RE//CREATING
Twenty-two Riverina Female Artists
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The three exhibitions have been a partnership between the Cad Factory and Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga Campus.

RE/CREATING HAS BEEN SUPPORTED BY:

City of Wagga Wagga

The Regional Arts Fund is an Australian Government initiative that supports sustainable cultural development in regional, remote and very remote Australia.

The Country Arts Support Program of Regional Arts NSW is funded by the NSW Government through Arts NSW.

THE CAD FACTORY AND WESTERN RIVERINA ARTS ARE SUPPORTED BY THE NSW GOVERNMENT THROUGH ARTS NSW:

We’d like to acknowledge the artists Corrie Furner and Jo Roberts, who were part of the 2015 and 2016 exhibitions.

RE/CREATING is presented at the Narrandera Arts Centre as part of the project Activating Narrandera Arts, produced by Western Riverina Arts. Narrandera Arts Centre is a facility of Narrandera Council.

A special thank you to the many people who have supported the project and the artists over the three years to help create such a wonderful series of events.

Thank you to our guest speakers Jan Roberts OAM (2015), Jacqueline Millner (2016) and Elvis Richardson (2017) who have placed the exhibitions within a larger social and visual arts context.
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20 February – 10 March 2017
HR Gallop Gallery

1 May – 13 May 2017
Narrandera Arts Centre
ESSAY

Worse than Beige

At the heart of the struggle of feminism ... has been the necessity of making women credible and audible. Billions of women must be out there on this seven billion person planet being told they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives. That truth is not their property, now or ever. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt.

Rebecca Solnit

Nice girls don’t eavesdrop, my mother tried to teach me. Although I confess there are times when it provides useful intel about the world – a refreshing kind of off-line social media feed. Eavesdropping can take us out of the comfortable realms of ‘like’ opinions and provokes considerations that we might otherwise not encounter. I recently overheard the claim that ‘regional arts is beige’ - a generalisation both misleading and unfair. If we accept this assertion – that city centres are the exclusive sites of innovation and critical cultural dialogues accordingly, regional life must be bland and arts practice of those living at a distance must necessarily be beige. Questioning the likely origin of this assertion I realised there is something worse than beige – the invisibility of regional arts to audiences beyond each region.

Having lived in regional NSW for the past 20 years I am familiar with city-based colleagues perceptions of the cultural landscape of the bush as out of touch with city arts events. Connected to this, is a matching blind-spot about what other debates and creative works are being made in communities beyond the sandstone curtain. These alternatives – dynamic regional relationships with other centres both nationally and internationally is rarely imagined. My home, often described as ‘the middle of nowhere’ half-way between Sydney and Melbourne, is no less isolated than Sydney is from Los Angeles or Berlin – ironically. However mere geographical distance, the usual explanation for the invisibility of much dynamic arts practice across Australia, is far too simple an account. The Bush, to most city-dwelling Australians, is the go-to for a gourmet weekend to rest and recharge – just far enough to escape the city briefly rather than seek out significant cultural events. While coastal real-estate has long remained the preferred address for most Australians, until recently many had at least one close relative living in regional Australia. This enabled first hand encounters with more distant communities, preventing the gradual relegation of regional lives to invisibility and irrelevance. These relative encounters have dwindled dramatically in recent decades and likely play a significant factor in the disconnection of city-dwellers from the remote Bush.

The perception of regional Australia as a zone of perpetual cultural drought, is born of entrenched conception of ‘the country’ as an ‘other’ place. The Bush, beyond the coastal fringes, is a place of contradictory cultural meanings – long mythologised as the alleged source of the Nation’s true identity and spirit of resilience - it is equally perceived as a place of mamba: miles and miles of bugger all. The bush remains at once a place of romance and utter disdain – a problematic dualism contrarily and uncomfortably held in the mind’s eye of most Australians.

