback tradition, “there’s joy, fulfilment,

sensitivity, listening”.⁹ She invokes flowers and the process of rejuvenation: After winter, or tears, springtime does come. And see, there are many, many flowers in our countryside – think of how the desert flowers when it’s had a bit of rain.¹⁰

Veronica Brady draws our attention to the Aboriginal people’s traditional success in this land and their deep bond with country. “The desert is garden and home. That’s what it is to them and they know *how* to live in it. We can learn from them”.¹¹ Implicit in this exhortation is a view that a way of imagining the land which is different from the traditional and popular mythology, is the route to a more viable way of belonging. This is the dilemma for the non-Aboriginal person: how to belong. How to make contact. How to be at home in this country.

Returning to Meeline Station – Focus on the ground

When I arrived back from Italy I returned to the Meeline site to continue my artistic explorations. This is the place where I have repeatedly worked to understand how to express my ideas and feelings about being at home in this country. Meeline Station, where my sister and family live, is situated 600 kilometres north of Perth, the capital of Western Australia and 500 kilometres inland from





Rondell's Wandering 1995
60 x 129 cm
Oil on board
Private collection, Perth

the regional centre of Geraldton. The region is sparsely populated, semi-desert rangeland country. Though I live in Perth, I regularly spend time at the Station.

At Meeline the land stretches out flat under an overhead sun. When wandering over the terrain, my vision is cast down to the ground as I pick my way and try to avoid the intense glare of the sun. Over time my paintings reflected this experience in various ways. As I became increasingly captivated by the microcosm at my feet, my paintings began to bring the ground plane into central focus. The ground viewed from directly overhead and quite literally at my feet, also proved to be a visual way of making contact. By lowering my gaze from the vista, so popular in traditional landscape painting, to the scene at my feet, I disconnected my vision from the horizon and connected it instead to the place where I stood.

The horizon is a 'charged' site because it is implicated in the imaginative possession of land: our early colonial knowledge of the country was based on the observations of men who, "on assuming a vantage point far removed from the embodied social world",¹² gazed over the forms of the land. This distanced, purportedly objective, viewing eye surveyed the vista and encompassed it – as a prelude to mapping and occupying it. The horizon reinforces the viewing subject since its very existence is dependent on the eye

that surveys. So in this sense, the horizon becomes associated with what can be described as a "culture of conquest".¹³

In the panoramic or picturesque vista of the traditional landscape painting, the horizon is relentlessly present as the basis for the single spatial continuum of European Renaissance 'scientific' perspective. In a painting, encompassing the land using the logic of linear perspective can therefore be seen as an act of imaginatively possessing that landscape. The landscape is possessed but not touched because the horizon, which is pivotal to this form of spatial possession, slides away as the viewer advances towards it. Berkeley observes that there is no contact without touch.¹⁴ This then is the vision of a relationship that is *with* the land, not *in* the land, to use Ross Gibson's distinctions.¹⁵ The horizon is the mark of the outsider.

By looking down to the ground where I make physical contact, I find the visual expression for what Paul Carter describes as a "migrant way of seeing".¹⁶ This he suggests, "is one whose historical education has made it suspicious of sublime visions, and which, without claiming deep affinities with the land, treads lightly, provisionally".¹⁷ His proposed in-between space "remains in touch with a space neither sublime nor linear but hyperbolic and intimate and connected to the spaces of everyday life".¹⁸

Picking everlasting,
Meeline Station
Western Australia



To me, this in-between space allows for the possibility of being located in a cultural history and, at the same time, located in a landscape, when these two elements are not hermetically meshed, yet feed and shape each other. Here is where a reflexive relationship has space to grow.

