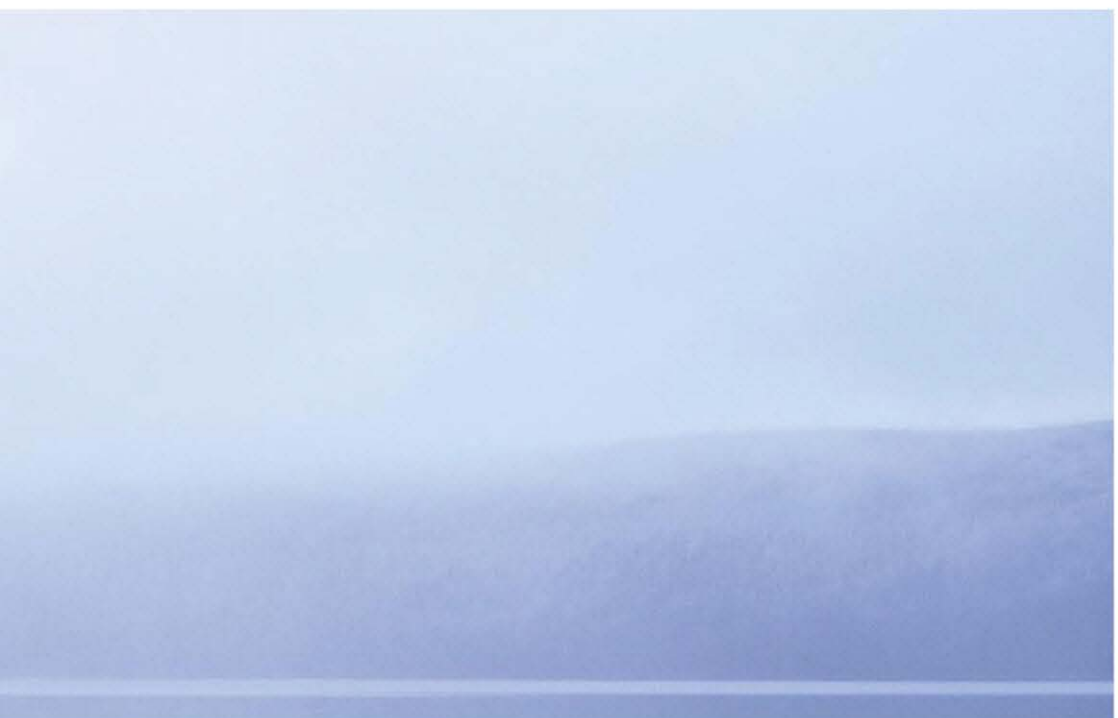


TASMANIAN WILDERNESS RESIDENCIES EXHIBITION

isolation solitude



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*Presented by Salamanca Arts Centre
and supported by Arts Tasmania*

Salamanca Arts Centre has presented a major curated exhibition as part of the annual arts program since 2001. This year's major exhibition for the 10 Days on the Island arts festival, ***isolation solitude*** TASMANIAN WILDERNESS RESIDENCIES, has as curator 19 participating artists rather than one individual. The exhibited work represents their self-selected diverse responses to individual residencies in lighthouses, in forests, near lakes, on islands, in mine-scapes. These were times of contemplation and imagination, isolation and solitude.

The exhibition was conceived by Telford Rigg and the parameters were developed and agreed by the Artists Reference Group: Martin Walch, Denise Ava Robinson, Telford Rigg, Julie Gough, Anthony Curtis and Christl Berg. The project was coordinated by Colin Langridge and, in his catalogue essay, Peter Timms has provided a thoughtful introduction to the ideas and approaches of the artists. Michael Edwards of CAST and Mary Knights, formerly Cultural Development Officer for Hobart City Council, provided advice to Telford Rigg in the early stages of exhibition development.

Salamanca Arts Centre thanks the artists, the Artists Reference Group, the Exhibition Coordinator and the catalogue essay author for their contributions to ***isolation solitude***, and the Government of Tasmania through Arts Tasmania and Parks and Wildlife for developing and supporting the ongoing residencies program which connects Tasmania's artists with their island/s which, through them, links us to new ways of seeing and experiencing them.