Contrived settler mythologies frame our dominant history and continue to distort cohesive conceptions of a nationally respectful collective identity. Stories of brave frontier heroes who built the nation amidst the unruly bush, wilfully ignore issues
pertaining to the hard lives of women and children, the squandering of natural resources and the brutality of two hundred years of violence and the dispossession of First Nations peoples. Evidence of these counter-histories may be found in countless letters, journals and diaries and in the works of artists, culture keepers and activists whose works remain generally overlooked. Many of these voices, who speak of the darker histories of suffering in ‘the bush’ and the small quotidian joys and bounties of country, belong to women - writers Barbara Baynton, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark and Miles Franklin, activists Anna Euphemia Morgan and Daisy Bindi, and more recently Patricia Cornelius and Maree Clarke.

Misconceptions, of both the past and present of regional Australia, may largely be considered the product of European Enlightenment Colonialisation projects that justified the dispossession of First Nations Australians via the British doctrine of terra nullius. According to feminist philosopher Nancy Hartsock's rationalist Colonial assumptions of the rights of a superior elite to power and privilege are closely aligned with racism, sexism and the ideological capitalist exploitation of the natural world. Hartsock asserts that each prejudice supports and excludes the majority ‘other’ to confirm the legitimacy of the power of the elite who consequently creates its own reality. Stereotyping and homogenising the deficiencies of a binary ‘Other,’ in turn denies all social, cultural, religious and individual integrity and diversity as the dominant class ‘draw on an anonymous collectivity’ that sustains their wealth and position through labour and subservience.

Outstanding Feminist philosophers such as De Beauvoir, Grosz and Frye and postcolonial critics such as Said, Fanon and Bhabha amongst many others, refer to this as an example of hegemonic centrim - a hierarchical order established by a primary central power underpinned by sexist, racist and colonial authority. Australian feminist philosopher Val Plumwood further refined this dualism as hyper-separation or dissociation which creates a sharp ontological break or radical discontinuity between the group identified as the privileged ‘centre’ and those subordinated. From the earliest years of colonisation this hyper-separation is apparent, the British elite became increasingly socially and geographically distanced from the free-settler classes and squattocracy, the convict classes and most distinctly from First Nations Australians they were brutally and systematically dispossessing. Far beyond the colony, elite London-based Colonial Office regulators had little idea of the circumstances of the colonial ‘Others’. This model of a distanced wealthy governing class remains a feature of Australian society, a century after Federation sustained by economic rationalist models of governance inherited from nineteenth century rationalist constructs. Plumwood further elaborated her concept of hyper-separation identifying that,

Modern economic rationalism maps the heroic narrative of the modern economy onto the older heroic narrative of the supremacy of male-coded reason [...] Economic rationalism has replaced the classical warrior of earlier rationalism by the corporate warrior of the global economy. It establishes their privilege through the subordination of all other aspects of social life to the form of economic organisation controlled by corporations and loaded in their favour, the rationalist 'free-market' [...] is portrayed as a detached, disengaged, supremely rational mechanism. It in this neutral and dispassionate guise as ‘rational machinery’... the historical social relations that have selected its rules and established its cast of players in far from neutral ways have been disappeared from view.

Australian artist and academic, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll focusses on additional anachronistic effects of hyper-separation on colonised ‘Others’ which results in their being out of time. Nineteenth century rationalist definitions of time as an ordered linear progression fundamental to the European process of civilizing the colonised,
ensure that the ‘Other’ is forever unable to catch-up with centuries of superior civilized advancement from the point of invasion. As von Zinnenburg Carroll also notes, history has often failed to represent art in its practitioners’ own idiosyncratic terms while also ignoring those beyond the colonial narrative.\textsuperscript{36}

The Colonial binary, that stereotypes and homogenises in racist and sexist ways the perceived deficiencies of the ‘Other,’ as Hartsook asserts, endures as a relic of nineteenth century rationalist thinking, framing conceptions of city and Bush as out of time and late to history. As ‘Other’, the Bush appears distant and invisible in its diversity and value, while the city-centre remains the hegemonic focus of rationalist models of engagement. Similarly, the first step of dispossessing, the assertion of an undifferentiated identity of all First Nations Australians as ‘Aborigines’, is similar to perceiving regional Australia as undifferentiated communities of ‘Others’. Beginning in 1770, the generic term ‘Aborigine’ describes the original inhabitants of any country on earth and disregards the sovereignties of a diverse set of Australian First Nations and the continued use of the generic term ‘Aborigine’ demonstrates the enduring effects of rationalisation’s subliminal hyper-separation.

