

The corporeal and spiritual connection that we have with place *Heartland*: emotion, spirit, resilience and originality

Broadsheet editor Alan Cruickshank, and assistant editor Wendy Walker, discuss with Art Gallery of South Australia project curator Lisa Slade, her exhibition of South Australian artists *Heartland* (co-curated by Nici Cumpston)

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: The Art Gallery of South Australia's history of presentation of contemporary South Australian artist exhibitions of magnitude and substance over the past decade (and more) has been limited. Discounting annual SALA Festival presentations as inapropos, *Chemistry: Art in South Australia 1990-2000* was presented in 2000 (from the Collection), and surveys of Hossein Valamanesh and Anna Platten were presented in 2001 and 2012 respectively. *Heartland*, in presenting "the distinct visions of contemporary artists... in response to the state of South Australia" has as its genesis "an attempt to articulate the corporeal and spiritual connection that we have with place", has all the appearance of a very 'South Australian' concept with its focus on "land", "heart", "spirit", qualities seemingly quite abstracted in the self-absorption of the urban rush of the city—and why this, given the broad domestic panorama of universal ideas that has not been engaged over time by such major domestic AGSA presentations?

LISA SLADE: I'm fascinated to hear that you feel "land", "heart" and "spirit" are particularly South Australian concerns. I believe that these qualities preoccupy many Australians, both indigenous and non-indigenous; those living in the bush or city or in the interstices. I also think these qualities have underpinned other exhibitions, both from the Art Gallery of South Australia—the surveys of artists Antony Hamilton (1984) and Hossein Valamanesh, and the more recent *Desert Country* (2011), curated by *Heartland* co-curator Nici Cumpston, spring to mind, but also many exhibitions interstate.

The fifty artists included in *Heartland*¹ all have a relationship with South Australia on some level, many have always lived and made art here while for others such as Kate Breakey, Stewart MacFarlane and even Yhonnie Scarce, their experiences in South Australia represent the crucible of their art making practice. Some have drawn on recent experiences and the role of the residency emerges as a pivotal one. Yhonnie Scarce for instance participated in the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal artists' residency at the University of Virginia and her experiences working in their glass studio became the fulcrum for her *Heartland* work. The provision of artist's fees enabled many of the artists to make new work. With Ian North and Wendy Fairclough existing works have been brought together for exhibition for the first time in South Australia.



The AGSA's presentation of contemporary art has been transformed by Director Nick Mitzevich and his passionate engagement with the art of our time has changed our working practices. In curating this exhibition, Nici Cumpston and I were responding to recent exhibitions of South Australian contemporary art, including *CACSA Contemporary 2010: The New New* in 2010, an exhibition of magnitude and substance with a constellation of twelve venues showcasing the work of forty four artists, and the return of *CACSA Contemporary 2012: New South Australian Art*, albeit on a much smaller scale in 2012.

BROADSHEET/WENDY WALKER: The fact that the AGSA has staged few exhibitions of specifically South Australian contemporary art has often been the subject of extended discussion. Solo survey shows aside, the last major exhibition was *Chemistry: Art in South Australia 1990-2000* as stated above. Three of the artists from *Chemistry* are also featured in *Heartland* (James Darling, Angela Valamanesh and Hossein Valamanesh). The selection of artists in *Heartland* seems highly eclectic, the result (I surmise) of your curatorial resolve to "traverse media, age, gender and culture". What connects all these artists to the central premise of the exhibition?

LISA SLADE: *Heartland* is not posited on a single principle or argument. To extend the 'heart' metaphor, the conceptual linkages between works of art are arterial and the downstairs temporary exhibition spaces are conceived as chambers through which connections (made by the beholder) flow. *Heartland* offers an embodied experience, one where sound is employed in the work of James Darling and Lesley Forwood (through a collaboration with sound artist Philip Samartzis), in the moving image work by Angela Valamanesh and Hossein Valamanesh with their son Nassiem, and in the installation by Tjala artists from Amata in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands. Furthermore, the beholder is



actively engaged in making the work with artist Annalise Rees who creates a provisional space for the viewer to become maker. The fifty artists reach across generations and cultures. Amy Joy Watson, being one of the youngest artists, has a studio at the artist-run-initiative Fontanelle. On a material level, I can't imagine any selection of contemporary artists being anything other than eclectic, given the myriad practices with which contemporary artists engage. Having said this, there are points of convergence across the exhibition—these include an engagement with nature (an arboreal motif recurs through *Heartland* and has been selected in the graphic treatment for the exhibition) and an interest in object-based installation. My impression of South Australian contemporary art before moving to Adelaide was that there is a strong spatial practice here and an experimental approach to materials.

BROADSHEET/WENDY WALKER: Having stated that art from Amata in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands—the ancestral heart of this country—occupies the centre of the exhibition, you add that the “aspirations and enthusiasm of the Tjala artists extended [your] curatorial ambition”. Can you elaborate on this?

