Our Ground:
A Study of Artmaking and Landscape in Mildura

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I certify that the thesis entitled

OUR GROUND: A STUDY OF ART MAKING AND LANDSCAPE IN MILDURA

submitted for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis in whole or in part has not been submitted for an award, including a higher degree, to any other university or institution.

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Frontispiece is a detail of painting by Peter Peterson, The Spirit of the Road, 1994.

"Thank you to these people, and thank you to the five artists, Yvonne Beyer, Stephen Hederics, Peter Peterson, Andre Schmidt, Joyce Smith: without you there would have been no project."

Anjelie Beyer
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Introduction

The three-part project of interviews, an exhibition: *On Our Own Ground*, and the paper: *Our Ground: Artmaking and Landscape in Mildura*, was researched, curated, and written at Mildura during 1996 - 1999.

The five artists taking part in the project are Yvonne Beyer, Stephen Hedrick, Peter Peterson, André Schmidt, and Joyce Smith. The artists’ histories, and descriptions of selection and interviewing, are outlined in *Appendix 1: The artists in the project*. (The appendices contain much information pertinent to the thesis, for example some fascinating stories about the artists’ lives.)

The artists’ own words and works are placed into discursive frameworks of recent theories, in particular the conceptual category of the Text\(^1\) as explained by Roland Barthes. The concept of Text emerges throughout the paper in discussions as various as the meaning of a gum tree and the effects of the size of a canvas. *Chapter 1: The Text* analyses Barthes’ concept of the Text, and discusses some of what may be uncovered by textual readings of representation.

The history of Mildura’s cultivated landscape, and the landscape as subject and as Text, is described in *Chapter 2: The local landscape as subject*.

In *Chapter 3: The artists’ engagement with artmaking*, the efforts and rewards of artmaking are discussed. The artists also define their social roles and the bearing these have on their role of artist.

In *Chapter 4: Artists and their context*, the artists speak about responses to their art, and about the physical context in which art is shown. The exhibition is described in *Appendix 2: Exhibition and publicity: On Our Own Ground*.

The art as expression of the individual person is the subject of *Chapter 5: The artists in the art*.

How the artists make use of the elements of art is discussed in *Chapter 6: The artists and the elements of art*.

The artists take what they need for their artmaking from the stock of art styles, and return their innovations to this ‘cultural capital’; this is discussed in *Chapter 7: Cultural capital*. The interaction between originality and cultural capital is also discussed in this chapter.

The proposal of the paper is that the conditions of artmaking are not inherently beyond the reach of anyone - child or adult - who has a fair share of visual vitality and

\(^1\) The capital letter reflects Roland Barthes’ use of ‘the Text’ to distinguish it from the normal use of ‘text’.
enthusiasm about extending experience into visual representation. Art is not the sanctuary of gods and masters, it has potential far beyond what many art-history books would lead us to think. Art is always socially constructed interpretation and practice; it is a result of many histories; it is incomplete and partial by nature, many-faceted and always changing within and across groups, individuals and situations; and it is always political, tempered with particular interests even, or particularly, in everyday life which seemingly is the individual’s preserve, but into which encroach the interests of others.2

The energy for this project flows from enthusiasm for the marvellous visible world and its many fabulous manifestations in art, painting especially: ‘... as the Byzantine Church understood, the painted image (whether of floating buttocks or Pantocrator) has enormous power to hold the mind in a benumbed thrall,’ writes the artist Ailsa O’Connor.3

The Mildura artists too are enthralled with the power of artmaking. That does not make the artists supreme beings; their art, however grandly or humbly it may be conceived, is specific to place and time. Because of its limited nature, it may serve as a blueprint for a flexible and emancipatory role for art, such as that subscribed to by postmodernism.

Of the various postmodern themes dealing with representation, ‘localism’, ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ influenced the early stages of the project, hence the choice of a Barkindji4 artist, a painter of wildflowers, a realistic landscape painter, a non-realistic painter, and a teacher popular with both non-professional and professional artists. As ideas continued to metamorphose, other concepts emerged, for example ‘contingency’ and ‘cultural capital’. But a more unifying concept was still needed..

The framework that eventually proved very useful, Roland Barthes’ concept of the Text, underlies many postmodern writings. While postmodernism in its complex entirety illuminates too wide a range of ideas, the concept of the Text provides a useful lens with which to read local artmaking. It brings together from many recent discourses, from anthropology to psychology, the realisation that usually unnoticed cultural messages inhere in the work of art. Barthes writes, ‘The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.’5 Thus Barthes’ concept fits the proposition of this paper to consider art as a less absolute concept.

While the primary material of this project is the artmaking and commentary that the five artists have provided for it, it is important to note that both the art and the ideas are much more than examples or discussion-points for a theory. They are the expressions of real people, sometimes weighed-up, sometimes impromptu, full of delight to behold and to read, each absorbingly different in content, and wonderfully different in style. The paper is animated with the voices of these artists, and not only do they radiate character and

4 ‘Barkindji’ is spelled and pronounced in various ways by the Aborigines, for example with a soft explosive ‘P’ at the start.
humour, they provide subtle insights into the matter of artmaking from perspectives that are individual yet reflecting some important views of the culture within which they work.

The artists' interviews may be read in full in Appendices 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Quotes taken from the spoken interviews are used throughout the paper (without notation). Even when the artists’ words are isolated within the text of the paper they retain the freshness of spoken language. The artists’ really speak for themselves.

My own voice is audible as well in the interviews, a reminder that I too am real, not always sure, thinking on the run as I explain my motives, for example to Stephen Hederics: ‘…to satisfy some questions I had about the importance of local art. Because I could see that it wasn’t important in the eyes of important peers. That it’s sort of second rate. And I couldn’t understand it because it is being made, and being made beautifully, by quality people …’, and to Joyce Smith: ‘I think I started it all happening and I was open to having all that input coming in, and then seeing what resulted. So my aim was fairly open. I didn’t have set ideas, or at least, if I did have some set ideas, they were changed by the time it all happened’. In the main section of the paper my voice is edited, and kept neutral and academic. I bring in quotes from theorists in celebrated disciplines such as anthropology and art history whose deliberations provide an authoritative context for what the artists are doing.

Contemporary discourse (for example Roland Barthes’ influential ‘Death of the Author’ theory6) may problematise the voice of authority yet use the expertise of writers and artists to make its claims. To resolve this dilemma, strategies such as deconstruction, layering of voices, and appropriation and re-use of problematic material are sometimes tried. However this paper stays within formal academic guidelines, and its main strategy is to frame within sanctioned theories the prime material of its research, the art and the artists’ words, while letting these speak for themselves in order to cast some light on a creative segment of an Australian country town and its not-so small claims to significance.

While the paper aims to be carefully reasoned, it is more subjective (or less) than it might have been in other hands, and its findings are contingent upon factors such as formal requirements and personal attitudes and skills, and even chance events. The choosing of artists was also a contingent process, taking those artists I found around me and liked. The results would have been different had any of those factors been different.

The project is a process of learning, and what is being learned is not a firm set of facts waiting to be discovered, but a wavering set of conclusions gradually shaped.

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6 Ibid, p146.
Chapter 1: The Text

Works of art are part of almost everyone’s everyday life. Art history is devoted to accounts of artmaking. Art exhibitions, books, and the media bring innumerable works of art, traditional and contemporary, ‘high’ art and popular art, from here or far, to the attention of millions of people.

But there is more to a work of art than meets the eye, more than the intriguing variety of subjects and styles, more than the intricate play of colour and line, shape and texture. There is a layer in each work of art that does not actually reside in any of these in particular, yet exists right alongside them. That layer is ‘the Text’.

Works of art may be read as Text.

The concept of the Text that coexists with a work of art comes via linguistics, semiotics, and structuralism into contemporary cultural theories. It is explained eloquently by the French theorist (semiologist/structuralist/post-structuralist), Roland Barthes. Barthes was not the first to explicate a radically symbolic relationship between the artist and the viewer, for example some of the details of his theory were foreshadowed by the philosopher Lewis Mumford. But it is Roland Barthes who places the Text in the spotlight in his 1977 essay, ‘From Work to Text’.

Earlier, during the ’fifties, Barthes wrote about ‘myth’, an antecedent for his Text (his use of the capital letter retaining some of myth’s extraordinary quality), with many of the same cultural, historical, and ideological implications. In this earlier version of the meaning to be found in cultural works Barthes wrote, ‘myth is a type of speech ... a system of communication, ... a message ... a mode of signification ... a form. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are no formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones. Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions.’

Barthes’ myth is still a fertile concept, though by 1970 Barthes already felt that his ideological critique (of his essential enemy, ‘the bourgeois norm’) and semiological analysis of mass culture in Mythologies belonged to the past. Yet his 1950s ‘impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history’ and his desire to ‘track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-

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11 Ibid, p117.
saying, the ideological abuse which ... is hidden there,’13 are still echoing in recent discourse.

Barthes’ exasperation is still reverberating in contemporary critiques of culture, and his semiological framework as well as his focus on mass culture also have great influence, not least in the discipline of cultural studies. In John Fiske, Bob Hodge, and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Popular Australian Culture*,14 the authors base their accounts of Australian life on this definition of myth: ‘...the grouping of signifiers around a concept creates what Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* called a “myth”. This is not a myth in the sense that it is untrue, but rather in the sense of a systematic organisation of signifiers around a set of connotations and meanings. ... Such myths act as points of focus for the culture.’15 The critic, Adrian Martin, in *Phantasms*, quotes Barthes’ influence: ‘Any book that presents a collection of short, inter-related essays responding to the daily vagaries of mass culture must acknowledge its debt to Roland Barthes and his 1959 book *Mythologies …*, Barthes not only penned a great work of literature, he also singlehandedly created a modern genre - the genre of the cultural chronicle.’ 16

Barthes continued pursuing the universe’s ‘infinitely fertile’ suggestions, taking apart the concept of ‘messages’ further, finding many accretions that gather around apparently matter-of-course cultural facts, and analysing the connotations of many forms of cultural expression, from advertising to angels, and film to song.17 Barthes thus uncovered an image’s ‘supplementary message’, its ‘second meaning, whose signifier is a certain “treatment” of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain “culture” of the society receiving the message’.18

Barthes here considered that images within the ““imitative” arts comprise two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogon itself” - such as the photographic image which, though not the reality, is at least ‘its perfect analogon’, and ‘a connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it.’19 (The matter of a ‘perfect analogon’, of a ‘message without a code’ as Barthes says here about press photography, is precarious, and even the ‘first order’ assigned to the denoted message was later revised by Barthes himself, denotation, or literal meaning, being now conceived of as ‘the persistent shape which only gradually emerges in the space marked out by connotation’. 20)

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15 Ibid, pxi.
17 Roland Barthes, films from Sergei Eistenstein the filmmaker, and songs from Panzera, a great singer; see also various chapters in *Image, Music, Text, op cit*.
19 Ibid, p17.
Barthes continued to uncover further layers of meaning. Next he found a ‘third meaning’: an ‘obtuse meaning given by tenuous relationships of parts of an image or of the mise-en-scène of a film’. From there Barthes went on to uncover a plurality of messages in representation, and this he termed ‘the Text’.

