

SAND and SUN  
Interpreting the desert on canvas

*A film about five artists who travel to Australia's heartland to paint the many moods of the desert explores their – and our – changing attitudes to the outback. John McDonald reports.*

Sunday morning might not seem a promising time for a film preview, but the auditorium at the Art Gallery of NSW was packed recently, for a documentary on five contemporary artists inspired by the desert landscape.

Two Thirds Sky: Artists in Desert Country was written and directed by Sean O'Brien and produced by Sophie Jackson, who must have been gratified by the enthusiastic response of the audience. The film will make its television debut on SBS's *Masterpiece* program in September.

The five artists featured were not the most predictable choices. While painters such as John Olsen, John Wolseley and Tim Storrier are well known for their excursions into the desert, Peter Sharp, Jenny Sages, Idris Murphy, Judy Watson and Gloria Petyarre are not names that spark much recognition with the general public.

Yet one of the film's best aspects is that it shows the strength of contemporary Australian art beyond the conventional roll-call of "big names".

More significantly, it captures changing attitudes towards the desert that are not only characteristic of artists, but of an increasing number of Australians who feel the urge to explore their own country, and to gain a greater understanding of a landscape once thought to be uniformly hostile and forbidding.

As this documentary shows, the word "desert" may stand for a tremendous variety of landscapes – no less beautiful than the forests, mountains or coastlines painted by artists who have sought more conventionally picturesque subjects.

All of the artists in the documentary have a strong abstract component to their work, although the landscape references are not hard to discern.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Two Thirds Sky* is Joel Paterson's cinematography, which moves effortlessly between the landscape and the painted work in a series of spectacular fades. In fact, I've never seen the relationship between a painting and its subject so well handled on film.

The landscape is so attractive in these shots that one has to struggle to recapture the image of barren no-man's land found in early works by S.T. Gill, E.C. Frome, and – most memorably – Ludwig Becker, the German artist who perished on the Burke and Wills expedition.

Becker's watercolour of the exploring party marching along under a blazing sun is an iconic image of the desert-as-inferno.

That image persisted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the works of Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale. For the latter, who travelled in far-western NSW during the devastating drought of 1944, the desert takes on an apocalyptic aspect. Drysdale's desert is a harsh, red void – the world after a nuclear holocaust.

Both Nolan and Drysdale were preoccupied with those rare specimens of humanity that inhabit such landscapes, although Nolan also painted a series of red desert views seen from the air.

When the British critic Peter Fuller visited Australia in the early 1980's, these mid-century desert paintings came as a revelation. Fuller felt that such works provided a symbol for the 20<sup>th</sup> century that made a mockery of Kenneth Clark's tidy ideal of the English country garden.

The works of Nolan and Drysdale made Fuller think of T.S. Elliot's poem *The Wasteland*, with its elegant vista of a world and a cultural tradition that lay in ruins.

It is remarkable how quickly this image has been superseded by a more benign idea of the desert. We can attribute this change of heart to environmentalism and eco-tourism, to four wheel drives and handheld satellite navigation devices, but mostly to the impact of Aboriginal Art.

Petyarre is a member of the Utopia community of central Australia and her relationship with the land is far more intimate than that of any other artist in the documentary, but every participant pays homage to the influence of Aboriginal art and the indigenous sense of place.

Watson, who is from an urban Aboriginal background, travels with her family back to her ancestors' lands in northern Queensland.

Sharp, Sages and Murphy all speak passionately about the way Aboriginal art has shaped their approach to the country.

There is no reason to deny white Australian artists can find their own "heartland" in the desert landscape, or seek out broadly spiritual relationships.

One of the most common metaphors for the experience of the desert, from the times of the earliest explorers, is that it represents a journey within, as though moving towards the heart of the continent also entails looking deeply into one's own heart without the distractions of everyday life.

It may be that without experiencing the desert at first hand, we may never really know what it is to be truly Australian.