

The fertile life of rivers and streams has always stirred the human imagination. Throughout western history, poets from Coleridge and Tennyson to Emily Dickinson have waxed lyrical about the force of a river flowing out to the sea, or the quietude of a gentle brook or trickling stream. Late last century Australian painter Arthur Boyd based his final suite of paintings around his beloved Shoalhaven River. For nearly a decade, contemporary Sydney artist Kate Dorrough has inherited this fascination with the landscape of Australia's inland rivers.

With childhood memories of swimming in the deep river waters of the Wollomombi brook (lower Hunter Valley, NSW) embedded in her psyche, Dorrough has long been drawn to the symbolic quality of rivers as a powerful source of life.

The river landscape has also provided the artist with the opportunity to expand her art practice. Since the 1980s she has primarily been known as a figurative painter, but in recent years Dorrough has increasingly diversified her work, paring back her landscapes to reductive abstract compositions, as well as turning her talents to hand-built ceramic vessels and objects, that resemble essentialised organic forms.

In 2011 she spent a month in Mildura, Victoria, capturing the changing moods of the Murray river, which formed the basis of her series 'The Enduring Landscape' at the Catherine Asquith Gallery in Melbourne (2011), followed by a solo show at Arthouse Gallery in Sydney (The Enduring Landscape and the Inland River, 2012).

For this exhibition at Manning Regional Art Gallery, the artist has expanded her ambitions to create a mixed media theatrical presentation of river life, specific to the Manning River environment of the northern tablelands and the Mid North Coast. To create this multi-faceted interpretation of the river, she has incorporated abstract paintings, rustic ceramic and concrete sculptures, video projections and fabric hangings, to build up a multi sensory experience of the river environment. The common link between all these forms is a rich materiality that evokes a visceral experience of the environment for the viewer.

This series has developed over several field trips to the Manning River region; undertaking plein air sketching, which was further, developed and expanded back in her Sydney studio. She was inspired by the diversity of the area, with its inlets, deltas, tidal flats, lagoons and islands. The artist explored the Harrington and Saltwater National Park, where the river meets the sea and observed the abundant fish and bird life of the Cattai wetlands.

Employing acrylic paint on linen, her layered paintings possess a rough hewn texture that suggests hidden depths, with calligraphic lines floating on the surface like some kind of primeval markings on the land; this is echoed in the tactile surfaces of her ceramic vessels. Wandering from room to room through the exhibition is akin to meandering along a winding riverbank – the large scale acrylic paintings are stained with deep pigments - sea green, turquoise, golden yellows and deep amber. Concrete rocks tinted salmon pink and ochre are embedded with oyster shells and ceramic fragments, like ancient fossils from the rivers depths. Ceramic vessels resembling water jugs of classical antiquity are transformed into aquatic naiads, personifying the varied river systems - Channel, Tributary, Islands and Wetlands.

Scattered among these works are water birds coarsely assembled from branches found along the river bank, as well as loosely constructed emblems of river fauna and sources of human industry- fish and dairy cows, oysters and fishing boats which sit on rough timber and ceramic plinths. In exploring the river's long history, Dorrough's materials and forms reference the farming of the Manning region, as well as the timber industry that thrived by the river. Underlying all of this commercial history, she acknowledges the long history of the Biripi people upon this land.

Sounds of rushing water fill the exhibition rooms, alongside a video footage of the flowing river itself. The mystical aspects of the river are addressed by a series of ceramic water 'sprites'; simplified bleached forms with human like features. Like primordial spirit totems, they bear witness to the layered history of these changing waterways. Dorrough's gestural works also reference the elemental forces of the river, as a source of fecundity and life, with its constant movement and elemental cycles of creation and erosion, renewal and destruction. According to the artist, her abstract markings suggest a kind of primal language of the land. It is only through some form of communion or connection with this environment that we can decipher and interpret its meaning.

Through this poetic and immersive visual experience, Kate Dorrough aims to steer the viewer's perception towards an almost animistic understanding of river life; in order to appreciate the uniqueness of this complex yet fragile ecosystem, which requires our respect and protection.

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