



FIELD

contemporary
landscape

This exhibition catalogue documents *FIELD: contemporary landscape*, the first exhibition held by The Hold Artspace.

FIELD was curated by Lisa Bryan-Brown and featured works by Louise Bennett, Freda Davies, Madeleine Keinonen, Carol McGregor, Monica Rohan, Camille Serisier and Shayna Wells.

The exhibition opened on 1 March 2013 and continued until 17 March 2013.

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Front cover

Madeleine Keinonen
Exuvium II, 2012

Over page

Freda Davies
Untitled, 2012



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Fielding futures

By Professor Pat HOFFIE



The subject of Australian landscape has been almost exclusively located as a male terrain since Federation, when the newly formed Australian government recognized the power of Arthur Streeton's unpeopled landscapes to perform the role of national visual icons capable of mending the rift between the wealthy rural squattocracy and an emerging class of metropolitan industrialists. Streeton's gorgeous, light-filled fields stretched back to forever, bursting with promise of fecund futures and un-marred by even merest whispers about the former occupants of the land. These paintings were 'strong', they were 'silent': they offered a perfect sanctuary for 'decent blokes'.

Later on, the sturdy, stalwart gum tree boles of Hans Heysen's sun-drenched landscapes offered metaphors for another iteration of the Australian male – the proud, strong Anzac tradition that once again brought a young nation together in a collective recognition of shared values. Hansen's gums stood silhouetted together in comradely groups, proud and true even though wearing the tattered rags of the seasonal shed as they bore witness to the dying of the day.

In Australia, as with elsewhere, this subject of landscape is irretrievably conceptual. In this country the very term 'the land' is woven through with notions of prior ownership, custodianship and land rights all the way through to environmental and ecological management and disaster. It's 'a big country'; the genre is a big one too. But it's also been about the little spaces – the microcosms, the personal, the backyards and urban-scapes and metropolises as so many writers and visual artists and songwriters and playwrights and film-makers have reminded us.

This exhibition – simply called *Field* – offers a gathering of 21st century glimpses of young Australian women's' interpretations of what landscape might mean. To those who are familiar with Australian art history, the title relates to *The Field*. Held to herald the newly refurbished, re-opened National Gallery of Victoria in 1968, the exhibition of Australian post-painterly abstraction - also referred to as hard-edge, colour-field, geometric abstraction and minimalism - did its best to signal that Australia had 'come of age' in terms of coming into line with the dictates of powerfully influential international, US based art critic Clement Greenberg. In 1966, writing in *Art and Australia*, Greenberg had described 'a new tendency' that was the Anglo-American inheritor of a School of Paris legacy of modernism, one where colour was recognized as the 'significant carrier of meaning'. If the punters at the time who had equated Australia's painterly 'coming of age' with a willingness to adopt post-figurative abstraction, the exhibition exhibited little evidence of 'coming of age' in terms of recognizing the large proportions of young women practicing as artists at the time: of a total of 40 artists in that exhibition, 3 were women.

In the forty-five years since that exhibition, a quick survey of the representation of women artists represented by commercial gallery and included in solo, group and survey shows at State and National galleries might suggest that very little has changed. The figures, as artist-researcher Lisa Bryan-Brown attests, still fall well and truly short of representing the numbers of women who graduate from tertiary art education institutions.

So this exhibition – *Field* – stripped of the enunciative declaration of its former definite article, offers another way of thinking about 'landscape' in terms that might offer us new clues into negotiating that fraught terrain. Those who are offering us that insight are young women, but as to whether or not they bring issues of gender into the field-guide is up to the reader – or perhaps the viewer, with side-whispers from the artists and curator.

Carol McGregor
identity cloak (detail), 2010



And while we're on that subject of landscape, let's not forget the terrain in which this exhibition is being offered:

Here we are in the first show in a brand-new artist-run initiative – conceived by artists Luke Kidd and Kylie Spear, *The Hold Artspace* is being launched with an ad-mixture of dreams, ambition, passion and a commitment to long-term slog. Let's hope it's not thankless, because spaces like these benefit us all, and make the urban-scape we inhabit a far richer space. They deserve full support in whatever ways it can be thrown their way.

And on that note, curator Lisa Bryan-Brown, who also trained as an artist, is a tireless worker, digger, delver, researcher and scholar who has remained devoted to unearthing some of the more sticky underbellies of the art sector in this country, and to turning it round into positive curatorial production. She proudly describes herself as a feminist, and has all the generous spades of humor, self-deprecation and devotion to long and hard work that that almost antiquated term requires. She is passionately committed to the work of artists, and to the necessity of art to contemporary culture.

