Trickle down effect: sculpture and land

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University of Wollongong

MASTER OF CREATIVE ARTS (RESEARCH)

2012

EXEGESIS

TRICKLE DOWN EFFECT: SCULPTURE AND LAND

Kim Williams

2012
CERTIFICATION OF ORIGINAL WORK

I, Kim Williams, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts (Research), in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Signature
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ABSTRACT

_Trickle Down Effect: Sculpture and land_ is an exegesis that underpins the multimedia exhibition _Under a Cloud_. Through the lens of visual arts the project explores human relationships to water through the cyclic narratives of drought and flood along the length of the Darling River. The research project involves a journey along the river to bear witness to the changing circumstances of the river and its surrounding landscape and to listen to community concerns about the security of water as scientists predict a hotter, drier climate in south eastern Australia.

Journal entries recorded during two field trips to the Darling River trace the journey along the river and form the structure of the exegesis. Contained within this structure are the environmental, art historical, physical, social, methodological and aesthetic considerations that informed the response to ‘place’.

Through an investigation of Australian artists’ engagement with and response to environmental issues, the exegesis also examines the value of the artists’ contribution to the broader environmental debates.
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1. Overview

Journal entry, Monday 26th September, The Coorong: Camping at 42 Mile with Perla and Neville. It’s freezing cold. On the way to Tea Tree Crossing, we stopped for a while to watch a sea lion floating on its back about 100 metres from shore with its flippers in the air. Neville said that sea lions do this to warm themselves and that they can also sleep that way. I interviewed Neville in the evening. He used to be a fine wool sheep farmer. He described the reaction of the bank representative, when Neville took him to the edge of the pit where he had dumped the bodies of the 2,500 sheep he had to shoot, for lack of food and water. The banker vomited when he saw the rotting bodies and smelt the stench. Without him saying it in words, you could feel the utter pain of it all for Neville. Broken marriage, financial ruin, broken spirit. He wants people to understand what it’s like.

Water’s necessity to life is without question. It has come into public conversations about sustainability as populations grow around Australia. A guaranteed supply of water is something most people living in urban areas have been accustomed to, but the severity of the most recent drought in eastern Australia has turned attention to the security of water supplies as scientists predict a hotter, drier climate in south-eastern Australia. The environmental predicament of the Murray-Darling Basin is a key part of this story - regional and rural communities of the Murray-Darling Basin have been particularly affected by the long drought at the beginning of this century, which is anecdotally regarded as the worst drought on record in Australia. The Murray Darling Basin Authority, a federal government body responsible for planning for the future of the Basin, continues to struggle with the complex task of allocating river water equitably to stakeholders who rely on the rivers of this system, while attempting to protect the environmental health of the rivers themselves.

The Murray-Darling Basin is a vast catchment which covers one-seventh of the entire area of Australia, upwards of one million square kilometres, draining southern Queensland, all of New South Wales west of the Great Dividing Range, and parts of northern Victoria and South Australia. The two longest rivers of this catchment are the Murray and the Darling Rivers. The Murray River is fed by the southern mountains of the Great Dividing Range and by tributaries in Victoria. The Darling River, fed by a network of rivers in southern Queensland and northern and eastern New South Wales, originates at the confluence of the Barwon and Culgoa Rivers near Brewarrina in north-west New South Wales (Hammer, 2011: pp. xviii-xix). It cleaves a circuitous south-westerly course for approximately 1,500 kilometres before joining the Murray River at Wentworth, on the Victoria-New South Wales border. From there they flow as one river to the sea in South Australia. Known as the ‘food bowl’ of Australia, the Murray-Darling Basin produces almost forty percent of Australia’s agricultural output, supports two million
inhabitants and provides drinking water to a further one million people in Adelaide (Hammer, 2011: p. xvii).

The Murray-Darling Basin

The Darling River first came to my attention in the early 1990s, when a toxic blue-green algal bloom brought the river into the news. More recently, it has rarely been far from public attention, as the government proposals to restructure current water usage from the river systems of the Murray-Darling Basin have sparked strong reactions from stakeholders in the region. The situation is further charged by the attention science is giving to the human influence on climate trends and how this may be impacting the patterns of drought and flood natural to the Darling River. Economist Ross Garnaut’s government-commissioned report, the Garnaut Climate Change Review (2008), suggested that unmitigated climate change could bring an end to agriculture and human habitation in the Murray-Darling Basin within the century (Hammer, 2011: p. xvii). The vulnerability of Australia’s main river system raises questions about human practices which have seriously compromised and in some cases irreparably damaged riparian ecosystems – the Murray-Darling system represents the complex relationship between humans and water.

As the long drought at the beginning of this century intensified, farmers left their land and dams diminished to historically low levels in many regions. Various themes arose repeatedly in the
public arena: desalination of sea water, long-distance pumping from rivers to shore up city water supplies, government water buybacks to increase ‘environmental flows’ in the Murray-Darling Basin, water allocations to properties on these rivers, rising water tables, increasing soil salinity, and the drought’s impact on agricultural production. In the past few years, drought turned to flood, affecting cities, townships and rural areas. This added a further layer of tension to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority’s proposal to cut water usage at a time when there was not only water, but in some cases excessive amounts. The severe ‘El Niño’ weather cycle which brought drought to eastern Australia shifted to the ‘La Niña’ cycle, bringing flood. As the ‘La Niña’ cycle weakens and ‘El Niño’ returns, the prospect of another drought is never far away.

This exegesis is framed by a journey along the Darling River – journal entries made during the course of two field trips to the river provide a structure for the ideas and considerations which formed my response as an artist to this region. Firstly, I broadly outline the environmental issues of the Murray-Darling. Next I acknowledge the artistic lineage of my journey and then map my trajectory towards this project in the context of other Australian artists who have engaged with environmental debates. This is followed by a brief examination of the work of relevant Human Geographers, whose research provided cross-disciplinary viewpoints which complemented my own research. I then describe the geography and topography of the Darling River to provide the reader with a physical picture of a landscape within which the cultural and environmental issues are located. This is further explored through the relationships between people and the river and settler Australians’ identification with and sense of ‘belonging’ to this county. Going back to the river, I discuss my interaction with the people and landscape of the Darling River. How this shaped the thinking behind the artistic outcomes of the project is then made evident. Next I reflect on the knowledge I gathered in this place and the ways in which the journey determined my methodology. Finally I bring together my own thoughts about humans’ relationship to nature and the place of art in the broader story.
2. Looking back

*Journal entry, Wednesday 30 June, Coonabarabran: Went to the Warrumbungle Observatory last night and gazed at the night sky through high-powered telescopes. It’s a cold clear night, minus six degrees. Apparently there are millions of galaxies in the universe. I asked if there are more universes than just ours. The astronomer said the universe (only one) is meant to be everything. The space in between things – stars, planets, nebulae etc. - what is that made of? Nothing at all, it seems. Space is nothing unless there is something there. It’s hard to imagine nothing. Drove into the Warrumbungles today and did a 13km walk up to the summit of one of the volcanic peaks. It’s a stand-alone mountain range which leads out on the western side to very flat country. You get the feeling as you head toward the Macquarie Marshes that the land lays very low.*

This research project began with a passionate interest, as an artist, in the land and humans’ relationship to the natural world. The Murray-Darling Basin became a focus of this interest – the environmental and political issues which overlay the landscape have placed this region at the centre of water and climate change debates. Much of the public conversation about the Murray-Darling Basin had come from the perspectives of science and economics. As an artist, I wanted to find a way to contribute to these conversations and to articulate my concerns about water through the language of visual art, bringing a more experiential narrative to audiences. Art has a key role to play in broader discussions. While other disciplines may offer rational argument, this is transmitted generally through the spoken and written word. Through more poetic and experiential means, art can draw on the senses of the viewer, bringing different perspectives and understandings to the debates. I wanted to offer a contemporary artist’s reading of the interplay between the human and non-human in the Darling River region. To do so, I needed to undertake my own journey to Western New South Wales to collect material from the landscape and bring it back, to contribute with an artist’s voice to broader discussions.

By going on this journey, I would be following in the footsteps of many artists in Australia who have gone out to remote areas to bring back information. An ‘undiscovered’ land such as Australia was ripe for exploration by colonial artists, who would bring back images of unfamiliar places to the public in Australia, England and Europe (Organ, M. pers.comm. 5/11/12). Some were employed as official artists on exploratory expeditions, while others undertook expeditions at their own expense. Ludwig Becker (1808-1861) was commissioned by the Victorian Exploring Expedition as artist, geologist and zoologist on the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition of 1860-61, from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria (Bonyhady, 2002: p.25). After reaching the Darling River just north of today’s Pooncarie, the expedition party made its way on to Menindee. Becker died of scurvy north-west of Menindee, at Bulloo, after
completing nearly eighty drawings and watercolours of the expedition, and collecting scientific specimens which would later be sent back to Melbourne. His watercolour *Dick, the Brave and Gallant Native Guide* “celebrates the role played by Aboriginal people – often at great physical cost and danger to themselves – in enabling settlers to venture across the continent” (ibid: p.11). Becker was an accomplished artist, “producing landscapes, natural history subjects and portraits with equal skill” (ibid: p.9). He kept a daily diary of his journey, of which one excerpt reads:

Saturday, 13 October 1860.

