

# Recovering Roots ....

Belinda Allen & Christopher Lawrie

For this collaborative exhibition Belinda Allen and Christopher Lawrie have each in their own ways been exploring the landscapes and history of Australia, using historical books and texts as both lens and medium for this exploration. The exhibition aims to raise awareness of the way that personal narratives, memories and assumptions about the settlement and exploitation of Australia might inform and distort our understanding of Australia and its history.

*“Collective memory has recently emerged as a major focus of interdisciplinary research. This study is part of a growing body of literature exploring the social construction of collective memory, the relationship between history and memory, the role of commemorative narratives and rituals in contemporary social life, and their impact on the political sphere. It explores how a society of immigrants, engaged in constructing a distinct national identity and culture, recreated its roots in the past. These collective memories of recovered roots became a driving force for change and a means of articulating new values and ideas. In this process the new nation relied heavily on both history and tradition. By introducing a highly selective attitude to them, alternating between rejection and acceptance, suppression and elaboration, it has reconstructed a new national memory and tradition.”*

*Yael Zerubaval (1995) Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the making of Israeli National Tradition.*

## The Timeless Land

Belinda Allen

**The Timeless Land** presents photo-assemblages, named after a novel by Eleanor Dark. Contemporary landscape photographs are printed onto vintage book pages taken from classic Australian literature, and juxtaposed with texts from historical documents, to explore and critique the way that assumptions about the invasion, settlement and exploitation of our environment have informed and distorted our understanding of Australia and being Australian.

The landscape images have been taken by the artist in different locations around Australia, following the routes of early explorers. The selected novels and poetry represent seminal literature depicting archetypal and problematic Australian experiences: of convicts and overseers (*His Natural Life*), free settlers (*Australia Felix*), first-fleeters and displaced Aboriginal people (*The Timeless Land*), pioneers (*Bush Ballads*) and early multicultural and half-caste society (*Capricornia*). Other texts include extracts from explorer journals (*Eyre and Mitchell*), and newspaper articles. These help to illustrate how a quintessential Australian view grew out of imported European culture, but also raise questions of how imported assumptions about land and society constrained our vision for Australia and continue to limit our perspectives.

The dissonance between imported cultures and attitudes, and those of the land being invaded, often represented by the strangeness of the landscapes, led to feelings of alienation. The figure of the new Australian as ‘outsider’ is a strong theme - whether transported convicts, black-sheep settlers, or the purely restless and psychologically unstable. Rufus Dawes (*His Natural Life*) is presented as an individual who has no future either in the new land to which he is transported, or in his homeland of England where he has rejected the values of his father. Richard Mahony (*Australia Felix*) also is a ‘stranger in a strange land’, who obsessively travels to and fro between hemispheres and is unable to settle. Norman Shillingsworth in *Capricornia* is a half-caste who is in denial about his heritage and does not know how he fits into the European culture into which he has been inducted as a child.

The authors themselves lived ‘outsider’ lives - Marcus Clarke and Adam Gordon Lindsay were sent to Australia as young black sheep, and were short-lived. Handel Richardson struggled with her sexuality and lived most of her life in Europe, although she was obsessed with the Australian experience of her parents. Herbert sided with Australia’s aboriginal inhabitants against the white bureaucracy, and Dark lived a reclusive life and felt ostracised because of her and her husband’s left-wing politics. These experiences resulted in enormous empathy in their writings for the outsider perspective.

Concepts of measurement, of time and of property, were imported with European settlement, ending the ‘timeless land’ of the original inhabitants. All of the selected texts offer a view on how this

European concept influenced our perspectives of the land: as prison, as alien and threatening, as property and opportunity, as resource to be exploited, as a method to measure status and achievement. The mandala images, suggestive of symbols of eastern spirituality and gothic religious architecture, propose a more holistic and metaphysical relationship to land.

## The Futurist’s Dilemma ... (Collective Attrition)

Christopher Lawrie

**There is that point in life when a person might stop looking forward and start looking back . . . or not.**

**The Futurist’s Dilemma . . . (Collective Attrition)**, is a contemplation of both the personal and the collective attrition of memory, asking the questions: When is it that an artist realises that the only way forward involves a contemplation of the past? Is it a concept peculiar to an artist who is concerned with making artworks of historical and personal substance? Or is it a process that is common to every person at a certain stage of life, and every culture at a stage of socio-political development? As a person who at a later stage in life develops an interest in Genealogy, so for a culture to develop requires a process of owning, exploring and assimilating its own history – of discovering and recovering its roots.

The assemblages involve a range of physical and digital media, including vintage photographs and objects, fine art prints, books and book pages encrusted in salt, projected and digital images, and a website.

This exhibition continues ‘The History of Salt ...’, Christopher Lawrie’s series of works exploring family, history and immigration, begun almost two decades ago.

*“For Christopher Lawrie the corrosive nature of salt provides an aesthetic and cultural metaphor for the attrition of memory and a colonial past. His installations of works on paper utilise historical artifacts to form contexts for contemporary readings of the past.” Exhibition Catalogue - The History of Salt (2002)*

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