



Ross Booker

Mapping landscape —
Central Australia

Woolloongabba
Art Gallery

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Mapping and unmapping

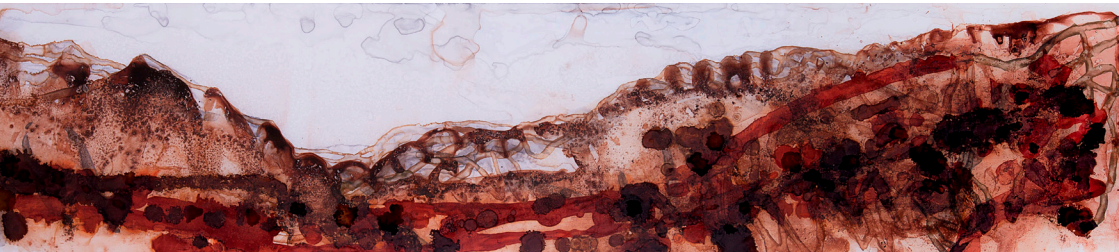
The landscape of Central Australia has been mapped in many ways. Aboriginal people have traversed this land for thousands of years and have mapped it through songlines, stories, painting and dance. Western insight into this mapping is relatively recent and Aboriginal names and descriptions for these places have lain beneath the overlay of European place names applied by explorers, surveyors and missionaries to honour their sponsors, families and prominent figures of the time.

I am familiar with the region in which Ross Booker has most recently worked through names such as the Finke River, Ormiston Gorge and the MacDonnell Ranges. But these aren't the names that Aboriginal people use to identify their country. Traditional Indigenous names are being restored to places all around Australia, the most well known, of course, being Uluru in place of Ayers Rock.

Through his abstracted landscapes, Booker 'unmaps' the European view of this land. Over a series of two to three-week visits to various sites, he has spent a total of around six months camping, walking, drawing and, most importantly, *being* in the landscape of central Australia. As the days of each visit unfold, he senses his European ways of seeing and understanding receding in his consciousness. He spends many hours walking; not point to point but intuitively, crisscrossing the land like a beetle that makes its tracks in the trunk of an old eucalypt.

This land is millions of years old. That sense of deep time is incomprehensible to me. The feeling is one of timelessness rather than of time that has passed. And yet this land is not static, it is constantly changing through climate, erosion and the seasons. By being still within this land, Booker observes the subtle changes within each day.

Booker doesn't attempt to create artworks when in this place, but rather makes studies with pencil and camera, to take an 'impression' of the land. Back in his studio in urban Australia, he finds that the greatest source for his artmaking is not these visual notes, but the echo or imprint that the land itself has left on his subconscious. Working intuitively with ink and brush in myriad tones of rust,



oxide and ochre, he works across his surfaces, building up layers of tone and intricate networks of line to suggest a mountain range here, the structure of a cliff face there. These landscapes do not record specific places but, rather, evoke the essence of the land that has inspired them. Booker's application of sand and pigments to their surfaces virtually returns these drawings to the rock forms from which they have mentally sprung.

Ross Booker's most recent series of works have been created on drafting film, an apt medium for his process of mapping the landscape of the mind. The translucency of this material has also enabled Booker to work on both sides of the film, a process that has enhanced the non-representational aspect of his works and has furthered their spontaneous and intuitive nature. The final image is sometimes as much a mystery to Booker as it is to his viewers.

These new works also mark a shift in format, to that of elongated vertical and horizontal landscapes. Booker's abstracted shafts and slivers of cliff, rock and earth create glimpses of the expanse of the central Australian landscape. They also suggest another non-European way of interpreting land, that of Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings. Booker draws inspiration from the brush and ink work of traditional floating landscapes as well as that of contemporary Asian artists. He reflects on a long tradition of mark making as an intuitive act.

There is something spiritual about Booker's works, an intangibility that is beyond a certain place or even a certain artist. Their humility allows us all to enter these mental landscapes, to meander through their valleys and to lose ourselves in their silence and their stillness. I may never travel out from Alice Springs for days on foot, but I have been given a glimpse into the beauty and the feeling of that place.

Clare Williamson 2015

Clare Williamson is an independent curator based in Melbourne.



Mapping landscape — Central Australia

The work in this exhibition is the result of many years spent camping, walking, and drawing in central Australia.

Initial impressions of the vastness of 'The Centre' are illusive, but over time, the landscape starts to imprint a map on your memory — a fabric of veins left by walking. The map is layered with sights and senses, and feelings not quite grasped — a weaving of the conscious and the unconscious.

There is both the afterimage of the landforms left on your retina, and a premonition of something primeval lying beneath. All this is smattered with red dirt laced with the palpable presence of history.

Stored within the map are the geological landmarks: patterned cliff faces, folding mountains, rocky spines, ochre pits, clay pans, and snaking river beds — embedded within a story that is millions of years old. My last camp was spent beside the Finke River, a 340 million year old artery deemed the oldest river in the world.

Dotted beside the tracks are the living and dying forms of the wildlife of these arid lands. The balance is so tenuous. After a good rain you can't help but call it a garden. But a few years of dry can soon bring the reality of survival to the fore — it all turns to dust.

The map catches the light — it describes the time of day. High noon bleaches everything to the bone. Dusk and dawn transmit a muted spectrum, quivering between nuances of the softest ochres to deep charcoal.

There is another layer that can only be revealed through listening to the sounds of the land and its stories. The more I hear, the more I am haunted by a melancholy that has seeped into the soil.

My work draws from this map — this sensory storehouse. The process is intuitive. I depict the country where I've walked, interpreting the annotated marks I have made — imbuing my work with impressions of things observed, drawn and remembered.

Ross Booker 2015

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