The concept of the Text is not new, Barthes (in 1977) gives a time frame of about a century. Lewis Mumford’s 1952 published lecture, ‘Art and the Symbol’, for example, recognises the separation of symbol from the mature artist: ‘At this stage, the esthetic symbol becomes detached from the immediate life of the artist; … it starts, as it were, on an independent career of its own.’ Nor is Text limited to philosophy, structuralism and semiology: Barthes lists a discursive field of several great disciplines: ‘linguistics, anthropology, Marxism, and psychoanalysis’. It is during the development of these disciplines that the new concept filtered into discourse.

Barthes’ describes how his ‘vivid idea of the Text’ came to him: he was strolling along a valley in North Africa, feeling slightly at loose ends and unfamiliar, and what he perceived as he strolled was ‘multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives, lights, colors, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises, scant cries of birds, children’s voices from the other side of the valley, passages, gestures, clothes of inhabitants near or far away.’ Barthes’ next sentence leads us to his vision of Text. ‘All these incidents are half identifiable: they come from codes which are known but their combination is unique, founding the stroll in difference repeatable only as difference. So the Text …’

The Text is always present but not always obvious.

Something that Barthes does not actually say, but which can be gleaned from his euphoric description, is that the Text is ever present, but not ever obvious. Because the stroller, the observer, is immersed in the surroundings, they form a background to more immediate concerns. It is only a sudden shift in awareness, perhaps even a slight apprehension, which makes the background impinge on consciousness. The Text has always been there, forming an environment in which the observer acts, but it has only recently impinged on the consciousness of those who discourse on culture, and its existence is more generally speaking still an unnoticed and unremarkable phenomenon. That is what makes the concept of textuality even more fascinating, that there is something going on right under our noses that no-one usually notices at all.

Regarding the work of art: the work is what we look at but its Text is largely what we experience, often without ‘seeing’. Barthes describes the work and the Text as very different, almost opposed concepts. Where the work of art is a single entity, the Text comes as ‘an explosion, a dissemination’, a ‘stereographic plurality’, ‘woven entirely

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22 Lewis Mumford, op cit, p29.
24 Ibid, p159.
25 Ibid, p159.
26 Barthes is more subtle and implies it is not always present.
with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which traverse it through in a vast stereophony.’ 27

The work can be seen here or there, and held in the hand; the Text is held in language. The work is seen, the Text ‘only exists in the movement of a discourse (or rather, it is Text for the very reason that it knows itself as text)’; it is ‘experienced only in the activity of production’. ‘The Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work that is the imaginary tail of the Text.’ 28

The work is a sign of our ‘civilization of the sign’, but the Text slips out from being signified and plays around the field of ‘disconnection, overlappings, variations’, of ‘associations, contiguities, cross references’. 29

The Text is contained not only in ‘good’ work, it ignores hierarchies or genres or other classifications. It is easy to envisage even a child’s drawings, such as those of Yvonne’s young daughter, Freya, heard in Yvonne Beyer’s interview30, as beginning to contain messages as the young artist begins to apply cultural codes she has absorbed from her mother’s work, other children’s drawings, books, school, and TV. She is assimilating and reworking the cultural codes she is privy to at the same time as exploring the symbology of images and the schema of picture making. Even a child’s drawing may manifest textuality, as shown for example in the stilted drawings Freya did when she first started school31 as compared to the richly embellished drawings she makes at home. More subtly, textuality lies in the connection between the two sorts of drawings: she is aware of difference in context, of ‘a certain culture of the society receiving them’. While the drawings themselves are moderately symbolic, with recognisable pictures of, say, a girl and a dog, their Text - the total picture of image, style and suitability in a context - is radically symbolic.32

The viewer completes the work.

Barthes signals an important shift in contemporary interpretation. Where previously it was the intention of the author which was seen as paramount in determining a work’s meaning, its meaning has become loosened, decentred, and open - free to be created each time again by the reader.33

The Text as pictured by Barthes is a signifying practice, a playing activity, even a production. This activity diminishes (if not abolishes) the distance between reader and author. The play, action, production, is in the court of the consumer.34 Barthes dallies with the term ‘play’; he lets it mean loose, as the play in a door, and play as in music,
participating in production. This thought leads Barthes to quote Mallarmé: ‘Who executes the work?’

Lewis Mumford too has already considered the spectator’s participation through play: the work of art ‘must be a little ambiguous, a little mysterious; it must leave play for an answering response, of an equally indeterminable kind, in the spectator or listener, who thus participates in the creative act.’

Barthes writes that the viewer completes the work of the creator, disconnecting, overlapping, varying, associating, connecting and cross referencing. The viewer hears the ‘explosion, a dissemination’, a ‘stereographic plurality’, hears the ‘citations, references, echoes, cultural languages ... which traverse it through in a vast stereophony’. The work of art reverberates with its textuality.

A radical change in focus results from the new reading. The work is not anonymous, has ‘known origins or sources or influences’, and may even be monologic, even Law, such as the Holy Scriptures, or ‘certain Marxist interpretations’. Texts are ‘anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read ... they are quotations without quotation marks’.

Barthes describes the work as caught up in a process of filiation (from the word for son). He postulates ‘a determination of the work (by race, by History), a consecution of works amongst themselves, and a conformity of the work to the author.’ This calls for respect of the author’s intentions and products, and gives legality to the author’s claim of ownership. But the Text is read without ‘the inscription of the Father’. The Text extends itself, grows like an ‘organism’. The author is present ‘only as a “guest”’, ‘no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, but ludic [playful] - a “paper author”’. Even in biographies, ‘the I which writes the text, it too is never more than a paper I,’ writes Barthes.

‘Who executes the work?’ becomes an important question in Barthes’ development of the concept of textuality. In ‘From Work to Text’ with Barthes we ‘slide, vary, exceed, repudiate’ and ‘relativize the relations of writer, reader, and observer’. In ‘The Death of the Author’, Barthes has already signalled the author’s ‘distancing’, and ‘diminishing’. The author/artist has become a tissue-thin film - Jackson Pollock forever caught in the net of paint strings of Blue Poles (1952), no longer able to influence what happens in the interaction between viewer and painting.

Barthes’ concept of the absent author was seemingly stimulated by the persuasiveness of a sentence from Balzac. He asks ‘Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story ... Balzac the individual ... Balzac the author ... universal wisdom ... Romantic

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36 Lewis Mumford, op cit, p27.
38 Ibid, p160.
40 Ibid, p173.
41 Ibid, p156.
The statement had come into autonomous existence as soon as it was made, (and read, heard or seen). Barthes writes that ‘as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.’ No creator is evident - and may be disruptive if evident, for example an actor who suddenly breaks the illusion of a narrative film by looking directly at the camera, interrupting ‘the very practice of the symbol itself’.

All cultural products may be read as texts.

In both ‘the Death of the Author’ and ‘From Work to Text,’ Barthes closes the door on the author and opens it for the reader or viewer. In so doing he opens the door too for a rush of new interpretations of cultural works. Barthes has influenced most recent cultural discourse, not least postmodernism. Brian Wallis, editor of Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, signals that ‘in a broad sense postmodern critical practices underlie all the essays’ and that ‘Barthes’ theory of the text’ underlies, in particular, the section ‘Theorizing Postmodernism’. Wallis adds, ‘To a great extent these definitions depend on a literary source, particularly Roland Barthes’ theory of the text and, more broadly, post-structuralism.

A feature of much postmodern writing is its fascination with the textuality of any form of representation. In ‘What’s Wrong With This Picture? An Introduction’, Wallis writes, ‘This tendency to read all cultural products as “texts” has led to considerations of the structure and function of representation outside of high art.’ This fascination has led to celebration of the multiplicity of meanings in representation - as contrasted to the single essence sought by modernism. But the reading of the Text may also lead to concern about aspects of the human condition that are being ill-served by messages that are more or less hidden in what appears to be a straightforward representation of the facts.

Readings of Text in representation may uncover structures of power.

Recent investigations of the Text are often much concerned with assumptions of power, aiming to uncover the under-layers of what is kept suppressed. Such interpretation is used most notably by the historian Michel Foucault who wrote about the structures of power and knowledge, the codes and assumptions of order, and of legitimacy and exclusion, which are kept obscured by the stories of inevitable and chronological history. Some contemporary art has taken up Foucault’s concern by making explicit some dominant cultural codes in art and media images.

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43 Ibid, p143.
44 Ibid, p141.
46 Ibid, pxvii.
49 Artists concerned about the hidden Texts in representation include Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, and Cindy Sherman, as illustrated and described, among others, by
That there are messages in representation, and that these messages may serve a myth (which often appears to be a natural phenomenon) is of great interest not only to postmodernists but also to media and public relations organisations. Most of the representations that daily surround us carry a load of deliberately encoded Texts. These are sophisticated and often enjoyable, with dynamic interplay of images and captions, and no doubt they affect our values and behaviours as they are intended to do. Judith Williamson writes in a 1982 Preface to her earlier (1977) book, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, that after 1977, advertising ‘began to show far more skilful, self-conscious use of “semiotics” (whether under that name is irrelevant), so that many of the formal practices of advertising which … I felt I was teasing out as implicit in the ads, is now explicit.’ Williamson asks, ‘Where do you go next, when the notions that some of us struggled over years ago in Saussure and Barthes now seem to be part of public imagery and a source of increasing refinement in, not just academia, but the media?’ 50

**The work of art is ‘unmade’ by the author and the artists.**

In contrast to designers of advertisements (who often deliberately use ‘semiotics’ as Judith Williamson says), artists are not always so ‘self-conscious’. When Barthes metaphorically kills the creator, he takes an extreme position in order to counterbalance the modern Western emphasis on the ‘Author-God’. 51 But however much the creator may be problematised by Barthes’ proposition, many creators are not overly concerned about their presence in the work, not even Barthes himself (he seems to enjoy writing his vivid metaphors), nor the ‘paper I’ enjoying my own figures of speech, (although there is consideration of academic style which has its own rule of a hidden author).