The artists in this exhibition offer us solace that we have not yet run out of ways to re-think our relationship to place, to new modes of thinking, to new realms of possible interaction and to new ways of negotiating how we relate to each other even at a time when airwaves are jammed with the numbing sameness of bleak statistical facts and predictions of doom.

This exhibition – the fact that the work was created by the artists, that the premise was dreamed up by Lisa, that the gallery space was brought into being by Luke and Kylie and all those who have supported them along their way – is testimony to the fact that collaboration between artists can move all kinds of futures into play. All that's needed for this field to continue as a place to keep producing rich harvests is the support of those of us who appreciate its worth.



Camille Serisier
Hawaiian Song Bird, 2012
Photo: Sam Scoufos Photography

Reflecting the Contemporary Landscape

By Lisa Bryan-Brown

Field; noun

1. an expanse of open or cleared ground, especially a piece of land suitable or used for pasture.
2. a piece of ground devoted to sports or contests; playing field.
3. an expanse of anything: a field of ice.
4. any region characterized by a particular feature, resource, activity, etc.: a gold field.
5. the surface of an object or image, on which something is portrayed: a white star in a field of blue.

Field; verb

6. to place in competition: to field a candidate for governor.
7. to answer or reply skillfully: to field a difficult question.
8. to put into action or on duty: to field police cars to patrol an area.

In 1968 the National Gallery of Victoria reopened its' new building with *The Field*, an exhibition of then highly contemporary Australian minimalism that has become emblematic within the history of Australian art as one of our first brushes with and against the vogue of the wider international artistic community. Opening just a few short months after the pivotal *Primary Structures* exhibition did in New York, the curator of *The Field* John Stringer sought to demonstrate that Australian hard-edge abstraction could hold its own against that of the established centres. Forty-five years on *The Field* remains a divisive and oft referenced show, and while this exhibition, *Field*, is by no means a direct response to its 1968 namesake, it certainly addresses a number of issues associated with *The Field* and several other prominent Australian 'survey' exhibitions of the 20th Century.

The works exhibited in *The Field*, while united and characterised by their aesthetic genre, pertained to a wide variety of specific themes, amongst which landscape featured prominently. It included works such as Harald Noritis' *Come Away* and James Doolin's *Artificial Landscape 67-6*, which were large-scale, monumental feats of geometric reduction. Rendering Australia's dearest artistic subject matter in bright, flat colours was a confrontingly unfamiliar idea to the art-going public of 1968, who were more accustomed to the traditional landscapes of Arthur Boyd, Fred Williams and Sydney Nolan.

The legacy of these artists will be long felt in Australia, and their works serve as important stalwarts of the Australian art historical canon – alas, it is a canon that, due to then prevalent and still persistent racism and sexism, does not tell the full story of the Australian landscape tradition, or even artistic production in this country. Female artists, indigenous artists, and other artists of colour were either dismissed at the time, or have been omitted retrospectively, and were and are

excluded from exhibitions or publications, leaving contemporary audiences with a filtered and biased perspective on Australian art history, and in particular the landscape genre.

While it is well outside the scope of *Field* to correct or amend these issues, the exhibition premise certainly welcomes and embraces the important revisionist work that has been done in the area of Australian landscape, and the national canon in general. Rather, *Field* takes as it's point of departure the historic disempowerment of female artists engaging with the landscape genre, and seeks to examine the relationship that exists between this subject matter and female artists. *Field* effectively asks the question, how has feminine gender (inclusive of the implicit societal factors that accompany that gender) influenced the way artists engage with the topic of landscape?

The answer to that question is not straightforward, laced as it is with equal parts negative sexist essentialism and positive feminist activism. Add to this already volatile combination the abhorrence that many female artists feel at being defined by their sex, and the problematic aspects of such an enquiry begin to crystallise. In fact, it is due to the particularly challenging nature of this area of investigation that this exhibition and catalogue are so necessary, interesting, and non-prescriptive. Through the multi-disciplinary works of seven emerging Brisbane based artists, *Field* explores the ideas that surround the assertion that an artist's gender has a direct relationship to their engagement with the subject of landscape.

