

# Artist Statement

Julie Gough

## Artworks

*Intertidal*, 2003, Canberra earth, Canberra grass juice, Hyde Park Sydney ochre, St Kilda pier sea washed charcoal, ground cuttlefish bone and chopped sea lettuce on board, dimensions 4 x 6 ft

*Murmur*, 2003, twined lomandra, variable dimensions

*Stronghold (cat's cradle)*, 2003, twined lomandra, black crow shells (*nerita atramentosa*), feathers, 4 x 6 x .3 ft

*Stronghold*, 2003, roped lomandra, variable dimensions

## An artist's synopsis of her own works - and the process

The works I created for <abstractions> were all partially inspired by my mobility over the two and a half years prior to the exhibition. From July 2001 to October 2003 I had been fortunately able to live in or travel to Mauritius, Rodrigues, Paris, NYC, Singapore, Texas, Utah and various parts of Australia.

These longterm travels commenced in July 2001, with a two month residency at Eddystone Lighthouse in North East Tasmania – my traditional homeland - also known as Tebrikunna to my maternal Trawlwoolway ancestors. This solo stay enabled me to experience country in a way that I had not before or since and it is to that residency that these works strongly refer materially and emotionally.

In July 2003 I relocated to Melbourne from Hobart to commence employment as a curator, Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Victoria. Prior to this I had been a lecturer in Aboriginal Studies at the University of Tasmania and before that an Interpretation Officer of Indigenous Culture at the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service whilst completing my studies at UTAS.

The invitation to participate in the ANU *Fusion across the Arts – Synergies* Symposium was most welcomed by me, and a long 2003 liaison with ANU commenced with my presentation on 10<sup>th</sup> April "*Still present currents*" which related my impossibility in differentiating between my life from my art practice because they are so bound together and they inform one another.

Mid year 2003 I returned to Canberra for a preliminary meeting with some of the artists and curators proposed for the <abstractions> exhibition. Nigel Lendon, Howard Morphy and Djon Mundine from the ANU School of Art and the ANU Centre for Cross Cultural Studies were the initial co-ordinators of the project. The artists and the curators working with each artist were/are (artist first/curator second (!)): Vernon Ah Kee and Mary Eagle, Julie Gough and Nigel Lendon, Djambawa Marawili and Howard Morphy, Wanyubi Marika and Howard Morphy,

Phaptawan Suwannakudt and Christine Clark, Savanhdary Vongpoothorn and Mandy Thomas, Ruth Watson and Gordon Bull, Constanze Zikos and Nikos Papastergiadis.

At that early stage the exhibition title <abstractions> was proposed to the artists, and I myself felt some trepidation that this word did not relate at all to my own practice and hence I felt that knowledge/control/decisions and outcomes? were being exercised and determined outside of my realm. I felt uncertain about my own position and my own work's relevance in the group of artists, none of whom I had met before, and amidst whom I found myself in a large room sited upon a circle of chairs.

It was a meeting of uncertainty where I sensed that we had too little time allocated to discuss matters and to get to know one another. Thus, the meeting felt rather like a surreal psychoanalytical or counselling appointment with an added anthropological edge due to the lurking presence of deftly handled video and recording equipment. Interestingly, the meeting of people of so many diverse cultures around that room became the key unifying element of the day and of the project.

There was an awkward, uncertainty and newness to the project and that preliminary meeting which (for me) proved alienating and a debilitating start to an interesting proposition of a program – and it was at this point, this disjuncture of who, why and what was being proposed, organised, predetermined or potentially organic and fluid that Djon Mundine drifted away from participating fully in the project.

It seemed that the potential for genuine exploration of fresh notions of interaction and engagement between artists, curators, cultures was proving too difficult to deliberate and engage with as newcomers and co-strangers at the very beginning of the project. It certainly felt like a shaky start to me – but the artists themselves wanted to explore the terrain, the potential to work in new ways together – so we gave our agreement to proceed and contribute and make work for the exhibition - and so it originated and moved forward.

During that preliminary meeting between everyone able to visit Canberra I perceived the diversity of gender and culture in the room to be very potent factors that made me wonder constantly not only how I was receiving the meeting of these many artists and curators, but how the others around me were digesting our time together in the room. I wanted to know more about everyone and their practice and how we somehow were selected to be together in this cross-cultural studies/art life experience, but awkwardly, simultaneously I felt fairly uncertain about what exactly I was feeling.

I remember trying to assert my concerns about the tentative blanket title <abstractions> proposed for the exhibition and accidentally noticing that one curator nearby jotted whilst I spoke in a note book that *Julie Gough was concerned about the title "Abstractions"*. It was a very strange experience, a bit surreal, but not disturbing enough to make me want to leave the composite team - a kind of *this is Australia* model that we were being (for the most part) willingly assembled into.