The five artists generally accept the painting traditions within which they work: their artmaking is ‘located and embedded in the complex and particular dynamics of the moment as those emerge from the moments that have preceded it’. 52 They are not usually deliberately introspective about potentially multiple meanings.

Such an easy-going attitude seems contrary to politically aware self-reflexivity, for example that of Feminism, implying a refusal to suspend our relation with things for the sake of an analysis of our attitude toward them, as Donald A Kuspit writes about a Marxist approach. 53 But, even though the artists often prefer not ‘to suspend relation with things for the sake of an analysis of their attitude’, they do demonstrate an understanding of their situation within the culture as they negotiate their relations with various traditions and their myths - mostly to be read between the lines (the Text of their text) but also spelled out, for example, in descriptions of subjects for painting.

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51 Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, *op cit*, p146.
52 Judith Solsken and David Bloome, *op cit*, p3.
53 Donald A Kuspit, ‘Flak from the “Radicals”: The American Case against Current German Painting’, pp137-151; Brian Wallis (editor), *op cit*, p139.
For instance, Yvonne Beyer, whose art is probably the most simplified and perhaps the most ‘modern’ of the five artists, declares a nostalgia for old things which are felt as more relevant than the new, while acknowledging such an attitude as a ‘bit of a fashion’:

I have a certain disrespect for brand-new things and for dismissing used objects or broken objects, but I think our appreciation of aged objects is a bit of a fashion at the moment. It started off with people looking in countries that they thought were really cute, like Prague, or Mexico, and then examining what’s nice about them - and what’s nice about them is their stuff is repainted, or it’s all worn, or it’s preloved, fixed up. It’s very personal, very human. I think probably people overdosed on factory-produced or very slickly produced items, and it’s got a more human touch. People want these objects in their home; they want their home to look like it’s been there for a little while; it makes you feel better if you think it’s got a bit of history. It makes it look more permanent. It’s more relevant because it’s got a past.

Joyce Smith searches for a topic which is relevant to a woman who has seen much of Mildura’s development as a major rural city. For Joyce, the ‘flower’ has a particular Text: the relevance of the native as compared to the irrelevance of introduced plants. The rose particularly is a radical symbol of all that is not local nature, especially as it intrudes its alien presence without comment even by other local artists. Joyce says,

… there’s no-one else in Mildura, that I know of, who chases around looking for wildflowers to paint. Most people that I know paint roses. And I’m not in the least bit interested in painting roses. And I don’t like putting wildflowers in pots or glass or anything like that, I just like the natural stem combination.

The familiar myth of valued tradition and its alter ego, inevitable change, is tackled by André Schmidt:

As far as I’m concerned, I think that I’m perhaps a little bit traditional. And even though I use acrylic paints, there’s a certain amount of tradition in my work. Certain things I use for practical reasons. But the traditional oil paint, though, gives me a feeling of being involved with history a bit more, and when I use oil paints, that’s something I think of.

At another time André focuses on how the artist changes:

Of course you change too. As you progress through certain stages, your ideas on art, and on life - you change your thoughts on what you want to paint, what you want to achieve in your painting. But that’s just natural. You see things differently and you want to investigate them, perhaps in detail, or in some way.

Some of the artists’ accounts reveal some powerful myths, including those which have the capacity to cause war, genocide and displacement of large groups of people; not a new power but horribly evident in our century. Artmaking is always a negotiation with dominant myths. For example, Stephen Hederics looks at himself as tempered by village life in Hungary.

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54 Philip Adams writes that about 140 million people have died in war and genocide this century; ‘What’s God got to do with it?’; The Australian Weekend Magazine, March 6-7 1999, p32 Review section.
55 See Appendix 4: Interviews with Stephen Hederics, for Stephen’s detailed stories of events and effects.
It’s a bit like religion: it’s strong, you’ve got your ways of looking at things, ways of looking at life, treating people, and food - and the way people respond to life is different in the European sense. My childhood, see I was nine years old when we came here, so I was affected pretty well by many things, and I remembered a lot from my childhood, and they were powerful, emotional experiences that I’m conscious of now, forever. You can’t escape all those things.

Then his family fled Hungary in the mid-fifties and Stephen was tempered anew by the loss of that familiar life and the difficulties of living in Australia as an immigrant:

It gives me strength to know that I’ve survived that. That’s reassuring. But it is difficult too. Coming here, we couldn’t speak the language - the embarrassment of that, that also affects you. It’s all those fundamental things that chink your ego. And you have to compromise, and swallow hard, and bear it, and live through it, and then try and make something of yourself. Those emotional things are difficult to come to terms with. Every day you can eat, and sleep, and walk with others, and talk with others, and so seemingly everything is fine, but deep down the scars are still there from the experience. That certainly does affect my response to people. I’m conscious of it, many times, many times. I’ve re-visited Hungary, and reinforced a lot of those sensations. It will always be there, it will always either support or not support. Hopefully I’ll get the positive out of it, and use it as a strength factor.

Peter Peterson too has known disruption of his home life, as is the misfortune of many Aborigines because of the direct and indirect consequences of colonisation: Peter speaks of ‘... when I was a little fellow. When the police and the welfare took me away ...’.

Peter has sublimated his experiences, for example by taking the highway, which has carried him away from home many times, and encoding it as his road:

The highway is my road! The reason I done that was because when I was in Brisbane, I hitch-hiked back from Dubbo to here; it took me two days to hitch-hike back, and that gave me enough time because when I was on the road I was singing, just looking around, camping here ... I was a lost man on one part of it. I was trying to get home. And then when I started painting, it took me right back to that road. That’s when I wanted to start to paint, right from there.

Textual readings are often put to use in studying problems such as the maladjustment of personality (diagnosed in psychoanalysis), the inequities of Capitalism (raised to consciousness in Marxism), ‘the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which ... is hidden’ in myths (exposed in Poststructural discourse), and ethnocentrism (uncovered in all cultures by Anthropology). Textual readings may have milder applications in literature and film appreciation. But I do not seek aesthetic interpretations of the art of the five artists (although when I describe the work I cannot keep my own Text out), nor to uncover maladjustment, inequality, or hidden ideological abuse in the artists’ lives (though the paper touches on broad cultural issues). So what use is the concept of Text in understanding the artmaking of the five artists?
Picasso said bluntly, ‘I don’t search, I find.’ This project started off with finding the real, the taken-for-granted art of these artists, and from there has gone outward to search for its meaning, an open-ended search, as ‘knowledge and meaning are always partial … incomplete, not just “in progress” but inherently “uncompletable”’.  

Generally, while this project is inspired by Barthes’ concept of the Text, it is inspired as much by his enthusiasm for unravelling strands of cultural messages in an apparently ordinary work of art. This paper hopes to impart enthusiasm about the place of local artmaking which itself is enthusiastic about its place in the scheme of things. The artists’ wise comments on artmaking and the visual exposition of their ideas in art combine to make the project intriguing. The work of art is ‘unmade’ by the author and by the artists (as their words are manoeuvred by the author into sometimes intricate arguments) to see how it is ‘conceived, perceived, and received in its integrally symbolic nature’. Though no ‘great’ discoveries will be claimed, the little discoveries are exciting.

Why five artists? A study of five artists can give as much material as a study of five thousand. Judith Solsken and David Bloome note the multiplicity of knowledge and meaning, differing across groups, individuals, and situations, and within them, so even one artist’s work can give almost ‘infinitely fertile’ suggestions. Five is a good and manageable number. With five it becomes clear how much artists can vary in approaches and influences, even when their place, time, and general subject are the same.

Adrian Martin quotes some advice: ‘When the expatriate Chilean filmmaker Raul Ruiz toured Australia, I was moved by two comments that he offered local audiences. Firstly, he suggested that it is sometimes better to watch only five films a year - and to keep thinking about them deeply, returning to them again and again from different angles - rather than to force oneself to see and have a bullish opinion on the thousand new films released every year. Secondly, he counselled that ‘the way to escape from yourself is to form your obsessions, which are birds, and to track those birds in flight.’ Obsession is a bird in the wind. Barthes was obsessed, changing his mind now and then, circling back to view culture from different angles. The five Mildura artists are obsessed; it is marvellous to fly with them as they return to their subjects again and again, seeking and experiencing new wonders each time. Their search keeps going too.

Any reading of cultural codes is as flexible and fallible as the interpreter. For example, as Philip Fisher writes, ‘It is crucial to see how easily a reading could be given of the same details that would make them parallel, rather than contrary …’. Here is Barthes’ advice for anyone discoursing on Text: the discourse may be called into doubt, and ‘should itself’ be nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that social space which leaves no communicator or communication safe, outside, nor any

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57 Judith Solsken and David Bloome, op cit, p3.
58 Ibid, p159.
59 Judith Solsken and David Bloome, op cit, p3.
60 Adrian Martin, op cit, p3.
subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder...’. But that did not stop Barthes from having a go at opening out *his* obsessions.

So this paper’s words too will fly, carrying their own Text, floating it over the head of the ‘paper I’, author/judge/analyst/confessor/decoder, and beyond my reach, to pick up the calm or wild winds of the social space.

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Chapter 2: The local landscape as subject

‘I think that poetry and painting are still the best ways of looking at landscape, of adoring landscape, of looking at it in a deeper way,’ says the novelist Tim Winton. These five artists conceive of their subject within the landscape, perceive it there, and receive it, looking in a deeper way.

Landscape develops identity.

The artists find themselves painting the local landscape because they are surrounded by it, but their choice of local landscape as subject is more than convenience. This place is home.

