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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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### **Acknowledgments**

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.

## **A Sense of Place**

A sense of place is not simply the affective response to a particular locale but includes a growing sense of what the place demands of us in our attitudes and actions. This viewpoint has echoes at a deeper level than in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when “nature was taken as an exemplary object of aesthetic experience” (Carlson 2 – 2007) The landscape is an important part of Australian national and personal identity and through it we can explore our spiritual and artistic links with both traditional and contemporary attitudes to place. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which a political engagement with a place frames my creative process and adds a depth of feeling and a political dimension to my paintings and prints.

Such a framework should not be construed too literally as, although some political and historic elements are buried in my images, as will be noted later, it more generally orientates me to certain places and issues rather than others and provides me with a more layered and diverse understanding of place as a cultural landscape not limited to aesthetic concerns.

In response to my growing sense of awareness of ‘place’ I have become involved in citizens’ action groups to protect thirty-nine open green spaces in my community and two large tracts of land known as the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Nature Reserve. This led to attending Council meetings and rallying with protest groups in order to hopefully inspire in others a growing sense of what the place means to them as individuals. It is now a matter of moral values for many local residents to protect these valuable assets, to recognise the importance of the past and challenge those who threaten to remove these open green spaces.

Kim Leever’s (1949 - ) research states that the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Nature Reserve “[was] where the Gundungurra people lived in this area for arguably 30,000 years.... The longer we remain in this place [the Wingecarribee area] the more the past will become important to us.” (Leever 8 and 77)

The theoretical framework that makes a link between landscape, morals, place and aesthetics belong to an area of environmental aesthetics expressed by Alan Carlson (1943 - ) and Australian cultural landscape architect Professor Ken Taylor (1937 - ).

Allen Carlson describes the emergence of the two or three main areas of environmental aesthetics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a “focus on philosophical issues concerning aesthetic appreciation of the world at large...a world composed “not simply by objects but also by larger environmental units” Carlson goes on to write:

...Thus, environmental aesthetics extends beyond the narrow confines of the art world and our appreciation of works of art to the aesthetic appreciation of environments, not only natural ones, but also our various human-influenced and human-constructed environments...however it has historical roots in earlier work on the aesthetics of nature...[which] lie in the ideas about aesthetic appreciation developed in the eighteenth century and given classic expression by Kant (Carlson 423)

Carlson defines the sphere of environmental aesthetics as an ‘emotionally and cognitively rich engagement with an environment, created by natural and cultural forces, informed by both scientific knowledge and cultural traditions, and deeply embedded in a complex, many-faceted world.’ The territory expands to include wilderness through to city backyards from the ordinary to the extraordinary, the bizarre to the banal. ‘Environmental aesthetics is essentially the aesthetics of everyday life’ (Carlson 433)

Taylor explains the ‘Cultural Landscape’ as belonging to the field of heritage conservation management which is justified by powerful cultural associations and history. He writes:

Landscape is a rich record of human history. It is a storehouse of cultural values...landscape is not what we see but a way of seeing: what John Ruskin called ‘seeing with the soul of the eye...it is important therefore that we learn to interpret cultural landscapes as living history, not just dead history but history which is with us now and which we need to take into the future. (Taylor 25 and 26)

My creative work and my research was supported and altered by the politics and history of the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Reserve that gave me a sense of place of both the past and present. This allowed me to move to painting a landscape that had a definite significance.

My interest in this particular landscape is reinforced by my position on a Council sub-committee that manages all aspects of the Bong Bong Common and a depth of feeling arising from researching the 19<sup>th</sup> century history of this area that was, in those times, a challenge on numerous levels for its indigenous and non-indigenous occupants.

The relationship of environmental aesthetics - 'the aesthetics of everyday life' and the 'cultural landscapes as living history' - to this thesis is paramount. It is my contention that it is the moral right of people to object to any violation of the natural world for personal gain and to be vigilant in defence of Australia's environment. The next section of this thesis will provide a brief overview of the history of the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Nature Reserve.

