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Not Empty

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Not Empty
Australian Aboriginal Concepts of 'Country' in Modern America:
A Comparison of Two Cultures' Relationships to the Environment
Laurel Orme

Professor Nancy Macko
Professor Donald McFarlane

A Studio Art and Environmental Studies Dual Thesis
Presented to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

April 23, 2010

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to
Lynlie Jessup Orme Hermann, 1952–2008, who taught me how to paint.
Also to my sisters, who share my legacy,
my mother, the first strong and independent woman in my life,
and my father, who gave me country

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my mother, the first strong and independent woman in my life,
and my father, who gave me country
because he stayed.

Thank you.

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Introduction

“This is the earthly painting for the creation and for the land story. The land is not empty, the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power...the land is not empty. There is the story I am telling you— special, sacred, important.”¹

The word ‘earth’ can be used to describe several things both general and specific. Often, it refers to the ground, which when undeveloped is often considered empty space. Sometimes it is a gentle word for dirt or soil. Usually, it refers to our planet as a whole, including all it is composed of. These meanings for the same word are interchangeable because they are related, if not inherently the same. Earth is greater than space or soil. It is a compilation of minerals and organic matter that come together to form the basis of all life on our planet. By its very definition, earth is not empty space. It is full of energy; it is the very canvas of life.

Not Empty is a two- part exploration of the relationship between humans and nature. In this essay I intend to discuss the relationship Australian Aboriginal peoples have with their environment. Their many cultures are among the oldest surviving civilizations on the planet, and their natural history is rich and complex. I plan to compare the relationship Australian Aboriginal cultures have to their environment to that of a Western civilization, specifically the United States. Neither relationship is perfect, nor is one of them ‘better.’ Both have histories riddled with extinction, evolution, and the conquest of new lands. The struggle Aboriginal Australians experienced when first settling their new land is concurrent to the degradation occurring today by Western cultures, with some differences, including scale and speed.

Among the differences between the two cultures is their age discrepancy. It took thousands of years for Australian Aboriginal people to adapt to their environment, which they had significantly changed. They achieved a sort of balance within nature that is perpetuated through many aspects of their culture, though it took thousands of years to develop, and at the expenditure of many resources. Using this knowledge, I argue that the ‘youthful’ state of Western civilization is a driving factor of its wasteful use of natural resources and

¹ Wandjuk Marika. Brown, 2004.

environmental degradation. While this theory alone might promise an environmentally minded future for Western civilizations, other major differences between Western and Aboriginal culture make this less likely. Those differences include rapid development of technology and globalization, which modern American culture has and Aboriginal cultures do not. The last difference I plan to discuss is the concept of “Wilderness,” and the sense of separation that Western civilizations have constructed regarding nature.

These cultural–environmental differences are reflected through the art produced by each civilization. I will compare them, and draw examples from regional art and artists from both Australia and the United States, spanning several decades. Historically Western artists like Thomas Hill, Ansel Adams, and Agnes Denes have captured nature as a commodity; wilderness to be conquered and owned, or preserved and kept apart from humans. In Aboriginal art, as demonstrated through generations of artists like Emily Kngwarreye, Dorothy Napangardi, and Silas Hobson, the people belong to and are extensions of the land. It is their resource to use but also their purpose to maintain. Though they significantly changed the landscape upon arrival in Australia, after adapting to the altered surroundings, and living within it rather than on top of it, Aboriginal civilizations have achieved relative balance with their environment by managing their use of natural resources. Their cultures were fashioned alongside their adaptation to the Australian landscape, and the result is a deep sense of belonging and connection they feel to their homelands. These cultures, which include belief systems, ceremonies, tools, and day to day activities, developed out of their environmental relationship and then remained relatively unchanged until the 19th Century, because it worked. Modern societies are expanding and rapidly changing at an ever–increasing rate, making balance, something that requires time and environmental awareness, difficult to achieve.

Half of this thesis will explore these separate relationships to nature; their development, their differences and their similarities. My premise regards a potential future. Modern societies have the rapid development of technology at their disposal, and the ability to instantly share information across the globe. While much of this advantage over nature is abused; harnessed to rapidly exploit resources, it has potential for great environmental good. If attitudes of separation from and superiority over nature continue, this good will never come to full fruition. If history is any lesson to us, modern societies can learn from ancient

civilizations to adapt to our natural surroundings before we lose them, and live together, within.

The second half of this thesis is an exploration of my own connection to the landscape, specifically my family's ranch in Arizona. Alongside this paper I have developed an art project that shares the same title. Using Aboriginal concepts of 'country,' or the place where one belongs in the land, as a framework, I have documented my home in the American Southwest, and have explored my sense of 'Place' within a landscape my family has learned to manage responsibly. My method for this project was 'un- Aboriginal,' as their styles are sacred and not mine to use. The concept is derived from their historical 'ground paintings,' which functioned as forms of both ceremony and land stewardship.

Like this ancient ritual art, my project extends beyond canvas and paper. I have taken different shades and textures of earth and shaped an undulating topographical map of my homeland in a lot outside of my college campus' art building. The swirling topographical lines, the textures and colors of the earth fill the space with energy and life; space that ordinarily might be considered empty. The purpose of this piece is to remind its viewers that undeveloped land is far from empty space, but is in fact teeming with life, to which we are all intimately connected. By removing ourselves from nature through separation and overproduction, this connection is too often forgotten. I hope to rekindle the realization that earth is not empty space. It has a long and complicated story to which all things, including people, belong.

Though neither modern America nor Australian Aboriginals' relationship to nature is perfect or 'better,' each has promising qualities. I am not out of hope for modern societies to develop a balanced connection to nature. Indeed, we have the lessons of those who made mistakes before us. The goal of my art work, and my argument in this essay, is that by combining Western ingenuity and the Aboriginal understanding of adapting to a specific environment and living within the land, we can move forward in time as equal and responsible components of the earth.

Histories

“You can sit down here. You read ‘im this Country.”²

My life has been linked by two deserts. I have spent the majority of my years in one, and an important part of my life in another. The thing these two deserts have taught me is to believe in the wilderness, because it is both greater than we are and an integral part of us. An environment shapes those who inhabit it. It connects people to the land and gives us a sense of place. I have grown up and continue to live on a ranch in the northernmost point of the Sonoran Desert in the heart of Arizona. My family has owned this land for four generations. I have grown up on the back of a horse riding through mesquite and prickly pear cactus, seeing and reading the same landscape that my father read, and his father before him, and his father before him. When I am asked, “Where are you from?” I can easily answer. I come from 26,000 acres of undeveloped pavement-less high desert steppe environment. I come from cowboy hats tilted back on a one hundred and fifteen degree day, dust-blowing, and endless phthalocyanine-blue sky. I come from wind in two hundred-year old cottonwood trees, hundreds of feet above me. I come from lizards in my shoes and coyotes (“cai-oats”) in my backyard. I come from arrowheads and heads of cattle. Three monolithic mesas look after me like benevolent giants when I crawl like an ant up their sides to get a hawk’s-eye view of my great wide world. Clear blue horizon to clear blue horizon. Not a single building or even telephone poles obstruct my view. That’s what I know about where I am ‘from.’