‘Home’ means the relationship of people with a place. A network of Texts surrounds it. The artist Stephen Davidson writes, ‘I see the land as a vessel that contains our history, our actions, and our ideas.’ The outcome of this containment is to restrict and limit but also to give ‘rise to cultural diversity, ethnic variations and natural interaction based upon the bio-region.’

The artist Carmel Wallace also embraces a ‘bioregional theory’. Carmel Wallace believes that learning about and acting in the landscape (which encompasses the climate, topology, the plants and creatures, the human and geological history, and all the things of the place) leads to a realisation ‘that you are part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is a whole. You start with the part you are whole in,’ as Wallace quotes Gary Snyder. Wallace puts bioregional theory into art practice: ‘This research, as well as my physical experience of place largely gained through “walking over the ground”, has enriched the conceptual base of my artwork …’.

Carmel Wallace’s ‘walking over the ground’, Joyce Smith’s ‘driving around in the scrub, walking around, getting stung with spinifex and looking out for snakes’, and Stephen Hederics’s: ‘Then go for a walk. Touch a few trees. Familiarise yourself - the usual thing, piss on a few trees like an animal does, you know. It finds its parameters. It needs to feel where it is in relation to everything, if there’s any dangers or why he has to feel good with all these qualities around. You need to go out and do that. You need to go out and find bottles and bits of tin,’ are all routines which enrich the artist - who becomes part of the whole, and whole within the part.

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63 Tim Winton interviewed on ‘Between the Lines’, ABC TV, April 16, 1997.
64 Stephen A Davidson, Transmigration, Isolation, Distance and Post-Colonial Adaptations in Finding Place. Expressed through the Vehicle of Paint, Master of Arts (Fine Arts) Thesis, Faculty of Arts Deakin University, 1994, p2.
Home is the primary marker, writes Nikos Papastergiadis. It is from there our mapping of the world starts. It is where the idea of self is constructed as experienced apart from the other. And home is where ‘[c]osmologies are significant insofar as they address the local by differentiating it from the beyond’.

Mapping his new homeland was difficult for the Surveyor General of New South Wales, John Oxley, who discovered the Murrumbidgee Valley in 1817 and said of it, ‘There is a uniformity in the barren desolation of this country, which wearies me more than I am able to express. One tree, one soil, one water, and one description of bird, fish and animal, progressively alike, in ten miles and for a hundred.’

Since that dispirited encounter, gradual familiarisation inspired the colonists to find ways of discerning variety in the Australian landscape, and the depressing sameness began to transform into a diverse and knowable landscape. Ross Gibson, in *South of the West*, describes this as establishing ‘a local set of signifiers through a process of a myriad tiny adjustments to the imported European system of meaning.’ New metaphors are tried out and metonyms gathered into understandable records. Thus, gradually, says Ross Gibson, ‘the normlessness gives way to adapted significance, and local phenomena begin to be perceived and comprehended in terms which are somehow specifically (which is not to say, essentially) Australian at the same time as they are still sensible in European terms.’

The local phenomena have become ‘our place’. ‘Our place’ is not always countryside, Australia being ‘the most urbanised nation in the world’, although even in cities and suburbs there are vistas of earth, sky, water, and trees which evoke ‘nature’. And a ‘landscape’ of ‘our place’ can do even without such elements, for example Jeffrey Smart’s lone, business-suited man squeezed between massive walls in *The Water Tower* (1968). City environments are not necessarily any more impersonal than the country (or the country any more personal than the city). Smart’s painting deliberately evokes an intolerable atmosphere - actual urban landscapes are generally less hostile, and people living in cities probably consider them as contributing to a feeling of belonging. But it is the landscape of the countryside which is sought by many Australians in their time off work - getting away from it all into ‘nature’.

It is the ‘natural’ world which provides metaphors for Australia’s national identity. The bush (eponymous with the landscape) is our nation-wide notion of an often harsh but ideal place to be, and the qualities that we like to think of as Australian are largely those we picture as part of bush life. ‘… Australians believe, probably more strongly than any other Western nation, that they are ‘naturally’ rural people.’ write Fiske, Hodge, and

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68 A E Lawrence, *Taming the Wilderness: One family’s contribution to irrigation in Australia*, A E and A Lawrence, Armadale Victoria, 1985, p2.
Turner in *Myths of Oz*.72 The authors give a reason for this belief: ‘Australian cities are recent, the Australian sense of an independent national identity is young and still developing, and its differentness has long been mythologised in terms of landscape (nature) rather than of culture. So the cities, on the geographic but also symbolic fringe of the continent, have been neglected as a resource out of which to construct a social or a national identity.’73 Stephen Hederics sums up the city: ‘It’s only a place that they have to be.’

It is nature which is sought as a subject by these artists. The title of the exhibition, *On Our Own Ground*, alludes to all who go ‘walking over the ground’, but it concerns particularly the five Mildura artists and their public. The subjects that they paint come to have a meaning for artists and viewers which arises partly from knowing *where*, and therefore *who*, they are.

**Mildura’s history is written on the landscape.**

Mildura adds a well-known story to Australia’s narrative of landscape. This area, for which a 1918 competition came up with the name *Sunraysia*, encompasses Mildura Rural City, and straddles three states, Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia (more or less), and two major rivers, the Murray and the Darling. Mildura’s history arises primarily out of the waters of the Murray River - the unwritten history (at least fifty thousand years) of the local semi-nomadic tribes, and the colonial history (one-and-a-half centuries), of exploration and settlement.

![Image of Stephen Hederics, Following the Shadows, 1996, pencil and watercolour on paper, 55x72 cm, (framed).](image)

Where ‘not so long ago the blacks hunted opossum, hacked their canoes from the trees, and crowded singing about their camp-fires in the vague darkness’, is now the homeland

of ‘the yeomen of the river’ as the historian Ernestine Hill writes in *Water Into Gold*.74 Mildura on the Murray is a agreeable place to live and a popular one to visit, ‘a real fruity place’ as Peter Peterson says. ‘Thousands of proud Australians and curious globe-trotters make a pilgrimage of this province of the south land each year, for love of the sun and joy of the vines. ... It would surprise them to know that this dried fruits industry was founded by people who knew nothing whatever about it; who borrowed a river that did not belong to them.’75

Mildura’s existence depends in a roundabout way on the American War of Independence, followed by England’s loss of the American Colonies and subsequent use of Australia as plunder and prison. Distance was not a problem as the oceans were largely controlled by England’s ‘splendid naval organisation’, and the flag was safely planted on the other side of the world. The first Australian colony was annexed on 26 January, 1788, in Sydney Cove, New South Wales. An officer reported later: ‘I do not scruple to pronounce that in the whole world there is not a worse country than what we have yet seen of this. ... here Nature is reversed; and if not so, she is nearly worn out.’76

However, adventure, vision, and gold fever soon drew enthusiasts, and severe English laws deported ‘some eighty-three thousand convicts’ to New South Wales,77 and the country was on the map. By 1830 the young Charles Sturt, having already mapped the Darling and various other rivers, found, rowed, and named the Murray ‘after a Colonial secretary 12,000 miles away in London’.78 (A few earlier explorers had not taken much notice of the river.)79 During Sturt’s trip to the Murray mouth and back (to the deserted Murrumbidgee depot and, six months later, to Sydney), the ‘blacks showed far too lively an interest in these ghosts of men in a strange canoe’,80 which was prophetic of them as similar ghosts eventually came back to commandeer their land and river.

The river was called Millewa (from mill star and eye, and wa, big one) by the local tribes, as the next traveller, Major Mitchell, travelling by bullock dray, found out in 1836.81 A year or two later, Joseph Hawden decided to drove cattle from Melbourne (where he had taken the first stock from the Murrumbidgee) to Adelaide, ‘then a few huts in the bush’.82 He too became prophetic as they neared what is now Mildura: ‘In this neighbourhood there are about a hundred thousand acres which, at a small expense, might be flooded.’83

In March 1847, ‘Frank Jenkins swam nine-hundred head of cattle across the river from New South Wales and settled on a section of land then known as Yerre Yerre’.84 Jenkins neglected to get a licence at once (other histories say, that not knowing he was in

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75 Ibid, pp.36-7.
76 A E Lawrence, *op cit*, pp1-2.
77 A E Lawrence, *op cit*, p1.
78 Ernestine Hill, *op cit*, p2.
80 Ibid, p3.
82 Ibid, .8.
83 Ibid, p11.
Victoria, Jenkins went off to Adelaide to get his licence. So, in July, Hugh Jameson established himself and six thousand sheep on Yerre Yerre, and in September was granted a licence in Melbourne for these coveted pastures, and soon a station homestead was built close to the river. Jenkins swam his cattle back and established himself in Gol Gol just across the river. Jameson’s run prospered. Yerre Yerre became Mildura in 1858 - Mildura meaning either red rock or sore eyes.

In 1881, the South Australian Government began to encourage the navigation of the Murray/Darling system by steamships ‘that transformed it into an inland highway - even if the vagaries of an unreliable rainfall sometimes reduced the rivers to an unuseable depth’. The same year, the Colony of Victoria (named in honour of the middle-aged Queen) was proclaimed, vague about boundaries and rights to the water, nevertheless introducing unpopular border custom levies.

In 1884, Parliament acted to develop the resources of the State of Victoria. This resulted in the meeting of the ‘brilliant young Cabinet Minister, Alfred Deakin’ (enthusiastic about the potential of the mighty Murray River) with the founders of the flourishing colonies of Etiwanda and Ontario in California, the Canadian brothers George and William Benjamin Chaffey, who too became inspired and sent an agent, Stephen Cureton, to investigate. Soon George Chaffey followed and found ‘on the Mildura run, “just the soil for irrigation”, and the river there, “a grand stream over three hundred feet in width, and more than thirty feet deep, and an ideal climate”’. George sent at once for William Benjamin, and the Mildura run (which had changed hands twice, become unprofitable because of drought and rabbits, and ended up in the hands of the liquidators) began its transformation from a scene of ‘dead and dying stock, rabbits in plague proportions, evil black crows and raging sandstorms’ to ‘a garden’. This part of the worst country in the world, where Nature was reversed or worn out, was to become a Land of Promise, an Eden, an Oasis, a Cornucopia, as local historians write, all because of the ‘Miracle of the Murray’.

