

PLACE
new work by
JUDY HOLDING

*my place, your place, our place, same place, different place,
the place of origin, the place traveled to....*

PLACE is anchored or poled by the sculptural trees – the tall Blue Northern gum tree and the wide spreading red Mallee tree. They define the distance between places – the dry flat plains of north western Victoria where Holding comes from and the monsoonal escarpment country of the Kakadu region of the Northern Territory where she goes to – Holding has been visiting and painting there regularly since 1979. This is the first time she has brought the out there home and put home in with that out there. A change in focus after twenty six years moving between places. Going back to the Territory is getting harder – physically, emotionally and psychologically; her recent trip centred on funeral ceremonies for the great old man who died last year. He had been an important mentor and mediator of the place and his passing has changed the landscape.

For some time Holding has been preoccupied with the seasonal changes of the Top End. She has been coming back to the same area in the Kakadu region for twenty

six years and the weather has come to possess her imagination mightily. Over time she has codified and refined her own set of signifiers – simple representative shapes and signs for trees, hills, bottles, guns, rock art, burial platforms, dogs, birds, lightning, mining markers, anthills, clouds, lakebeds, spears, lotus lilies, stars, fire and universal female forms, that are repeated and reconfigured in suites of paintings, drawings, cut outs and three dimensional objects. Certain things signify each of the six seasons – Gunumeleng /clouds, Gudjek/new green ferns, Banggerreng/dry yellow grass, Yekke/waterlilies, Wuurgeng/stars, Gurrung/fire, and Holding has developed her own palette to depict one yearly cycle or nagudji andjeuk, which means 'one rain'. However **PLACE** marks a shift away from a seasonal focus to a longer cycle of life and death, change and renewal. **PLACE** reflects intimations of mortality and a deep understanding of the power of memory so that invocations of place are recollections in tranquility after sadness has muted and disturbance settled down.

In **PLACE**, there are two types of dilly bags both made from recycled plastic. The large ones are loosely crocheted from old bread wrappers and stuffed with plastic debris and flywire, the small ones are tightly woven and multicoloured made from plastic shopping bags cut into fine strands and woven together using coiled bundle weaving technique.¹ The large dilly bags hang freely making generous shadows on the walls, the small ones are presented under glass in bell jars hanging from a glass hook. There are six small dilly bags in colours and forms

that represent the six seasons or cycles that Aboriginal people in the Top End recognize and describe. The dilly bags refer to the changes in the traditional role of women as food gatherers and explicitly link Aboriginal women to the artist and her family and friends. They all shop for food in stores and bring it home in plastic bags. Holding first began making the dilly bags some years ago; now plastic shopping bags are being phased out in Australia and supplies of different coloured bags are becoming scarce, the plastic bag faces extinction. The dilly bags act as reminder of the past, preserved as an object of study under glass in a bell jar to keep out the effects of the surrounding atmosphere. They are preserved under ideal conditions, for future scrutiny and made precious, rare and jewel like; relics from a previous time.

Holding's work is about a peopled landscape but the people are implied even when they are not depicted. It is a second degree figuration – the observation of someone else's observation, recollected and remade. In **PLACE** she has made a striped spirit doll; this version is three dimensional, stuffed and sewn from canvas and painted with stripes and a red cross. It is an enigmatic female figure presented upside down signifying death, a references to Liwi carvings seen on Bathurst Island and the Yawk Yawk

Tiwi 2005
mixed media
140.0 x 150.0 cm

Hot weather landscape 2005
pastel and charcoal on paper
70.0 x 150.0 cm

Sky II 2005
pastel on paper
70.0 x 50.0 cm

Dry season paperbarks 2005
pastel and charcoal on paper
70.0 x 150.0 cm

Dry season 2005
oil on linen
152.0 x 112.0 cm

Wet season – Cannonhill 2005
oil on linen
172.0 x 172.0 cm

Mallee tree 2005
powder coated aluminium
70.0 x 150.0 cm



carvings and woven figures associated with waterholes and billabongs across Arnhemland. The cross alludes to Christianity and Balander² and the existence amongst the Iwi of the two ways – Christian doctrine and Aboriginal spirituality. Sewn together the figure has a vulnerability and a reflexive potential to refer to Holding's former practice as a fabric artist as well as her own desire to keep both ways alive in herself.

For Holding some ideas ask to be made in certain media, she could not have made the trees from stitched canvas anymore than she could have made the spirit doll from metal. The distinction she makes between her paintings in oils and drawings in pastel and charcoal amplify confirm this. The way the mark is made is critical – drawings in pastel are gritty, dusty, powdery and retain a roughness while painting in oils results in smooth semi transparent layers that are rich and intense. Holding has developed her own repertoire of lines which can look incised or moulded, appearing to cut into or push out through the picture plane. They have affinities with marks made on the body with ash and ochres or on the rock surfaces, or ground marks made with sticks. Some have come from the schema of Aboriginal string figures, others are from weaving. They are now an integrated part of her personal symbolic language.