Many of the artists in ***isolation solitude*** are deeply engaged in questioning concepts of wilderness and ask you, the viewer, to consider this as you experience their work. Does the work reflect or question romantic or gothic ways of seeing? Is there a place for the stark assaulted landscape as wilderness, mined of vegetation and mineral wealth, asserting its own breath-taking beauty?

This exhibition poses the question "what is wilderness?" Is it a pre-conception, an affirmation, a physical location, a critique, a place of the imagination or an experience of isolation and solitude? The answer rests with you.

Rosemary Miller
Director
Salamanca Arts Centre



Anthony Curtis
Ben Booth
Christl Berg
Denise Ava Robinson
Harry Atkinson
Jenny Burnett
John Lendis
Julie Gough
Kim Kerze
Maria MacDermott
Martin Walch
Michael Schlitz
Peter Gouldthorpe
Philip Wolfhagen
Ron Nagorka
Telford Rigg
Tim Burns
Tim Pugh
Veronica Steane



Ice lay thick on the windowsills the night Tim Pugh arrived to take up his wilderness residency at Lake St Clair. His first priority was warmth. Unfortunately, having cut some wood, he couldn't get it to burn and had to phone his grandmother back home in Wales for some fire-lighting instructions. It's a story that Pugh cheerfully tells against himself, shrewdly raising the question of what we think wilderness is, now that distance and danger have been all but eliminated. In 1912, Robert Scott and his party all died of illness, hunger and hypothermia during an horrific expedition to the South Pole. These days, grandmothers go there on jetskis just for a lark.

Paradoxically, when asked what he enjoyed most about his wilderness experience at Eddystone Point, a windswept promontory on Tasmania's north-east coast, Ron Nagorcka mentions the opportunities it gave him to socialise with other people, since this popular tourism and fishing spot is much less remote than the place he lives in. Veronica Steane, too, found her two months in a Parks and Wildlife shack at Rocky Cape in the north-west delightfully comfortable in comparison to the deprivations she usually experiences during long bush walks.

This is not to decry the excellent Arts Tasmania Natural and Cultural Residencies Program, just to point out that wilderness means different things to different people at different times: it's entirely relative.


For some of these artists, two months alone in a bush shack in winter provided a valuable opportunity just to look and think: "a lot of quiet time sitting on the Jason Recliner", as Ben Booth so laconically puts it. For John Lendis, it meant staring for hours at the surface of the Gordon River, "... endlessly lost, moving between abstraction and realism, imagination and the world".

For others - Kim Kerze, Christl Berg and Julie Gough among them - it was a time of intense exploratory activity. And, in at least one case, the experience proved to be literally life-changing. On the completion of her time at Eddystone Point in 2003, Denise Robinson threw in her day-job and went off to live on the remote north coast. The residency, she says, "reminded me of what's real and what matters".

It is I think revealing that, in both what they say about their residencies and in the works they have created in response, many of these artists extol the virtues of absences: no noise, no crowds, no distracting modern technologies or dulling routines. By this reckoning, wilderness is wherever we feel we can "get away from it all". It's a way of recharging our senses and re-ordering our priorities, in the expectation that this will make us better people on our return to daily life.

Paradoxically, this conception of wilderness as a place of solace is largely a product of urbanisation and industrialisation. Only in a complex civilization can we enjoy the luxury of removing ourselves to an isolated place to think, write and make works of art without having to devote our energies to wresting a living from the land.

The word 'wilderness' has done a complete about-face. Once it meant a fearful place, where wild animals dwelt and people dared not go. We may still use it in that negative sense today to describe a desolate shopping-mall carpark or a maze of city streets. Usually, however, wilderness now refers to a place of natural tranquility, a refuge from the pressures of modern life. Such a reversal of meaning has come about because we now feel nature to be our friend rather than a threat. (Surely one motivation behind the extraordinary response to last December's Indian Ocean tsunami was that it dramatically upset that assumption, awakening in all of us primordial fears of nature triumphant. In a metaphorical sense, the zealots who claimed that the tsunami was a warning from God may have been closer to the mark than many of us care to admit.)