Floral carpets – How the metaphor evolved

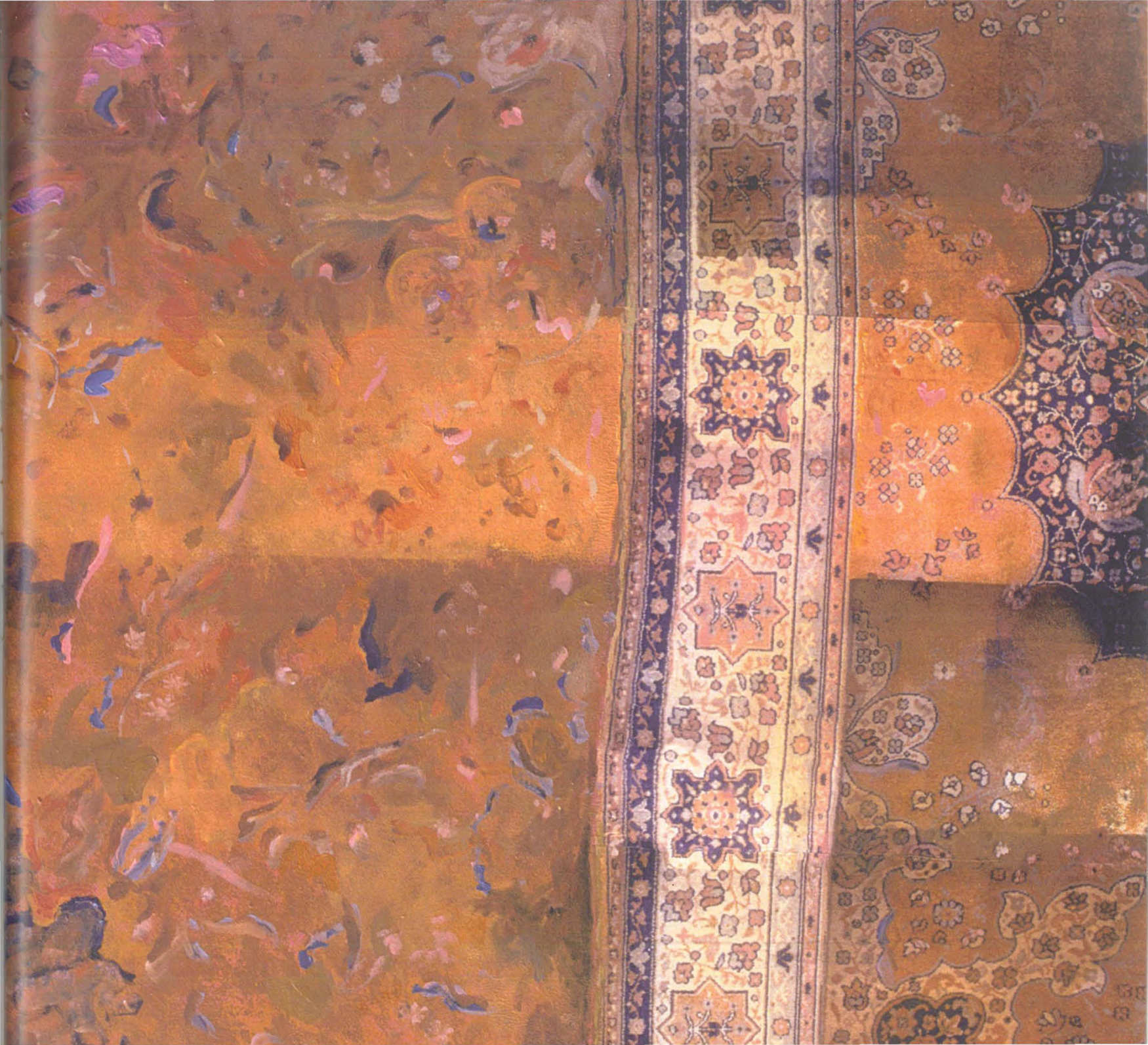
Meeline Station is situated in an area of low annual rainfall that's prone to drought. However, in the words of the author Barry Lopez, "I know what they tell you about the desert but you mustn't believe them. This is no deathbed. Dig down, the earth is moist".¹⁹ At Meeline after rain, everlastings sprout from the hard ground during July and August. In a good year, these paper daisies will carpet the open ground as far as the eye can see: white, cream, pink, yellow; singles and doubles. Charles McCubbin recorded his response to a similar flowering in another part of the Australian desert landscape.

We saw flowers from the beginning, but nothing prepared us for the vast exuberant flower garden that filled the middle desert. Mile after mile of blooms – great incredible sea of flowers that flowed between the dunes and splashed their slopes in yellow, white, pink and gold. Rain had followed rain and the desert bloomed as never before.²⁰

On Meeline, this abundance is hoped for and much appreciated. For those of us in Perth, a trip to the Station is organised. It provides a welcome opportunity to escape from the cold and rain and travel north to bask in crisp, thin, winter sunlight. Walks and picnics are arranged. A day can be spent lying submerged in blooms, ambling through a rustling sea of colour, gathering posies of flowers, absorbing the atmosphere through every pore. These are often cherished occasions of ineffable joy. As Karen my sister writes in her Station Diary,

To really appreciate the expanse of yellow buttons that cover our Boodanoo Hills is to know that this area is usually a searing stony place. Being mostly treeless, you can just imagine the intensity of heat reflecting off the ground in midsummer – when the temperature has risen to 47°C in our homestead breezeway.²¹

When we return to the homestead, posies tied with string, a thread of wool or a length of vine, are hung upside down to dry on the verandah. Straggly bunches and carefully arranged ones, big ones and small ones, multicoloured combinations or the simplicity of one colour arrangements reflect the dexterity and taste of the different flower pickers. Sometimes these bunches are left hanging upside down like this to gather dust but usually they make their way into vases – around the homestead, at my place, in my studio,



Opposite: (cropped)

Carpet Ground 2000

61 x 65 cm

Acrylic and technologically
manipulated media on board

Collection: Royal Perth Hospital

Persian carpet laid on
lawn for cleaning



in the children's rooms at boarding school and in the homes of city friends. Everlastings have been woven into funeral wreaths and presentation posies. They decorate the church and have enlivened local arts festival venues. They are a connection to place.