The Blue Tree and the Red Tree are constructed from templates laser cut in aluminum and powder coated. They sit encased in squared off metal plinths with hard sharp right angles; there is no suggestion of dimension or growth. The metal is unforgiving, flat, solid and resistant; a profound contrast between the organic and the inorganic. For Holding the metal trees and the metal boxes they sit in represent human agency in competition with nature to tame, restrain, exploit and master it. They allude to mining and the contamination of once fruitful hunting places in Northern Australia, and in the Mallee to the iron horses; the farm machinery that has cleared the trees, harrowed, ploughed, fertilized, sown and reaped the sandy plains. Both places have been under environmental threat – the Kakadu area has been subject to

successive waves of mineral exploration and mining, while the Mallee plains are notorious for overclearing and unsustainable farming practices. Each tree serves as an exemplar as if it was the last one left standing, carefully fenced in, to remind future generations. In *PLACE*, Holding has made a series of small paintings related to the gridded sections employed in the construction process which consider the trees as pure abstract forms. It begins and ends with the free drawn line. In the Mallee paintings and drawings of trees there are black crows hanging around the bare wheat stubble, mournful and deathly but also sometimes another bright bird, a pigeon suggesting the new day and renewal. Holding says there are always birds in the trees, but you can't always see them.

Shadows cast by the trees are as important as the trees themselves, in some ways more real more present. The shadows are the only certain outline and reliable shape. In the middle of the day when the sunlight is so strong that it sucks all the colour out of the place, in the blinding light often you can only see the landscape in reflections in black water or as sharply etched shadows on a rock face or the bare ground. Shadows and reflections are substantial while the thing itself may only be a shimmer, almost a mirage.

Holding's landscapes are about the energy of the land, the palpable vibration of place in the play of layers, where the surface is a reflection or is shielded by a heat haze or the smoke of burning off. Everything is seen through a glass darkly. The viewer must penetrate the surface, peel away the layers and veils, look through the trees, the smoke, the haze, or beyond the reflection of the water. The surface is never still and colours pulse with their own particular energy.

The Blue Tree and the Red Tree are indigenous trees adapted to their environment. They signify water – abundant and predictable in the Top End and scarce and erratic in the Mallee, and they grow best in their own place. Both are examples of that shady tree which Aboriginal people speak of coming home to sit under, when



Anthill at Koongarah 2005
pastel on paper
76.0 x 57.0 cm

Dead tree at Djuwarr 2005
pastel on paper
76.0 x 57.0 cm

Night birds 2005
pastel on paper
70.0 x 50.0 cm

Night camp at Djuwarr 2004
diptych
pastel on paper
75.0 x 114.0 cm

all the work of life is done, a resting place for the body and the soul. Holding made the Blue Tree first, a brilliant ultramarine blue; because in nature blue is the rarest colour and she wanted to use a colour not found within the organic colours used by Aboriginal people, however it was an uncanny choice because Bluebag Blue/Reckitts washing blue was taken up and used by Aboriginal artists in Rock paintings throughout the Top End so that it signifies the Balander.