Started at 7½ and arrived a 5 o’CI at our halting place from where I sketched No 22, entitled ‘a Darling bend’. I made several of such smaller drawings only for the purpose of giving an idea of the country we went through and also to show the character of the trees, of which nearly every one in my sketches is a portrait. On the way I saw, at noon basking in the sun, a fine specimen of a guano which kind I do not remember having seen it before. It was of a slender form, about 2 feet long of a yellow color with black markings from head to half of tail, the other half was free from this markings – legs black with large, rounded, yellow spots. I was sorry not to be able to pick it up and to carry it with me. (Burke and Wills web archive)

Ludwig Becker, *Portrait of Dick, the Brave and Gallant Native Guide*, *Darling Depot*, 1860

Watercolour, brush and ink on paper, 14 x 22 cm

Finding things and recording them was a way of delineating the unfamiliar surroundings in Australia. In correspondence, colonial artists Conrad Martens and Eugene von Guérard “both expressed a strong commitment to giving their work a documentary aspect and recognised that a balance had to be drawn between science and art” (Bonyhady, 1985: p.93). The superb botanical and entomological drawings of sisters Harriet and Helena Scott contributed a wealth
of visual information to the natural history of New South Wales. In 1865-66, Helena Scott (1832-1910) accompanied her husband Edward Forde on a surveying expedition along the Darling River, travelling upstream from Wentworth towards Bourke. Scott collected and painted specimens on the lower reaches of the Darling, which were subsequently donated to collections in Sydney and Melbourne. Scott and Forde both contracted fever at Menindee, where Edward Forde died (Ord, 1987: p.198). Helena Scott Forde survived the illness – her sketches of the landscape of the Darling give some idea of the remote and difficult conditions in which she was travelling, camping and working.

Helena Forde, March 4th 1866

*Red Sandstone Cliffs above “Cutthro” J. Piles Station, Camp 17*
Watercolour on paper, Mitchell Library, State Library – PXA 551/9

In 1944, the Sydney Morning Herald commissioned artist Russell Drysdale to join a reporter, Keith Newman, to visit and document drought-ravaged areas of Western New South Wales. Drysdale was shocked by what he saw (Klepac, 2012: p.19). He made drawings for Newman’s articles; these drawings became the starting points for a series of paintings shown in a major exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in 1945, including iconic paintings such as ‘The Drover’s Wife’ and ‘Walls of China’ (both 1945). Drysdale’s evocations of the Australian outback and its people provided visual evidence of the impact of drought. His images offered a stark, unromanticised view of the Australian landscape and influenced a new sense of Australian identity:

> It was the paintings of Russell Drysdale which first taught me to love this country, to see the beauty in its vast horizons and the grandeur of its stony ranges which rise so abruptly
from its flat plains……He also taught me to admire and understand the dignity, and, yes sometimes, the natural elegance of its people, both white and black, who live there. (Pringle, 1974, foreword)

Russell Drysdale, *The Drover’s Wife*, 1945
Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 61.5 cm

Drysdale’s journey to western New South Wales to bring images back to the populated, coastal fringes resonates with my own journey. Despite the comparative ease with which the Darling River region can be reached today, it is visited by relatively few people. Its’ place in Australia’s environmental, historical, cultural and agricultural story, however, provides compelling reasons to learn about this region. I felt a sense of responsibility to see, with my own eyes, a place of such significance. I wanted to ‘bear witness’, to see what was happening out there and to bring back stories, my own and others’, to give city audiences an idea of a place which is governed by extremes of weather – drought and flood. To do this I used several means: a journal, which was a daily record of the experience of travelling along the river, a DVD which I made back in Wollongong, from many hours of video footage and sound recordings taken at the river, and a multimedia installation which would provide a poetic response to the broader idea of people’s relationship to water.
3. Mapping the territory

*Journal entry, Thursday 1st July, Warren: It was dirt road all the way from Quambone to Willie Station, in the Macquarie Marshes. Willie Station is a wildlife retreat run by an elderly woman, Myra Tolhurst. She was saying that the water situation has been looking up – they’ve had 26 inches of rain this year. Prior to this, they were in drought for 11 years. I’ve spoken to a few people in the region who think that cotton shouldn’t be grown in Australia – it uses too much water. I asked Myra if she ever has a holiday. She replied that the last one she had was in 1983! She grew up on the coast and would dearly love to see the sea again. It’s raining this morning, not heavily, but I can see how this flat land would quickly fill with water. The Macquarie Marshes are described as ‘braided swamps’. I left just in time. Even so, my car was sliding everywhere in the mud – a bit scary.*

Weather has been of interest to me since childhood, when clouds, rain, wind and sun were the determinants of a life outdoors. My father, a keen fisherman, was closely focused on weather conditions which governed his trips out to sea. Days were prefaced by his consultations with the barometer on the wall. This made a lasting impression on me. I would record daily weather conditions in a diary, and carried around in my head a simple taxonomy of clouds: cumulus, cirrus, stratus, cumulonimbus. These formative experiences have surfaced as ongoing interests in my creative practice – more recently my artwork has evoked landscape through the imagery of clouds, weather and water. Over the years my artwork has gravitated toward a conversation with nature, animated by the idea of humans’ connection to and reciprocal relationship with the non-human world.

This idea began to take shape during walking journeys in remote parts of Australia – Cape York, Arnhem Land, Central Australia, and the Kimberley – where I began to undertake artworks ‘in the field’ and then bring material back home for further development. Theoretically, the idea of ‘connection’ is expanded by philosopher Crispin Sartwell’s notion of ‘situativeness of the subject in time and space’ (1995: p.123). The dualistic modernist idea of the separateness of mind and body is challenged by the notion of fusion (1995: p.124). Sartwell says:

> People are of the order of nature, are always in the process of trying to achieve mutual adaptation of organism and environment. That situation is a participation in, or perhaps more deeply, an identification with, the world.
> We absorb parts of the environment into ourselves, and eliminate parts of ourselves into the environment. The materials out of which we are composed, and into which we impress our mark……are the environment in transformation.
I suggest that it is our complete embeddedness in the environment that makes human knowledge possible, and that we need to articulate a new orientation in epistemology that is true to our identity with the world. (1995: p.124) This idea of ‘embeddedness’ resonates with my own experiences during walking journeys. Walking has been a key part of my creative process: it is a way of physically mapping space, feeling the landscape through my body to become part of that space in a sensorial, experiential form of research. This is neatly articulated by Sartwell, who writes in relation to children’s ways of learning: “the impulse to move is itself a demand for knowledge; it is an impulse for exploration of and fusion with the environment.” (1995: p. 134). These journeys have enabled the idea of connection to the non-human to emerge as a key theme in my creative work, around which issues such as environment and politics revolve.

Kim Williams, **Boabs, Calder River, Kimberley**, 2009
ink and gouache on Stonehenge paper, 110cm x 225cm

The walks I have undertaken in remote areas have been governed by the realities of a site: exposure to the weather, to flora and fauna, to the availability of water, to topographical barriers and physical challenges and risks. They have offered a richness of experience that can only be gained by the physical commitment of immersing oneself in what are often places of great beauty, where human voices are silenced by the immensity of the natural environment. In the words of one of my walking companions in a recent letter from the Kimberley:

There’s just being here in this landscape that satisfies some deep part of my being. I’m happy here. The remoteness, the need to be self-sufficient, the need to take care of oneself and one’s teammates in order to get back out again; is something you can’t get from ordinary life. I love discovering what’s around the corner. We’ve discovered some places with views and an ambience that is humbling and moving. I feel privileged, as if
I’ve stumbled into a huge natural cathedral. We all just sit down and absorb the grandeur of the place (Shepherd, Charnley River, Kimberley, 16/7/2012)

Such experiences have been, in a sense, a rite of passage, a way of ‘knowing’ Australia more deeply and connecting more strongly to a sense of Australian identity. Contact with Aboriginal cultures in these places, as well as my own work with a local Aboriginal community, sparked an interest in Indigenous knowledge systems and practices of care for the non-human world. I began to see parallels between Indigenous practices and environmental thinking. An Indigenous worldview is described by Peter Melser and Tex Skuthorpe in their work with the Yorta Yorta people of the Barmah Forest for the former Murray-Darling Basin Commission:

The fundamental principle of Aboriginal cultural expression is the unity of land and people: people and land are one. People are born of the earth and the purpose of their life is sustaining the land. People exist from and for and through their death they return to it. This idea is the fundamental interdependence of people and the natural environment that supports us. People are an integral part of the landscape in an Aboriginal ecology.

(Melser, Skuthorpe, 1994: p.12)

The Native Title debates of the early 1990s triggered my interest in the politics of land ownership in Australia. The Mabo case successfully challenged the legitimacy of the European view of ownership in the courts. Political debates about land rights in Australia filtered into my own observations about the impact of humans’ thinking on the land. I began using the physical marks of human habitation in my art practice – roads, fences, lawns, open-cut mines, ploughed fields. These were marks of ownership and colonisation, and they represented an attitude which was being challenged.