Perhaps it is the nature of mankind, or just the nature of a teenager, but as soon as I was old enough, I left. I love my home, but even the horizon can be too close for an eighteen year old. I came to college, and college helped me find a new desert; Australia. My grandfather grew up on the same land I did, but he too had an urge to see the world. Australia was the one continent he never got to see. It was my first. I wanted to go to a place where there is more wilderness than what is left in the United States. When I was there, I met a kind of people who know much more than I do about ties to land.

² Charlie Jampijinpa. Faulstich. 1987, 159.

There are at least seven hundred different countries within Australia. That means seven hundred different cultures, languages, and places that belong to seven hundred different groups of people. They have all been lumped by Western society into a single category: Australian Aboriginals. It is unknown exactly how long ago the Aboriginal people came to Australia, but it can be approximated at around sixty thousand years ago. Humans caused huge amounts of ecological changes when they arrived long ago, as most species do when newly introduced into their environment, though human caused environmental impact has been greater than most species for several thousand years. After centuries of adapting to their unique environments and developing cultures suited to them, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia have lived in near- perfect harmony with their changing land. They had to. Australia has the most unpredictable climate and some of the most fragile ecosystems of any other continent on earth. Adaptability to environmental change was a skill Aboriginal peoples learned well, particularly after their own environmental mismanagement. When the Dutch and British began to colonize Australia in the 18th century, they brought with them a Western view of the world significantly younger and less adaptive than Aboriginal cultures. Adaptability was the only thing that kept their native cultures alive. The adaptation to colonization came in the form of art.

Though mostly different from each other, Aboriginal cultures have a few inherently similar qualities. For each of them, life begins in the Dreamtime. Though the creation of the world was long ago, the Dreamtime, or Dreaming, does not exist solely in the past. It is a dynamic process that connects several universes that come together to form a basic human, natural, and spirit identity. They are separate but connected.³ The holistic and unified view of the world (or more appropriately, worlds) is what causes Aboriginal people to feel such physical and emotional ties to the earth. "...Aborigines believe that the lives of all Australian people are inextricably bound together, as are the soils, water systems, and lives of the plants and animals. In refusing to deny or forget the past, they assert the value of their own understanding into Australian life, in particular, and for the future of life on earth."⁴ Created together and tied together, Aboriginals have a deep sense of responsibility for the

³ Faulstich, 1998.

⁴ Rose, 2000, 24.

management and care of their specific tribal land, which in their languages loosely translates to their ‘country.’ Nothing is of more value than country, and balance between nature and the spiritual world is sought above all. Country, therefore, is greater than a landscape or physical place where one lives. It is a reflection of the humans and creatures that live there. Country is not only the location of birth; it is a set of values, a dwelling place of the spirit, and sites of historical events which are forever added on to.

Removal from country therefore, would be the grossest kind of violation to an Aboriginal person. During British colonization and under English rule many Aboriginal people were taken from their homelands, often to missions for conversion. Aborigines were torn from country and forbidden to tell Dreaming stories. This is arguably the birth of Aboriginal art as a documentary basis.⁵ Painting happened as a way to secretly remember stories and traditions, and to pacify anxious feelings of being apart from the country they felt responsible to maintain.

“During the worst years, people saw most of their children die, or had them wrenched from their arms to be taken to institutions...and sick people grabbed, their dogs shot. Through it all they sought to maintain the knowledge of self, society, and cosmos in which their essential identity was based...And they maintained a covert resistance so that when the day came there would be Aboriginal people who knew who they were, what traumas they had survived, where they belonged, and what was incumbent upon them.”⁶

Aboriginal peoples surreptitiously maintained their cultural ecology by remembering the physical, spiritual and ecological aspects of their country by ‘writing’ it down through art. In the hope of a better future, Aboriginal knowledge adapted to survive the imperialization of Western culture.

⁵ Butler, 2009.

⁶ Rose, 2000, 20.

While art was the avenue for their cultures to survive, it had existed long before as a religious, cultural, and documentary tool. Arnhem Land in northern Australia has some of the oldest and greatest concentrations of rock art on the planet. Some has been estimated to be at least eighteen thousand years old. It has become vital for understanding ecological changes in Australia, particularly how changing environmental conditions influenced the development of Aboriginal culture, and vice versa. An example is some rock art dating over three thousand years, depicting figures holding boomerangs. Today, no Aboriginal groups in Arnhem Land use boomerangs, and they have no stories or traditions including them. After further research, it was determined that approximately three thousand years ago Arnhem Land was mostly grassland, where boomerangs are used, rather than the dense vegetation it is today, where they would be essentially useless.⁷

Artistic traditions continue today, and adding to its repertoire it has become useful to in many Aboriginal communities for producing capital. Though Aboriginals are most famous for their paintings, paint does not stand alone to reflect indigenous Australia. Sculpture, batik, and weaving are examples of further artistic extension.⁸ Styles and patterns are usually derived from ancient ceremonial body art, ground paintings, rock art, mythology, and information about the ecological condition of the land. Though not considered art nor admitted into galleries until the 1980's, Aboriginal art is currently the most famous and desirable form of Australian art; a feat no other indigenous art has ever accomplished.⁹ Evolved from fugitive tradition, many of the symbols in artistic renditions remain cryptic to viewers without the proper background or 'rights' to the information. Those 'rights' to Dreaming knowledge are based off of race, tribe, gender and age. A single painting may mean different things to many kinds of people, though there is one meaning that remains the same. Every piece of Aboriginal art no matter how different is a documentation of country. "...Aborigines...utilize their graphic and cognitive systems to symbolically represent their connections to the landscape. The natural environment sustains the Warlpiri [an Aborigine group] worldview, and this central Australian landscape exists not only in physical terrain, but

⁷ Flannery, 1994.

⁸ Butler, 2009.

⁹ Butler, 2009.

as a geography of the mind.”¹⁰ This artistic documentation stakes claims of historical and spiritual ownership of locations within a country that are important to specific people.

To the untrained eye, Aboriginal paintings are abstract. Even a Westerner with an understanding of the cultures and the stories cannot comprehend them completely. There are contingencies of meanings; information many are allowed to see, but not to understand. Most of these artists, some world famous, have never received formal artistic instruction. They model their paintings after nature and thousands of years of stories, and the lessons are similar: pattern, repetition, and balance.