### **The Place: Bong Bong Common and Cecil Hoskins Reserve.**

The Wingecaribee area of the Southern Highlands lies approximately 120 kms to the south-west of Sydney and is located at the centre of the ‘mountain tribe’ or Gundungurra lands. R. Ian Jack, Professor of Australian History at the University of Sydney will appear before Wingecaribee Shire Council, at a future date to be decided, in a last attempt to have the approval for the Botanic Gardens rescinded. In 1993 he wrote a report for the Wingecaribee Shire Council that begins:

The decision to lay out a township at Bong Bong on the north side of the great bend in the Wingecaribee River was taken in March 1821 and the site was surveyed in November of that year...Already by 1820, when Governor Macquarie visited the area, [Charles] Throsby had moved south of the Wingecaribee to the property which Macquarie named Throsby Park and was grazing a substantial herd of cattle there. His [Throsby's] hut to the north of the river remained but otherwise the site of the township was undeveloped when it was reserved by the government in 1821... On 18 October 1820 the Governor noted in his journal that ‘the country we passed through to-day, called Mittagong, is generally a very poor soil and not very fit for small settlers but a tolerable good grazing country. It improves however as we come nearer the Wingecaribee River and immediately at that river it becomes really beautiful, being fit for both cultivation and grazing’  
( Jack 1)

The 70 acre site of the Bong Bong Common is now separated from the Hoskins Nature Reserve by the present road and not the one planned by Macquarie during his visit in 1820. On this visit, after fording the Wingecaribee River, Macquarie “encamped on a very pretty bank on the north side of the river” (Jack 2) This is the area and its surrounds that is the subject of dissent between an incorporated body of people including professional landscape gardeners that want to develop this historical site as a botanical garden and a large section of Southern Highland residents led by the Bong Bong Common Management Committee who want to retain its present important historical significance. The Botanical Garden group had

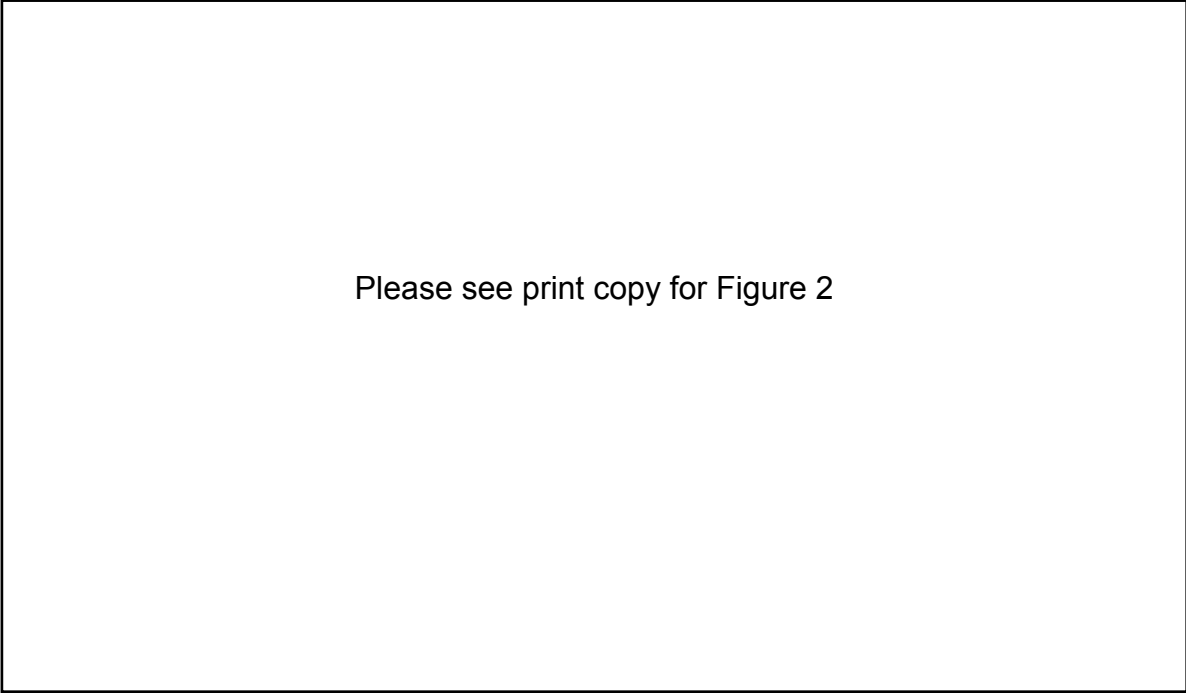


proposed to build this garden primarily for scientific and educational reasons.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of the first military settlement outside of Sydney was on the banks of the Wingecarribee River in 1817 as the outcome of the 46<sup>th</sup> Regiment's involvement in an Aboriginal uprising at 'Winge Karrabee' in 1816.