Kim Williams, Suburban Landscape, 1995, mixed media and lawn, 150 x 150cm
As the long drought in eastern Australia intensified in the first years of this century, it became apparent that water was also a contested resource, as the consequences of colonial water and land management practices became evident. In 2009 Jessica Weir, researching for the Native Title Research Unit, spoke of the relationships of Indigenous and non-Indigenous river communities to the Murray-Darling River systems. She described how non-Indigenous users and authorities have commodified water and how, in Australia’s current water policies, rivers are viewed as competitors for their own water (Late Night Live, ABC Radio National, 30/9/09). In an Enlightenment view of nature, water is regarded as an economic resource, while in an Indigenous view “many of the traditional owners attribute the capacity of the river to sustain life to a life force that is the river itself”. This is part of a broader view of country “being alive and having the capacity to act” (Weir, 2009: pp 52-53). I am interested in this sense of a systemic totality. As drought turns into flood, the extremes of the Australian climate become the focus of our fears and hopes, and as we face the prospect of increasing extremes of weather through climate change, a different approach to the way we live seems necessary rather than desirable.
4. Planning an expedition

Journal entry, Saturday 3rd July, Brewarrina: Went for a walk and immediately found the Aboriginal fish traps, just below the Barwon River weir. I filmed them from many angles. They’re ancient Aboriginal rock arrangements in the river (age unknown, but some say tens of thousands of years old), designed to trap fish that were swimming upstream, making it easier to spear them. They were designed for all water levels except flooding. Standing there on the river’s edge, looking at these beautiful, complex arrangements, you get a sense of how important and communal a place this would have been so many generations before. Because the weir is now there, just above the traps, it has changed the natural water flow – an Indigenous system overlaid by a colonial system. I wonder why the fish traps aren’t more widely known about.

Curiosity and concern were the starting points for this research project: the appeal of the Darling River lay in an awareness of its’ environmental importance and contested nature, which gave rise to the idea of an adventure into the unfamiliar landscape of western New South Wales to see this river first-hand. The media fed this curiosity with stories of political struggle and human hardship, with images of dying river red gums, dead animals, dry, cracked river beds, and the inverse of this: inland seas created by slow-moving floods, as the floodwaters slowly moved down the Darling from Queensland, breaking the riverbanks and spreading for up to eighty kilometres wide across vast floodplains.

I conceived of a plan to go to this ‘place’ and see for myself the site of so much passionate debate. The journey itself was a central idea of this inquiry. My overriding aim was to travel the entire length of the river, over two thousand kilometres, from Brewarrina to the sea, so I planned to drive from place to place and explore these places on foot, making contact with people along the way. The process would be an intrinsic part of the story. Both my creative work and my written reflections could be informed by the landscape, the ‘journey’, and who and what I encountered along the way. By collecting ‘material’ from the landscape and bringing it back for discussion, I hoped to develop my own narratives from this process. How I interpreted the material would give people an artist’s perspective of the timeless realities of drought and flood - the presence and absence of water and its’ impact on people. By using the affective potential of art, I wanted to transmit an idea about this place and its’ people which would resonate with the viewer. My aim was to find ways of expanding my own creative practice and to contribute, as an artist, to the broader economic, environmental and cultural narratives of the Darling River.

The potential of art to have an impact on peoples’ thinking and to influence public opinion has no better example than Tasmanian photographer Peter Dombrovskis’ iconic image, *Morning*
Mist, Rock Island Bend (1979). This photograph became the flagship image for the successful campaign in 1982/83 to save the Franklin River in Tasmania from being dammed.

As the campaign to save the river gathered momentum, it ignited passionate debate across Australia. Dombrovskis’ photograph brought the Franklin River into public view – the image resonated with the public who overwhelmingly recognised the long-term value of preserving this wilderness area. Acting on public opinion, the Federal Government eventually prevailed over the Tasmanian State Government and the Hydro Electricity Commission. Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend not only bolstered the campaign to save the river from being dammed, but was also closely linked with Bob Hawke’s Federal election victory in 1983. Dombrovskis, an inveterate bushwalker, who explored and photographed and eventually died in Tasmania’s rugged wilderness, said of the Franklin River:

I’m not an activist by any consideration, but I do think it is terribly important that people do have visual material of these places, that they do have some inkling of what they are like. If people don’t know, it’s very much harder for them to feel for these places.
(Dombrovskis in Flack, 2003: p.9)

I visited Tasmania during the Franklin campaign and saw first-hand the level of antipathy between people which this issue provoked, initially in Tasmania, then across Australia. Even today, the memory of my own boat trip down the Gordon and Franklin Rivers in 1983 is fused with the image Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend.

Dombrovskis and his mentor, photographer Olegas Truchanas, shared a philosophy which was “simple and remarkably effective - if people could see the beauty of Australia’s wild places then
they may be moved to protect them. They may also be encouraged to understand the true value of the world around them” (Flack, 2003: p.9). I went to the Darling River knowing that I was not taking part in a unified environmental campaign. This region has many complex issues – as an artist I wanted to learn about this place to bring back a sense of its value, like Dombrovskis and Truchanas, and to contribute to the environmental conversation.

The breadth of possibilities remained with me when I first travelled to the Darling River. Initially, I hoped to undertake many different activities on the journey as part of my process – journaling, drawing, filming, sound recording, making site-specific artwork and engaging people who live on the river in interviews and art activities. My intention in making this journey was to remain open to what I saw and heard and to the experiences, conversations and chance events which came my way. Initially I was unsure how I would use the raw material I gathered, but it was a starting point from which to form a considered artistic response. I wanted to find a way to bring this environmental story to the attention of the wider community through the affective language of art.

My journey along the Darling River began in July 2010 in Brewarrina in the north of New South Wales. Following the river downstream, I reached Wentworth some fifteen hundred kilometres later, where the Darling meets the Murray River on the Victorian border. Returning to the river in late September 2011, I completed the river’s course, this time from the Coorong in South Australia, upriver to Wentworth, where the first research trip had ended.
Journal entry, Monday 5th July, Bourke: There’s cotton all over the sides of the roads in this region, blown from the cotton farms. They look like snowballs in this arid semi-desert landscape. Met up with Andrew, who works for the Western Catchment Management Authority. He’s also a poet, musician, and painter. His songs and poems speak of a deep attachment to the Darling River. They articulate beautifully the intrinsic and reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. I filmed him while we walked near the river. What he was saying about the river made a lot of sense to me – some of it was diametrically opposed to what the driver of the tourist paddlewheel barge was saying. I went on a tour of the river yesterday in the barge, complete with historical and environmental commentary by the boat driver. He clearly resented ‘greenies’, supported cotton farmers and wanted the native corellas culled because they were eating the leaves from the trees. Andrew had told me that the waters of the Darling used to be quite clear before European carp were introduced, whereas the boat driver claimed that the river has always been muddy and was reported as such by the early settlers. I was disturbed that he was giving this commentary to tourists as though it were ‘official’ knowledge. What is true?

Many artists nationally and internationally are contributing to environmental dialogues through a diverse range of art practices. In recent years, I have seen three exhibitions which explore the complexity of environmental debates and the intersections between environment and culture. MCA Senior Curator, Rachel Kent, writes that in bringing a scale and breadth of artists and practices to the show In the Balance: Art for a Changing World (Museum of Contemporary Art 2010), “a new critical understanding of these national, state and local issues will be raised” (Kent, 2010, media release: p.1). The exhibition 2112 Imagining the Future (RMIT Gallery, Melbourne 2011/12) responds to “general anxieties about an uncertain future and public concern about the consequences of climate change” by inviting artists to imagine the world in one hundred years’ time. Curator Linda Williams writes of the way in which art can influence ideas about the future:

By resisting predictions of inevitable global disaster, or nuclear winters, the artworks explore the idea that although the unintended consequences of human actions have already begun to shape our future, the future is not fixed and is a domain that can shift and change according to human vision and consensus (RMIT Gallery website).

The River Project (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010) links humans to water through broad cross-cultural considerations and highlights the elemental relationship humans have with rivers. Through the theme of rivers – the Georges, Yangtze, Mekong, Yamuna, Indus, Han, Pasig and
Sepik Rivers – artists from Australia, Asia and the Pacific examine the relationship between humans, culture and nature, “weaving a narrative which connects river systems across countries” (Havilah in Huangfu, p.10). Curator Binghui Huangfu acknowledges the profound global environmental change over the past century and the need to examine past practices, present conditions and ways forward. She proposes that investigating our relationships with rivers through contemporary art “helps us to raise new questions about how we can sustainably manage these dynamic, complex and changing landscapes in which nature and culture are intertwined” (2010: p.10).

As the world’s population grows and access to abundant, clean water diminishes through human impact and actions, it has become clear that water is a rich source of imagery for its layers of political, social, environmental, and cultural meaning. By drawing attention to a local and specific situation – the Darling River – I hope to echo global concerns about water and through the discipline of art, articulate a fundamental connection between the human and non-human worlds.

![Kim Williams, Forecast, 2009 (detail)](image)

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Water came to the fore thematically in my work during a year’s residency at the Wollongong City Gallery in 2008/9. The residency culminated in a solo exhibition, Landmarks (2009), which explored humans’ relationship to nature through the marks humans make on the land. During the residency, the long drought in south-eastern Australia still had a firm hold. Not long
before, I had travelled through the Wimmera district in western Victoria, where the severity of the drought brought many farmers to their knees and townships watched their water storages shrink to critically low levels. Meanwhile, banks of cumulus clouds would hang in the sky, promising but never delivering rain.