Regional Artists, ascribed as the ‘Other,’ are collectively disenfranchised despite extensive evidence of dynamic projects achieving international standing\textsuperscript{37} and routinely denied cultural legitimacy and cultural capital for their arts practices because they lack close proximity to established metropolitan centres. If we accept Hartsook’s conclusions as to the interconnectedness of race and gender as a result of longstanding hegemonic-centrism, it follows that regional women artists and women artists of colour face doubled and tripled disadvantage.

RE/CREATING, is the last of three annual exhibitions which aimed to address the invisibility of regional women artists. Not claiming to be on the cutting-edge of innovation in contemporary practice, nonetheless these works remain vital and significant. They bear few similarities to contemporary feminist artists like Deborah Kelly and Elvis Richardson (CoUNTess), whose practices challenge the representation of women, quoting propaganda posters and the visually dramatic graphics of print-media. Neither do they align with works by women artists from different regions. By and large these works adopt fragile, small scale and unassuming voices, but they are NOT beige. Some may require time and quiet reflection to uncover their meanings; to see past the expectations we bring to them. Each reflect the quality of time the artists’ spent in sharing, mutually acknowledging and incubating their ongoing practice – gaining the confidence necessary to claim this time despite the obligations of lives indebted intimately to others.

Telling their own stories as Solnit says is, ‘[...] already a victory, already a revolt’ and these works are in their own way, disobedient objects’ refusing to remain invisible. As disobedient objects, these are not predictably finely crafted aesthetically refined, works. The unhammered edges, awkward hand-written graphic signatures, found materials, and quirky forms are purposeful, expressive and intentionally noncompliant. Each work is a determined choice to challenge the prescriptions of ‘quality’ in craftsmanship, refusing to demonstrate a culture of groomed discipline, training and normalisation patronage requires which echoes the restrictions typically placed on women who are similarly narrowly defined. As Flood and Grindon note, ‘...Fine Objects are themselves mostly failures in the task of making change’.\textsuperscript{38} The works in these three exhibitions are testament to the vitality of regional women’s arts practice by women who, lacking the opportunity, formal education or confidence to share their work with audiences beyond their own families, may counter invisibility when granted exhibition opportunities that enable them to share these valuable documents of lived experiences with us all.

This exhibition opportunity has offered each
artist at least some experience of creative practice approaches, tracing pathways through process, toward unknown outcomes. They have discovered the need to be reliant on both tacit knowledge as much as invention. Negotiating unexpected questions is essential to creative practice—an unpredictable process; contingent and performative driven by discoveries of visual and material solutions of 'what works' can only arise through uncertain and brave practice. Each woman has discovered the unruly nature of their own arts practice and a certain fearless intent to identify the importance of the symbolic, visual, material and formal character of their own work no matter how unsure they are at the beginning. These are examples of an 'attention to the process of creativity' as defined by Merleau-Ponty. Creative practice-based approaches understand art-making as an enactive space of living enquiry; a performative, material 'making visible/tangible' production of meaning. According to Academics Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt:

> the innovative and critical potential of practice-based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways of modelling and externalising such knowledge while at the same time, revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for the critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes.¹⁰

Some of these women will venture their works over the horizon, claiming audiences in cities and internationally, as they seek to establish voices from the 'other' Australia. For others, this has been a chance to establish a foundation, to identify the ways in which their work can move forward towards new conversations, collaborations and opportunities. For many, circumstance and responsibility will suspend their work with art temporarily. Although they may return to living between other kinds of uncertainties – the spaces between the rock and the hard place that is so frequently women's lot – each will undoubtedly return to their studios later as so many of Australia's best women artists have done long before them: Rosalie Gascoigne and Elizabeth Cummings to name just two. These works attest to the lived experiences of marginalised invisible communities, challenging us all to find new ways of seeing this country and respecting our landscape and its inhabitants by reflecting upon what we have made, what we have destroyed, and what we have become in the process.

**Julie Montgarrett**


¹⁴Op.cit


¹⁶ibid

¹⁷Plumwood ibid. p. 22


¹⁹Op.cit

²⁰Artlands National Regional Arts Conference Dubbo 2016 confirms this claim.


²²ibid