By 1887, the Chaffey brothers had come ‘to terms with the governments of South Australia and Victoria for the use of the waters of the Murray to irrigate some of the parched land it traversed’, and ‘the legislative and engineering enterprise that used the waters of the Murray to produce such a Cornucopia’ had begun.

Settlers came by boat, cart, horse and on foot ‘from the four corners of the globe, socialists from the slums of cities, and soldiers home from the war’. They made their selection, and ‘shouldered the burden of pioneering the wilderness, faced the grim years

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89 Ernestine Hill, *op cit*, p1.
90 Sydney Wells, *op cit*, p1.
92 Ernestine Hill, *op cit*, p57.
in patience and persevering, shared the valiant hopes and the bitter disillusionments, and
the unending struggle that paves the way for success’.  

Ernestine Hill sums up her 1937 history of Mildura, *Water Into Gold*:

These were the dreamers of dreams, and great is their triumph.
Sixty-five thousand acres cut out in jewel-patches from the wilderness; fifty
thousand happy people where once was but the melancholy mallee; seventeen
settlements in 500 miles, coining the gold of the sun into fruits as golden - such is
the achievement of half a century, a brief span, less than a man’s life.
They paved the way in what has proved to be the most phenomenally successful
colonization of waste lands in closer settlement in the Commonwealth’s history,
an example to Australia, and a vindication of its vast silent spaces that are all too
lightly dismissed as deserts.  

Those vast silent spaces hardly existed, indeed, the ‘wilderness’ was a negative entity in
the minds of the colonisers, a terra nullius, vindicated only when it could provide the sort
of massive production which is typical of Western-style land management.  The
landscape appeared gradually more real as it was progressively harnessed and harvested.

Today the golden fruit of the sun is still being harvested, the most important crop being
grapes - where growers originally tried all possible fruits, with more trees than vines,
growing figs, apricots and peaches, and street names bearing witness to other varieties:
Cherry, Walnut, Lime, Orange, Lemon, Almond and Olive and a later Avocado, and a
Guava in Red Cliffs.  Grapes are dried as sultanas, and have been a major source of
income since a low river in 1893 killed all hope of getting the bounteous fresh fruit
harvest to market.  Wine grapes are still increasing in importance, being pressed and
processed in many wineries in Sunraysia and the South Australian Riverland, the first,
William Chaffey’s *Chateau Mildura*, crushing its first vintage in 1891, and in 1909, as
the Mildura Winery Company, now Mildara, setting up a large plant at Merbein (the
native name *Merebin* being wrongly spelled in tenure documents).  Grapes are also
produced as fresh fruit, carefully thinned out, sprayed, picked, packed and sent to markets
in Australia and overseas.

Wheat and sheep are the fruit of the un-irrigated land (its water coming down in an
irregular ten-inch-per-year rainfall), the ‘melancholy mallee’ having been stripped in the
early nineteen-hundreds by human and horse power and ingenious machines such as a
giant forty-five ton steam-driven traction engine now on show at Red Cliffs, the famous
*Big Lizzie*, which alone flattened and ripped 4000 acres of ‘close and dense scrub’.  

What is left of the Mallee is now protected in huge parks, such as the 6,330-square-
kilometer Murray Sunset National Park.  There are parks too in New South Wales,
although much of the land, still treed but threadbare, is still used as semi-arid grazing
land, with some areas growing fresh crops watered by the Darling River system.

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96 Video, *Vintage Sunraysia and the Mallee*, National Film and Sound Archives, Australia.
The landscape of the irrigated areas is still one of jewel patches, (iridescent yellow-green at bud-burst, full green in summer, gold in autumn, and in winter charcoal against red soil) in more or less regular blocks, lines of vines following the slight slopes of the land, gravity-fed water streams glistening amongst the rows - although many blocks are now sprayed with pumped water (water rights cost $1,000 a megalitre, delivery $4897), with the most up-to-date blocks98 being micro-drip irrigated, computers and sensors measuring each drop of the ever-more-scarce resource (and salt degradation being less likely as a consequence).

The Murray River, once the inland highway, has been blocked along its length by weirs and locks, Lock Eleven, counting from downstream to up, allowing boats through at Mildura. The pool above the weir makes irrigation much easier, but affects the river forests, the permanent water killing trees that were once flooded occasionally, resulting in what now seems a typical fringe of grey skeleton trees. These forests have for aeons provided shelter and wood, and more recently the fuel for the fires of paddle-steamers and pumping engines, and lumber for early buildings, fencing and trellises, and they still carry a few mighty trees, some with a canoe scar. Now that these river forests are somewhat protected, trees are mostly left to grow, and new stands of River Red Gums and Black Box are germinated as floods spread wide every few decades.

Trees are growing elsewhere too, in pockets of original mallee, murray-pine, box, and sandalwood, and in new plantings of ‘natives’.99 But the landscape has changed forever, and Mildura is now synonymous with the golden crops of cultivated landscapes.

The artists interpret the Text of the local landscape.

The Mildura landscape consists of both the ‘naturally’ rural and the cultivated rural. The artists know the cultivated landscape in an intimately practical way, only Yvonne Beyer has not worked consistently on a block. But however typically local a scene it is, the irrigated land is not usually the topic of their work, although André Schmidt has tackled this subject in small works and Stephen Hederics too has drawn the gnarled vines in close-up. But, as Joyce Smith says of common weeds, they are ‘just plants that everyone would see walking down the road, they were just growing everywhere, in Europe, England, America.’ There is a feeling that this type of introduced ‘countryside’ is not the

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97 There are three ways of trading in water: a capital cost of $1000 a megalitre - this right may be bought and sold even apart from the buying and selling of land; a delivery cost, for example by the First Mildura Irrigation Trust, of $45 plus levies such as a salinity levy which bring it to $48; and a trade of water throughout the growing season when a grower may sell the right to ‘spare’ water for $200-$30 (the later, the cheaper). Information from Dr John Cooke, Manager Flora and Fauna, North West Victoria, Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

98 Block and blocky derive from early days of selection when land was divided into rectangular blocks of land for farming.

99 The problem of reforestation is hampered by various factors such as the tendency of species to sucker rather than propagate through seed germination, compounded by the near annihilation of trees on large tracts of land; for example the Sandalwood which was a sought-after source of ‘pocket money’ from sales to Asia as blocks of incense - a typical sight in the decade before WW2 was a stack of the aromatic wood on local railway sidings; personal communication from Allan Scown, past owner of Kiera Station and present adviser to State and Federal conservation and land management councils such as Sustainable Land Use of the Western Division of NSW.
real landscape, that which gives Australians their national identity. The artists set out to search for the (now partially lost) wilderness, the melancholy Mallee, the waste lands, and the vast silent spaces of the deserts.

The super-cultivated landscape is passed by and the images painted by the local artists, the river, Mallee, gums, wildflowers, station buildings, creatures on outback farms and bush creatures, all partake in the quality of the mythological Outback, that quality which tourists hope to take back with them in the form of paintings such as those André Schmidt sells at his Mallee Gallery.

André Schmidt says about nature in general: ‘Nature can be very absorbing, and it can hold you to what’s there in front of you because it looks good.’ André is held by the light that illuminates bark, twigs, grasses, leaves, saplings, tree trunks, surfaces of water, red earth and white clay. To stand in front of one of his paintings is to breathe the air and smell the bush. His large paintings epitomise the experience of bush-ness, especially through texture: the lattice-work of twigs and branches at all angles, the dryness and brittleness of the vegetation which bars movement through it.

André Schmidt, *In the Bush*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 120x180 cm. (The bent tree was painted out in the version seen in the exhibition.) Photograph by Anne Hederics.

The genre of landscape painting may illustrate our liking for secure landscapes, our feeling that they are beautiful being ‘a mechanism that drove our ancestors into suitable habitats’, argues the cognitive scientist, Stephen Pinker. ‘The landscapes thought to be

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100 Anne-Marie Willis writes about mechanisms producing national identity: most important are the many visual images of the distinctive Australian terrain - these images never act in isolation, are always embedded in texts, intertexts, discourses and social practices, whether as illustrations or in art galleries, and are generally woven through high culture and popular culture; in *Illusions of Identity: the Art of A Nation* Hale and Ironmonger, Marrickville NSW, 1993, p27.

the loveliest … are dead ringers for an optimal savanna semi-open space (neither completely exposed, which leaves one vulnerable, not overgrown, which impedes vision and movement), even ground cover, views to the horizon, large trees, water, changes in elevation, and multiple paths leading out.102 Pinker adds, ‘The land itself must be legible, too. Anyone who has lost a trail in a dense forest or seen footage of sand dunes or snow drifts in all directions knows the terror of an environment lacking a frame of reference.’103

André Schmidt’s bush is saved from being terrifying by his intimate depiction of the differences not only between species, but even between same species trees, for example, the trunk of one young River Red Gum and another. The trunks become personages, recognisable, familiar, and the landscape touchable and legible.

André Schmidt, *Hillside - Marks and Colours*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 90x120cm. Photograph by Anne Hederics.

Attention to composition is another of André’s devices, an aesthetic order imposed on the random textures of the bush, and relating to the frame within which this piece of bush is secured. The track leading the eye is another strategy to give the viewer back a sense of ease, though in yet another work, André lets the track swoop away along low dark-pink-foliaged ground so freely, straight to the horizon, that he foils another element of environmental aesthetics: mystery. Pinker writes, ‘Paths bending around hills, meandering streams, gaps in foliage, undulating land, and partly blocked views grab our interest by hinting that the land may have important features that could be discovered by further exploration.’104 André Schmidt takes us to the edge of comfortable interpretation in his landscapes: his bush and open plain are beautiful, and beautifully depicted, but this beauty is not a formulaic picturesque quality. It leaves us with a tinge of the unease felt by the earliest colonists trying to find refuge, mystery, or familiarity.