In response to the powerful memories of this experience, I made a key work for this show, *Forecast*, which suggested the “futile absurdity of our expectations of regular rainfall in inland Australia where a ‘dry’ sense of humour is a survival strategy, a psychological mechanism for coping with prolonged drought” (Beare, 2009, catalogue essay). The cloud in this mixed media installation dripped very slowly – it was a way of articulating a concern for the environment and a reminding the viewer of the possibility of climate change. It was during this residency that I conceived of the idea to explore the theme of water further by focusing on the Darling River. In the midst of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in early 2009, I had a sense of urgency to bring stories of the land to urban audiences through visual art, as these stories were affecting both the human and non-human world and the repercussions were being felt nationwide.

During my first fieldtrip to the Darling River in 2010, I visited an in-situ replica of Major Thomas Mitchell’s Fort Bourke Stockade on the banks of the river near present-day Bourke. Mitchell’s expedition was mounted for the purpose of exploring the course of the Darling River. After arriving at this part of the river with his men, Mitchell found a site and “strengthened it as a place of defence against the Natives, by cutting down the few trees on it, and erecting a blockhouse large enough to contain all our stores and equipment” (Mitchell, 22nd September 1835, *The Australian*: p.2). Contained in his written report to then Governor Alexander McLeay were accounts of “the interior country being parched by such excessive drought” (ibid.)

Mitchell’s Stockade had a strong resonance for me. The simple, open log structure clearly gave Mitchell and his men a sense of security which belied its’ vulnerability and diminutive size in the vast, open landscape. It became the starting point for another key work, *Stockade, Bourke* (2011/12), which in its first incarnation was shown in my second solo exhibition, at Maitland Regional Art Gallery. The work was significantly revised for a second showing at Wollongong City Gallery (2012).

This artwork is a metaphor for humans’ reliance on water in the face of continuing cycles of drought. The idea is evoked by the large suspended cotton bale crammed inside a flimsy ‘stockade’, referencing the cotton industry’s reliance on large amounts of water in a semi-arid region and the protection of assets by settler Australians. Much as Thomas Mitchell tried to protect his assets, the work speaks of the vulnerability of settler existence in the often hostile
climate and acknowledges the presence and absence of water with a video loop of the river projected on to cracked clay on the floor.

Mixed media and video installation
Dimensions variable

*Stockade, Bourke* prefaced my current body of work and set the scene for an exploration into not only the landscape and people of the Darling River but also into other artworks which have looked at the complexity of the human/non-human relationships in the Murray-Darling. Bonita Ely, a multi-media artist, and a pioneer of environmental art in Australia, brought the toxic state of the Murray River to peoples’ attention in a memorable performance piece in 1980. Elegantly dressed and coiffured, Ely presented *Murray River Punch*, 1980, “to an astonished student audience at Melbourne University in the Student Union foyer” (Green, 1995: p.21). Art historian Janine Burke goes on to describe Ely’s performance:

With a table of kitchen implements before her … she began to make a punch, relaying the recipe to her bemused audience in a saccharine patter. The ‘recipe’, however, was a noxious and vile-smelling concoction of all the pollutants that infect the Murray River. Urine, shit, European carp, phosphate compound and nitrogenous compound fertilizer were mixed and heated by Ely, emitting a pungent, unpleasant odour while she maintained her ritualized chat. Finally, garnished with rabbit dung, the liquid was poured
into plastic cups and handed around to the spectators. … The point was made, but with grace, humour and imagination. I for one, shall never forget that malodorous mixture nor the knowledge of the Murray’s contamination” (Burke, 1981: p.24)

*Murray River Punch* still resonates: the work was updated and reproduced for the 2008 exhibition *Heat: Art and Climate Change* at RMIT Gallery. Ely has made numerous artworks about the Murray River, having grown up on the river at Robinvale. More recently, as a result “of the artist’s sustained engagement with the landscape surrounding Appin” (Huangfu, 2010: p.15), she produced a series of fourteen photographs for the Campbelltown Art Centre exhibition *The River Project* (2010). In this body of work Ely has documented the complex story of the Georges River in the Appin area, evoking “an unfolding contemporary narrative” (Huangfu, 2010: p.16) which juxtaposes the landscape’s natural beauty with human presence and environmental impacts through longwall coal mining.

![Ken + Julia Yonetani, *still life: the food bowl (detail)*, 2011](image)

*Ken + Julia Yonetani, still life: the food bowl (detail), 2011*

cast Murray River groundwater salt, dimensions variable

The critical issue of soil salinity in the Riverina was explored by collaborative artists Ken and Julia Yonetani, who undertook an art-science residency in Mildura in 2011. They were briefed by scientists on this largely human-induced problem which stems from introduced agricultural practices: “550,000 tonnes of salt is pumped out of the ground each year to try and stem the increasing rise of highly saline groundwater” (Yonetani, 2011, website). After seeing the impact of salinity on the environment, they produced an elaborate artwork, *still life: the food bowl* (2011), a still-life tableaux cast from Murray River groundwater salt. It makes direct reference to the Murray-Darling’s status as the ‘food bowl’ of Australia, but also makes ironic historical reference to the artistic genre of ‘still life’ – this term is taken from the French ‘nature
morte’, which translates literally as ‘nature dead’ (Fizell, 2011). Researching the origins of still-life, the artists discovered that it emerged as an artistic genre “when agricultural methods in Europe were bringing a large amount of fresh produce to the tables of the bourgeoisie. The end result of that [agricultural revolution] is the environmental impact we see today” (Julia Yonetani in Meacham, 2011).

Ken and Julia Yonetani have produced a work which is accessible to broad audiences through the universal theme of food. The ghostly forms in the tableaux remind us of the fragility of the environment which sustains food production. Using casting techniques with delicate materials in their past and present works: sugar, salt and currently uranium glass, Ken and Julia Yonetani have subtly and elegantly alerted audiences to the connection between human practices and environmental issues.
6. The lie of the land

Journal entry, Tuesday 6th July, Bourke: Went into town and had a look at the Darling flowing past, behind the shops. Earlier in the day I’d seen some old river maps of the Darling around Bourke from the 1920s that the boat captain MacFarlane had made. The maps were drawn on the boat while travelling along the river, on a long scroll of canvas, rolling and unrolling as the mapping was done. These beautiful, simple maps marked the snags, sandbars and tributaries of the river, and nearby dwellings, as a navigational guide for other riverboats. Because the river was a transportation ‘highway’, the snags were removed to make it easier to navigate. These snags (fallen trees) are a natural part of the river ecology that today’s water authorities are trying to replace to restore the health of the river. I went to see the lock and weir. The lock was once used to raise and lower the paddleboats up and down stream. Sometimes the boats were stranded in one place for months or even years in times of drought. The transportation industry on the river was eventually superseded by the railway line, which is now closed.

[Navigation chart for the Darling River]

Maker: James B Packer, 19th Century
43cm x 173 cm. Sailcloth, sepia ink

Previous journeys into remote areas of Australia had fed into my art practice, yet I had a sense that the landscape of western New South Wales would not be inspirational in the way that the brilliant colours of central Australia, the compelling topography of Arnhem Land, or the stony boab country of the Kimberley region I had walked through were. This proved to be true in ways I couldn’t have imagined. Travelling out towards the Darling River through Coonabarabran, I walked to the top of the astonishing volcanic peaks of the Warrumbungles and
gazed out to the distant west over a billiard-table flat land, which is largely the topography of western New South Wales. It is an unremarkable semi-desert landscape with sparse vegetation – in the words of Wilcannia resident Christine Smith, “marginal at the best of times” (interview 9/7/2010).

Unlike central Australia or Arnhem Land or the Kimberley regions, with their immediate visual appeal and distinctive landforms, the landscape of the Darling is much more difficult to define for its ‘nothingness’. There are few spectacular vistas or landmarks, yet it is an iconic landscape which speaks of the barren, empty interior so familiar to the imagination of many Australians when thinking of the ‘outback’. Through much of western New South Wales I saw a flat, benign-looking land, with slow-moving waterways and muted colours. It is a landscape of subtle beauty that asks to be read in ways other than purely visual – the physical and cultural histories are intimately written over the land and the river.

Aerial view of the Darling River

While the Darling appears as a distinct, if elegantly sinuous, line on a map, it is difficult to map the entire river system with complete accuracy as it ebbs and flows. Journalist Chris Hammer, in his own field trip and research of the Murray-Darling River systems, writes of the ephemeral nature of many of the water courses in north western New South Wales (2011: p.8). This is also the case in parts of the Darling, where floodwaters create their own secondary courses. Human geographer Heather Goodall paints a vivid picture of the floodplains. She describes a region
where land and water are not separate, where there are no ‘permanent defining boundaries’ (2002, p.36) and water is ‘the continuing, shaping force’ (2002, p.37).

Out there, the Darling is often called ‘The Gutter’ – when not in flood it is a deep channel which drains the waters from its’ vast catchment southward, while the ‘red’ and ‘black’ soils of the floodplains surrounding the river are testament to the ephemeral presence of water. The Darling River itself is the most obvious geographic marker in this landscape, as it meanders through the flat land and is located by the more dense vegetation which naturally occurs in the riparian zone.

Towns and localities are sparsely dotted along the length of the Darling: Bourke, Louth, Tilpa, Wilcannia, Menindee, Pooncarie then, as the Darling joins with the Murray, the larger town of Wentworth. From this point, the Murray-Darling winds westward into South Australia, where the landscape looks more diverse and fertile. Meandering through the more populated region of the Riverland, the river curves southwards through towns such as Mannum and Murray Bridge, before emptying into Lake Alexandrina at Wellington and notionally into the sea at the mouth of the river near Goolwa. In recent years of drought, the river has not reached the sea.