During my stay in Australia I spent several months studying Aboriginal art history. I also took a trip across the Central Desert of Australia’s Northern Territory, and visited Stradbroke Island off of the coast of Queensland. While there, I spent time in a few Aboriginal communities where I met and learned from the indigenous desert and island dwellers. Their extremely specialized and well adapted cultures kept alive through their art and tradition was of special interest to me, as a product of an undeveloped and sustainably managed landscape myself. I brought these lessons home with me. The Aboriginal consciousness came alive with my own connection to the corner of Arizona which is full of my family’s history, and it gave me an idea. By universally combining the strengths of each culture; the specialized style of living within a specific landscape and the importance of feeling a part of that landscape, with modern technology and innovation that allows us not only to learn from the past but connect to others across the globe, I think that humans can, if not live in balance, at least live responsibly within nature. That is the essence of both this thesis and the accompanying project. It is inspired by the art that came from the people who travelled to a new place long before I did. They changed the land and they were changed by it, and since modern civilizations have already come halfway, we should do the same.

¹⁰ Faulstich, 1998, 1.

Upon Arrival: Aboriginal Influence on the Australian Environment

“Australia has a history of human occupation extending back at least 60000 years. It is a history of one of the most unusual and highly specialized people. Their impact on Australia was enormous and I now see virtually all the continent’s ecosystems as being in some sense man-made...I now believe that changes in technology and thought undergone by the aborigines changed the course of evolution for humans everywhere, for they were the world’s first future eaters.”¹¹

No environment has ever gone unaffected by the presence of a new inhabitant. It is basic biology that tells us that every organism has a niche within its ecosystem. Likewise, it is biological instinct that drives an organism to accumulate the maximum amount of resources at the minimum expenditure of energy. Therefore, a new arrival into an ecosystem is bound to overturn the balance when it disrupts niched species in its mission to attain energy. When the first Aboriginals arrived in Australia approximately sixty thousand years ago, an area full of resources and devoid of predators, the resultant environmental disruption was great.

Unlike their ancestors in prehistoric Africa and Asia, Australian Aboriginals had not evolved with their land. Without predators (mainly large cats) and surrounded by prey who did not yet recognize humans as dangerous, the first Aboriginals had an incredible impact upon the land. They arrived in Australia as fully modern *Homo sapiens*, so there had been no co-evolution that occurred between them and the prehistoric Australian landscape.¹²

The abundance of resources would have lent more time to leisure, providing time for thought and developing technology innovated for their new environment and its unique challenges. The abundance of natural resources and leisure would have also caused the populations of these new arrivals to rapidly multiply.¹³ Needing resources in turn, these increased populations would spread out across the landscape, causing environmental disturbance elsewhere.

¹¹ Flannery, 1994, 14.

¹² Flannery, 1994.

¹³ Flannery, 1994.

The disappearance of prehistoric megafauna from Australia is a subject of heated debate. Fossils prove that there used to be many, in both variety and number, though Australia is the only major continent that does not have large native mammals today. Many believe that the seventeenth and final global Ice Age was the sole contributor to their demise, though this does not explain why smaller animal populations seem to have been hardly affected. The other theory, occasionally combined with the first, is that many animals in prehistoric Australia were driven to extinction by humans. This theory is supported by the data that show the extinctions occurred twenty thousand years before the height of the Ice Age, and within the arrival of humans.¹⁴ No evidence has yet been uncovered to prove this theory; there are no kill sites or other indications of use (tools and jewelry out of bone, etc.). Fossilization occurs by chance alone, and it is therefore supposed that the extinction of Australian megafauna occurred so swiftly that no evidence was left in its wake.¹⁵

In time, the rapid utilization of natural resources and outcompeting endemic organisms caused the environment to change, and resources to become scarce. Many civilizations (a historically favored example is Easter Island) continued exploiting resources until they literally expired, causing the civilizations themselves to die. Rather than continue blindly exploiting resources, early Aborigines began to manage their landscapes and preserve some ailing natural resources. The encouragement of some resource–species by altering their environment was particularly prominent. The main source of this environment alteration was fire management.

‘Firestick farming’ as it is traditionally known, has been in practice by every Aboriginal culture for centuries. Fire provided its user with a weapon against pests and enemies, and provided them with food. By burning brushwood in forested areas and clearing dried grasslands, not only were many locations rendered safe from large wildfires, but it encouraged the growth of edible plant species and supported populations of grazing prey animals. “It is not unreasonable to suggest that there may be a link between the appearance of people and this change in vegetation...The Aboriginal system of firestick farming had clearly evolved over tens of thousands of years and had resulted in a new equilibrium being

¹⁴ Flannery, 1994.

¹⁵ Flannery, 1994.

established in Australian ecosystems.”¹⁶ Though altering the initial landscape and wildlife, over time firestick farming became an intrinsic process within nature, and after the removal of many Aboriginal peoples from their homeland the actual biomass and productivity of several areas decreased. “The degree to which this activity changed the landscape is the subject of heated debate in Australia at present, but wherever it occurred, this burning practice would have resulted in a selective advantage for fire-tolerant plants with an increase in grassland.”¹⁷ Accidental brushfires cause great destruction, leaving fewer surviving plant species and less biodiversity in individual areas after the Aboriginals were removed.¹⁸ Brushfires in Australia remain troublesome to this day.

Though causing great destruction to the original ecosystems, it cannot be denied that Aboriginal Australians learned to live sustainably within the environment, though they shaped that environment first. It can be argued that this is because the limited resources in Australia’s naturally fragile and unpredictable environment call for interspecies cooperation over competition.

“In Europe, life had always been a war against hardy competitors. The Australian environment did not evolve through warfare, but rather through cooperation between species to make the most of what little there was... These factors, as much as any, account for the extraordinary lack of sensitivity of the first European colonizers of Australia to their new environment.”¹⁹

With the arrival of Europeans in 18th century and the attempted ‘Westernizing’ of Aboriginal Australia, the acquired balance was once again thrown off, and further environmental degradation occurred. Like the first, this second wave of human interaction with Australia’s environment has caused degradation that hundreds of years later, there is little evidence of—or even potential for—recovery.

¹⁶ Flannery, 1994, 228.

¹⁷ Augee, Fox, 2000, 74.

¹⁸ Augee, Fox, 2000.

¹⁹ Flannery, 1994, 306.