Such pleasures and activities speak of an intimate engagement with the environment – in this case, the natural environment – where people weave the circumstances of their place into their daily lives. With this enmeshing we see that “they accommodate themselves to the place where they are...”.²² Pleasure and the nourishing of the soul are found, in part, in an appreciation of the particularities of place. People who inhabit this desert environment and accept its rhythms, touch, and are in touch, with it.

The rustling translucent petals of these delicate paper daisies blow away on the wind during September and October. Karen records this in her Station Diary: The strong October winds are already beginning to blow. Soon, the last of the flowers will disintegrate and this past season will be one very pleasant memory.²³ These everlastings that disintegrate in the wind and yet as picked flowers last indefinitely without water, are both ephemeral and eternal. As such, the essential quality of a state of equilibrium, which incorporates the transitory and insubstantial within the density of permanency, is encapsulated. The nature of the flowers echoes the nature of human existence in these regions, for those people who fashion their lives to the ebb and flow of their environment.

Two major exhibitions of my work, one entitled *Ground Carpets* and held in Australia and another titled *Desert Ground (not deserted ground)* and shown in New Zealand, take up this theme. A number of paintings in these exhibitions feature titles like *This is No Desert, Everlasting, Floral Carpet and Carpet of Flowers*. In these paintings, the living and abundant desert is invoked in images of the ground strewn with details that are signs of life. Without hierarchy or focus, the quality of a random patterning of the ‘everyday’ is paramount. The sense of centrality and boundary is dissolved and the implication of an unbounded continuity extending beyond the edge of the image is created.

Works such as *Rondell's Wandering, Our Shared Lives and Desert Blossoms*, which incorporate the footprints of my nieces and nephews as well as those of the Aboriginal children who are part of the Meeline community, speak more directly about habitation. The footprints were made by inking-up the children's feet before they walked across the painting boards. The imprinting of the footprints brings an immediacy to the work that hints at an embodied experience of a desert home. A number of the artworks include painted drifts of everlasting flowers that evoke the phrase ‘carpets of flowers’. This idea was elaborated in the next evolution of the artwork.

The Meeline Station rubbish tip, like any station tip, is a lucrative source of interesting artefacts. On one occasion when wandering around the site, I came across a pile of old linoleum that had



Linoleum leanings 1998

82 x 204 cm

Acrylic and technologically manipulated media on board

Private collection, London

Opposite Page

*Strange Flowers
On The Land* 2003

100 x 122 cm

Acrylic, mixed media and wax encaustic on board

recently been discarded as part of renovations occurring at the old homestead since the retirement of my brother-in-law's parents from Meeline to Perth. As I inspected the discarded linoleum, I recognised fragments from the bathroom: a pattern of yellow roses in a blue field, which now lay scattered on the red earth amongst clumps of saltbush, mulga twigs, desiccated leaves and the occasional everlasting. Gently rotting alongside, was a bedroom carpet patterned with sprigs of pink roses. This image of exotic European flowers in that desert setting struck a chord.

Along with these discards, the renovations had also resulted in the cleaning on the lawn, of several large, room-sized Persian rugs. These rugs from Tabriz (in northern Iran), which were richly patterned with stylised exotic flowers, had been purchased from a Dutch travelling salesman by Adrian's parents – back in 1953. The carpet cleaning was carried out in May 1995. That year the Station had unseasonable rains. Usually January and February are hot and dry months when temperatures in the forties are the norm. In 1995, cyclonic activity brought 30 mm of rain in January and an unbelievable 215 mm (nearly 9 inches) in February! This represented much more rain than the annual average. More rain fell in March and April. The month of May turned out warm and sunny, and brought on a false spring in early winter. This coincided with the carpet cleaning exercise. So, at the time the floral carpets were being cleaned and 'brought back to life', so too the bush was bursting into bloom.

Here, was the imagery I needed to advance my ideas. By conflating the carpets of everlastings in the desert with the imported homestead carpets and linoleums that are patterned with designs derived from roses, asters, chrysanthemums, tulips and other flowers from the Northern Hemisphere biome, I could create a space that bridged the domestic space of a non-indigenous family and the desert environment in which it was located. Chris Sharkey in a catalogue essay that accompanies the paintings from this time writes that

The myriad of threads that structure the lives and existence of family members and narratives are symbolically held together, in all their variety, repetitions, colour and form in the patterning of the carpet. Both order and abundance are integrated in the very ground of existence.²⁴

Concomitantly I was linking the domestic site from which women traditionally garner authority – and the desert space, from which women have been consistently excluded in the dominant cultural narratives. The 'carpets of flowers' metaphor created a hybrid space that provided me with mobility and visibility.

