

**people and places**  
**interactions with land by some**  
**contemporary central australian artists**

Curator: Alison French, 24HR ART, Darwin

*From Atenlkenyarliweke or Anzac Hill, the vast panorama of the McDonnell Ranges exerts a force which calls into question the sprawl of Alice Springs below. The efforts of settlers and developers appear transient in the context of this universal landscape.<sup>1</sup>*

The Centre and its diverse art has held up well in the Top End in this extremely coherent and user-friendly exhibition. Alison French has selected the works as thoughtfully from amongst the artists of the Centre as she has placed them on the gallery walls in Darwin, setting up a genuine dialogue between the works—by Aboriginal and White Australians, by men and women, by long time residents and recent arrivals, and between viewers and the works. Each wall speaks to that across from it, and the two areas of the gallery space project different voices and timbres.

The relationship of people to land is a central concern which leads (the artists) into territories beyond the superficial seduction of the picturesque.<sup>2</sup>

In the main part of the gallery we are confronted by the vast sepia panorama of Robert Kleinboonschate which ori-

ents us in the landscape of the Centre—with its overtones of 19th century topographical art or the Nolan/Drysdale harsh and beautiful drought pictures. It also reads as an ironic comment one of the more notorious art sites of Alice Springs, the Panorama Guth which, cyclorama style, places the visitor to the Centre in the middle of the local universe and amongst the collection of sacred tjuringa in a way that is distinctly uncomfortable to contemporary sensibilities.

On the two long walls flanking it are works by three artists, Rod Moss, Anne Flynn and Linda Syddick, who in very different and distinctive ways place figures in their landscape—peopling and scaling down the panorama. I found it interesting that for the white artists, Moss and Flynn, the land and the people are in a dynamic tension, each vying for visual supremacy and demanding we see both—we are not to assume the existence of either. Land and people are asserted in these works with equal force.

In Moss' big picture the textures of water and land forms blur with the folds of skin, the tendrils of hair and the creases of worn clothing so that the figures are part of and run into the land they inhabit. In Flynn's painting the wild flying figures appear to dominate the landscape because of their prominence in the foreground—they are placed astride the picture space—but on closer inspection it is as if they were born of and generated by the wild eyed beauty of the hills, that so embedded are they in this landscape they could only manifest here.

By contrast, Linda Syddick does not need to assert the land, she claims it as the indivisible backdrop of her quirky and witty finely marked Emu Men and kangaroo ancestors who dance across the red claypans. She does not need to sign the land, she knows it. While in Bessie Liddle's work, comprising women's body designs, the land and the people are one and refer back and forth. The designs are painted on the woman's body, most often on the upper torso and breasts and the designs signify the contour lines and topography as suggestively as would any cartographer.

The side "wing" of the gallery provides a more intimate space and is used effectively to show Halcyon Lucas and Jan Mackay's softer, sketchier, more scratchy pieces which employ quite a different palette from the predominance of

ochres-browns and red which we have come to expect of the Centralian artist. For these artists, the land is peopled in a very particular way—Lucas treats it as stage set for the animation of anthropomorphised flora—dancing grass trees and fashionably attired plant families which in an irreverent way strike up a conversation with Syddick's Emu Men in a reel of dancers across the gallery floor. Mackay's painting/collage of her baby daughter swaddled and placed amongst the towering anthills guarding and marking her position in the desert has a surreal dreamlike feeling that speaks to Flynn's angelic figures floating above the Santa Teresa hills. Mackay's other works are of the flora in close focus, or as pattern, and write the land in minute detail.

This was altogether a very satisfying exhibition that literally hung together well and allowed a Top End audience to experience a strong and dynamic sense of the places and people of Central Australia. It marked the first collaboration between the Araluen Centre and 24 HR ART and managed to be more than representative of the art of that region; it presented the Centre and generated a language of forms and subjects and styles with which we could begin to read and to understand that place and those people for ourselves.

**suzanne spunner**

**notes**

1. Alison French, Exhibition notes
2. *ibid*



Installation view, **People and Places, 1994**. 24HR ART, Darwin.