Comparison

“Wilderness. The word itself is music...But the love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need- of only we had eyes to see.”²⁰

The relationship between Western man and nature is complex and has often been explored. From the earliest beginnings of empirical civilizations there has been a desire to journey away, seek and discover new worlds, and eventually, conquer them. The idea of the Wilderness is one that has always appealed to Western mankind. Writers like Ernest Hemingway, Rudyard Kipling, Richard Golding, and Jack London spent their lives exploring the idea of man and his place in the wilderness, particularly during the 19th Century through their works like Old Man and the Sea, The Jungle Book, Lord of the Flies, and Call of the Wild. Though unique and independent, the themes of these literary classics are often the same: the struggle of humans in nature. Man succumbs, he conquers, or he leaves, but there is always a struggle. This conflict does not exist in fiction alone. Many important events in history are the result of exploration by Western civilizations and taming ‘New World’ wilderness, including Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of America, the colonization of Jamestown, and Western expansion through Manifest Destiny, to name a few.

Sometimes, the Wilderness wins. London’s men die in the tundra, and Kipling’s Mowgli leaves his tempestuous life in the jungle. Most often, Western man wins. According to Hemmingway, he catches the fish, though at great cost. Man settles the frontier, sends the indigenous people packing, and extracts resources, also at a cost. Afterward there is a sense of longing, a hunger for the challenge or perhaps a yearning for nature, which Western man removes himself from but to which he always belongs.²¹ Western art is a product of its history, and reflects these feelings. When there is new Wilderness to be explored, harnessed and captured, there has been art to provide the propaganda. Thomas Hill and his 19th Century landscapes depict Manifest Destiny and the great settling of the “wild” western frontier. When Wilderness is slipping away, there have been artists like photographer Ansel Adams who

²⁰ Abbey, 1968, 190.

²¹ Bowdin, 1986, 1.

capture its fading glory. When it is absent and missed, contemporary environmental artists like Agnes Denes have given the epitaph. Whether the aim is to conquer, conserve, save, or resurrect, the theme of Western art that documents human and environment interaction is often the same as its literary relative. There is a struggle.

Thomas Hill was both a settler and a painter. He moved from Boston to Yosemite in 1886. A product of Western expansion, he painted emotionally–stirring landscapes of the west, often featuring Native Americans, bison, and hundreds of miles of sweeping wilderness. The paintings were often shipped east, or across the sea to England, advertizing bounty and adventure in the undomesticated west. Hill attracted his viewers though inspiring awe of the wilderness and a curiosity for ‘Otherness’ by leaving white settlers out of his paintings and focusing instead on exotic native people, wildlife, and landscapes.²² His painting *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite* is a brilliant example (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Thomas Hill, 1870-84, *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite*, 72x95,” oil on canvas.

A cluster of Sioux Indians are pictured at camp at the base of rearing mountain cliffs that dwarf a dark and unfamiliar forest. The people are unusual, with their dark skin and tipis. The forest is dark, thick, and lush; the mountains are gigantic, towering over the people in

²² Ogden.

wild and challenging majesty. The sense of curiosity and awe that the painting inspires, combined with a desire for adventure or the accumulation of wealth, is what caused people, himself included, to venture west. Development, war, and removal of indigenous people followed suit, all in the name of progress.

Ansel Adams is a more modern Western artist. Raised in San Francisco, the famed photographer heard the call of the wilderness, and he too found inspiration in Yosemite. A lifelong member of the Sierra Club and a member of the Yosemite Park Board, he was a strong advocate of national parks and global wilderness preservation. His photographs depict the simple and profound idea of nature idealistically devoid of humankind and therefore safe (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ansel Adams, 1942, *The Tetons- Snake River*, photograph

“His black-and-white images were not "realistic" documents of nature. Instead, they sought an intensification and purification of the psychological experience of natural beauty. He created a sense of the sublime magnificence of nature that infused the viewer with the emotional equivalent of wilderness, often more powerful than the actual thing.”²³ Adams’

²³ Turnage, 2009.

goal was to re–create the siren call of the wilderness, emphasizing its glory, and inspiring a longing to see these profound and endangered acres with a purpose to save them.

Though defying both consistent definition and medium, Agnes Denes is considered to be an ‘environmental artist.’ Her work pleads to modern society to reorganize its values in favor of nature rather than stripping its resources and paving over it.²⁴ Planting and seed germination, a powerful process that emphasizes rebirth and healing, is one Denes commonly features in her large- scale earth installations. A well known work of Denes,’ *Tree Mountain– A Living Time Capsule*, is essentially a small man–made mountain in Finland planted with hundreds of trees in a regimented spiral working upward toward the peak of the mount (Figure 3).

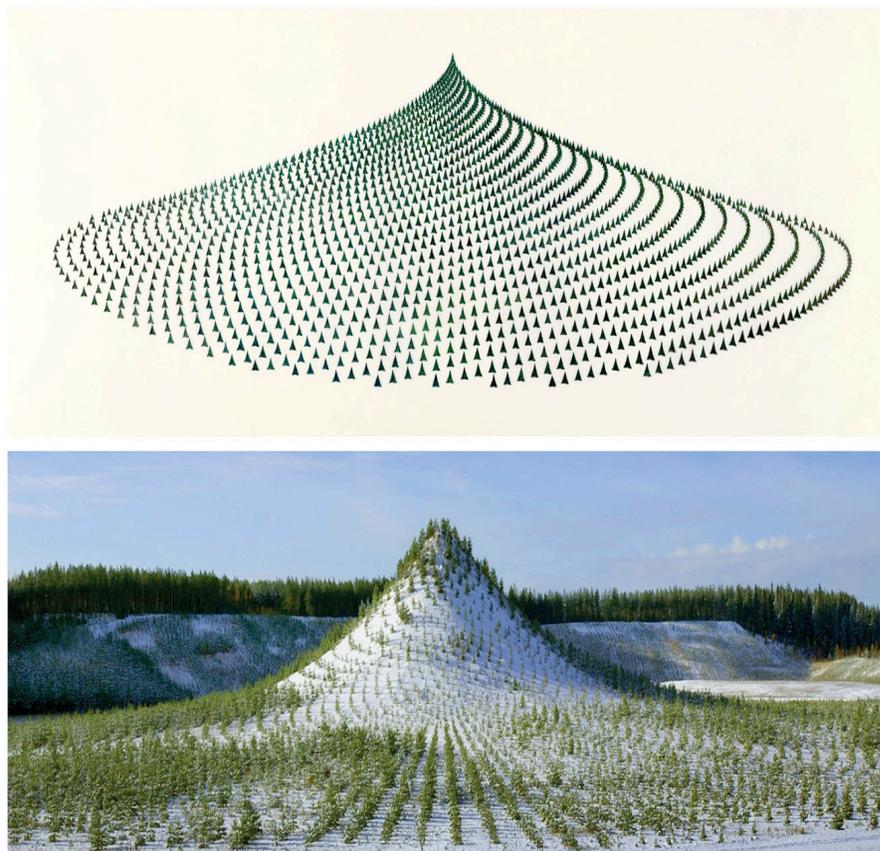


Figure 3. Agnes Denes, 1992-1996, *Tree Mountain- a Living Time Capsule*, earth installation utilizing 11,000 trees, photograph and design.