For example, **Camille Serisier's** *A Perfect Day* series considers the relationship people have with the environment, as constructed through our shared cultural metanarratives. Each of the eight photographs in this series contains multiple symbols and reference points, drawn from art history, pop culture, religion and mythology, that Serisier has appropriated and recontextualised. Although playful and humorous in their execution, Serisier's works very seriously question the way Australian society regards and interacts with the environment and its resources.





Louise Bennett's works also consider modes of environmental interaction, with her video works *Traces* and *Instagram Slowed* each exploring the mass phenomenon of smartphone usage, and how the prevalence of this technology has affected the ways people engage with and record their surroundings. Photo-sharing apps like Instagram and social media tools like Facebook have influenced a profound shift in the ways and reasons people take photographs; simultaneously creating distance while creating new modes of interaction with visual representation. Bennett's videos reflect on this currently occurring shift, and what it means for the act of producing (and by extension consuming) personal memories.

Far removed from the realm of technology, **Freda Davies'** paintings of geometrically abstracted landscapes can be understood as recordings of environments, utilising excruciating attention to details of tone, texture, brushwork and depth to render the emotional experience of certain places. Rejecting representational methods, Davies' works rather embrace intuition and seek to communicate the feeling of sites, as impacted by factors such as light, colour, movement, and the surrounding architecture. Particular forms, primarily the arch and the triangle, recur consistently throughout her two series of *Untitled* works, acting as containers within Davies' evocative, highly formal works.

Sharing Davies' interest in formality, **Shayna Wells'** painted and photographic works focus on the interplay of light and colour. Wells' interest lies in ideas about vision and the act of seeing, and the interchange between micro and macro environments. While her sculptural paintings *Atmosphere* and *Time Lapse Continuum* depict skyscapes, her photographic light box diptych *Landscape no. 1 and 2* displays out of focus images of domestic environments. In this way, Wells' uses blur, light and perspective to activate the viewer's sense of sight while disrupting their expectations of what they think they should see through a fluctuation between representation and ambiguity.

The exchange between the domestic and natural landscapes is also evident in the work of **Madeleine Keinonen**, whose series *Exuvium* and *There's No One Else Like You (I'm Just Like All the Rest)* both invoke notions of an individual's internal and external landscapes. Interested in exploring the construction and exhibition of identity, her *Exuvium* works transform comforting, familiar floral fabrics into a claustrophobic binding, establishing a series of tensions; between the viewer and the unidentified subject, the decorative fabric and the blank white space of the walls, and the natural and the domestic.

Monica Rohan's illustrative oil paintings enact similar tensions, and also employ a direct relationship between the domestic and the natural landscape. Her figures are distorted and in perpetual flux, becoming the environment they inhabit. Floating darkly like storm clouds in an empty sky, the figures in *Shapeless* and *Sitting Awkwardly in the Corner Again* can also be read inversely, clothed in a starry night sky. The figure in *Say* is as much a tree as person, and *Choke* a lone mountain; Rohan's surreal images eschew reality for an appealing dreamscape, small glimpses into another more imaginative realm.

Back in a more concrete reality, **Carol McGregor's** work *identity cloak* exhibits a much more direct connection to the land itself. Drawing upon her ancestral Wathaurong heritage, the cloak is stitched together from panels upon which she has screen printed the fingerprints of her family members; literally patterned from skin. The patterns made by the magnified fingerprints reflect McGregor's identity, like the patterns used in traditional possum skin cloaks which were added to from childhood to death, at which point the individual would be buried in their cloak. McGregor's cloak progresses from lighter (newer) panels to much darker (older) panels, referencing notions of seasonal change and life cycles.

Each of these artists engage with the topic of landscape in widely varying ways. As an exhibition, *Field* actually contains very few images that would be commonly be termed 'a landscape', however the recurrence of themes of nature and the environment is evident if abstract at times. United for the strength of each artist's thematic

reference to the landscape genre, the all-female nature of the exhibition may not in fact be obvious to a viewer who was not aware of that fact. That in itself is testament to the progress the art industry and society in general has made in the forty-five years since *The Field* exhibited the work of 37 male artists and only 3 female artists, a fact which should be celebrated, but certainly not taken for granted.

Female artists still do not experience an equal level of representation with their male counterparts, which is why it is important that galleries and curators continue to explore issues of gender at their point of intersection with artistic practice. When each of the works included in *Field* are read as authored by women, and the historic disempowerment of women working within this particular genre is considered, *Field* does exactly that.

Bibliography

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3. Stringer, J 1968, *The Field*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

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