

ARTIST STATEMENT

'The Lyrical River' is in response to a specific environment, the Manning River, the Mid North Coast, NSW.

My exhibition focuses on the importance of this river system to both its community and as an iconic cultural symbol. The river is a source of fertility with its cyclical nature of renewal and destruction. It is a potent historical and cultural emblem embedded in our literature and inherited visual language. In our nation's psyche, limited water resources, droughts and floods mark our consciousness. In its role as both caretaker and provider, the river is political and its essential ecology needs protection.

It has been a liberating experience creating this exhibition for the Manning Regional Art Gallery. It has provided me with the opportunity to extend my art practice and experiment with new mediums, such as concrete based sculptures combined with ceramic forms overlaid with video projection and fabric hangings that incorporate stitching and paper sections.

The gallery space itself, four rooms and a corridor within the original building of the Manning Regional Art Gallery, has influenced and informed the exhibition. Each room has become a site of discussion, exploring historical, social and ecological aspects of the Manning River.

As I worked and visualised the space, the exhibition evolved and became an installation that is akin to a theatrical or experiential museum experience.

Like a river, the exhibition traverses from room to room. Two-dimensional paintings and fabric hangings work as a stage set, echoing the symbolic three-dimensional ceramic and concrete sculptures. Objects are placed in dialogue with video and sound and hanging sculptures cast shadows to create an all-encompassing conversation between different mediums, forms and ideas

A participatory element invites the audience to contribute; chairs, two desks and drawing materials offer an intimate space for personal response and recollections.

I undertook several field research trips for the exhibition and loved getting to know the local towns of the Manning Valley and their

history. I followed the meandering river with its unique double delta system, islands, tributaries, catchment areas and its two entrances, where the river meets the sea at Harrington and Saltwater National Park. The parks essential role in protecting estuarine habitat, fish and migratory birds was also evident at the Cattai Wetlands, a habitat sanctuary for bird life and the Wingham Brush Nature Reserve with remnant subtropical lowland rainforest.

Creating plein air sketches on site at various river banks offered the opportunity to just sit and observe the river flow, deep and strong; the meandering blue ribbon amongst fields, fresh water trickling and bubbling; and the wide and shallow salt water tidal flats with their glittering white sands. These sketches, along with research of historical accounts and stories, provided the foundation for my work back in the studio.

In referencing and acknowledging the history of the Biripi people, their river management and fishing skills, the subsequent timber clearing, dairy and oyster farming, ship building, wharfs, ports and trading, these works evolved to become symbolic totems of the life on the river and its evolution over time.

This work is a personal interpretation, a reduced and abstracted essence of the river, where gestural calligraphic marks on canvas, are an inferred language or musical denotation of the river, and direct hand built stoneware ceramic forms and rudimentary cement, wire and plaster sculptures become a series of signs or totems. The materiality and tactility of clay, with a layers of slip, glaze and numerous firings, the layering of cement, revealing and disguising shells and ceramic shards, and wrapped wire with torn cloth soaked in plaster, echo a layering of stories and collected memories of the river.

The river becomes a place of remembering, broad and strong; it is a region of our mind, a unifying and iconic symbol.

KATE DORROUGH
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