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Abstracting from the landscape: a sense of place

Sarah Willard Gray
University of Wollongong

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Abstracting from the Landscape: A Sense of Place.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

Master of Creative Arts - Research

from

University of Wollongong

by

Sarah Willard Gray B.C.A. (Hons)

School of Art and Design
Faculty of Creative Arts

2008

Synopsis

In this study I will examine the following question: how is my painting informed by a layered sense of place through a political engagement with the environment?

During this research consideration was given to the origins, techniques and structures of my creative work that was underpinned by the artistic theories and processes I used while painting the landscape of the Hoskins Nature Reserve and the Bong Bong Common. These areas are situated midway between Bowral and Moss Vale on the Southern Highlands of New South Wales and are approximately 120 kms from the first penal colony established at Port Jackson in 1788.

In my thesis I describe the historical background of the protected land and wildlife corridor, Hoskins Nature Reserve, which is managed by N.S.W. Department of Parks and Wildlife and the Bong Bong Common early settlement owned by the Wingecarribee Shire Council. While researching these two historical areas of the Southern Highlands I contacted people with sound environmental and historical knowledge from the NSW Parks and Wildlife rangers at Fitzroy Falls, European representatives from the Aboriginal Reconciliation Group and Dr Kim Leever through his PhD thesis *First Contact/Frontier Expansion in the Wingecarribee area Between 1798 – 1821: Exploration and Analysis* (2006).

The writings of Australian cultural architect Ken Taylor and Canadian philosopher Allen Carlson's essay on environmental aesthetics in the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2001) were a source of valuable insight into the thesis question. Taylor's views on 'landscape as living history' (Taylor 25) informed a layered sense of place and Carlson provided 'an emotionally and cognitive engagement with the environment' (Carlson 433)

Declaration

I, Sarah Willard Gray, 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.

Sarah Willard Gray
..... April 2008

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I would like to thank my supervisor Richard Hook for his valuable support and inspiration through this period of research and painting.

I would also like to acknowledge the Wodi-Wodi people on whose lands I have studied for the past five years at Wollongong, and the Gundungurra people on whose land I reside.

Warning

**This thesis contains the names and accounts of the deceased
that may offend some people.**

Abstracting from the Landscape: A Sense of Place



Fig.1. Sarah Willard Gray
Hoskins Nature Reserve (2007)
Acrylic on canvas 60 x 90 cm.

SARAH WILLARD GRAY

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse and discuss the idea that knowledge, perception and intuition relating to a certain landscape's topography, atmosphere, location and history can achieve a sense of place strong enough to impress itself upon creative work. My paintings are the evidence for this notion. Therefore the merging of the analytical aesthetics of the philosophy of art with the significance of the natural environment, history and everyday life is paramount to my research which culminates in a series of paintings and monotypes entitled *A Sense of Place*.

My chosen environment for the series of abstract paintings and monotypes is the site of the early settlement of Bong Bong on the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. This area is now under threat from developers after approval in principle has been given for a Botanic Garden by the local Wingecarribee Council. This garden would cover the whole large area and remove the early Aboriginal 'burning grounds' and heritage remnants of the first village, Bong Bong, that lies beneath the surface of the alluvial deposits on this land. The N.S.W. Parks and Wildlife Department informs me that Hoskins Nature Reserve is itself safe from development but it could be threatened environmentally by an application before the Lands and Environment Court to build 73 retirement villas on land directly above the Reserve.

While I appreciate the beauty of the landscape during painting at Hoskins Nature Reserve and the Bong Bong Common I am ever aware of the impending destruction of historical evidence and am doing all that can be done to avert this disaster.