

# STILL THERE

RUM JUNGLE/CORONATION HILL

MARIE MCMAHON

AGOG

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'Kakadu, Kakadu, Kakadu,  
People come and people go,  
You're still on the top...'\*

\*Peter Miller Blekbala Mujik Caama Music 1990



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## STILL THERE

*Still There* comprises work made over the last year about two sites in the Top End - the Rum Jungle area and in particular a wetland place called *Anyipak* alongside the town of Batchelor where McMahon lives and Coronation Hill/*Guratba* in Kakadu Stage 3 where she attended the first 24 Hr Art Artists Camp held in May this year at the *Gimbat* base for the Office of the Supervising Scientist (OSS) beside Coronation Hill. The Coronation Hill works are the most recent and occupy the central wall of the gallery, they are flanked by the works from Rum Jungle, which were shown in Darwin at 24 Hr Art (NT Centre for Contemporary Art) in June this year as part of an exhibition entitled *Fruitful Places*.

Over the last four years McMahon has produced a body of work about the Top End in two series. Each series consists of three partially overlapping solo exhibitions. The first series: *Bush Place/Whole World* (1989), *Songs* (1990), *The Sacred Palm* (1991) was centred on the Tiwi Islands where she lived and worked during 1988/9. McMahon made drawings, paintings and prints of the land/seascape and the vegetation, as well as portraits of Tiwi people, in particular the women she knew from her work with Bima wear. These portraits related to the monumentality of Tiwi figurative carving, and to the stories told to her by her sitters about their place. Many of the Tiwi portraits recalled carved masks or sphinxes and were often embedded in, and growing from the landscape, and some even appeared to rise from the sea itself. The last works produced in that series were close up studies of plants, flowers and fruits significant to the Tiwi as bush tucker and bush medicine.

In 1990 McMahon moved to Batchelor, 100 kms south/west of Darwin and continued her exploration of the forms, meanings and values of the plants of the Tropical Woodlands in *Woodland* (1991) and *Fruitful Places* (1992) and this exhibition *Still There*. Again the final works in this series mark, or at least prefigure a transition and a shift of focus. The work arising from the Gimbat Artists Camp -pastel drawings and oil paintings incorporates significant land forms; *Guratba/Coronation Hill* and *Pul Pul* the rocky outcrop opposite, which

are important sites for the Jawoyn people. Both places lie in the Sickness Country called *Bulajang* inhabited by *Bula's Ngan-mol* or essence which goes right through this region and makes it an important and dangerous area. The Jawoyn imperative to prevent any further exploration or mining in *Bulajang* arises directly from their concern that any disturbance of *Bula* will cause increasing illness and death.

"You're talking about wealth, not rocks. You go ahead and do it. Grab every mineral you want... If you want to go play with people's lives, that's your business. You'll go back to your country, wherever it is, and we'll still be here." *Brian Barraway, Kalano, Feb. 1989* (i)

The area around *Gimbat* in the headwaters of the South Alligator River about 220 kms S/E of Darwin is rich in mineral deposits - gold, platinum, paladium and uranium and has been mined since the early 1950s. Mining at Coronation Hill closely followed that at Rum Jungle and constituted the shortlived but feverish NT uranium boom. The model town of Batchelor, McMahon's backyard was built to service the mine, and was opened by Prime Minister Menzies amidst great fanfare in 1954. (ii)

McMahon's fascination with and study of the fragile ecosystems found in tropical woodlands and her awareness of their vulnerability in the face of mining has become acute since her move to Batchelor. McMahon had followed the Coronation Hill debate but the Gimbat artists camp was her first contact with that country up close. Meanwhile her own backyard has come under increasing threat. The country around Rum Jungle included in the Finnis River Land Claim which was recommended for grant by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner in 1981 but not yet granted as Aboriginal Land has seen a furious rush of mining exploration leases. McMahon has been an active member of a Batchelor residents group questioning and opposing some of these leases. Making work about Rum Jungle and Coronation Hill is inevitably informed by their Aboriginal significance, as well as their mining history and the exploitable potential "still there".

McMahon's knowledge of the significance of these sites is deep and confident, so although it mediates their representation in her work, it is

not made reductively explicit or literalised. Rather, threat enters as a shadow cast across the landscape and upon the fruits and flowers within it. The soft diffused Dry Season light in which many of the studies were drawn is rendered darker and invested with metaphor calling up the portentous Wet Season light. The atmosphere is overcast, sombre and glowering with metallic greys and aluminium skies, the surfaces are more wrought, scratched and pitted showing the layers of rubbing out and redrawing. Fruitfulness is no longer a benign fecundity but contains the imminence of decay.

Throughout this series McMahon has been wrestling with representing the lushness and fruitfulness of the plants of the tropical woodland and her first influences were Rousseau, and the twentieth century Mexican painters. Her work has increasingly moved away from the graphic, by way of a moulded fleshed out painterly phase and entered a more symbolic, ritualistic style of still life that has its origins in Spanish and Italian paintings of fruit and flowers set in landscapes. Photographs in illustrated cookbooks of Mediterranean food arising from this same tradition, in which regional dishes and raw foodstuffs are arranged and photographed in the appropriate regional landscape settings were also an important source.

Most of these works begin an ovoid still life compositional studies which McMahon arranges in her studio. Following Matisse, her practice is then to work from the drawings without going back to nature in the reworking into the finished pastel drawings and the oil paintings. The first rendering of a theme is perceptual, the second, a picture based on that picture is more synthetic.<sup>(iii)</sup> McMahon finds this frees her of the mutable tyranny of real things to concentrate on their symbolic meanings.

The results are portrait landscapes. Landscape made alive - edible country, pinched, pricked, fluted and piped and baked like pastries. Interestingly they recall the work of Arrernte artist Otto Pareroultja whose work McMahon admires. Fruits and flowers are invested with a monumental significance that corresponds to the land where they grow, while land forms lie piled up and garnished like food. There is a

significant and paradoxical collapse of scale. Use gives worth to bush flowers and fruits and their scale and valency changes, we see them magnified with a close up lens as they might appear to an Aboriginal woman gathering them. Food and medicinal use qualify and multiply the meaning of the country in which these plants are placed. By putting the fruits and flowers in the bowl of the landforms an inversion of volume and scale occurs. Tiny Cluster Figs remind us of rocky outcrops, Kurrajong Flowers look like weathered sandstone outliers.

McMahon's achievement is to create this tension between the monumental rendering and intimate familiarity arising from her knowledge of the country and its vegetation. The land is anthropomorphised into a vast reclining figure and becomes itself a Memento Mori. If not looked after properly she and all the variety of fruits and flowers still there within her, could die.

*Suzanne Spinner, Darwin, September 1992*

#### NOTES:

- (i) "Just Sweet Talk", The Jawoyn Response to the Coronation Hill Joint Venture Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Jawoyn Assoc. 1989
- (ii) "The 1950s Uranium Boom in the Northern Territory" by Leith F Barter, NT Journal of History
- (iii) "Primitivism in 20C Art" - Matisse and the Fauves, Jack D Flam. Museum of Modern Art, New York.