The result of this quite edgy, uncertain and even confrontational first key experience between the <abstractions> group was to be an exhibition revealing a very exciting range of works and curatorial perspectives and engagements with and between works from all corners of Australia – but essentially each artist and their own curator worked (I sense) very much in isolation due to the nature of busy lives in institutional urban sprawls that most of us were/are negotiating. Initial grand plans eventually revealed and reconfigured themselves to be workable only as a slightly sideways alternative to a regular group exhibition.

Regardless, the entirety of the <abstractions> experience was invaluable in providing new understandings about what aspects did or didn't 'work' in developing such new cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary projects upon untrammelled ground - and outcomes and experiences were unpredictable right up to the opening of the exhibition.

I am not sure how I came to be allocated to Nigel Lendon or me to him in the artist/curator experiment – regardless, for the duration of <abstractions> (until November 2003) he and his family were entirely supportive in this endeavour in all manner of communications, that included transportation, billeting, meals and ensuring that all materials and equipment were on hand for the making and installation of my work for this exhibition.

Hence, on the personal level of participating in a group exhibition there certainly was more assistance offered to me than for a 'regular' model of a group exhibition, in particular en site in Canberra during the installation sector of the project.

After the initial intensive day meeting of those to be involved in <abstractions> Nigel and I intermittently emailed, me to eventually provide information about my proposed works – which, alarmingly to me, and possibly also to Nigel, were determined as needing to be mostly made en site from materials collected from nature over weeks to hours before the work was created.

Over the two months prior to my return (and prior to all the artists return to Canberra - except Ruth who lives there at present) I realised that my work – thought not abstract in content ever, nor appearance generally, would be, in fact, in this instance, for this exhibition, apparently, fortuitously? "abstract".

## **The Development of the Artworks**

Usually narrative-based – my relocation/dislocation to Melbourne and the prior two years or unsettled living had directed my practice into this series of works that were less bound than usual by settings of place, time or national stories.

Instead, I had responded to a growing visceral need to work materially and sensorially with materials from my travels and materials familiar to/from my home country – I was keen not to predetermine exact results but let the space itself and my own response to that be a new way of working that I could practice as an opportunity particular and resonant to this exhibition.

Late September 2003 saw my return to the ANU Drill Hall to install the works for the group

exhibition now definitively called <abstractions> that was to open from 2 October to the 9 November 2003. My four works; titled "*Intertidal*", "*Stronghold (cat's cradle)*", "*Stronghold*" and "*Murmur*" were all created, but for "*Stronghold*", in the gallery space in the week prior to the opening.

## **Stronghold (Cat's Cradle)**

I was presented a large entry space which incorporated two corners that I had specified a requirement well in advance. It was a matter of working quickly to hand twine plant materials – Lomandra – into 35 feet of string onto which were periodically twined small black shells "*Black crows*" (*nerita atramentosa*) and also some feather down. This work had commenced in Melbourne and wound its way down to Canberra via Sydney where my fingers kept on twining the plant despite becoming quite swollen from the intensity of the process. This work was titled *Stronghold (Cat's cradle)* and is an expression of ongoing, personal connection to culture.

In making this work I strongly wished to express that even whilst living a modern and mobile existence one carries the meanings, the communicative aspects of culture regardless of location or luggage. This work visually appears to resemble a gate or a flag – but it is also a rendition of the cat's cradle international children's string game. The shells spaced along the length of the endless twine are a reminder also of my Tasmanian culture and attachment, in particular, to the coast of that island. Also, crows are also personally very significant, and were also the names given to Aboriginal people by some early white settlers, in particular when referring in code to how many they had shot in a day, how many 'crows' were disposed of..

During the twining of the work I realised that I had not brought enough lomandra with me and Nancy at the Drill Hall drove me after hours to an outcrop of the plant. Nancy was also responsible for providing fantastically nourishing food during the installation period – which was an invaluable incentive for all day non-stop continual installation and making processes to occur.

## **Stronghold**

The other "*stronghold*" art work exhibited in <abstractions> is a larger rendition of the twined string work. This version is comprised of twined lomandra that form three ropes which meet in a knot in the middle of a corner installed space. The ropes also have knots running up their lengths to denote they are climbing ropes. This work is also about connections to culture that persist in particular ways, for example, this work is about webs of interconnection that are sometimes almost imperceptible in form or in their particular relation to culture. The knots and joins in this work refer to connections across space and time that ensure culture endures in dire times.