Not long after Macquarie's 1820 visit army barracks, a police post with four constables, a school house with resident teacher, the Argyle Inn, a Commissariat store, a gaol house, blacksmith's shop, post office, and a cemetery had been added to the Bong Bong village. The name for the village of Bong Bong was derived from the Aboriginal words "Toom Bong" and means "many watercourses" or "many frogs."

The thrust to develop the Common is a contentious issue as investigations prove that the remains of these buildings are under the topsoil of the Common and as such are the remains of one of the earliest Australian settlements (Rappoport 127) and would be disturbed forever by the establishment of a cool climate Botanic garden.



Please see print copy for Figure 2

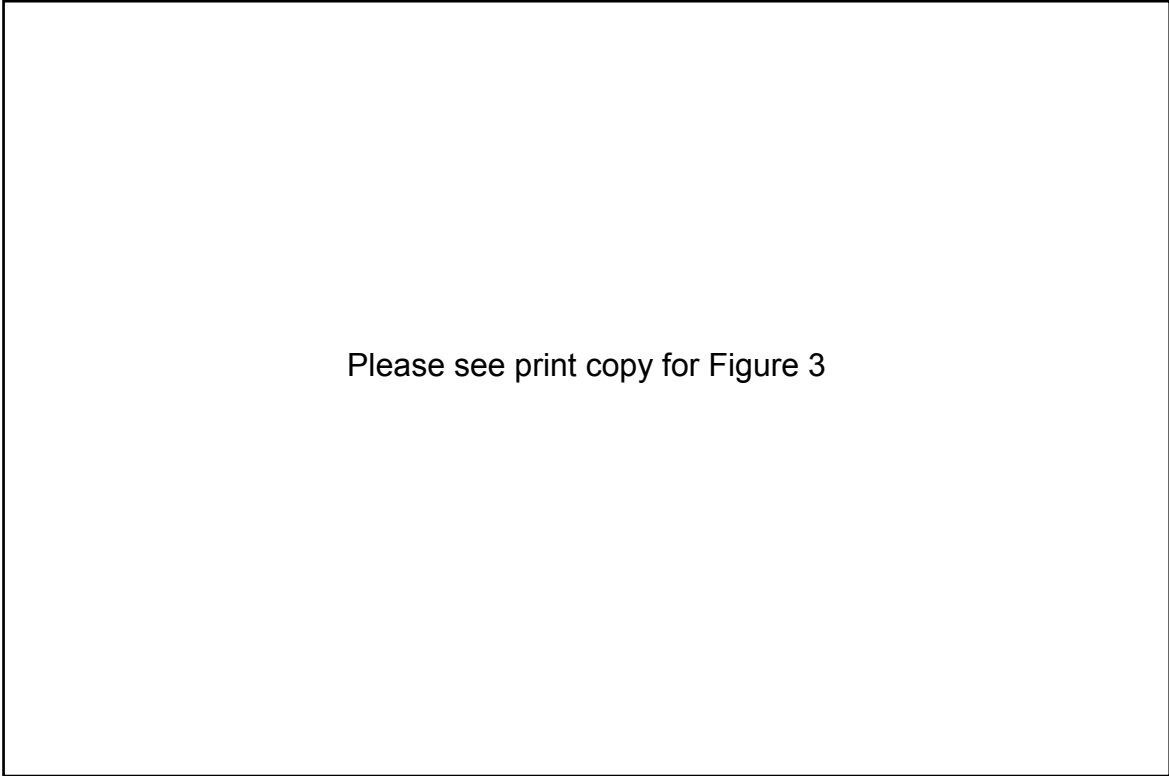
Fig. 2. Sketch map of Dixon's 1829 survey plan showing the settlement at Bong Bong, the line of the Argyle Road and the Wingecarribee River. (Source: Rappoport Pty Ltd. 29)

Both the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Reserve are of high historical interest as the site of the first European settlement south of the Cumberland Plains. This area was the land of the Gundungurra people pre-settlement with the Wingecarribee River as the source of their food and existence. The name Wingecarribee is taken from the Gundungarra name for the area, 'Wingie Wingi Charabie.'

Among the European artists who arrived in the colony of New South Wales in the early nineteenth century were John Glover (1767-1849), Eugene von Guerard (1811-1901) and Conrad Martens (1801-1878). They were to experience the 'terms of infinity, vastness and intensity of feeling' in a new country and Martens wrote that the challenge of painting lay "not in that of imitating individual objects, but the art of imitating the effect which nature has produced with means far beyond anything we have at our command" (Martens 101). Martens, while painting in the English landscape manner of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, illustrated the picturesque, pastoral landscape of the Wingecarribee area. This encouraged further migration to the new colony of New South Wales once his landscape paintings were viewed in England. Of interest to this study is Marten's 1836 watercolour of Throsby Park which shows that there has been very little change to this landscape over the past 162 years.