Along the length of the river weirs, dams, pumps, barrages, locks, shutoff valves and pipelines evidence a system of containment and regulation put in place by settler Australians. These structures speak of the reliance of humans on the river – the flow of water is mediated to contain supplies for human use. The most recent drought left the Darling as a chain of stagnant puddles in places. Many towns such as Wellington, where the Murray-Darling flows into Lake Alexandrina in South Australia, rely exclusively on the river as a water supply and by 2009, this town was in danger of completely running out of water (interview, ferry driver, Wellington Sept 2011). Drought and flood are a natural part of the river’s ecology. Human intervention has, however, altered the natural ecology – the tension between the ecological needs of the river, the stress put on the river by humans and the possibility of the added pressure of climate change weigh heavily on this region.

During my field trips in 2010 and 2011, I saw neither an empty river nor a flooded countryside. What I did witness were the legacies of both, written as a palimpsest on a flat, sparse landscape. Out there, elemental relationships are in plain view: clouds bring rain, rain brings water to the river, and the river brings water to humans, flora and fauna, who cannot survive indefinitely without it. This, of course includes the fabled river red gums; seeing these trees for the first time was for me as significant a moment as seeing the river for the first time. I was beholding the site of a monumental struggle for survival, both human and non-human.
7. Streams of thought

Journal entry, Wednesday 7th July, Trilby Station, near Louth: I’m now committed to dirt roads for the rest of the journey. Any rain, even light rain, makes these roads impassable with the stickiest, slipperiest mud imaginable. I have to keep a constant eye on the weather, to avoid getting stuck in the mud. Had a walk earlier in the day at Gundabooka National Park, through a forest of mulga. It’s a species of acacia. I noticed that a lot of the dead mulga was encrusted with red soil - it gave me an idea for an artwork. Drove west to Louth, crossed the Darling and headed a further 20km south-west to Trilby, a 200,000 acre sheep station. In addition to running sheep in the good years, they also capture feral goats there for meat export. They get killed Halal style in Mildura and are shipped mostly to the Middle East. This place is pure floodplain – the runnelled floodplain soil around the homestead is all soft pinks and greys. It’s right on the Darling, which now truly looks like a giant gutter with grey muddy water flowing slowly along the bottom.

The idea of cross-disciplinary dialogue arose early in this research project. I was curious about complementary ways of looking at this landscape and its’ people. Cross-disciplinary collaborations are not new – Mandy Martin’s work on conservation projects such as Watersheds: the Paroo to the Warrego (1999) and Inflows: Channel Country (2001) wove art, science and history together to produce environmental studies which have provided integrated understandings of river systems through collaborative research. Leah Gibbs, a Human Geographer from the Faculty of Earth and Environmental Science at the University of Wollongong, has participated in the ongoing Siteworks Project (2010 - present), a site-specific art/science project auspiced by the Bundanon Trust. The project is a means of engaging the broader community in environmental issues through collaborative works and dialogues between practitioners from both fields. In conversation, Gibbs remarked on the value of co-operating with other disciplines as a way of generating new knowledge, viewpoints and questions.

While responding to the ‘site’ of the Darling River as an artist, I examined the work of Gibbs, along with other Australian research academics working in the field of Human Geography, to gain some insight into the values which underpin contemporary water politics. Favouring qualitative research methodologies, Human Geographers study human understandings of the world, and how humans use and interact with their physical environment (Johnson, 2000: pp. 353-360). By talking directly with people from the Darling River, the Murray River and the Lake Eyre Basin, Human Geographers Jessica Weir, Leah Gibbs and historian Heather Goodall have examined peoples’ relationships to ‘country’. These stories fed into my research as I travelled to and from the Darling River and became more deeply acquainted, through local
accounts, with the ‘boom and bust’ nature of the river, its’ surrounding landscape and the effect of this on river dwellers.

Jessica Weir’s 2009 study, *Murray River Country: An Ecological Dialogue with Traditional Owners* provides a theoretical and historical background to Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships to and management of water. Weir argues that the binary narratives which privilege economic growth over traditional ownership and spiritual connection have led to the ecological degradation of the Murray-Darling Basin since colonisation (2009: p.3). By working closely with an Indigenous coalition of river communities, Weir reflects on official policy and practice, which are shaped by European views of nature, against traditional knowledge systems and practices of care and management. She critiques the history of official water management, arguing that it has developed from an Enlightenment view that nature can be dominated and transformed for human use (2009: p.18).

This view is shared by Human Geographer Leah Gibbs, whose work with communities living in the Lake Eyre Basin also challenges the approach to water governance in Australia. Gibbs interrogates a ‘Eurocentric’ thinking, transplanted from a “northern, temperate region to a dry and variable landscape” (2009: p.2964). Examining the notion of ‘value’, she contends that water bureaucrats see rivers as providers of goods and services (2010, p.363). Gibbs’ interviews with local communities reveal alternate, nuanced meanings of ‘value’ – like Weir, she argues for a revised framework which “emphasizes interconnections between water, humans and the non-human world” (2006: p.73).

Heather Goodall takes a different approach by looking at the way language is used to define relationships to water and land in the Darling River region. Like Gibbs, Goodall underscores the variability of Australia’s river systems and how ecosystems are geared to this. Her research also highlights the intimate knowledge and appreciation locals have for this variability. Goodall frames her observations around a study of language and how it shapes understandings of land, showing how colonial concepts were transplanted on to this landscape and inversely, how the land itself has shaped the language of Indigenous river communities. (2002: pp.31-51).

Like many contemporary artists, I am interested in finding ways to examine broader social and environmental issues through the language of art. In the terminology of art writers, this could be called a ‘socially engaged’ art practice, reflecting a broad trend in contemporary art practices which theorist Susan Best explains as “a decisive shift from the modernist concern with the autonomy of art, to art with a more expansive view” (2001: p. 185). An interest in human interaction with the physical environment was my common ground with Human Geographers. Their work spoke directly to my own curiosity about the opinions of people living along the Darling River. I had heard the ‘official’ stories: the media reports, the scientific prognoses, the
party-political debates, but I wanted to gain an understanding of what life was actually like from people who live there and whose lives are intimately connected with the river.

The research methodology of Human Geographers – interviewing people and making meaning of their stories – sat comfortably with my own experiences of working closely with people in community arts projects. However, I was using this methodology for a very different outcome to that of Human Geography or science. My intention was to give space to the voices of others within my own artistic response: combining the immediate experiences of an ‘outsider’ with the deeply-lived experiences of long-term river dwellers would, I thought, give substance and texture to my narrative. Therefore the interviews I recorded, from Bourke to the Coorong, became the backbone of a DVD of my journey, which I filmed and recorded on site, then edited back at the University of Wollongong. The DVD is an appendix to both the exegesis and the exhibition. I hope that the nuanced views and insights of people living on the river will elicit a sense of connection in the viewer and in turn tempt the viewer to reflect on their own relationship to nature.
8. Relationships

Journal entry, Thursday 8th July, Wilcannia: Drove along the west side of the river to Tilpa, then crossed over to the east side and drove the next 145km to Wilcannia. The vegetation was slowly changing as I went. Reached Wilcannia about 3.30pm and went for a walk around town, looking at the many beautiful old buildings from Wilcannia’s days as the major port for wool transportation and other goods on the Darling. Then I walked out to the edge of town to find Waddi Harris, who lives in a humpy amongst a pile of rusting cars just off the road. He talked for some time about his life, his learning, his responsibility to nature, his mentorship of young Aboriginal people. I felt privileged to hear his stories. Afterwards I walked back to the Golf Club for a pretty bad Chinese meal.

Written over the Darling River is a chronicle of relationships: early stories of colonial settlement which overshadowed Indigenous ownership, and the contemporary stories of entitlement, which see Indigenous owners asking for input into decision-making processes and arguing for their own practices of care and management, downstream river dwellers feeling the effects of the practices of upstream water users, and the arguments over water entitlements, weirs and dams – issues made more pressing by the possibility of climate change.

The economic well-being of many river dwellers is directly linked to the river, yet the management practices which have slowly devastated the river since white settlement threaten the survival of the river and in turn the survival of river communities. Jessica Weir outlines the intellectual tradition which “reinforces competing and oppositional worldviews…..the influential ‘ecology versus economy’ position” (Weir, 2012):

We understand that unhealthy rivers are the unfortunate sacrifice we had to make for economic growth, and that investing in river health is to the detriment of economic growth. However, we can see with our own eyes that a dying river does not support our economies (2012: Ecological Dialogue website project page).

What practices are acceptable? Such questions are predicated by the broader question: how can humans relate to the non-human world in ways which will ensure the protection of the environment and how can we live in better relationship to the non-human? Again, Weir argues for a rethinking of our ideas about nature to address global environmental devastation:

We need to respect a living world within which our lives are embedded in ethical relationships of care, and see that our own lives are co-dependent and connected with all ecological life. To do this we must be open to an ‘ecological dialogue’. Acknowledging
all the energy that surrounds us is crucial to addressing the modern misrepresentation of power relationships in the nature/society, human/nonhuman binaries. (ibid.)