## **Murmur**

The third twined lomandra plant string work exhibited in <abstractions> is called "*Murmur*" and this consists of a series of tiny twined plant strings that emerge from the corner wall opposite to the work "*Stronghold*". *Murmur* is an almost musical response to space and is less

about containment and holding fast and firm to components of culture than referring to the inherent joy of self expression. Little stringlets emerge from holes in the corner wall to advance in a pattern and then dissipate further along the wall. This work is a much more personal self-expression of making instinctively and installing the work intuitively rather than a tightly planned endeavour.

## **Intertidal**

The final work of four pieces that I created for <abstractions> was the most uncertain in its materiality and final composition. This is *Intertidal* – a large painting on board of pigments derived from the sea and earth in the weeks and hours prior to its making. There is an element of the uncanny in this work. The name *Intertidal* came to me out of the ether – as with the other titles and their approximate semi-planned visual outcomes.

I provided dimensions to Nigel Lendon of the acrylic sized board required by me to be made at ANU upon which I would apply the various mediums, half of which I would bring with me. *Intertidal* is a painting reflecting my current state of flux, movement and in-between-ness. The title expresses my being at this time. Neither earth nor water bound.

When I arrived in Canberra to continue creating the works (twining, crushing cuttlefish and charcoal) and commence installing them I enquired about Howard Morphy and was told that he was away up at Blue Mud Bay in Arnhem Land working on Intertidal zones with local owners of the country. I felt a little faint upon hearing this news ! The work *Intertidal* is a series of wide parallel linear striations formed by the horizontal application across the surface of the materials *Canberra earth, Canberra grass juice, Hyde Park Sydney ochre, St Kilda pier sea washed charcoal, ground cuttlefish bone and sea lettuce.*

These mediums provide a range of colours and textures including grass green, red ochre, yellow ochre, creamy white ground cuttlefish bone and charcoal black. The work is also physically representative of a continuing state of flux in that the bright green [now dried] grass juice has metamorphosed into a tan colour due to oxidisation and this sense of flux parallels the reason that the work was made – to represent my own mobility and sense of change at this stage of my life.

I worked rapidly with these mediums and found myself enjoying the physicality of creating and installing these works in the gallery space amidst the increasingly fervent and demonstrative activities of myself, other artists, curators working steadily on their works. Ruth Watson was in the adjacent space creating her own world whilst Vernon Ah Kee's work gave a linguistic perspective with verve at the perimeter by suggesting that *approach* – whether alliterative [or physical in Ruth's instance] is a key way of understanding the worlds we are born into and tend to henceforth unwittingly occupy.

Particular mention must be made of the team of committed and friendly researchers/postgrads from the CCR in particular, Ursula, Katie, Celia and others including the great installation crew at the Drill Hall who were equally involved in this project and who were [by the installation stage

of the process] seasoned hands with video and recording equipment. Relentless, they followed me into my makeshift 'studio' in the ladies toilets of the Drill Hall where I was busily pulverising cuttlefish bone and grass juice – with the aid of a blender that Nigel Lendon had procured and then a second one he replaced it with after the first one unceremoniously protested and then stopped dead. I still insist that grass clippings *should* be able to be blended as easily as any other vegetable matter..

The opening event of <abstractions> was as diverse, multi-sensorial and multi-disciplinary as had been the entire project. Opened by Doreen Mellor in conjunction with live classical music, quite a crowd intercepted the works and I witnessed the sense of anticipation and then liberation engulfing the gallery as people determined their own paths through the stories, versions, materialities and responses of each artist. There was a distinctive element in this exhibition of encouraging the public to personally engage with and experience for themselves the relationship between works and artists' ways of creating and installing that was refreshingly beyond constraints of culture. I also could not help but approach my own installed pieces in light of how they related to the entire exhibition and in particular the neighbouring works.

A broad range of work was exhibited in <abstractions> and I interpreted these dynamic engagements as mapping the scope of artistic individuality at work across this country. An initial concern, quickly dispelled during the opening minutes of the exhibition was that our respective cultures would be somehow highlighted as key means of engaging with each work and each artist and that as a result each artist could inadvertently have been suffocated into parodying a typecast representative of their own culture and its artistic production. Fortunately this did not prove to be the case.

There has not yet been time to debrief after the experience of <abstractions> and for all involved to share notes and work out what actually happened.

I sense that I did not take full 'advantage' of such a fantastic opportunity to communicate well or in an ongoing relationship (to date) with the other artists involved and I actually felt and feel pretty shy and daunted by the amazing group of artists and curators and people generally across campus that I was suddenly part of. I was intensively focussed on creating and installing the work – and then, suddenly, it was over ! - Hopefully there is scope for us to engage again. I am sure to meet with the artists again individually throughout life - and will then make up for lost time !

Julie Gough  
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