"continuity, layers in the landscape, and connections with the past - and not simply what the landscape looked like - make it valuable to the local community." (Taylor 54)

Martens' pencil drawing in 1836 of Throsby Park near the Bong Bong Common (fig.3) is now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney and preceded the watercolour painting of the same subject. This drawing has been made use of in the Rappoport Heritage Report to illustrate the fact that at the time of settlement of this area there were vast expanses of clear land. This evidence is thought to be a good reason to leave the Common without changes; open space from pre- early nineteenth century to the present day.



Please see print copy for Figure 3

Fig.3. Conrad Martens

*Throsby Park* 1836

Pencil drawing unsigned, dated 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1836 from his “Scenes of Sydney & NSW, 1836-1863”

Reproduced with permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

Original: call no PXC 296 no.30.Digital a1567031: File no ML 08/13

On the 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1798 an unnamed young man belonging to the first exploration party to visit the area viewed the surrounding countryside from the summit of Mount Gingerbullen, near Sutton Forest and wrote in his journal:

We came into the most beautiful country, being nothing but fine meadows with ponds of water in them: fine green hills, but very thin of timber. We got to the top of this hill, where we had the most delightful prospect of the country, and in my opinion one of the finest in the known world. It certainly must be a pleasure to any man to view so fine a country. (Babbage 286)

This journal was included in the Brabourne Papers sent to Sir Joseph Banks by ex-Governor Hunter in 1801. The journal report was followed by a further visit in 1802 and then no further official movements into the area until 1814. There was increased pastoral expansion by Surveyor General John Oxley and Surgeon-General Charles Throsby after

1816. It is interesting to note that the journal contained evidence that the ‘fine large meadows’ and ‘very thin of timber’ in the above quotation are the result of early Aboriginal burnings to clear the land around water sources. This was done so that animals coming into drink at these sources could be captured for food and also to provide camping grounds for the indigenous people beside the water.

In his work, *Prehistory of Australia*, historian and archaeologist D.J. Mulvaney (1925 -) writes “forests, scrub and grasslands were torched to keep open travel corridors or pathways and provide more general access to hunting and gathering areas” ( Mulvaney 60) Leever confirms this with the words:

This deliberate clearing technique created a mosaic of areas, at varying stages of recovery from the fires, which provide food and shelter for a wide variety of birds, reptiles and animals, including koalas, wombats, quolls and many other marsupial species, as well as establishing a system of fire breaks in case of a major fire...the dispossessed Gundungurra people, whose fire stick farming practices helped create these verdant fields, so reminiscent of the old country [Britain] are nowhere to be seen.(Leevers 6 and 7)

One example of the ‘fine large meadows’ is seen beside the Wingecarribee River at the approach to Moss Vale now known as Hoskins Reserve and the Bong Bong Common.

The first European to occupy the area was Charles Throsby (1777- 1828) a naval surgeon born in Leicester, England. The earliest land grant outside the County of Cumberland was awarded to Throsby by Governor Macquarie in 1819 as reward for Throsby’s explorations on behalf of the government. This grant of 1000 acres (405 hectares) was named Throsby Park and was near the Bong Bong Common. Dr.Throsby was known as a considerate person...this was evident in his attitude to the Aboriginal people which could be considered relatively progressive for the Colony. Throsby abhorred the random slaughter of the indigenous population as he felt it would only bring violent retribution when there could have been harmonious coexistence. An excerpt from the Reverend James Backhouse’s journal dated 4<sup>th</sup> October 1836 expresses his viewpoint on Throsby and some Indigenous people:

...at length we reached the noble mansion of Charles Throsby [at the present -day Moss Vale], by whom and his wife we were kindly received, and who supplied our numerous sable attendants with food also, maintaining a kindly feeling towards the race, who are here quiet, peaceable people towards the whites, more intelligent and less of a depraved appearance than many of their countrymen (Organ 206)

Leevers notes the fact that 'there is currently [in 2006] no identified population of Gundungurra people living in the Wingecarribee area. It is unusual, in Australia, for the Indigenous people not to be still on their ancestral lands' (Leevers ii) and he later goes on to write:

The early British explorers recorded meeting family groups of Gundungurra people as they traversed the area, though no population figures are compiled. The report of the 1830 Battle of Fairy Meadow suggests that several hundred warriors (or up to 1500) of the 'Bong Bong tribe' (Gundungarra) and Wodi Wodi people took part...but by 1833 the Gundungurra people as recorded in the Blanket Returns comprised only 180 people from Picton to Goulburn...a rapid decline in the population over a relatively short period...to-gether with an absence of recorded resistance of the Gundungurra people to the pastoral expansion in 1818-1825 (Leevers 81)


The following document, taken at Bong Bong, of recipients of the blankets stamped with the Aboriginal owner's name, is listed below dated 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1836. The total of Bong Bong (Wingecarribee) Aboriginals had been drastically reduced to thirty-seven with only five male and three female children noted in this total.

Please see print copy for Figure 4

Fig.4. Blanket Return of Aborigines at Bong Bong 1836. (Organ 211)

The Aboriginal sense of place is connected to a particular part of the country in both a physical and social sense. The social sense is seen as a position in the moral, kinship and religious system of the Indigenous society that is disrupted by leaving their particular area of country. Numerous Aboriginals had a physical and social history of 30,000 years in the Wingecarribee area that they no longer occupy.

The Hoskins Reserve contains the path that the Aboriginals took as they made their way on foot to other ritual meeting grounds at Robertson on the crest of the Illawarra Escarpment some distance away.



Please see print copy for Figure 5

Fig. 5 Map of Cecil Hoskins Nature Reserve ( April, 2008)  
N.S.W. National Parks and Wildlife Service  
Fitzroy Falls 2577

Cecil Hoskins wildlife sanctuary and nature reserve, named after Sir Cecil Hoskins, a long time resident of the area, adjoins the Bong Bong Common and lies within the land of the Bong Bong Aboriginal tribal group and is now part of the Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council area. This area represents all facets of Aboriginal culture – the water, plants and animals that are connected to the Dreaming stories. The Bong Bong weir ( fig.6) built in the 1920's has caused a back up of water that has subsequently joined the chain of existing ponds to form a large lagoon (fig.7) that is the habitat of over ninety species of native and wetland birds.

Some of the native birds and animals in the Reserve are *Litoria denata* the Bleating Tree Frog, *Aquila audax* the Wedge-tailed Eagle, *Dacelo novaeguinaea* the Laughing Kookaburra, *Cygnus atratus* the Black Swan, many varieties of Ducks, Herons, Ibis, Falcons and *Ornithorhynchus anatinus* the Platypus. A total of one hundred and eleven different species were reported by the N.S.W. Parks and Wildlife Services in 2007.

The regeneration of native grasses is an important feature in the Hoskins Reserve with any fallen tree branches, large or small, left on the ground to provide shelter for native animals. (Fig.7)

These two special areas have changed the way I approach my creative work as items of history were folded into it while working in situ to achieve a sense of place, authenticity and connection. The painting *Secret Aspects* contains an abstraction of features from the St. George Cross and the reddish brown soil of the Hoskins Reserve is mixed with its paint, while *Hoskins Nature Reserve* incorporates the pumping station for the 1920's Bong Bong Weir. This weir, when constructed, joined to-gether a series of deep ponds that later became a lagoon and these are shown in the painting entitled *Chain o' Ponds*. A strong historical influence has moved through every painting or monotype contained in this series of works.





Fig.6 The Bong Bong Weir

Photo: Sarah Gray. January, 2008.

Note: two boys cooling off in the weir after discarding bikes and outer clothes.



Fig. 7 The Lagoon at Hoskins Nature Reserve.

Photo: Sarah Gray. November, 2007.

(Note the growth of native grasses. Small and large dead branches are allowed to remain in the environment to provide cover for native animals)

### **The Paintings and Monotypes.**

In this section I will discuss specific ways that a sense of place has affected my creative work. I have been deeply moved by aspects of the historical background discovered during my research into the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Nature Reserve. My senses were alerted further during an interview with a local group's representative who insisted that no Aboriginals were killed during the early settlement of the Wingecarribee district. This assertion is disputed as there are stories passed down the years of Aboriginal mass graves at Canyonleigh, Roberson and other areas. Leever's writes:

There is no simple, single answer to the question of the absence of the Gundungurra people. There are many answers. The broad answer is that colonization and dispossession from their traditional lands led to the destruction of the pre-contact Gundungurra society...many specific and diverse answers are that some people died from introduced diseases, settlers, stockmen, colonial officers and soldiers killed others.(Leever's 71,72)

My abstract creative work involves ideas that revolve around past events, locations and early colonial history of the Hoskins Nature Reserve and the Bong Bong Common, home of the Gundungurra people. I want, in this series of paintings and monotypes, to link what has historically occurred in this place by the use of hidden references to past incidents in some of the paintings such as the *Hanging Tree* and the monotype, *The Path to Robertson*, where a massacre of Aboriginals took place.