²⁴ Traditional Fine Arts Organization Inc. 2004.

Each tree serves as a messenger to the people to be responsible for preserving their environment for the future. The trees become a legacy for generations, placing responsibility directly into the hands of the locals. By reorganizing decisive values and placing responsibilities on the present, Denes' work remains as a resurrection of natural resources, anthropogenically organized, for generational benefit on a global scale.

Though each with a different attitude, the Western artists spanning both time and medium share a common theme; the separation of humans from nature. The works are either exclusive of Westerners, as in Hill's paintings and Adams' photographs, or stand as invitations to responsible ownership; as in Denes' pieces. Both approaches are less than ideal; one ignores the presence of humans and the other includes them in an artificially controlled design. Like literature, art is a reflection of the attitude of its people. In Western art and literature man is viewed as separate from nature, its rightful owner, and at fault for its destruction.

I argue that while Western humans are at fault for a great amount of environmental degradation and the demolition of many indigenous cultures worldwide, it is not because they are separate from them. The fact that humans are capable of damage is proof that we are intimately connected within earth's ecosystems, and have historically misinterpreted and misused our roles within those systems. Removing our bodies from nature causes a removal of spirit, but there will never be a removal of impact. All humans have a place within nature, "If only we had eyes to see."²⁵

The ancient Anasazi people in the Southwestern United States believed that before time, all creatures lived deep within the earth. Brethren all, they came together to dig themselves into the air; antelope, badger, tortoise, man. Indigenous Pacific Islanders maintained that the earth was balanced on the back of a great turtle, and every beast must maintain a balance in population and principles to not to tip her over. The Aboriginal peoples of Australia believe that ancestors and ancient spirits form humans, creatures, and earth at the same time in a dynamic and ongoing process in several spiritual realms. Western civilizations, whose popular Christian origin myth expels Adam and Eve from Eden, should take a lesson from the indigenous cultures they have historically persecuted.

²⁵ Abbey, 1968, 190.

Australian Aboriginals are among the first of ancient peoples. It is estimated they have been in Australia for approximately sixty thousand years. A theory of their longevity was their ready ability to adapt to the constant change that occurred in Australia's turbulent environment. Another theory is the fundamental practice of management and inclusiveness in their cultures which were central to their ways of life. Religion has been and remains still one of the most omnipresent features of Aboriginal culture. It is manifested in land claims, social obligations, rules of marriage (determining where genes will be spread), etc. These beliefs have been evolving alongside the people for thousands of years. "In effect, they embody hundreds of generations of accumulated wisdom regarding the environment and how best to utilize it without destroying it."²⁶

The very foundation of the Aboriginal worldview is that humans are not separate from nature and instead have a critical role within it as its keepers. Living in constant and direct interaction with their environment for so long, Aboriginals formed a symbiotic relationship with the landscape that they had influenced. Aboriginal Australians traveled in small family groups and maintained small populations numbering approximately two million in the country at most. They became useful population monitors of other animal life within an area, targeting the most abundant animals as sources of food, and readily switching species if necessary. The natural resources of the areas people lived in were their right to use, but it inherently became their responsibility to maintain them.²⁷

The sense of balance within ecosystems is reflected in all Aboriginal art, from prehistoric rock art to ceremonial body and ground paintings, and modern contemporary art. The art itself, mainly featuring Dreaming stories or daily activities, serves as an illustrative rewriting of ancient beliefs and traditions which are passed into future generations through both the crafting of the art and the aesthetics of it.

The generational knowledge and love of their homelands is the connecting theme of most Aboriginal artists. Emily Kngwarreye, Dorothy Napangardi, and Silas Hobson do not share the same country or artistic styles, and they span three different generations. In principle however, their art is the same. It is about their countries.

²⁶ Flannery, 1994, 284.

²⁷ Butler, 2009.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye did not begin painting for artistic purposes until her seventies. She was born around 1910 and was removed from her homeland in Alhalkere (an Aboriginal country north of Alice Springs) at a young age. She produced batiks to support herself until the 1970's when she began to paint; an enterprise that was more lucrative. Having never had a single lesson in art, Kngwarreye painted what she knew; her country. Her work is equally famous for its complexity, balance, and uncanny documentation of a place she had not seen since she was a girl.²⁸ Using traditional knowledge and stories from her country to aid her, Kngwarreye painted hundreds of representations of her homeland and traditional 'women's business' (Figure 4). One of her most famous pieces, *Big Yam Dreaming*, is a simple recreation of the complex root system of a yam pulled from the ground.



Figure 4. Emily Kngwarreye, 1995, *Big Yam Dreaming*, 10'x27,' polymer paint on canvas

The detailed monochrome piece, 10' x 27,' was painted with polymer paints on a canvas spread on the ground. Kngwarreye was seated on the canvas itself and completed the painting within a few hours entirely from memory. She completed approximately eight thousand paintings in her lifetime, roughly the equivalent of a painting a day.²⁹ Given the complexity and large size of her work this was an incredible feat. She had generations of memories. "The paintings are not the daubings of an 'untutored' artist acting purely on intuition; the term has been applied often in the press to hype up the phenomenon which is

²⁸ Caruana, 1998.

²⁹ Butler, 2009

Kngwarreye. Intuitive no doubt these works are; but it is an intuition founded on decades of making art for private purposes, of drawing in the soft earth, of painting on people's bodies in ritual.”³⁰

Dorothy Napangardi is from Arnhem Land, outside of Darwin, Australia in a country called Yuendumu. She was born around 1956, and lived ‘out bush’ until she was a teenager and her family ‘came in’ to the Alice Springs area. Her paintings were recognized by the art world in 1998. Napangardi’s work usually embodies Dreaming stories (*Jukurrpa* in her Warlpiri language) or reinventions of the Yuendumu landscape, infused with the teachings of her grandparents and other ancestors (Figure 5). “The Jukurrpa theme, generally, is one of the inseparability of the self from the environment, and the stories usually include travelling.”³¹