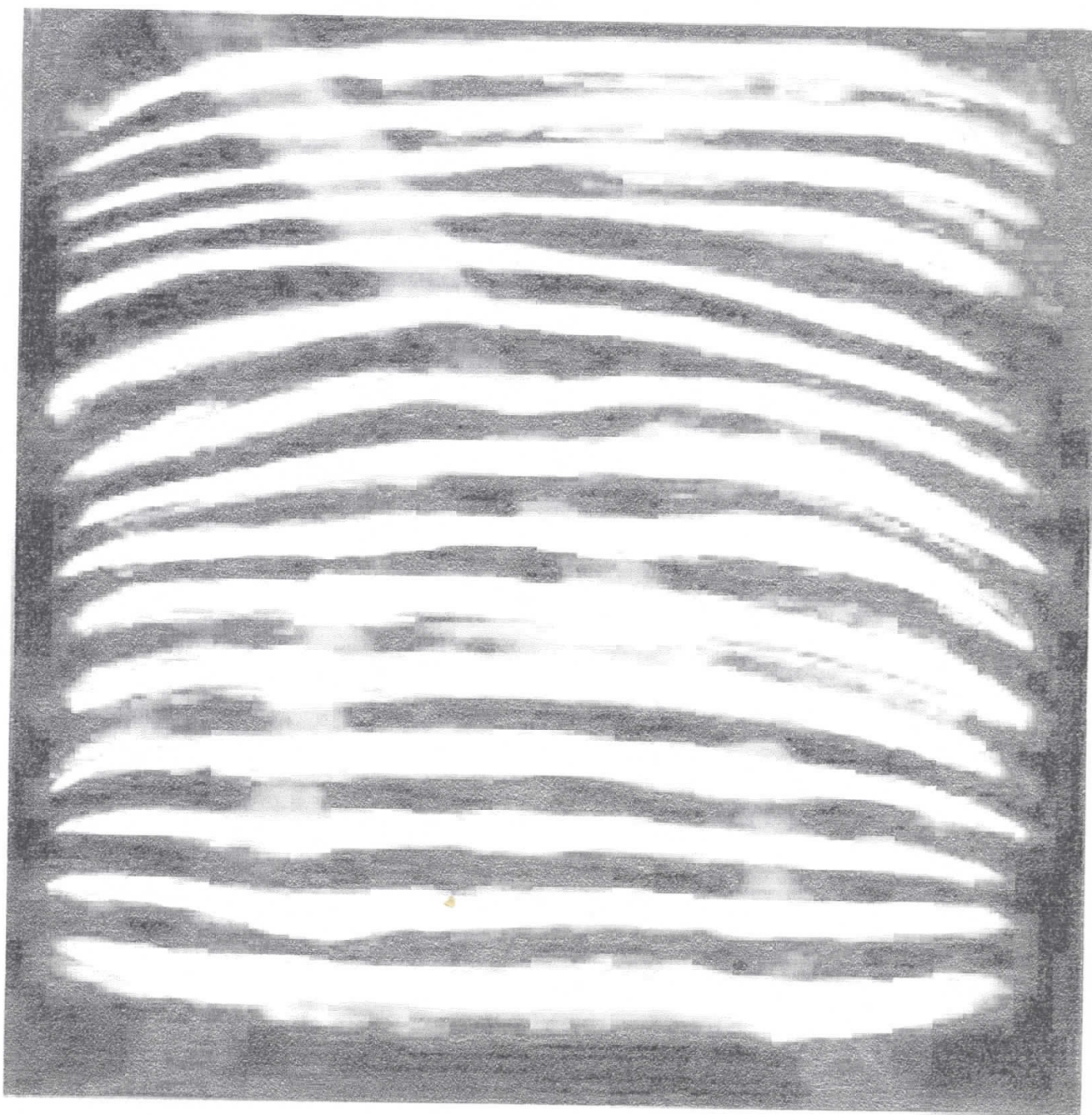
The Blue Tree is Kadjimulk's tree, named for the big man who spoke for much of the Kakadu area and who died last year. The Red Tree is deep rich red, of the raging fire and the searing dry heat of the Mallee. The Red Tree although the artist doesn't name it, belongs to her. Both trees and both places matter to her.

SUZANNE SPUNNER
Melbourne, May 2005

1. Coiled bundle weaving – see FULL CIRCLE – Judy Holding's Plastic Dilly Bags
2. Balander/Balanda – means foreigner, outsider, white person in Arnhemland. It is a borrowed word from the Macassans who used it for Dutchman or Hollander.

Suzanne Spinner is a playwright and writer on visual art. In 1997 she returned to Melbourne after a decade living in the Northern Territory. Like Judy Holding she regularly returns to the Top End. She is now writing a book on Indigenous & Other Art from the NT post Land Rights – Looking Both Ways.

Photography: John Brash – fotografitti Design: Ronald James Butters



Biography

Judy Holding is a Melbourne based artist who has been exhibiting since 1983. During this time she has participated in 22 solo shows and 77 group shows throughout Australia, Italy and France. In 1977 she completed a Diploma of Fine Art [Painting] at Monash University.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2001 *Selected Work*, Antipodes Gallery, Sorrento
Weathers of the Mind, 24 Hr Art, Darwin
Nagudji Andjeuk – One Rain, Gallery 101, Melbourne
- 2002 *The Wet – the Dry?*, Framed Gallery, Darwin
New Work, Beaver Gallery, Canberra
Weathers of the Mind, McClelland Gallery, Langwarrin;
Mildura Regional Gallery, Swan Hill Regional Gallery

Le Sei Stagioni della Terra Australiana, Monash University
Centre, Prato, Italy

2003 *Prato & Beyond*, Gallery 101, Melbourne

2005 *Place I*, La Trobe University Art Museum, Bundoora, Victoria
Place II, Gallery 101, Melbourne

Collections

Artbank; Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory;
Benalla Regional Art Gallery; Private Collections: Australia, USA;
Shepparton Regional Gallery; City of Port Phillip; La Trobe
University, Melbourne; The Productivity Commission;
Holding Redlich