My creative work has been executed as a response to the history of the area and the textures and shapes of my chosen landscape. These paintings and monotypes uncover and make visible the hidden energy, balance and tension of the natural landscape while discovering feelings of a deeper nature through the process of historical research. Important to the painting procedure is the space that comes from the resonance of the colours themselves when they are joined or disconnected on the picture plane. The use of brush and ink while drawing linear calligraphic marks on the canvas are an important basis of the painting process and are sometimes allowed to show through washes of paint.

The first painting in this series alludes to the story of the Hanging Tree on Bong Bong Common which is still passed by word of mouth and has taken on a mythical existence that is denied by many and must, for lack of written evidence, remain so. The painting below (fig.8) consists of strong verticals and horizontals with soft passages of paint obscuring and denying the strength of these elements. This veiling use of paint represents the denial of the past history of this place and what took place there in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *Hanging Tree* is an expression of my compassion for the absent Gundungurra people and those who are believed to have been killed on this tree .

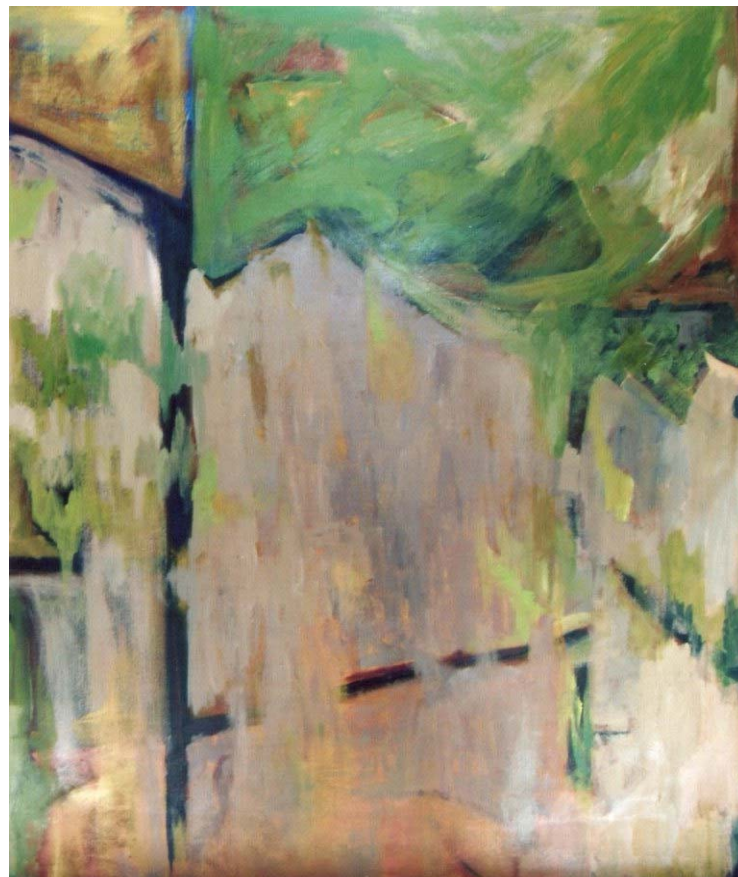


Fig. 8. Sarah Willard Gray  
*The Hanging Tree* 2007  
 Acrylic on canvas 120x 90 cm

Memory, process and the instantaneous direct action of abstracting features from the landscape are means of transferring memories and impressions into art that is a construction

in it's own right and not dependant on mimetic accuracy.<sup>2</sup> I agree with Brice Marden (1938- ) who writes “[My] painting is based on reality, a reality. And the painting itself becomes an addition to the reality if it is a successful painting.” (Garrels 17)

My first mark on the paper, drawn with sepia ink, is governed by vertical and horizontal shapes in the landscape – tree branches, rocks, crevices and fence lines. “The effect of that mark making is to divide the canvas visually and conceptually into figure and ground and thus, as it were, to create space for some other kind of content or meaning.”( Harrison 203)

Oil paint is used for the monotypes which are then hand printed. The hand printing of the monotypes is important as this action allows them to be printed in the actual landscape and thus enables me to have a sense of spontaneity and to quickly obtain an awareness of context, form and colour which I do not find in any other artistic procedure. My restricted palette includes the oxides, both red and yellow, even though these oxides could be said to represent the Central Desert colours. When mixed with appropriate colours the oxides express the verdant greens and deep red soil of the Southern Highlands. The four or five colours used in the restricted palette are blended to hold all elements together in a movement from complementary to ternary colours that take on the hues of basalt rock, earth and foliage of the locale.