*Journal entry, Friday 9th July, Wilcannia: Went for a walk to the weir, then found a track nearby which led to a circle of about five huge, magnificent river red gums. I had the feeling they may have been the ones Waddi was talking about yesterday. They’ve been tested and dated at about 800-900 years old. Interviewed and filmed Christine Smith, the local weather observer. She has to read the temperature and rain gauges in her backyard and report on the wind and cloud cover at 9am and 3pm every day. There was stiff competition for this job, but Christine got it, as her yard was ideal. It’s hard for her to get away for a holiday.*

Travelling along the Darling River, I was aware of the tension between the reliance on and the exploitation of the river. The knowledge of the environmental damage caused by practices of settler Australians sat uneasily with me as a white Australian travelling through a land underpinned by Aboriginal habitation and history. While there is evidence of Aboriginal habitation spanning thousands of years, the apparent absence of a traditional way of life for contemporary Indigenous river-dwellers and the evidence of dispossession is also readily apparent.

![Image](image.png)

*Ian Abdulla, *Catching Fish in the Backwaters*, 1990*

Stories of marginalization, dispossession and survival as an Indigenous river-dweller have been powerfully brought to life in the work of Ian Abdulla (1947–2011), a Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal who grew up in the Riverland region in South Australia. Abdulla left behind a major body of paintings which drew on the narratives of his childhood, documenting mission life and his family’s reliance on the river for survival. The river is an ever-present image in many of
Abdulla’s works, which incorporate text to support the narrative of the painting: "Catching fish in the backwaters/ with a Gill net for eating before the/ white man changed our way of /living off the land and along/ the River Murray".

Today, Indigenous people still live along the entire length of the Darling River, alongside non-Indigenous people in towns and localities. In several river towns, there is signage that tells traditional Indigenous stories. These in turn sit alongside signage that tells stories of colonial settlement. Today’s cultural diversity belies these stories. Who belongs to this place, this river? Is it the Indigenous person whose habitation can be traced back thousands of years, the Anglo-Celtic dryland farmer in Wilcannia, the Italian citrus grower in the Riverland, the Lebanese grape grower in Menindee, the American cotton irrigator in Bourke, the child who swims in the river in the heat of summer? Certainly my own sense of belonging in Australia has been challenged by the knowledge of Indigenous dispossession and marginalisation. Yet my own deep sense of connection to this country has been forged, in part, by a recognition of the importance of Aboriginal culture and a meditation on how to live in relation to the landscape and to the original inhabitants.

The idea of belonging is articulated by academic and philosopher Linn Miller, who refers to the ideas of 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, in her propositions on belonging in the world in 'correct relation' (2003). Miller’s ideas are formulated on the premise that many settler Australians feel not only guilt and shame but also insecurity for the past and present realities of Indigenous dispossession and marginalisation (2003, p.215). On the one hand, Miller describes a section of the population, articulated by voices such as Pauline Hanson’s, who reject claims of Aboriginal ownership and assert their own sense of ownership and belonging. On the other hand she identifies another group for whom “existential angst and guilt …is the natural consequence of a postcolonial consciousness and, further, that such feelings are not only warranted, but redemptive.” (2003, p.216) In this thinking, a sense of belonging for non-Indigenous people is at best tenuous and in many cases, an impossible proposition. For Miller such attitudes are of concern and warrant examination.

Miller defines the commonly understood meanings of belonging: social connection and community; historical connection to past and tradition; geographical connection to place or locality. “Belonging is a state of being from which wellbeing is derived; a relation that makes us feel good about our being and our being-in-the-world; a relation that is fitting, right, or correct” (p.217), in other words, a ‘correct relation’ to something external. She argues, however, that there is a fuller meaning to the concept of belonging: a fully integrated self, having what Kierkegaard called ‘transparency’ and what Miller calls ‘authenticity’ (p.217). This is further articulated by the notion of the ideal self as having integrity to oneself and also as
having moral integrity – to live in ethical relationship to oneself and to others (p.218).

Following from this, she asserts:

An authentic human being is one who knows oneself – has transparency – and lives according to subjective truth. To be such a person is to be in correct relation and thus….to belong (p.218).

Miller reasons that to either accept Australia’s colonial past or to redeem the past by never feeling entitled to belong is to stand in misrelation to oneself. She concludes:

For settler Australians this means attending to the selves that they are by virtue of their own particular heredity, history or locality, but also by pursuing a commitment to integrity. Such self-integrity must be demonstrated not only in the unity and wholeness of settler Australians’ identities, but also in their demeanour as moral agents in the world. If we are able to accomplish this, only then shall we properly belong – not only in the contemporary Australian context….but wherever and whenever we dwell. (p.221)

What struck me in my conversations with people were their deep ties to the river and the land, their sense of ‘belonging’ – an acknowledgment of the importance of the river as the lifeblood of individuals and communities. Each person and each community along the Darling River has the capacity to act with integrity towards each other and to the non-human world. These relationships are thrown into high relief, where people rely on each other to act with consideration and fairness in how they live in relation to the river and to water, and where everyone relies on the river for the survival of their communities.
9. Catchment

Journal entry, Sunday 11th July, Menindee: Went into Kinchega National Park, where the Darling runs right next to the Menindee Lakes. The Lakes are quite extraordinary, magnificent in their mirror calmness today, and somehow beautiful in the picture created by thousands of dead trees standing out of the water. There are many birds here, with all this water. I walked for a couple of hours, pondering the human control of the water here in the Lakes. To my mind the structures and systems of water capture and release are very complex. There are shutoff and release valves, pipelines etc to control water flow and storage. The various interests – water supply for Broken Hill, water for irrigators, water for the floodplains and rivers and creeks, water for the downstream communities and farmers, all result in a water management plan that is very numbers driven. I heard that the lakes had been dry for seven years until the drought ended.

The Darling River is a site where humans live in delicate relationship to nature. People rely on a river which has variable flows, offering a tenuous water supply which is mediated by human intervention. Sometimes there are long periods of drought; occasionally the flat landscape is blanketed by water, as floodwaters overflow the riverbanks and slowly spread over vast floodplains, locking people in for weeks or months at a time. The climate of this region can bring hope and despair to river communities. I was there after the long drought of the first years of the 21st century had been broken by rains, then one year later, after the second surge of floodwaters brought life back to the river. As I moved through the landscape of the Darling River I gathered information through the daily writing of a journal, drawing, collecting soil samples, filming the surrounds, and recording ambient sounds and conversations with local residents. During my second journey in September 2011, this time to the lower reaches of the Murray-Darling system, people spoke in excited and reverent tones of the renewal and unexpected revival of the river and the flora and fauna, awestruck at the abundance of birds and frogs. They communicated a sense of hope.

Travelling downstream, the human regulation of the river was ever-present – weirs, dams, locks, pumps and barrages. I also saw first-hand some of the effects of drought, pollution, over-extraction of water and introduced species such as carp – eroded riverbanks, muddy water, bony roots of river red gums literally dying of thirst, or drinking themselves back to life after the long dry. All of this physical evidence sat alongside the spoken and read stories. I heard of the tensions surrounding water entitlements and irrigated crops such as cotton. This was obvious not only from what I heard but what I could see. Climbing to the top of the fortress-like dirt walls, I saw vast holding dams. The natural variability of water in this region is at odds with the cotton industry’s need for large, consistent volumes of water. Bourke resident Andrew Hull told
me that when cotton was first grown in Australia from the 1960 through to the 1980s, there was enough water to plant cotton consistently. More recently cotton growers have been forced to operate at a more sustainable level since the last drought by planting opportunistically, when large volumes of water can be drawn from the river after big rains (pers.comm.15/9/2012).

Nevertheless, resentment is keenly felt by downstream communities toward the practices of upstream irrigators. The towns and many of the farms along these rivers rely on the water taken directly from the river for supply. Consequently every weir and every pump affects the subsequent towns and farms and their supply further downstream, producing a cumulative effect where the people furthest downstream experience the worst effects of drought and over-extraction of water. The river provides a connection between all of the people living along its’ length, but this connection is often problematic. “We get the dregs”, said one interviewee in South Australia (September, 2011).

While it was alarming to imagine just how much water the upstream irrigators could potentially draw from a river which is so inconsistent in its flows, their dams represented the physical needs of most people living on the river: the ability to contain water. Like most major rivers around the world, human intervention works against the natural flow, as peoples’ need for water competes with the river itself. My journey along the river led me to think about humans’ dependence on weather. Mostly the large volumes of water that flow along the Darling come from monsoonal or seasonal rains in southern Queensland and north-eastern New South Wales. I could picture in my mind a simple relationship between clouds, rain, flow and catchment.

*Journal entry, Tuesday 13th July, Pooncarie: Camped by the river last night. Got up in the middle of the night – the sky was clear and utterly brilliant with stars. Today I began doing a gouache of the river bend, knowing that rain was imminent. It began raining while I was brushing on a colour. I had to dash for the car, colour dripping everywhere. Drove the easy 115km to Wentworth, on bitumen for the first time in days. Eventually the rain cleared and I walked out to the end of the narrow, treed peninsula which divides the final one kilometre between the Darling and Murray Rivers. It was a special moment, to finally reach the confluence of the two rivers, which I celebrated alone by doing a little jig. By the time I reached the end, the sun had come out and the world was sparkling again. One constant of this journey, aside from the river, has been birds. I’ve really enjoyed the constant presence of waterbirds - seeing and hearing them.*
10. Bringing the outside in

Journal entry, Thursday 15th July, Wentworth: Woke up early and filmed the river and the brightening daylight on the water, complete with the sounds of the waking birds. I took out a small kayak and paddled through an interconnecting creek to the Murray, around the peninsula, then back up the Darling to the bridge. Spoke to a Council road crew who were having smoko. We got talking about drought, rain, and the rivers. One fellow, who owns some land on the Murray, explained to me that as a landowner he gets a water allocation, which he pays for. He can then choose to auction his allocation, getting a higher price than what he paid for it in the first place. In this way, landowners can make a tidy profit simply by owning land then on-selling their water allocations. Usually the first water allocations go automatically to Adelaide. Apparently if your water gets put into the first few auctions, that’s when you make the most money. He said he has done quite nicely for ten years simply by doing this.