This doesn't mean that a 'wilderness experience' is any less authentic now than it was in the past, only that it is different in kind and serves a different purpose. Essentially, I would suggest, it serves an important symbolic function. It is an exercise in objectifying, or 'bracketing off', our experiences of technological existence: of putting aside, for a time, the artefacts and constructs that control our lives so as to see them in a clearer light. The aim, as the philosopher Erazim Kohák points out, is not to abolish or devalue technology, but "to see through it to the human meaning which justifies it and directs its use". Only by this means can we put our lives into some sort of moral framework.

In order to lead 'normal lives' - that is, to live in houses, to drive cars, to earn the money with which to buy goods and services - we must, to some extent, dehumanise the world, to see ourselves as separate from the rest of creation, as cogs in a human-made system. We might not like it, but it is necessary. The more ruthless that dehumanising process is, the less problematic the exploitation of nature and other people becomes. Descartes started the ball rolling in the seventeenth century when he supposedly proved that animals had no souls, thus conveniently removing any moral constraints on the way they were treated. The price of unbridled utilitarianism, however, is profound alienation, a sense of being strangers in an absurd and pointless world. Life becomes no more than an endless cycle of production and consumption.

Since Tim Pugh made a point of recounting the incident, I would like to think that he discovered something important about values on that first night at Lake St Clair. While the phonecall to his grandmother on the other side of the world served a useful purpose, the technology it involved held no intrinsic value for him, since the services he was relying upon were not the result of his own efforts. They were supplied on demand by unknown and unacknowledged people a long way off. The fire in the wood heater, on the other hand, was a direct result of his labours. It was not an abstraction, but connected and intimate, demanding a measure of personal accountability. The wood heater is still a form of technology, of course, but one which, unlike the mobile phone, the computer or the television, lets us see through the artificial layers of human constructs that usually conceal the meaning of our acts. According to Kohák, then, the purpose of retreating into nature for a short time is to distance ourselves from the works of technology in order to rediscover their forgotten meanings.


In certain religions - Taoism, Shintoism, some Buddhist sects and traditional Aboriginal cosmologies, for example - animals, plants and even rocks and rivers are thought to have a spirit which guards their interests. So before you kill a kangaroo or cut down a tree or ford a stream you must contact the appropriate spirit and ask permission or forgiveness. It is a way of instilling into individuals a proper appreciation of the impact of their actions, which is, in other words, a way of ensuring they remain fully human.

Those spirits, along with many of the plants and animals they protected, are now extinct, and we are the poorer for it, for we have lost any guiding sense of responsibility. If we are not to follow them into oblivion, we must find other ways of constructing a moral sense of nature, of reconnecting with the world from which we, as a species, have so effectively alienated ourselves.

This, surely, is what these artists are trying to do, each according to his or her own distinctive sensibility: to reinvent the nature spirits in forms that are understandable to a modern world in which destruction has been objectified and mechanised to an unprecedented degree, and thus to awaken us to the full weight of what we are doing to the natural environment.

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Peter Timms is a writer living in Hobart. He is the author of several books, including *Making Nature: six walks in the bush* and *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?*



Julie Gough



Staying alone in the north east of Tasmania at Eddystone Lighthouse on a wilderness residency mid 2001 changed my life. The tempo of the outside world gradually became muffled and eventually silenced by the life force and direction of the place of my maternal ancestors. I wasn't sure by the end of my stay that I would be able to leave and reside elsewhere. Even though I have lived, worked and travelled far and wide since then it is with a surety that I am different since my time up in the north east. I have left something of myself there that I will retrace and reclaim one day and something of that place, something that makes me who I am at my core was properly switched on, triggered during my stay. My life outside of the north east now seems borrowed time in borrowed places amidst borrowed stories in borrowed languages that don't live inside me as does the wholeness of being whilst in that big-time corner of Tasmania.

Artwork: *Intertidal Drift* 1100mm x 820mm mixed media on canvas
Intertidal Zone mixed media installation
Resignation 1169mm x 821mm inkjet print on canvas

Salamanca Arts Centre Inc. supports arts activities across all disciplines in its historic Georgian buildings on Hobart's waterfront. The Arts Centre facilitates the contemporary arts practice of resident artists and arts organisations. A primary focus for arts activities in Tasmania, Salamanca Arts Centre's influence reaches beyond the shores of the island via the presentation of local, national and international cultural experiences in its galleries, theatre, public spaces and in partnership with other cultural bodies, across Tasmania and nationally.

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