Fig. 9 and fig. 10 are monotypes abstracted from the Bong Bong Common. *The Causeway* (Fig.9) is based on the actual causeway used by Governor Macquarie to cross the Wingecarribee River in 1820. Constructed of basalt rocks, it is an integral part of the history of this area. Conservation and heritage architect Paul Rappoport writes that “...the causeway as an individual element of the place is the oldest surviving in the State and therefore has the ability to provide information on early construction techniques for river crossings.” (Rappoport 2)





Fig 9 Sarah Willard Gray  
*The Causeway* 2008  
 Oil monotype on watercolour paper 30x22cm.

The second monotype *Fields of Memories* is reminiscent of the golden fields of the Common before the hay-balers come in to cut the grass for fodder, usually in mid-summer.



Fig. 10 Sarah Willard Gray  
*Fields of Memory* 2008  
 Oil monotype on watercolour paper 30 x 22 cm

I used thick acrylic paint for the paintings, over tactile, expressive sepia ink lines made in a non-descriptive manner, that are then obliterated and allowed to partially re-appear. My desire is to construct paintings that are both a structured and lyrical interpretation of the landscape.

In the painting below, *Whispers in the Landscape*, I have sought the ‘essential sense of landscape values’ a quotation that writer Phillip Drew takes from Lawrence Durrell’s book *Spirit of Place*:

... get this essential sense of landscape values. It is there if you just close your eyes and breathe softly through your nose; you will hear the whispered message, for all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper. ‘I am watching you – are you watching yourself in me?’ (Drew 199)



Fig 11. Sarah Willard Gray  
*Whispers in the Landscape*  
Acrylic on canvas  
Triptych 120 x 270.

*After the Rain* ( Fig 12) was suggested by the cascading water at the Bong Bong Weir in the Cecil Hoskins Reserve following heavy rain after a six year period of drought in all areas. The Weir, built in the 1920’s was the direct cause of the forming of the large lagoon in the Reserve as it holds the water back as required. In this painting the Wingecarribee River

falls in a torrent of water before its journey through banks of green to be stored behind the walls of the Warragamba Dam eventually becoming part of Sydney's water supply.



Fig. 12 Sarah Willard Gray  
*After the Rain*. 2008 .  
Acrylic on canvas. 90 x 120cm

The painting *Chain O' Ponds* (fig.13) is informed by the ponds that existed before the Weir was built in the 1920's. After the weir's construction these ponds joined and formed what now is a large lagoon in the nature reserve, home to platypus, other wildlife as well as over thirty types of waterbirds which are dependent on the lagoon. The colours used here express soil, water and open space in free-flowing shapes.





Fig.13 Sarah Willard Gray  
*Chain o' Ponds*. 2007. Acrylic on canvas 120 x 90 cms

The creative works in *A Sense of Place* contain abstracted elements of the two investigated areas combined with a sense of memory and a longing for this environment to remain as it is at the present time.

