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**Outback inspiration**

**John McDonald**

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White heat ... in Ross Laurie's *Ridge and Creek, Fowlers Gap I* one sees the complete cycle from straightforward observation to studio transformation.

**When a diverse group of talents ventures west, their responses to the rugged landscape are deeply satisfying.**

In recent years there has been a spate of projects in which a group of artists are taken to some far-flung location and invited to respond to a new environment. The result is a group exhibition that gathers together works made on the spot, and those created afterwards in the studio from memories, sketches and photos.

*Not the Way Home* at the S.H. Ervin Gallery is the latest of these shows and, in terms of quality, probably the best and most consistent so far. This may be because the terrain was already familiar to some of the artists, while others are now seasoned veterans of these group excursions to the bush.

The destination was Fowlers Gap, a research station maintained by the University of NSW, about 90 minutes' drive from Broken Hill. For more than 10 years the NSW College of Fine Arts has been bringing students to Fowlers Gap to paint and draw on the edge of the desert. This time the sponsor was *Artist Profile* magazine, which supplied accommodation and upkeep, artists' materials and other essentials. It also sent a writer, an ABC producer and a printmaker, putting together a complete package for issue No.18 of the magazine. The editor, Owen Craven, is also the exhibition's curator.
The *Artist Profile* crew are obviously not superstitious, having chosen 13 artists for this adventure: Margaret Ackland, Elisabeth Cummings, Merran Esson, Joe Frost, Alan Jones, Jennifer Keeler-Milne, Ross Laurie, Steve Lopes, Euan Macleod, Idris Murphy, Amanda Penrose Hart, Peter Sharp and Guy Warren. This roll-call represents a broad cross-section of talents, techniques and experience.

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As teachers at COFA, Murphy and Sharp had taken hundreds of students to Fowlers Gap. Warren, at the sprightly age of 92, and Cummings were the senior artists. Macleod and Cummings have been on so many of these trips that it wouldn't be the same without them.

Since the idea behind the trip was simply for the artists ''to make a body of work in response to the landscape and their experience as a whole'', it's no surprise that the dedicated landscape painters seem to have produced the strongest pieces. Cummings's work has a depth and consistency that can make other artists' efforts seem amateurish, but the standout performer is Ross Laurie, who has produced an impressive variety of images, from small charcoal sketches to densely worked studies in oil stick, to large oils on canvas.

In Laurie's work one sees the complete cycle from straightforward observation to transformation in the studio. His two large paintings, *Ridge and Creek, Fowlers Gap I* and *II*, are very far from being snapshots of the desert landscape. Laurie has taken huge liberties with the colour, using swaths of white-ish paint to reproduce the effect of bright sunlight. This is reminiscent of Ian Fairweather, who would often finish a painting with a final tracery of white. The other Fairweatheresque aspect is the creation of an internal rhythm that holds the composition together, even though each component seems to be bulging and sliding.

It's hard to believe we are looking at the same environment when we turn to Murphy's work, which is a series of small, square oils and one large-scale acrylic painting on a sheet of aluminium.

The small pictures are much crisper and brighter than one expects from this artist, but the large panel *Reflections and Shadows, Fowlers Gap*, is one of the surprises of this show. A very simple arrangement of black and purple planes, it has a dominant presence in the room. As one looks into the black area at the bottom, one sees the outline of something that might be a tree trunk, but could just as easily be a detached limb borrowed from a Philip Guston painting.

We meet a subdued version of Euan Macleod in this show. While this is probably only a small selection of what he actually painted, his pictures are modestly scaled and introverted.

Alan Jones has eliminated colour altogether, working in tones of black, white and grey. Jennifer Keeler-Milne does something similar, producing a series of 42 charcoal drawings of desert plants, and one large study of the sky.

Amanda Penrose Hart has opted for a large number of small, naturalistic oil sketches, hung in clusters. Joe Frost takes the opposite course, veering towards abstraction in paintings that feel self-consciously experimental.

Peter Sharp has also tried to reinvent himself on this trip, concentrating on small details in the landscape that have been translated into ambiguous forms on canvas.

He has also completed a series of sculptures that reveal his increasing confidence working in three dimensions. If Sharp's paintings occasionally seem almost too elegant, his sculptures are the antidote: raw, jagged hunks of wood bearing the scars of their creation.

Of the other artists, Merran Esson is the odd one out. As a ceramicist she was constrained to scratch about, sampling clays and making impressions of animal tracks. Her real work came later in the studio, where she completed a set of rough-and-ready pots.

Guy Warren and Margaret Ackland were both preoccupied with the ghosts or spirits of those who had lived in this arid region. While Warren incorporated those wraith-like forms into a very free rendition of the landscape, Ackland placed the figures from old photographs against a pitch-dark backdrop - one of the few attempts to capture the nocturnal atmosphere of the outback, free from the light pollution of the cities.

That leaves only Steve Lopes, who remains staunchly figurative, painting realistic figures in the landscape and studies of the detritus that accumulates around any settlement. His most fanciful and rather touching work is *Memory Painting for Sam Byrne*, which incorporates an imaginary portrait of the great naive painter of Broken Hill. One wonders what Byrne would have produced on an artists' excursion to Fowlers Gap.

It's not possible to draw any sweeping conclusions from *Not the Way Home*. It is a sampler of 13 approaches to the desert landscape, but there are no revelations in these works. Each artist has remained within the bounds of a personal sensibility, even when they have tried to extend those boundaries a little or set themselves a new challenge. Nevertheless, this is a very satisfying exhibition. The experience will probably have effects on some participants that will emerge only over time, and in a way that is barely conscious.

In a month when Danny Boyle's theatrical version of *Frankenstein* is screening in cinemas across Australia, a new show at the Art Gallery of NSW looks at the way we respond to those who have been deformed and injured by misguided scientific ambition.

In Mary Shelley's tale Frankenstein's monster is good-hearted but made bad by the treatment he receives from society.

In Simone Mangos's *Damaged: Thalidomide Victims in Medical Documents*, there is only the mistreatment, not the retribution. The show features portraits of the victims of the greatest pharmaceutical scandal of the 20th century - a drug that caused 10,000 cases of death or deformity in the early 1960s. In 10 stark, blue-tinged paintings, Mangos has reproduced the medical record photographs of children deformed irreparably because their mothers took thalidomide during the early stages of pregnancy.

She was shocked by the way the children were handled and exhibited, treated like objects rather than human beings. Mangos found herself compelled to paint these images, even though she is better known as a maker of conceptually based sculptures and installations. The results are more melancholy than confronting, imbued with sadness at the children's ordeal in front of the camera. In the artist's words, she has used the medium of oil on canvas to give these works a ''monumentality and weight not easily dismissed''.

One thinks of Jusepe de Ribera's famous portrait of Magdalena Ventura, the bearded woman, on permanent display in the Prado - an image that retains a greater force than all the photographs of such conditions subsequently taken by medical science.

Although the word ''thalidomide'' will always be infamous, today the drug has found a new use as a cancer treatment. Science has redeemed itself, or so it seems. But have social attitudes also changed? It would be good to believe that, 50 years on, we are no longer prepared to treat the victims of a reckless pharmaceutical industry as if they were the monsters.

**NOT THE WAY HOME: 13 ARTISTS PAINT THE DESERT**
**S.H. Ervin Gallery, until July 1**

**SIMONE MANGOS: DAMAGED - THALIDOMIDE VICTIMS IN MEDICAL DOCUMENTS**
**Art Gallery of NSW, until August 5**

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