Then too, carpets are made to step on. Stepping out, even one stride, particularly when the next step is uncertain, signifies daily choice. Stepping on, and out, is inseparable from earthing and grounding.²⁵



For me, exploring the possibilities of this hybrid space has been a productive way forward in the evolution of my thinking and expression of a way of being present in this country. In the paintings that followed, one sees passages of floral carpets and linoleum fused with drifts of everlastings: sometimes overlaid, sometimes flooding into each other, sometimes fragmented, sometimes dissolving. There is both flex and fusion. These images give form to a desert place that is being remade daily through lived experience. This is not a space 'over there', this is a space that is underfoot! It is the particularised place where we come into contact with the world, the place we inhabit.

So, when the art critic David Bromfield asks "what kind of space is thinkable for contemporary Australian artists and for Australians as a whole",²⁶ I suggest one answer might be found in a space where carpets patterned with flowers derived from the Northern Hemisphere biome find resonances with carpets of everlastings in the desert. It is a space where cultural polarities dissolve and where instead, a form of cultural parallax arises. Where the combination of different world-views, or perspectives on the world, allow a multi-dimensionality to come into focus. For people living in the desert regions it is Bachelard's intimate immensity.²⁷ For all of us, it should be the nourishing terrain shown to the settler cultures by Aboriginal Australia.

It is the space where our feet and eyes make contact.

Notes:

1. Margaret Moore. 'Cultural navigation – reconciling sites of 'belonging''. In *Lo Spazio – The Space*. [Exhibition catalogue]. Ed. Maggie Baxter. Perth: PICA, 1995, pp.1-2.
2. Trinh T. Minh-ha. 'Other than myself/my other self.' *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*. Eds. George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lisa Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis & Tim Putnam. London: Routledge, 1994, p.17.
3. Laurie Hergenhan. 'The 'I' of the Beholder: Representations of Tuscany in Some Recent Australian Literature.' p.110. *Westerly* 4 (1991), p.110.
4. Laurie Hergenhan, p.107.
5. Sue Rowley. *Crossing Borders: Contemporary Australian Textile Art*. NSW: University of Wollongong, 1995, p.16.
6. Memory Holloway. 'Bleak Romantics'. *Australian Visions: 1984 Exxon International Exhibition*. [Exhibition catalogue]. Ed. Diane Waldman, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1984, p.20.
7. Capone, Giovanna. Foreword. *Australia and Italy, Contributions to Intellectual Life*. Ed. Giovanna Capone. Ravenna: Longo Editore, c1991, p.6.
8. Veronica Brady. In Judith Dinham, George Karpathakis and Glen Phillips. In 'Nature and Culture'. Episode 9. *Landscape & You*. [Twelve episode video series]. Perth: Edith Cowan University, 1996.
9. Veronica Brady. In 'Nature and Culture'. Episode 9.
10. Veronica Brady. In *Landscape & You*, footage tape 211. [Video]. Perth: Edith Cowan University, 1996.
11. Veronica Brady. In 'Nature and Culture'. Episode 9.
12. Gillian Rose. 'Some Notes Towards Thinking About the Spaces of the Future.' *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. Eds. John Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson & Lisa Tickner. London: Routledge, 1993, p.71.
13. Deborah Bird Rose. *Nourishing Terrains, Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996, p.11.
14. Berkeley. Cited in Paul Carter. 'Mining the Surface: The Illusion of Depth in Australian Landscape Painting.' *Art Monthly Australia* 46 (1991–2) p.5.
15. Ross Gibson. *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p.6.
16. Paul Carter. 'Mining the Surface: The Illusion of Depth in Australian Landscape Painting.' *Art Monthly Australia* 46 (1991–2) p.4.
17. Paul Carter, p.4.
18. Paul Carter, pp.4–5.
19. Barry Lopez. *Desert Notes and River Notes*. London: Pan Books, 1990, p.21.
20. Charles McCubbin. Cited in Roslynn D. Haynes. *Seeking the Centre, The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.254.
21. Karen Morrissey. *Station Diary, September 12, 1992*. unpublished, 1992.
22. Judith Fryer. 'Desert, Rock, Shelter, Legend: Willa Cather's Novels of the Southwest.' *The Desert is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women's Writing and Art*. Eds. Vera Northwood and Janice Monk, Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1997, p.45.
23. Karen Morrissey. *Station Diary, October, 1992*.
24. Chris Sharkey. *Hybrid Space*. [Exhibition catalogue]. Perth: Edith Cowan University, 2001, p.5.
25. Chris Sharkey, p.5.
26. David Bromfield. *Gone West*. Perth: PICA Press, 1993, p.16.
27. Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958], pp.183–210.