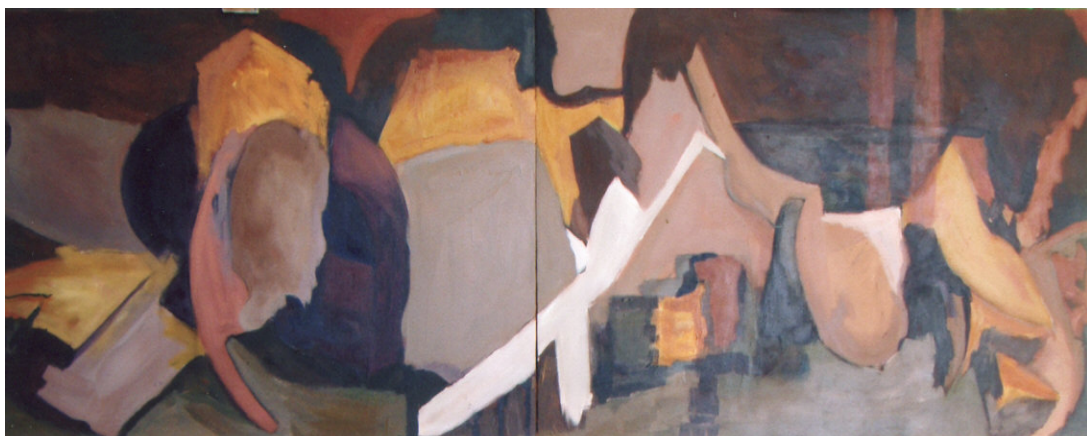


Fig.14 Sarah Willard Gray  
*Secret Aspects*. 2008 Diptych.  
 Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 180cm



The Bong Bong Common is a 70 acre area of open grassed fields exposed to the viewer travelling on the road due to ‘firestick farming’ by the Gundungurra people before the early settlement of the region. Across the road from the Common in direct contrast is the Hoskins Reserve. It is reached by means of a curving dirt road and is a smaller place with wide stretches of water and a feeling of seclusion and secrecy. There is a feeling of solitude in *Secret Aspects* (fig. 14), a painting which evokes my memory of ‘place’ with an array of shapes, from a map-maker’s viewpoint,<sup>3</sup> that lightly frame abstracted facets of the Reserve: the St. George Cross, the Dam spillway, the pumping station that is no longer used, and native foliage and vegetation. The dimensions of this painting have a connection to landscape; at 60 cm high and 1.8 metres wide it suggests a wide vista of landscape that spreads out before the viewer. The warmth of its colours is suggestive of enclosure, secrecy and seclusion. The image (fig 15) below reveals, in some areas of the detailed close-up, the grains of red-brown soil of the Reserve mixed into the paint and the lyrical curve and flow in the lines of the painting that are part of the natural environment.



Fig.15 Sarah Willard Gray.  
*Secret Aspects*. (Detail) 2008 Diptych.  
 Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 180cm.

There are different levels to ‘a sense of place’, some that involve familiarity, personal and private aspects that are deepened by a knowledge of its background and others in which one can appreciate an area’s beauty and peacefulness without any historical knowledge

The act of painting this particular area of landscape has deepened my connections to it and encouraged me to fight for its preservation. The research for this thesis has led me to take part in politically orientated activism against certain sections of Local Government that threaten the historical fabric of this area. This land, that conceals the secret of what happened on the Bong Bong Common and Hoskins Reserve in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been a framework for my written and creative work. With a determined effort by a group of like minded people the land will remain in its present undisturbed state.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Botanical Garden group had previously attempted to obtain two other significant areas for their project and were refused permission by the Wingecarribee Council due to the expense of maintaining such a large garden with ratepayers' funds when many other small council owned gardens are already maintained at a high cost. Also, their primary educational and scientific aims on this site were devalued due to the flooding of the Wingecarribee River across this land during heavy rain. The group have been advised to look at the NSW State government owned 'Hillview' historic home and acreage at nearby Sutton Forest as a viable alternative.

<sup>2</sup> The abstraction of the landscape that I subscribe to in my creative work has its sources in the theories and art of Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903). Nabis artist Maurice Denis (1870-1943) wrote about a small painting, *The Talisman* (1888), by Paul Serusier under the direction of Paul Gauguin: "Remember that a picture – before being a war horse or a nude woman or an anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order." (Ellridge 9) The abstraction in my painting deals with a manipulation of the essence of form in the real world and of 'a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.' (page 63) Honours thesis: *The Aerial Viewpoint in Australian Imagery. 1945-2000* . Sarah Willard Gray, 2006.

Other artists who have influenced me are Ivon Hitchens (1893 – 1979) Richard Diebenkorn (1922 – 1993) and indigenous artist Dorothy Napangardi, a member of the Walpiri language group, born in 1952 about 400 kms north west of Alice Springs.

<sup>3</sup> In my abstraction of the landscape the motifs in the landscape become seemingly abstract when viewed from an aerial perspective or the map maker's viewpoint and when there is an absence of linear perspective and illusions of space brought about by atmosphere. Although the landscape is involved in the works there are no concerns with reviving an interest in traditional landscape painting. Australian artist Fred Williams (1927-1982) remarked about his own painting from an aerial viewpoint "it has an ambiguous relationship with Aboriginal art." (Mollison 1989:210) and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c1930- 2002), a Papunya Tula artist "developed the concept of his paintings as maps of country" (Johnson 1994:47)

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