LISA SLADE: Art from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands was always going to be included in the exhibition—the art centres in the South Australia's north-west are home to some of the State's most exciting practitioners and recent exhibitions like *Desert Country* had presented an overview of the burgeoning community art centres. The initial funding application included the work of Hector Burton from Amata who was, at the time of writing, initiating along with other senior cultural law men and women some fascinating curatorial projects. These projects involved

many Tjala artists (men and women) and brought together painting and sculpture. Initially, we considered selecting exemplary work from across the APY for inclusion in *Heartland*, but after visiting Amata and meeting so many artists who were interested in being involved across myriad art forms, we decided to work closely with one community and to engage them actively in curating their own component of the exhibition. The outcome of this relationship includes an installation comprising painting, photography, video and sculpture, but also language and song. While we were in Amata in 2012, Wawiriya Burton started painting *Ngayuku Ngura* (*My Country*). Sitting in the centre of the painting, she worked centrifugally, as many desert painters do, and the work emerged as a type of arterial map containing the heartlines of her country. This work has become a type of curatorial talisman. The exhibition title is now part of Anangu parlance and is referred to in the art centre as *Ngura Kurunitja* (translated as “heart and soul of the country” in Pitjantjatjara). We see the use of Pitjantjatjara as an integral aspect of the Tjala component of the exhibition and have included it wherever possible. To do this is to honour the country's true heartland.

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: “Heart land”, while suggesting “many things to many people”, in this instance “connecting the heart and the land”, might also be viewed as the greater urban realm, Sydney's western suburbs for example (with a population twice that of Adelaide), or Adelaide's 80km suburban sprawl from Aldinga Bay in the south to Two Wells in the north. In Singapore the government constantly refers to its “heartland” when addressing its *suburban* constituents who occupy an area the size of greater Sydney. Apart from a small number of urban artists, “heartland” here seems to have more of a connection with the rural in “place”, at least demonstrated by the domiciles of the majority of artists.





Page 129: Ian North, *Felicia 22 (Yorke Peninsula)*, 1976

Photo courtesy the artist

Page 130: James Darling, Lesley Forwood, *Country* (detail), 2011

Photo courtesy the artists and Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide

Page 131: Paul Sloan, *Untitled*, 2012

Photo courtesy the artist and Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide

Opposite: Paul Sloan, *Planet Caravan*, 2013

Photo courtesy the artist and Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide

Right: Angela Valamanesh, Hossein Valamanesh + Nassiem Valamanesh, *What Remains?* (video still), 2012

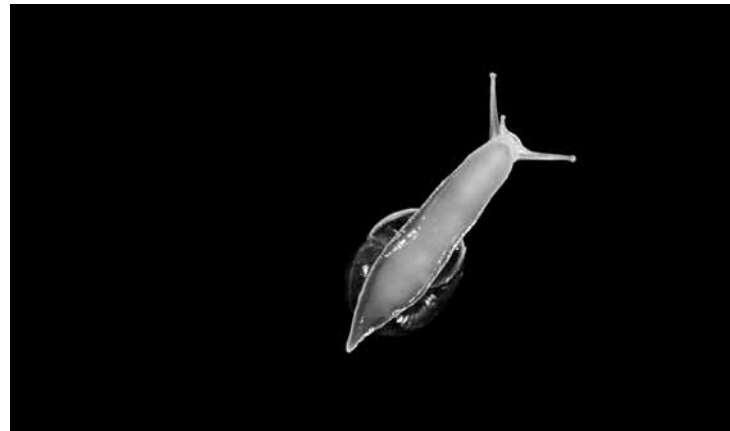
Photo courtesy the artists, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide and BREENSPACE, Sydney

LISA SLADE: We liked the suggestive connotations of *Heartland*—its frequent use to describe for instance, places like western Sydney, home to around ten percent of the nation's population and as such, a political tipping point. The word is also frequently used in the United States of America to describe a concentration of values and beliefs, and often carrying the connotations of a hermetically sealed society—even one that is insular or self interested. We like the provocation of this—it speaks to the contradictions inherent in the state—closest in many ways to the heart of the country and yet isolated from east coast concerns. Of course the word's semantic offerings (containing other words like heart, land, hear and art, opening up like a series of Russian dolls) enchanted us. *Heartland* offered a nomenclature for bringing together a range of practitioners and for engaging broad audiences, in asking them to consider or reflect upon their own heartland. Not tethered to landscape, many of the artists reside in Adelaide (reflecting the State's demography) but their work engages with locations or experiences beyond the city. We would like to think that the term has equal appeal for city, suburban or rural audiences. The ocean finds its way into the exhibition too with the large installation of coralline pelts, printed by Fleurieu Coast artist Chris De Rosa.