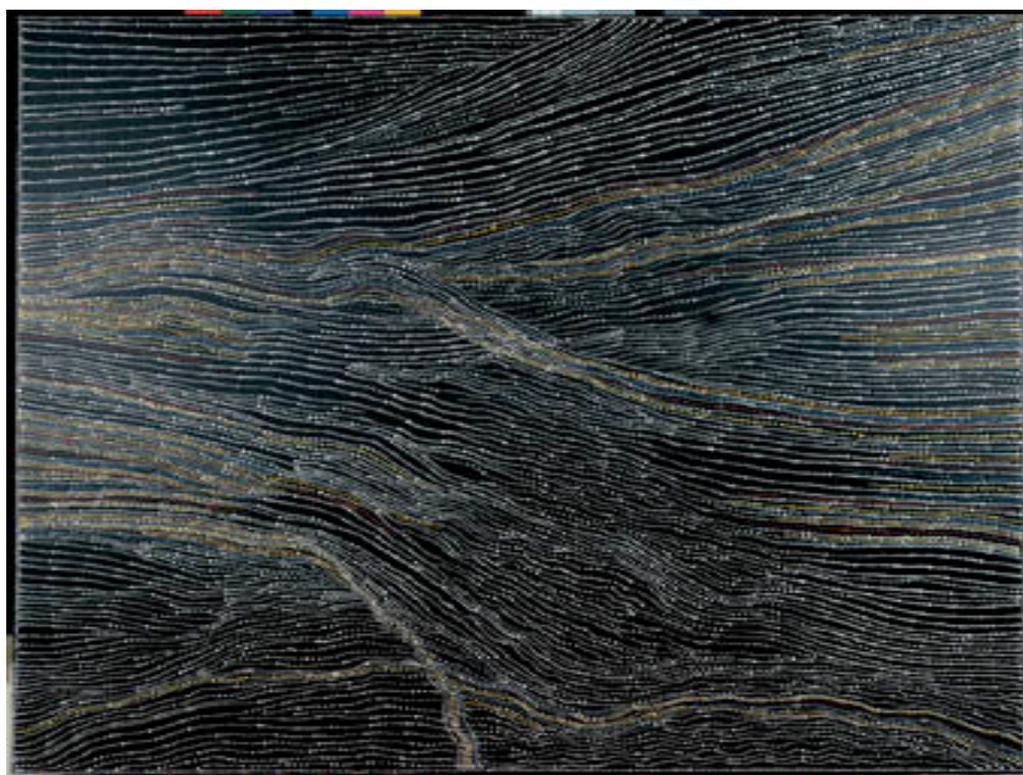


Figure 5. Dorothy Napangardi, 2002, *Sandhills of Mina Mina*, 5’x5.’ polymer paint on canvas

³⁰ Caruana, 1998.

³¹ Brown, 2004.

Her well known series, *Sandhills of Mina Mina* are a progression of traditional dot paintings, the lines of which form both the geography of local sand dunes, and traditional songs sung by female ancestors as they crossed over them. Napangardi herself travels between Alice Springs and Sydney, though her paintings remain of Yuendumu. “When I paint,” she told Kathan Brown for the Crown Point Press, “I think of the old days, as a happy little girl remembering my grandfather’s Dreaming.”³²

Silas Hobson is one of few well known Aboriginal artists from his generation. It is often argued that his generation has yet to come to full artistic fruition because is not old enough to have the privilege of depicting certain Dreamtime stories.³³ He was born in 1980 and lives in the Lockhart River Artist Community in Cape York, Australia, in a remote area centralized deep within his country. The community is only accessible by car during the ‘Dry’ season, and even then four-wheel drive is required to reach it. Unlike many Aboriginal artists, Hobson has had artistic instruction, and considers himself a contributor to the Contemporary Art Movement, and by traditional Aboriginal art standards, his paintings and prints are contemporary. Synthesizing the abstract and the literal, Hobson’s work often depicts human and animal forms swirling in environments of color and blending together (Figure 6). About his work Hobson simply states, “My work is about my country and animals and they are a contemporary response to the traditional culture and isolation of my community.”³⁴ When he is not painting Hobson is an active member within his Aboriginal community, and he enjoys playing footie (rugby).³⁵

³² Brown, 2004.

³³ Butler, 2009.

³⁴ Hobson. Queensland Art Gallery, 2000.

³⁵ Queensland Art Gallery, 2000.



Figure 6. Silas Hobson, 2008, *Untitled*, polymer paint on canvas

No two artists or generations are alike. Each brings new experiences to add to the tapestry of the world. There are thousands of Aboriginal artists. Many, like the individuals mentioned previously are featured in galleries and websites worldwide. Many are undiscovered. Still more squat in town squares and along the roadside peddling small works for meager dollars. Western art has many facets and many themes. The view of humans as separate from nature either by choice, superiority, or being outcast, is merely one of many premises; Western art has thousands of themes and purposes. What makes Aboriginal art unique when compared to others is that since its prehistoric induction, Australian Aboriginal art is unified under one purpose; it is a response to Place within country. Though the populations of Aboriginal people remain small, and within them artists are fewer still, there are thousands of styles, mediums, and renditions of Aboriginal art, each singular to the individual who creates them. The message of ‘oneness’ that is the intrinsic link between them, however, rise together as a single powerful voice.

Among the greatest contributing factors to the differences between Western civilizations and the worldview of Aboriginal peoples is the age difference between them. The

separation of man from nature is a concept relatively restricted to Western societies, and compared to ancient ones Western civilizations, particularly the United States', are young. Perhaps when we have been around for seventy thousand years we will have learned to fit into our environment as successfully as Aboriginal Australians. As does any newly introduced species into an ecosystem, Aboriginal Australians caused great environmental stress when they first arrived in Australia around 1000 BP. "There can be no doubt that Aborigines did change their environment... The depletion of key species by hunting and or environmental change could have initiated a cascade effect leading to extinction of a much wider fauna."³⁶ The people that were to become Aboriginals arrived in Australia approximately fifty-four thousand years before the fall of the Roman Empire, which is considered the catalyst of the modern Western world. In terms of finding an environmental niche, that is a significant head start.

If it was the work of time alone, we could be secure in the thought that given a few thousand years developed societies like the United States' will have learned to live in conjunction with the environment and established a balance between the use and replenishment of natural resources. However Western societies implemented a tool that has been the cause of both great good and great devastation to the natural world. That tool is rapid technological and global advancement "The development of technology allowed people to speed up evolutionary change. Humans no longer had to wait for the evolution of a sharp tooth before they could tackle large prey, for they could simply fashion a spear instead...It is this very fundamental shift in evolutionary speed that has upset the ecological balance throughout the world today."³⁷ Aboriginal Australians remained relatively static in their expansion of territory and development of tools, unlike modern civilizations which are not only globalizing at an incredible pace, but are also developing rapid advances in technology, both of which currently tend to degrade the environment. The last group of Aboriginals to "come in" from their traditional way of life was a small group of Pintupi people as recently as 1984. They had successfully avoided contact with "whitefellas" until then.³⁸ Their tools, while

³⁶ Augee, Fox, 2000, 75.

³⁷ Flannery, 1994, 143.