Yvonne Beyer speaks about the ‘free’ attitude of Australian artists, which contrasts with attitudes of artists working in fraught places. The dense histories of ‘the old world’, and the tenseness of crowded cities contrast vastly with the spaciousness of Australian earth and skies - and moods of Australian artists:

There’s an easy-going attitude, and that comes across in paintings, because there’s an openness, a freeness. If you look at painters working in Berlin or somewhere where they feel a lot of pressure, where they feel pressure about pollution, overcrowding, and race issues, a lot of the work is emotional to the point of hysterical, but in Australia people seem to be relaxed and they can work more on developing the colour of the work, the aesthetics of the work within the subject matter or within their emotional story line or whatever is in the picture. Then there are the colours of the earth and the skies and the vegetation and the minerals - for example an opal. A lot of my colourful works are very like an opal and that would be something I’d like to achieve with paint too, eventually: to paint like an opal.

‘Free’ is an easy word for Australians to use. Even opals may be more or less freely mined - a license is needed, but almost anyone can get one. The landscape is free to a greater extent than anywhere else in the settled world. Despite our awful history of commandeering the ‘terra nullius’ we are still able to wander through most of the outback and we have access to most of the beaches. Four-wheel-drive-vehicle TV advertisements sell this freedom, showing the car flying into the air from the top of a sand hill, plunging into a creek, trailing dust through an empty desert, and climbing a rocky outcrop, all part of its off-road capabilities. The bush belongs to no single person in theory, or rather in myth.105 Signs keeping people out of ‘empty’ areas are a newly emerging crop, for example near Kakadu mining sites, although they have been up in military reserves and Aboriginal reserves for decades. And the recent revision of Native Title gives pastoral lessees much greater control over ‘public’ land than ever before.106

But there is still plenty of space to move. Flying over Australia at night shows the interior of the continent to be dark - as compared to the sulphurous glow of the US or Europe. The interior of the continent is almost empty. This emptiness results from the extremes of climate and terrain - and from these austere conditions has come the myth of freedom, as earlier came the great myths of Aboriginal dreaming - indeed the philosophy and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous peoples may be seen as a way of coming to terms with the country’s severities. The Aborigines were free to inhabit the continent only because they had developed intricate mythical relationships with each feature and creature in the landscape.

The Mallee has its own aura of harsh climate and semi-desert flora and fauna, as well as deserted ventures and scrap heaps (Aboriginal middens too). It is a tangible presence for

105 Georgia Beyer, long-time executive member of The North East Forest Alliance NSW, tells of ministries and departments of the environment preserving a few metres of roadside bush, a lot of the remainder being clear-felled as a consequence of policies which are every day again contested by environmentalists such as those of NEFA - who have recently added many stands of old-growth forest to the national heritage (for the time being).

Yvonne Beyer, and when she goes out into the desiccated landscape, she picks up scraps of it as if it were a treasure-trove, delighting in broken bits of ceramic, worn old wood, and rusty metal as if they were opal, ivory, and gold. Yvonne says of this landscape:

The thing about Mildura would be that, because of the dryness and the heat, you get those very worn, large areas where people have thrown rubbish or left rubbish lying around and because it’s dry, it is easy to wander around and pick things up and they don’t stink or anything because they’re dried out, so they are very sterile.

Some of the textures and particularly the colours of these discarded treasures are recycled in Yvonne Beyer’s paintings, which are not so much full of details as filled with the general mood of the worn down yet opalescent landscape.

Stephen Hederics is excited by encounters with the people, creatures and features of the outlying stations, in particular those around the Darling and the Anabranch Rivers. These stations are rich in all those overtones that we associate with the outback, and he finds his emotional as well as his intellectual faculties stirred by the noisy, smelly, humorous reality of the farming events that take place there:

Like when I went sketching, drawing shearsers at work, I elected to do that because I like the excitement that the action of the shearsers and the whole process of shearing created. So I knew I was going in there to draw shearing-type images, of men at work, of sweating, of sheep, of bleating, and of frightened eyes, and smelly wool, and barking dogs, and swallows flitting about the rafters, and the pinging of the corrugated iron roof. In that situation I’ve preselected it, and then I work with whatever happens in there. Initially, I might go in there to do a shearer shearing, but then I might glance down and I might see a dog underneath the classing table, or something, and I’ll find that a little bit humorous so I might focus on that and do that. Or I’ll go for a bit of a walk, and perhaps get that swallow in the corner, in its nest feeding the young - if they’re around at the time. Or the abstract nature of the whirring wheels might do that for me.
What affects Stephen is the full stereophonic, cinemascopic materiality of these local scenes, which are so typical of a way of life that they have become mythical. Stephen depicts these scenes with almost casual ease, capturing a moment of three-dimensional outback life on a two-dimensional piece of paper, while the moment itself slowly erodes into the background of farm life. Stephen describes the happenings in a day at one of the artists’ camps that he organises at one station:

We got the trailer, and we put hay on there so it had the station smell, and we went wide then. I got hold of Margaret who was the station owner’s wife. Margaret loves nature. She knows a lot about it, and she knows a lot about her area. I sat her in the back, and put the dogs in front with me, and a couple of them sat on the top of the Landrover, like kids, and out we charged into the wilderness, with the wind whistling through our hair, and again the promise of the next hill, and the next one. So we took them around and Margaret explained that was Old Man Emu Saltbush and this was Portulaca something-or-other, and this was Erection Hill, or Orgasm Hill or something. That was a bit intriguing. So we spent half a day looking and the landscape started to flood into them then. They saw this panorama, and of course they started to see clichéd paintings straight away. So after lunch a number of them elected to start painting; that was ok. So I let them do that. They painted, and we went to the salt-lakes. We didn’t know what we were going to find out there. We took mediums, watercolour and pads and charcoal and whatever, and just headed across the salt-lake. Just darted across, and on the way back we encountered cattle, and thought we’d draw some cattle. And because we’d stopped, and had hay on the back, a heap of horses bolted up and so we drew horses as well. So, you know, this sort of thing happens, and I love that.
Stephen Hederics, works made at Willow Point during a 1996 artists’ camp. Photograph by Anne Hederics.

Stephen Hederics loves the way all the elements come together so casually yet so fittingly, exactly as anyone might dream them up about a day on an outback station, and a day of being an artist in that setting. Even the names of plants and places have relevance in this dream. Impressions flood in, the artists are wide open to all the elements of that dream: Margaret the station owner, the Landrover, the dogs, cattle, horses, hay, hills, saltlakes, plants, the wind, and panoramas, and open also to the pictures that immediately come to mind. A non-artist, or perhaps even more so an artist, would add to the list of enchanted elements the artist’s media, watercolours, pads, charcoal, and the whole day’s worth of time in which to observe and respond as an artist.¹⁰⁷

Peter Peterson too is affected by intriguing details of his environment, and he tells many anecdotes about his travelling to-and-from on that most cultural of artefacts, the road, set in that most omnipresent reality, the indigenous landscape:

Everything I do, you look at it, everything is around you, all the things I’ve got, all the work - I’ve got. a couple of works around here - everything’s got the road spirit sort of thing in them. I’ve got a couple round here, those spirit sort of ones. This one’s weird, very weird, but it’s still the same thing, it’s the road again. … You see a lot of kangaroos coming back across the road, they never make it off the highway. People hitchhiking. Cars broken down on the highway. Everything is always happening along the highway.

¹⁰⁷ Such a day does not just happen, a lot of effort underlies it, in the case of the station people as well as of Stephen Hederics, who not only plans with care but remains open to happy surprises.
Peter also tells stories which evoke a life of growing up beside the Murray river. For example, he tells how it felt to be a little boy yabbying at the river’s edge:

> When I was a little fellow, I used to sit there, yabbying, and see the old paddle steamer come past, see all the waves that’s getting you, up against the water, you know what I mean, and you’d lose all your yabbies, and lines - you’d lose your little lines. That’s why I like the river, cause you just sit there, waves here, possums there. We used to eat a lot of possum, yeah, it’s good, I love it. We’d chuck em in a hole full, sit there and wait - it tastes nice, like chicken. I reckon it tastes like chicken.

For Peter Peterson the landscape has a rich textuality, he reads *it* rather than books about it, and it could tell him about the river people who were here long before Sturt first saw the river in 1830. It is much more for Peter than a place occasionally visited for painting trips or picnics. Peter Peterson has spent much time right inside the landscape, has tasted its food, knows the land and the river’s habits and their inhabitants and visitors. It is the physical setting of many of his experiences of growing up and learning how to survive and have fun. As an adult he still visits the river, although it is now more for time off deliberately sought, as it is for most Mildura people.

The landscape has a life-full of specific meanings for Joyce Smith, too. She has had her hands full of its soil and dabbled in its water. The local landscape has been her livelihood and her diversion. Now that she no longer owns a fruit block, Joyce has focussed her interest on the Mallee flowers, and goes driving and walking to find a particular species for her evolving record. She says, ‘Every new plant I found was an absolute treasure - to add to my collection.’
Joyce Smith, page from sketchbook, c 1995, depicting two forms of Mulla Mulla, watercolour on paper, 30x24 cm. Photograph by Anjelie Beyer.

Joyce Smith, more than any other artist in Mildura, is interested in the native flora left in the pockets of bushland and national parks and reserves, making it her mission to find and record as many Mallee wildflowers as she can. Like the artist John Wolseley, who also travels and searches for small and often inconspicuous subjects, Joyce Smith is moved to record these natural phenomena not because she may be the first, but because she may be ‘the last to see nature’s wonders in a world fast being ruined by industrialisation’.108

To the question, Why do you feel a need to do these? Joyce Smith says,

Probably because one day our flora will disappear, and I would like to have paintings of it so my grandchildren can look back, and think, ‘These plants grew in the Mallee at one time’. It’s for the future I’m really doing it. Plus the enjoyment of painting them. Which I do, I wished I had more time.

108 Jeffrey Makin, Wolseley’s fellow travelling artist, quotes Wolseley’s agenda, Meaning, Significance and the Sublime in the depiction of the Australian Landscape, Master of Arts Exegesis, Deakin University, 1995, p19.
Our landscape is criss-crossed, like a photographic record of decaying atoms, with the traces of professional and amateur explorers. The desire to explore this complex continent is one of Australians’ greatest urges since the first days of colonisation - and many millennia before that modern marker. It is our original mythical quest, more important to our idea of who we are than any search for a Golden Fleece, adding the tales of the early explorers to the great Aboriginal Dreamtime journeyings. But this great southern land, the island continent separate and self-sufficient till colonisation, is only slowly becoming ‘perceived, conceived, and received’ by its newcomers.