BROADSHEET/WENDY WALKER: You begin your catalogue essay for *Heartland* with a discussion of the various implications—semantic and otherwise—conveyed by the exhibition's title giving the impression that the written component of an exhibition is important to you. The catalogue, which accompanied the 2012 *Adelaide Biennial Of Australian Art: Parallel Collisions* included contributions from an author, a poet, academics, art writers, curators and artists. What has been your strategy with the texts for *Heartland* and the importance of the catalogue within the overall project?

LISA SLADE: The catalogue is another arm of the project, one that will hopefully reach audiences who haven't had the opportunity to experience the exhibition. Both Nici Cumpston and I value the art of writing and wanted to find a place for this in *Heartland*. Inviting authors located in South Australia and beyond to engage with artists has been an exceedingly rewarding aspect of the project. Many of the writers, such as John Kean, Gerry Wedd, Nicolas Jose, Domenico de Clario and Frank Young for instance, bring their sense of this place (their experience of South Australia) to their writing. They also bring a panoply of possibilities for art writing—art writing as social action, poetry or personal memoir. The art of introducing artists to writers is something we, as curators, hold in high value—in some instances the artists and writers were well acquainted (Stewart MacFarlane and Nicholas Jose attended school together in Adelaide in the 1970s) but in other cases (Kim Buck and John Kean) we were able to incite a relationship of mutual benefit.

BROADSHEET/WENDY WALKER: With the staging in Sydney of John Kaldor's *13 Rooms*, performance art has become newsworthy. In an interview with Kaldor, Museum of Contemporary Art Director Elizabeth Ann McGregor noted the growing number of younger Australian artists drawn to performance art. It was interesting that curators Hans Ulrich Olbrist and Klaus Biesenbach did not include well-known Australian performance artists in *13 Rooms*, choosing instead the young and relatively unknown duo Clark Beaumont from Brisbane. Did you consider performance art (either live or as moving image) as part of *Heartland*, as there are a number of such artists in Adelaide?



LISA SLADE: Personally I don't see this as a recent development. Australian artists have always been drawn to performance art and perhaps the spatio-temporal and its relationship to the body reflects an Australian sensibility? In *Heartland* there are several works that engage both the body of the artist and the body of the viewer. All of the work has a performative dimension and this of course extends to the curatorial process. For each of the works by the Tjala artists, there is of course *inma* (ceremonial performance) involved and it is not uncommon for the artists to sing and dance their work into the exhibition space. The most monumental work *River to Ocean* by James Darling and Lesley Forwood certainly has a performative aspect, captured via time lapse photography, of the artists and their family recreating the mouth of the Murray and its surrounding topography (including the Coorong) in mallee roots, sand and salt. We have attempted to reframe the traditional static mode of exhibition making to include temporary and temporal components both in the exhibition and in the public programs, all of which are free to the public to maximise participation.

BROADSHEET/WENDY WALKER: Since there are many South Australian artists of substance not included in *Heartland*, is it likely to be the first in a projected series of exhibitions of similar magnitude?

LISA SLADE: We made a conscious choice not to include the artists selected for other exhibitions funded through the same source.² Many of these artists and more were on our long list and we will be keeping a close eye on their development. We would love *Heartland* to be the first of many such exhibitions. The source through which the exhibition has been funded unfortunately no longer exists. Without additional support, it is unlikely that the AGSA will be able to stage in the near future an exhibition of this scale that supports the creation of new work. Of course the AGSA will continue to champion the art of the State—Nick Mitzevich is committed to contemporary art—visitors will continue to experience South Australian art alongside national and international contemporary art.

Notes

¹ The artists are Kate Breakey, Kim Buck, James Darling and Lesley Forwood, Wendy Fairclough,

Stewart MacFarlane, Ian North, Annalise Rees, Chris De Rosa, Yhonnice Scarce, Paul Sloan,

Angela Valamanesh, Hossein Valamanesh, Amy Joy Watson; Tjala artists from Amata—Hector Burton,

Steven Burton, Wawiriya Burton, Unrupa Rhonda Dick, Maureen Douglas, Ronnie Douglas, Willy Kaika,

Nyurpaya Kaika-Burton, Tjampawa Katie Kawiny, Anistene Ken, Frida Ken, Ilawanti Ungkutjuru Ken,

Ray Ken, Sandra Ken, Senena Ken, Sylvia Ken, Tjungkara Ken, Rene Kulitja, Paniny Mick, Barbara Moore,

Mary Pan, Kukika Tiger, Rini Tiger, Kantanari Nancy Tjilya, Mick Wikilyiri, Nita Williamson, Ruby Williamson,

Susan Williamson, Stanley Windy, Yaritji Young; and artists from Ernabella—Niningka Lewis and

Tjunkaya Tapaya

² Arts SA's now defunct New Exhibitions Funding category; those exhibitions being *Tough(er) Love*, curated by John Neylon and *Crystal Palace* curated by Lisa Harms for Flinders University Art Museum