On completion of my two research trips, I returned home to consider what to do. Artistically, there were two problems: how to evoke this vast and complex site and how to suggest the human presence and the interplay between the human and non-human? Two possibilities arose: firstly to make a video which brought together the visual imagery I had filmed and the interviews and sounds I had recorded into a narrative of a journey. By making a video, I could weave the stories of people living on the river and their experiences and opinions about drought, flood, climate change, water management and politics into the framework of my own narrative. To do this, I had to learn the skill of film editing by undertaking this lengthy process over a period of several months. The outcome was a 48 minute DVD, which became a significant work in my project and provides the audio-visual appendix to this exegesis.

Secondly, I decided that an expanded installation could best evoke the landscape and the idea of ‘containment’ of water. I wanted to suggest the intrinsic connection between people, weather and water and to acknowledge the physical realities of a landscape shaped by the presence and absence of water at a time when there are real questions about the impact of climate change. I could suggest the physical presence that I personally witnessed – cracked earth, mud, dry soil, birds in the daytime and frogs in the nighttime, clouds, cotton – through a combination of three-dimensional forms, sound and video. Vessels catching rain could speak of the human relationship to the river and their reliance on water.

Installation had the greatest potential to embody my response to the Darling River, as it offered a breadth of possibility both spatially and conceptually. Curator and author Mark Rosenthal says “the very nature of installation give the artist an extraordinary opportunity by which to accommodate complex views of time, space, cultural diversity, philosophy, imagination and cultural criticism” (2003: pp.86-89). By creating an environment into which the viewer enters, I
was intending to offer the viewer a direct temporal experience which could convey the ideas that were generated by my experience of the landscape. In her critical history of installation art, author and academic Claire Bishop distinguishes installation from other art forms such as painting: “Instead of representing texture, space, light and so on, installation art presents these elements directly for us to experience” (2005: p.11). Rather than creating self-contained, discrete objects, I wanted to offer an immersive experience for the viewer.

Installation is a natural progression of my sculptural practice. It is, in a sense, ‘expanded sculpture’. The work that has come out of this project relies on a range of sculptural skills such as welding, construction and technical problem-solving, but it is the elasticity of the form of installation which has enabled these skills to work in the service of a more complex idea. It is “a form of art that is not defined in terms of any traditional medium but in terms of the message it conveys by whatever means” (De Oliveira, Oxley, Petry, 2003: p.14).

During the evolution of the project, I realized that I could combine my knowledge of visual art practices with my experience in theatre to achieve certain ends. The traditional ‘white cube’ of the gallery space would not adequately accommodate the broader aims of the project: to create an affective environment with the use of sound, lighting and video, in conjunction with fabricated three-dimensional elements and found objects. By using lighting and sound to evoke the cycle of day and night, I could ground the work in the temporal. I decided to give the viewer the experience of the ongoing movement of time by compressing a cycle of twenty four hours down to five minutes. Birds and frogs were ever-present in my journey along the Darling, so it was natural that they would form a kind of sonic backdrop to the passage of day through night. A narrative of the river itself, and my journey along the river, could be articulated by projecting video images of the river into a dish of water. Situating the work in a theatre, rather than a gallery space, would provide not only the technical infrastructure to achieve these ends, but also the suggestion that this work was in essence a cyclic ‘performance’, albeit without actors. There was symmetry to the notion that the installation - by nature an ephemeral art form - would cease to exist after its performative moment.

Journal entry, Tuesday 27th September, Wellington: This is a tiny little place, right where the Murray flows into Lake Alexandrina. Met a guy in the pub, who suggested I talk to Jamie Withers, a local farmer. I went out to Nalpa Station, Jamie’s 10,000 acre property which is situated right on the lake. The land is dead flat, a treeless plain, some above and some below sea level. He talked about the business of farming, the need to plan and think everything through, to follow nature’s directions, and to learn from past generations. We had tea and pastries served by his mother in their beautiful old fourth generation homestead. Everything looked very healthy. Jamie spoke of the joys of seeing so many birds again, as they have
returned with the rains. During the drought there was a plan by water authorities to build a weir near their property to keep the river water in and the salt water out, but that was dismissed as a bad idea, to the relief of the locals.

The use of technologies in my visual artwork has been further encouraged by the work of Australian multimedia artist Lynette Wallworth. She has utilised the immersive and affective potential of digital and responsive technologies and in doing so has gained an international reputation through her ability to physically, emotionally and spiritually engage audiences. Her work is concerned with ‘connection’ – the idea that an audience must form a relationship with the subject in order to be affected by it, whether the subject is human or non-human.

Multimedia video installation

Wallworth’s concern with disappearing marine communities was first articulated in the work *Hold: Vessel 1* (2001), which was subsequently expanded as *Hold: Vessel 2* (2007). In this DVD installation, viewers held a translucent glass bowl and entered a darkened space. By moving around the space, the viewer could ‘capture’ transitory images of marine life in their bowl. Author Ted Snell describes his experience as a viewer of *Hold: Vessel 1*:

*Hold was extraordinary, not only because it was so moving and so beautiful, but also because it changed the way the audience interacted. The experience transcended expectations about viewing artworks and drew people closer together in a commitment to share the moment of revelation, the magic. The gallery became a live space in which sharing, offering, communing became a necessary component….It was spiritually uplifting, full of hope and yes, transforming* (Snell, 2008: p.14).
In *Coral: Rekindling Venus* (2012), Wallworth brings the global problem of disappearing coral communities to audiences in a work that is designed to be shown in a planetarium. In this setting the video physically engulfs the viewer in an intimate, sensual encounter with another ‘community’. She states:

Like all my work, it is designed fundamentally to imagine the viewer in relation to the work. My aim is to immerse you inside the piece; that is what I care about. Immersion leads to connection and from that place your own relationship to the corals can emerge. (2012)

Wallworth acknowledges her task, as an artist, of building a relationship between the viewer and the subject:

A natural history documentary might show you all the same things but its relationship to you is one of authority, it wants to inform, its sees us as passive receptors of information. I don’t want to inform you of anything. I just want to offer you an experience that might build a connection to a community as complex as our own that happens to be underwater. (2012)

In *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, her intention is to make us care about the preservation of something that is endangered: “I will care more for a friend than a stranger, that is human nature, so connection matters when care is required” (2012). Implicit in this work is the idea that as humans our survival is connected to and dependent upon other living communities.

The idea of connection between the human and non-human world is central to my installation, entitled *Under a Cloud*. The work invites the viewer to move through the space and regard the various elements as a single entity, as an ‘environment’. By placing vessels underneath dripping clouds I hope to remind the viewer of peoples’ intrinsic relationship to weather and water. Also, by introducing multi-media technologies into the three dimensional field and situating the work in a space which can allow the installation to ‘perform’, my intention is to immerse the viewer in a temporal and rhythmic cycle, giving a sense of place and time in a landscape shaped by the presence and absence of water. *Under a Cloud* offers the viewer a sensory experience: visual, aural and kinetic, which I hope will prompt an emotional response. Through these means, I aim to create an environment which anyone could relate to, whether they have been to the ‘outback’ or not.
11. Reflection

Journal entry, Wednesday 28th, Mannum: Rang Peter Smith, OAM, who agreed to come and meet me by the river. The Murray-Darling is his life’s passion, for which he was awarded the Order of Australia. He spoke for nearly two hours while I recorded him, sitting next to the water on a windy day. He believes that climate change is occurring, but also believes that with proper management, the river will survive. A storm came through this afternoon and we saw a superb changing sky – lightning, hail, rainbows and huge white towering mountains of cumulus clouds.

This project forced me to look at the landscape in more than one way. Talking to people whose lives were deeply connected to the Darling River offered an important counterpoint to my own passing acquaintance with the region. I acknowledge the vast difference between visiting a place and having the deeply-lived experience of long-term habitation. What I have been able to offer is an artist’s reading of a region which has many people and many stories; these people are bound together by the commonality of the river and of the experience of drought and flood.

Kim Williams, Under a Cloud (detail), 2012, multimedia installation

My initial set of expectations and plans for the field trips changed by necessity: the realities of being there suggested the direction the work would take. My research proposal included the possibilities of working creatively with community groups on the river and doing my own site-specific artworks. In fact, this would have required extended periods of time in one place, making links, developing networks, gaining trust, finding venues and materials. I realised as soon as I was there that this was unrealistic and counter to my overarching goal of journeying the entire length of the Darling River. My first trip covered nearly four thousand kilometres, giving some idea of the vast expanses of not only western New South Wales, but also the task of
getting there in the first place. Another determining factor was the weather: the freezing temperatures of winter made it impossible to spend time outside in the evenings, so I would use this time to journal, to draw, and to plan. I heard stories of searing heat, ironically, while I was travelling in the bitter cold.