³⁸ Brown, 2004.

sophisticated and perfectly adapted for their way of life, were by modern standards 'stone age.' Australian Aboriginals had lived the same way and used the same tools for millennia. Modern civilizations not only have technology, but can rapidly develop advances in it. This allows the production of objects at an increased rate, using natural resources faster than they can regenerate. Byproducts of this advanced technology include pollution, accumulation of trash, and climate change. These impacts would be concerns for populations that maintained numbers as small as the two million Aboriginal peoples in Australia, but the United States' population increases by that number annually. China and India each increase by approximately sixteen million people a year.³⁹ There are multitudes of reasons why modern United States' society and relationship with the environment is different from that of Indigenous Australians, but the age difference between them, and the rapid spread and development of modern societies are among the greatest. The environmental degradation done by modern societies is spread globally, unlike that done by the Aboriginals. All this is made more obvious by the physical and emotional separation that Western civilizations have placed between themselves and nature on a general basis. This distance perpetuates the exploitation of nature and natural resources.

Perhaps several thousand years from now the United States and other Western civilizations will have learned to appreciate the central position humans have within earth's ecosystems rather than construct senses of separation from it. Unlike many indigenous cultures, the critical element of time will not be sufficient to allow nature to recover. There must be a conscious mandate to rearrange social priorities, such as recycling and reusing rather than producing, followed by a commitment to achieve balance with the environment. Advances in technology should be tools of reparation and management rather than instruments used to deplete resources. We are all responsible for the resources we use. The great difference between modern and indigenous people is which group recognizes and lives by that responsibility.

Though a popular theme within literature, art, and philosophy, the concept of humans being separate from nature is a convenient excuse that has allowed developed civilizations to exploit natural resources they should manage instead. If humans are separate from nature,

³⁹ Castro, 1998, 36.

environmental degradation will not affect them. The displacement of both the self and the product from nature, combined with a population no indigenous civilization has ever reached, and the technological means to cause massive environmental destruction are the tools Western civilization has employed on a main scale. These same tools (excepting separation) can be used for proper management, but it is our culture, which is one of separation from nature and dominion over it that has to adapt first to save our vanishing ecosystems.

The idea of nature and wilderness is appealing as a commodity to conquer, capture, and use. The exploitation of wilderness in the United States has been captured by Western artists since it began, though through time the messages have changed. Art has symbolized different aspects of humans' relationship to nature, regardless of time or culture. "Culture means many things to different people, but one of its key elements is the embodiment, in beliefs and customs, of actions that help people survive in their particular environment."⁴⁰ While in different places historically and with different tools, modern Western culture and Aboriginal civilizations both have seen environmental misuse and resulting resource decline. This is their greatest similarity. The greatest difference will depend on what Western civilization does with the last resources they have, and what they can learn from indigenous cultures who figured it out long ago.

⁴⁰ Flannery, 1994, 389.

Places in the Desert

“Now when I write of paradise I mean Paradise, not the banal heaven of the saints. When I write ‘paradise’ I mean not only apple trees and golden women but also scorpions and tarantulas and flies, rattlesnakes and Gila monsters, sandstorms, volcanoes and earthquakes, bacteria and bear, cactus, yucca, bladderweed, ocotillo and mesquite, flash floods and quicksand.”⁴¹

I disagree with many of Edward Abbey’s ideas. However there are a few we share. His idea of paradise is also mine. Abbey once wrote that every human being on the planet has a Place.⁴² Place is another concept Abbey and I share. I love my home in the American Southwest. As long as I live I have a Place there, high among the mesas and deeper in the soil than the tap roots of a saguaro. Place can be described as a physical location in the world with emotional significance in addition to a unique geographical location. It is a state of the mind; a spiritual connection to a physical location.

I had to uproot a little bit before I realized how deep my roots in fact were. The people of another desert taught me to articulate my sense of Place within my own. Desert aboriginal people live as an extension of the wilderness, embracing the fact that the landscape shapes who they are on a spiritual, cultural, and physical base. Evolved from living within a specific area and adapting to the unique conditions of that ecosystem, the cultural ecology of an Aboriginal is tied to their respective country, and even particular spaces within that country. To paint, or artistically represent their country is to lay a claim to it. Not a claim of ownership, but of right to the land and of history within it. “...in doing so they seem to shout ‘This is my land! This is my very being!’”⁴³ It is a great circular pattern; to know a people, you must understand their country. To paint a country, therefore, you paint its people.

I am not the first Westerner to find myself in the middle of nowhere, in every sense of the word. I am not the only artist who has found inspiration in the idea of humans within the desert landscape. Many, like James Turrell and Ana Mendieta have used the desert, specifically the Southwest, to explore the idea of personal relationships to Place.

⁴¹ Abbey, 1968, 190.

⁴² Abbey, 1968, 1

⁴³ Faulstich, 2009.

Turrell combines place, time and light to create a coincidental environment that invokes an emotional response in the viewer (Figure 7). Turrell gives the viewer an important role within each piece because they must physically enter the installation to experience it. He uses the Southwest because the desert is vast and bare, like his large installations, and has unique unhindered light from both the sun and the stars.⁴⁴



Figure 7. James Turrell, 2003, *Skyspaces*, permanent installation

Ana Mendieta was a Latina artist famous for her constant search for understanding of Place. Her exile from Cuba at a young age caused her to explore ideas of Place through physical location. She carved or traced her silhouette into the earth of the United States, Mexico, and Cuba (Figure 8). The desert serves as not only the location of her birth and nationality, but also her feeling absent of Place.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Art 21, 2007.

⁴⁵ Wikipedia, 2007.



Figure 8. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, “Earth, Body, Sculpture and Performance,” 2004.

Why does the desert inspire people? Perhaps it is the space; the distance of the vistas and the vastness of the skies that move us. Maybe it is the abstract beauty of barren rock and plants with thorns that we admire. Perhaps it is the idea of a wilderness so unforgiving that it is both a challenge and a comfort to know that living there will never be easy, taming it perhaps impossible. What caused the Aboriginal people to first walk into the desert of Australia? Humans have always felt drawn to the horizon, whether seeking adventure or better chances at survival. The desert begins with limited resources. The only way to survive in a desert is to experience it on its own terms. Australian Aboriginals and other desert dwelling indigenous people took the reality of survival and turned it into a way of life.

Aboriginal art successfully describes the bond with the landscape that its people have, particularly within the desert. Examples are the symbols used to depict humans and animals. Rather than painting the forms themselves (though that too is done in some Aboriginal cultures, usually in rainforested regions) desert artists represent animal and anthropogenic forms by the tracks they leave in the ground. Rather than their actual physical shapes, beings

are represented by the place where they connect to the earth.⁴⁶ These symbols have shifted through time from body and rock surface to canvas and studio, but the motifs themselves, or symbols and patterns within the art, remain relatively unchanged since prehistoric times. A contemporary acrylic painting will usually have the same designs as local pictographs and petroglyphs thousands of years older.