Each venture into the landscape from out of cities and familiar territories continues to be a mini-exploration as we seek new sites and features to gaze on: aesthetic prizes, jewels from nature’s vast treasure-trove. Mining and exploration go together; Broken Hill is the site of a lucky strike by a horseman travelling through. Gold and gemstones lure explorers to strange places, as in the case of Joyce Smith and her husband who have a digging-right at White Cliffs, the under-ground opal mining town north-east of Mildura. Joyce Smith has not given up her taste for prospecting, she seeks the treasures of the singular local flora, the finding of a new flower being the culmination of the quest, with the prize safely stashed in the fridge waiting to be transformed into a painted image.

The various versions of landscape - riverland, desert, Mallee and farmed land, and the creatures, spirits, and plants that live in those landscapes, its smallest details and largest spaces - all provide meaningful imagery for those who search for them. This meaning filters into the spaces between the everyday self and the great Australian identity.

Text ‘leaps’ into the topic at the moment of choosing.

The artists go out and select their favourite part of the Mildura landscape. Choosing a particular subject seems an easy thing to do: certain subjects are regarded as natural for artmaking while others are not considered, not even visualised. Choice is easily explained as a matter of preference; it seems almost as if there is no rule about choice of subject matter.

Stephen Hederics considers what underlies his choice of subjects. He says,

I select subjects, most of the time. Most of the time it’s something that appeals, something that intrigues, something that inspires, something that stimulates my artistic temperament. What’s the rule there? It’s not a conscious rule: ‘Draw that! Don’t draw that.’

But choosing a subject is an exercise in negotiating a maze of injunctions which already exist in the idea of the subject, leaping into the picture as soon as an artist conceives a certain image. To paraphrase Ross Gibson: the collection of subject matter has already proceeded, consciously or unconsciously, through selection, exemption, and combination in the instant of selection … the topic is already shaped subjectively precisely because it has been called a topic … so that interpretation may proceed.109 Even something as apparently straightforward a subject as a piece of landscape has textuality. Text is not

109 Ross Gibson, op cit, p115.
only the playground of semiologists; anyone who shares in the culture manipulates, consciously or not, the multiple messages in a work, of which one of the first considerations is the subject matter. Even a subversive reading\textsuperscript{110} is possible for landscape as subject, exposing romantic or patriarchal attitudes, for example in early depictions of the Australian landscape as an Arcadia peopled by noble savages.

Tim Bonyhady, in a meticulous account of the colonial landscape painters,\textsuperscript{111} writes about the presumptions of the early colonial painters, of whom probably only John Glover had seen Aborigines living their traditional lives:

Nevertheless, Joceph Lycett, John Skinner Prout and Eugene von Guérard as well as Glover all executed paintings in which they showed the Aborigines enjoying a bountiful, essentially arcadian existence of abundant food and ample leisure. The celebration in art of the prosperity and happiness of the Aborigines could have been intended as a criticism of the European civilization which had destroyed them. It seems, however, that these artists were not questioning the inevitability of the Aborigine’s destruction but were expressing a nostalgic attitude which developed only when the Aborigines were no longer a threat to the white settlers and were thought to be on the verge of extinction. Their paintings show the Aborigines in places from which they had been expelled and pursuing a way of life which they no longer enjoyed.\textsuperscript{112}

John Glover summed up the European encounter with Tasmanian Aborigines with a description of the Cataract near Launceston, written for an exhibition in England: it was ‘formerly a spot much frequented by the Natives for the purpose of Fishing, but they are now nearly extirpated.’\textsuperscript{113} Glover’s paintings bear out this disregard of the fate of the Aborigines as they nostalgically depict the Aborigines in park-like landscapes for the local and overseas art market. Aborigines being murdered by settlers would be rejected as a improper subject for a painting.

John Glover’s Arcadia was as much in his mind’s eye as in front of his eyes. When an artist begins to paint, some of the work’s eventual textuality goes into the decision to paint a particular topic. The Text of the eventual painting is being negotiated at the same time that the subject is being chosen.

The Mildura artists, when they think about it, are aware of the Text that a subject can bring with it. Stephen Hederics considers the guidelines that affect choice. In answer to the question about the effect of social rules, Stephen says,

Yeah, I think that comes into it. Because, with your upbringing, there are certain taboos and the conscious morality of church, and your upbringing, That’s got to be incorporated in your work. It’s there, it’s a little bit like undressing in public, you can only go so far and then you feel awkward. I think with subject matter too, with stuff that you know that is going to be exposed to other people, yes, you are

\textsuperscript{110} Roland Barthes uses such a reading of ‘The Blue Guide’, a travel guide which ‘hardly knows the existence of scenery except under the guise of the picturesque’, ‘The Blue Guide’, Mythologies, op cit, p81.


\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, pp23-24.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, p29.
conscious. With stuff that isn’t, I think not. There are times that I know that I’m going to tear something up, then I might go all silly and do all sorts of strange imagery, and it’s probably a nice release. With stuff that is to be viewed by others, knowingly, I think that does have subconscious rules governing.

André Schmidt ponders the cultural implications of a work’s topic, the many textual codes which the artist takes into account and which influence choice:

I suppose there’s subjects that are difficult, for various reasons, to paint. There’s some subjects that are traditional, subjects that have been painted forever. They are easy to look at. And there’s no taboo associated with them. Other subjects are more difficult - more difficult to paint simply because you might be inhibited in some way in the way you think about them yourself, so you just don’t want to do them. That’s perhaps a little bit weak, but that’s probably the way a lot of us think. We don’t paint things because we wonder what other people might think. Taboo is only in your own mind, often, but then there’s taboos associated with the society. Sexual type scenes, that sort of thing. You could think of anything you like really. You could think of so many different things that you wouldn’t paint just because they are simply disgusting. Then again, a lot of people wouldn’t paint landscapes, because they think they are pretty ordinary subject matter.

André concludes this train of thought with: ‘of course there’s things you wouldn’t paint, because to you they wouldn’t appeal. To you they wouldn’t make a painting. You couldn’t imagine them being the subject of a painting.’

The ‘pretty ordinary subject matter’ is no less filled with textuality than what might be considered extraordinary subject matter, something taboo, or disgusting. As André Schmidt says, the traditional, the easy-to-look-at, and the non-taboo subjects appeal, make a suitable topic for a painting and, most importantly, can be conceived as the subject of a painting. Artists and viewers can appreciate the shades of difference within the expectations of the accustomed genre.

Barthes throws light on this from another angle: the unacceptance of much ‘modern art’. He speaks of ‘the “boredom” experienced by many in the face of the modern (“unreadable”) text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, play it, open it out, set it going’.

As Stephen Hederics says, what we like about the bush is its accessibility, its ‘fundamental tree-root quality’. Stephen says,

That’s the sort of quality I like to work with. That’s why I like to take people out the bush, because I enjoy the bush life, the quality. And I think, I still reckon, that most men especially, romantically connect themselves to the land, to the wide open spaces here, rather than pigeon-holing in the cities.

The artists choose their favourite aspect of this bush life, usually regarding their choice as unconstrained, not needing to visualise any other possible choice of subject matter because their choice seems as fundamental as a tree-root.

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114 Roland Barthes, ‘From Work to Text’, *op cit*, p163.
The artists make both considered and unforeseen choices of topic.

But while the choice of subject matter is basic to the process of their artmaking, the way of going about finding it seems not to matter so much to the artists. They seem casual about the way a subject turns up in their awareness, and quite confident that something will present itself, even if they are looking in the wrong spot. The purpose and the subject will collide, and if one subject proves to be unavailable, another one may tap at the artists’ open mind. The artist is set on doing some artmaking, likes to go out into the landscape to get some subject to hang the art on, and knows that there will most likely be something that is good enough for the amount of effort to be spent on it. More than one particular image will serve. Joyce Smith says about some simple weeds she found growing along her road, ‘They were just a subject, I suppose.’

Because he already has his mind set on painting in the local landscape, André Schmidt is ready when something appears that stimulates him. Even the same subject can serve him more than once, André, being changed himself, will paint a different work, and his focus will be changed, and so will the indefinable textuality that is added during his excitement with that particular session of painting.

André explains how casually he chooses the subject matter for his paintings, and why an unplanned subject or one he has painted before will serve him as well:

It just appears. There’s nothing really special about that. You can go looking for something - very rarely find it - and in the process of looking for that, you find something else. And that’s what you paint. If you do look for something, often it’s something that you’ve painted before, and you know that it’s going to work out. That’s taking the easy way out, painting something you’ve done before, or something similar. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s all part of the painting process. Probably the reason I would do that is because I’m having trouble finding something to paint. Something is not coming forward. And so I will drive to a place or go somewhere where I know there’s good subject matter - because I’ve probably painted the same thing half-a-dozen times already - and paint that, just so that I can be involved in the painting process. Which is good. That’s what an artist enjoys, I think. As much as anything, it’s the painting process. And even though you’re painting the same scene you might have painted half-a-dozen times before, the result is going to be different anyway, because so many things have happened between then and now, between all the other times you’ve painted it and now. You’ve changed so much, or changed so suddenly, or whatever, it doesn’t matter, you’re going to be different. That’s one way of finding your subject. And the other way is to just stumble upon it, and to enjoy that part of the painting process, painting something new.

Stephen Hederics has much the same thoughts as André Schmidt on how he chooses his topic. It is there to be found, or rather, it may be found anywhere, so he just starts somewhere. He says, ‘There are different ways of choosing subject matter. If you’re thinking commercial, then you choose according to what you think will sell. If you’re making art for yourself, you just start somewhere. As I said before, you probably pick something that intrigues you, that you enjoy.’ Later Stephen sums up the interaction
between subject and search: ‘Sometimes I choose it, and sometimes it chooses me by its being there.’

Peter Peterson describes how he chooses his subjects from the layered environment around him when he is by the river. Peter does not merely absorb those images that he sees but envisages new images not directly connected to landscape itself: ‘What I want to’. Then he recalls them when he wants to paint in the studio:

> In my mind all I’ve got are pictures. I’ve got pictures of things. When I look at a cloud, I can make a picture of it. When I go down the river, I will look around and I’ll see pictures of things, what I want to. What I do is, I lay back and quickly draw pictures, and then I paint it. When I’m down the river, thinking about the pictures, I’ll keep the picture in my head, and when I come home, and when I start painting, I’ll draw that same picture that I’ve seen down the river.