Video filming and sound recording became major tools of information gathering. An integral part of this footage was my interviews with people. To this end, I made connections with people through friends, local recommendations and chance encounters with strangers. I thought that the people I interviewed, directed by particular questions, might just touch on some of the issues I was interested in. The reality was far more interesting, as conversations would often take their own unique course. By conducting these meetings in an informal manner, in informal settings – camping, walking along the river, picking rushes for weaving, sitting at a kitchen table drinking tea and eating scones, talking in a local gallery - I believe that this method elicited responses that would have been different if using a more formal approach. This is reflected in an examination of ‘conversation in place’ by Cultural Geographer Jon Anderson (2004: pp.254-261). Anderson contends that “‘talking whilst walking’ can harness place as an active trigger to prompt knowledge recollection and production” (p.254). Through his own qualitative research, he concludes that, through the unstructured dialogue of a ‘conversation in place’, “the knowledge produced is importantly different: atmospheres, emotions, reflections and beliefs can be accessed, as well as intellects, rationales and ideologies” (p.260). My own interviews produced stories that spoke of a deeply embedded knowledge of a place. Andrew in Bourke, Christine in Wilcannia, Bec and Yvonne in Berri, Peter in Mannum, Jamie at Lake Alexandrina and Neville in the Coorong became signposts in the journey, each telling of their connection to the river. This material, however, would subsequently be used for artistic rather than sociological ends.

Considering other fields of inquiry, such as Human Geography, provided further insights into the relationship between the human and non-human worlds. Ultimately the value of cross-disciplinary research lay in the opportunity to make connections with people like Leah Gibbs and Emily O’Gorman at the University of Wollongong, who shared their research with me. My ambitions to work more directly with Human Geographers were limited by the constraints of time and opportunity. Instead, I took cues from their methodology – what their work offers is a way of looking at places through people, which I drew on as I interviewed people and gathered stories at the river.

Within the structure of the journey, I allowed chance events to occur. This was the unknown quantity of my project: being in a place, often outdoors, making arrangements as a visitor and often a stranger and entering into people’s lives with a degree of openness and spontaneity,
generates its own conditions. Thus, the gathering of ‘knowledge’ was an organic process, an interaction between my own sense of time and motion and the realities of being in a place. The weather not only determined my journey, but also gave me insight into the conditions of the river landscape and subsequently fed into my artwork. The alluvial soils of the floodplains become an impassable, sticky and slippery surface with even light rain. Given that the majority of the road along the Darling River is unsealed, I had to pay close attention to the weather forecast. Any rain raised the prospect of being stuck in one place for days, if not weeks.
12. Trickle-down effect

Journal entry, Thursday 29th September, Berri: Interviewed Yvonne Koolmatrie, a well-known Indigenous artist. Yvonne and I walked over to the local shopping centre, where we sat outside having coffee. Later we went out to Martin’s Bend, on the river, where she showed me how to pull the rushes and bundle them. Then she showed me the stitching technique she uses for weaving. Later on I interviewed Bec at the Cultural Centre in Berri, where she works. She and her husband own a citrus orchard in Renmark, so she talked about the frustrations of water management and licences and their future as farmers, which includes the possibility of solar farming. She was passionate about the river and its’ importance to communities and how vital it is to protect the river, not only for people, but for the whole ecology. Like Jamie at Nalpa Station, she was excited about the return of life to the river after the rains. Recorded some more birdsong at dusk.

Gathering fragments of the deeply-held knowledge of other people has given me certain insights into the Darling River region. Its’ contested nature is all too obvious: the Murray-Darling Basin plan, which affects everyone living in the region, triggers passionate conversations about global and local concerns for the river. Where people differ is in how to best manage the situation. There is a strong sense of ‘fairness’ in the debates. Who should get water and how much? Why should people downstream have to suffer at the hands of irrigators upstream? In conversation, some people voiced their disdain for the upstream cotton growers. Others bemoan the polluting runoff of the citrus and grape growers further downstream. Some people want the Goolwa barrages removed to restore the natural ecology of the river (these barrages prevent the salty ocean water at the Murray mouth from flowing upstream). Others think it will be disastrous if the barrages are removed. Stated simply, everyone wants and needs water, but the question that haunts the Murray-Darling Basin Authority is how to best manage an already regulated river and to equitably share the water between people and the river itself?

Common to all these conversations are the expressions of value of the river, how it is the lifeblood of the region’s ecological health and of the communities which populate the river. The people I encountered all spoke of the fragile state of the river and the need for careful management and respect for the natural ecology. This was summed up by Jamie Withers, a fourth generation farmer at Nalpa Station on Lake Alexandrina, who said “you have to have a healthy river system to have healthy communities”. (Interview, Nalpa Station, September 2011). Everyone seemed to share a sense of ‘belonging’ to this area, a sense of connection, of care, of worry. The predicament of the Coorong and the Lower Lakes in South Australia was something I had been aware of for several years, but it was only by talking to people in the region that I found out just how important the lower reaches of this system are to the whole
environmental story of the river. In the words of Bec Farrant, a citrus-grower in Renmark: “everyone knows that a river dies from its’ mouth” (Interview, September 2011).

The universality of concern was reinforced by the realities of this often harsh region. Extremes of weather, causing prolonged droughts and sometimes extensive floods are an essential part of the natural ecosystem of the Darling River, but are understandably at odds with people’s need for reliable water. Some of the people I spoke to acknowledge the need to adapt to the vagaries of the climate cycle and to prepare for the possibility of a changing climate. Underlying these conversations is a stark reality: it is humans who are having the greatest impact on the natural ecology of the river and riparian zone through over-extraction of water, soil salinity, engineering, pollution and the introduction of feral species such as carp and goats. While there is palpable relief at the drought-breaking rains and the respite they offer, there is the knowledge that drought will occur again and that all of the tensions will once again be played out.

Gathering these insights and stories, I returned to the east coast of New South Wales to reflect on my journeys and translate these experiences into artworks. At a time when so much focus in Australia is directed toward economic imperatives, the mining boom leaves little space for nuanced views of nature as it digs inexorably further into the ground. Yet it is a time when, more than ever, people around the country and the world are recognizing the need for humans to be sensitized to our intrinsic relationship to the non-human. While this story may appear to be about a place remote from many peoples’ lives, it is in fact about a region which produces a significant percentage of Australia’s agricultural output. Consequently people all over Australia and other parts of the world who consume the goods produced in the Murray-Darling Basin are all in some way or another linked to the fate of this area. The orange that a person eats in Sydney probably came from Renmark, the grapes I enjoy were probably plucked from a vine in Menindee, and the T-shirt you wear may possibly have been spun from the cotton grown in Bourke. Our stories are inextricably linked.

I returned from the Darling with the challenge to articulate the ineffable, temporal qualities of a place that matters to so many people. My voice is one in a global chorus of artistic voices, conversing with people in ways that can complement the scientists and human geographers and biologists who are working to alert people to the consequences of human actions. As artists, we can offer audiences alternate understandings and affective experiences:

What imagination and dreams and therefore art and artists can do that no amount of rational, statistical surveys will ever give you is to open the eyes of the audience to connections that they would otherwise not have made or seen.

(Sasnaitis, pers.comm. 6/10/2012)
I have tried to tell a broad tale of human’s relationship to water, knowing that I am part of an artistic community which is linked by the river: Andrew is still in Bourke, writing and recording songs which tell intimate stories of the Darling River and Yvonne is still in Berri, weaving Indigenous stories with the river rushes. Many ‘country folk’ want ‘city folk’ to know what it’s like to live and work in a place which is so determined by climate. I knew little about the vast geographical area of the Darling River before going there, but I found that being in that landscape, walking through it, meeting people and talking to them, I developed a connection to this region and some of the people there which continues to this day. Now, when I watch the weather report at night, I keenly observe the forecast for Western New South Wales and wonder how everybody is getting along.

Journal entry, Friday 16th July, Hay: I realise now that something I’ve identified with very strongly on this sojourn are the trees. The river red gums and all the other species I’ve been in company with have been as important as the river. Somehow I’ve gathered strength from them, sometimes distress when I see them dying through lack of water – it must have been torture being out here during ten long years of drought. Drove back home across the Hay Plains, reportedly the second flattest place on earth. On and on, watching the flat landscape gradually give way to the green rolling hills of the Great Dividing Range, then the sudden escarpment of the Illawarra. I walk around Port Kembla, and see a woman hosing her concrete driveway. The hose trails all the way back to the Darling River and I imagine a world where all people can touch and be touched by the non-human.

The Darling River near Menindee
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Cotton modules, Darling Farms, Bourke
Source: http://www.abc.net.au/reslib/200904/r364423_1686433.jpg
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Navigation chart for the Darling River

Maker: James B Packer, 19th Century

This chart was hand-drawn by paddle steamer captain James B Packer in the mid-nineteenth century. Such charts were commonly made of canvas or sail cloth and were rolled up into a scroll. This chart shows a two hundred kilometre long section of the meandering Darling River from Cuthero Woolshed to the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers at Wentworth. The chart is just over 1.73 metres in length. The chart depicts sandbanks, fallen trees, rocks, billabongs as well as homesteads, woolsheds, hotels and pubs along the length of the river.


Aerial view of the Darling River


Ian Abdulla, *Catching Fish in the Backwaters*, 1990


Kim Williams, *Under a Cloud* (detail), 2012

Photography: Tom Williams

The Darling River near Menindee

Photography: the author