Regardless of why, people have always found Places within the desert landscape and my people are no exception. I am not aboriginal. My people were not there first nor did they evolve with the desert. I am a product of Western expansion and the invasion of a wilderness. However my ancestors learned to never suck dry or build over the wilderness. Instead, they learned to live within the environment, using it responsibly, with a vigilant consciousness of land stewardship. I am not pretending that our small cattle operation and vegetable garden are preserving the same natural landscape that existed a thousand years ago. Indeed, the ecosystem a thousand years ago was affected by the Sinagua Native Americans who lived there before we did. In turn, we have changed the landscape they left behind.

It is nearly impossible to find a piece of land that has not been affected by the species that inhabit it. Ecosystems constantly change. However, by understanding the specifics of an ecosystem it is possible to create a niche within it with minimal impact on the whole. Managing land to the specifics of its ecosystems minimizes environmental impact. It is important to respect the environmental complexities regardless of personal gain. By rearranging some priorities, I believe this can be done on large scale. I have learned to both protect wilderness and live within it. Rather than separate myself from it, I allowed my homeland to shape my personal culture. I am drawn to wilderness and I am at home within it. Responsible use of resources and preservation of our wilderness would allow humankind to have Places, equally well, together and within.

⁴⁶ Faulstich, 2009.

Project: The Earthly Painting

“This is the earthly painting for the creation and for the land story. The land is not empty, the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. Earth is our mother, the land is not empty. There is a story I am telling you— special, sacred, important.”⁴⁷

For senior thesis I was asked to develop a project that has value, is purposeful and mature. I am twenty-two years old. What do I know? Most of my opinions and passions have yet to be formed; my views of the world are not yet mature. I have been influenced by the opinions of those who have taught me, and my own experiences. My values and beliefs are still fluid, my purpose is unknown. I am young, and I do not pretend to know everything about the world. There is much that I find meaningful, but even that is fluid and subject to change. One thing I do know, however. I know where I come from; the physical place in the world where I have grown and learned, and where I will always belong. Knowing this place has given me a strong sense of self and ecological community. I am a part of a patch of earth in central Arizona, and I know my place in it. I know that over time it will change, too. Natural processes alter the landscape and my role and responsibilities relative to the land will change as I get older. My sense of Place in this environment will not change. Though it is not the subject of my project, this is why the topography of my home is the shape of my project; because it shaped me.

Not Empty is a topographical rendition of an important location within my ‘country’ in the Southwest. The project did not start out as a ground topography installation. It changed throughout the year as I changed and opened myself to challenging ideas that broke away from ‘Western’ tradition. Without making Aboriginal art, I wanted to honor it. In so doing I would share the intimate connection between humans and nature. I chose to share my own, because it is the only one I have the right to use.

⁴⁷ Wandjuk Marika. Brown, 2004.

I have filled a space approximately 25'x25' in an empty courtyard with an undulating reconstruction of part of my family's ranch in Arizona. I used several different shades and textures of collected soil to recreate the topographical lines in my version of a 'ground painting.' When viewed, the piece fills the space with energy, the differences in earth contrasting and highlighting each other. By placing the piece in the center of the courtyard, the viewer cannot help but to walk through it and around it, therefore interacting with it. This communication with the earth is important to the meaning of the work.

The lot itself has a gravel filling and concrete walls. It is full of plant life and a few wildflowers, and is comparatively undeveloped. In a few weeks, construction will begin in the area and a building will inhabit the space where the empty lot once was. I am offering no protest to the construction of the building, indeed it is an important and long awaited addition to the Scripps Art Department. The serendipitous timing is what I am hoping is poignant to my viewers. This lot, so easily considered 'empty' space, is, as the title entails, its own ecosystem; by no means empty.

My hope is to cause my viewers to find the energy and ecology in every undeveloped space, and reestablish a connection with nature that as a whole we have lost. By inspiring a desire to find their own natural environment, individuals might search for their own physical place in the world. I hope participants learn to read the stories the land can tell, and find their own story written within the wilderness. Perhaps the greatest chance for the preservation of nature is if we remember how to read it, and through it see ourselves reflected back.

Conclusion

“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”⁴⁸

“I have lived in the Sonoran Desert since I was a boy, and unless I get unlucky, I will die here. My home is a web of dreams.”⁴⁹

Humankind has a complex and varying relationship with the places we inhabit. Thousands of years ago, indigenous cultures shaped the landscape as they in turn evolved in response to new conditions. This relationship is destructive and constructive, natural and dynamic. Nature is meant to change, and in balance, we within it. This understanding lives deeply within the cultures of many indigenous groups both alive and extinct, and manifests itself in religion, philosophy, story, and art. Modern civilizations are in a unique situation. With modern advances in technology the environment is used and changed faster than ecological balance, something which requires time and conscious effort can be achieved. Wilderness is appreciated by ‘developed’ societies, but as a resource or an idea, and it is usually at a distance. This relationship can be determined from Western art, in which nature is depicted as separate from humans, useful to them, endangered by them, and under their control. This does not have to be so. “...humans are different from other creatures. We can think, understand, and act to make our lives better. Yet despite all of our advantages—or technology and our intellect—we seem to have made as disastrous a series of mistakes as any other species.”⁵⁰ Land management practices and mentalities of balance are missing from much of the modern world, though not entirely lost. There are solutions for better environmental practices.

By seeking another, I recognized my sense of Place; where I fit ecologically in the world. By studying the ‘countries’ of others I gained an appreciation for my own. If all members of Western civilization could realize the connection humans have to the land, and understand the strain pressed upon it by our lifestyles, I believe it could be treated carefully

⁴⁸ Charles Darwin

⁴⁹ Bowdin, 1986. 1.

⁵⁰ Flannery, 1994, 406.

and responsibly. The first people to settle Australia, as in any new place, caused great environmental change, and then learned to live within their altered world. Western humans have already altered their world, and we have still not learned to live within it. Indigenous people across the globe, Aboriginals included, have a great deal to teach. Sixty thousand years' worth of knowledge is precious, and like so many natural resources, it is wasted.

My two part exploration has yielded the simple idea that nothing is empty or 'available.' Ecosystems are complex, unique to their locations, and as dynamic as the Dreaming. The products of a Place, including its people, are rooted deeply into nature. Western civilizations are not separate from nature. They have for the most part simply forgotten to adapt. To save nature we have to acknowledge it within each of us. By embracing our own wild-ness, we can learn how to use, and in doing so save, the rest of earth's wild places.

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