When Peter Peterson says, ‘What I see is what I draw,’ he means that he selects with his mental eye from his visual store, not just the landscape, but images about events in his life, his experiences and his dreams. Already, on the screen of his mind, Peter’s images are suffused with textuality, they are filled with cultural associations which he has gathered, consciously or not. Peter explains some of the back and forth movements of the associations of his images:

> What sort of pictures are they?
> Mainly with girls - with the back of their hair, like angels - you get people who look like angels. I’ve never seen their face, so I just draw the back of their hair. I like a woman’s back of the hair, going down, like in this picture here: so you get the hair
down to here, you get a moom<sup>115</sup>, you get the foot, the lizard, and the hand, you get walkabout, hands, tears, goanna. That’s all about myself, that’s on my skin [tattoo]: walkabout, tears, woman with the angel’s, with the woman’s hair. You know a paddle-steamer when you see the waves coming by? That’s what it looks like. When you go on a boat and you see the waves behind the boat, that reminds you of the woman’s back of the hair: it’s all wavy, down to the moom. You see some hair and it’s nice and straight, but when you see a wavy one, wavy right down to her moom, that’s nice, you know what I mean, that is nice. ’Cause you’re looking at the back of a boat, it’s a wave - or you’re looking at the back of her hair, it’s a wave, same thing. So if you go down to see a paddle-steamer, you see nice waves behind the paddle-steamer that remind you of hair.

Peter Peterson’s other subjects include the animals found in the landscape, a kangaroo, a cod, a snake, and also creatures that may be seen by the imaginative eye such as long, thin, horizontally suspended spirit people hovering over a roadside and big faces looming out of darkness. These creatures present themselves to Peter, and he interprets their meaning with a story:

The faces? As you’re driving along the highway by yourself, you think somebody is looking at you all the time, you feel weirdy, you feel real spooky like somebody is watching you all the time. You see the trees. You see a bird, you always see a bird when you are driving, always eagles, or crows. Every time you see something on the road, splattered. You see somebody sitting there looking at you as you are driving along. You see trees and branches, everything fallen down funny - like on a real hot day - there’s no wind - you see trees cracking down, fallen down, blown over. Where it’s fallen, there will always be a bird around it, or next to a signpost. ... When you travel, when you’ve got a long way to go, you think ‘I hope nothing happens’, so you drive along, and you feel yourself tensing up, all goosy. It’s a strong spirit sort of thing.

And Peter, perhaps more than any of the other artists, aims to make clear the significance which he knows exists in these images of people and creatures, and their context of bush, road, and river. Choosing his subjects with the aid of his sense of both familiarity and a feeling of strangeness within the landscape, he welds his knowledge of Aboriginal cultural codes and Western ones. He sees limits within which he needs to keep, and possibilities that are open to him. For example, Peter does not feel bound to treat the picture plane as a window on visual reality. Therefore he has more freedom with his subjects and for example they may be arranged in relation to each other, such as two kangaroos, one inside the other. As for his limits, they are for one thing related to what he has learned regarding Aboriginal topics and styles which he may not consider as they do not belong to him. For another, Peter would agree that there are subjects that are not suitable for a work of art within the Western tradition from which Peter Peterson has also - as a result of the loss of a lot of his Barkindji culture - taken his cues.

Yvonne Beyer also stays mainly within those two subject categories, figure and landscape. She speaks of two demands, a need to express and a desire to capture, but at the same time she makes prosaic choices of subject because they have a comfortable

<sup>115</sup> Moom means bum (and Moomba means Up your bum, not Celebration of the People as Lin Onus and friends advised the organisers).
textuality, or while ‘just being creative’ she invents a narrative from the emerging colours, shapes, textures, and juxtapositions, and uses a title as a clue to that narrative:

Some artists find something they can do and they just stick to that. I find the figure very comfortable to paint. I battle with some pictures, and some of them are disastrous, but to me that’s the price of putting something on the canvas that is meaningful to me. The figures stem from an inner need to express, and the landscapes are something I’m trying to capture. They are two different things, really. Although with the textiles, they just came from a fairly primitive desire to create. I was just being creative and that was the medium I used, because that was suitable - with the patches of colour and some small details, and you could look at it from what would appear to be an aerial perspective. You didn’t have to worry about tone or perspective, because it was just textures. I was taking things, fabric or colour, that appealed to me, and I was putting it together to make something that was an art object on its own and that then, when other people looked at it, they shared the narrative I’d created and further indicated with a title.

Yvonne Beyer goes out into the landscape to find something for her art as the others do; for Yvonne it is sometimes a real bit from out of the landscape, which may seem like rubbish but which can be given new meaning, and transformed into a visual gem. In the exhibition paintings there is a similar quality of visually mooching along, evoking landscape with rich colour loosely brushed onto a cream, ultramarine, or sienna ground.

![Three Trees](image)

Photograph by Anjelie Beyer

But Yvonne does not want complete effortlessness; she finds pleasure in the search for potential textuality where other people may see none. Yvonne prefers to be a *bricoleur*, a rag-picker, rather than a spotless photographer. She contrast her sort of gathering with the capturing by photography:

I’ve done photography and I found it extremely easy to find good things to take photos of, and there was absolutely no more challenge there, so I didn’t take it any further. There is a bit more challenge in finding something on the ground which you can remove, or at a tip. There is also the issue of stopping something going to waste by giving it a new life, and that appeals to me a lot: something that people
might think is just complete rubbish and not even look at. And you can re-enter it into the world as an object of interesting visual impact.

The scrap becomes a little icon of recycling and revaluing. This recycling, seen in the art of the Cubists and Dada artists early in the century, and persisting as avant-garde and postmodern or ‘transavantgardist’ practice to the end of the century, is described, for example by Michael Newman: ‘Bricolage might be seen as a possible paradigm for the constitution of the ‘decentred’ subject and its products, and more specifically the collections of quoted images and appropriated fragments which make up the postmodernist art work.’

Yvonne Beyer’s ‘arrested consumption’, her fascinated collecting, seeks ‘a nearness-within-distance’ during which ‘she does not see properly speaking what she sees. Rather it touches her in an immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws her close, even though it leaves her absolutely at a distance,’ to paraphrase Maurice Blanchot.

Yvonne’s use of found objects has an earlier antecedent too, the practice of *spolia*, which Philip Fisher describes as the Roman practice of taking over the fragments and broken pieces of Greek architecture and building with them without regard for their original purpose. Yvonne Beyer re-presents these practices – though she is not so solemn about it as these descriptions might suggest - at the same time that she quotes the culture in the scrap, and the landscape in the scrap’s formal properties: colour, form and texture.

The smallest elements of the bush which Joyce Smith collects are also filled with significance. In answer to *Which particular flowers are you interested in?* Joyce Smith says, ‘The little ones. I’m not interested in the gums, or bottlebrushes, or any of those, I like the small, low-growing natives. They are all unique, they really are.’ Like the others, she goes out into the landscape to find a subject and, like the others, she is prepared when a subject appears:

> Crimson Foxtail, that one appeals to me. I just love the shape, the shapes of the stems. It was growing at the edge of the road where it was getting all the dust from all the traffic. Coming back from Mungo, my husband was driving and I said, ‘Stop! Stop! Stop! There’s some flowers!’

But Joyce Smith is also more of a detective searching in suitable places and seasons, and for particular specimens. For example, when the local Art Group goes landscape painting Joyce goes on a search for a suitable plant:

> That’s the little Nardoo. The Art Group went to Merbein, to paint the river, the gums, and all the rest of it, and I go looking for plants, and someone will call out, ‘Oh. Where’s Joyce gone?’ I came back with the Nardoo. The next day I painted

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117 Ibid, p46.
120 Maurice Blanchot quoted in Michael Newman, *op cit*, p45.
it. I love the way it changes colour where it’s dying for lack of water. And I thought ‘Well, I must get that’.


Joyce’s descriptions of the searches for her unique subjects are little narratives, each about the finding of a particular new flower. The stories themselves are full of codes about this area, the place-names, for example, that evoke several landscapes: that of the Aborigines, the Mallee and its plants and creatures, the settlers, the infrastructure crews, and the geographers, (Meridian Road lies on the 142nd meridian of longitude). Even the plants’ Latin names describe a landscape of Old World botanists making sense of the New World, for example the Dampiera Rosemarinifolia, called after the familiar leaves of the Rosemary (alluding too to the Catholic mother of God) and to the English pirate and explorer for the Admiralty, William Dampier, who landed on the north and later the west Australian coasts three hundred years ago (not much liking what he found).122 Joyce is familiar with the different landscape Texts evoked in her descriptions, and adds her own conservationist meaning:

That’s a Dampiera Rosemarinifolia. It comes in three different colours, and it suckers, which is great. I’ve got it on the edge of the built-up logs in my garden, and it’s starting to weep over the logs, it’s a beautiful pink-coloured flower. When

we drove to Bronzewing, the blue one - there’s masses of it along the road, because
they sucker and grow everywhere - that was on the left-hand-side of the road, and
then we walked across the road to the railway line and the flowers were growing
along the edge there, and I thought, ‘Oh, the flowers that are destroyed by putting a
fire break along the line.’ Then I was speaking to a lady from the nursery last week,
and they went to the Sunset Country where it grows, the blue one - probably all of
them - and she said that the kangaroos had been eating it all. And I thought, ‘I’m
restricted to getting a couple of cuttings and the kangaroos are eating it!’

I found this one - do you know the Mallee at all? the Settlement Road and the
Meridian Road? - well, I found this one on the Meridian Road. It grows from a
bulb so I didn’t feel so guilty about picking this one, because I knew that it would
regrow. And there’s lots of that Eremophila in that area.

This one: Sue came home for Christmas a couple of years ago, and we said, ‘We’ll
go down to Psyche and have a look at the pumps, and we were driving along the
river, Sue was driving, and I said, ‘Stop! Stop! Stop!’ and Sue said, ‘Well, Mum’s
found a flower.’ This was the Eremophila that was growing along the river, it was
all around the Billabong, the Psyche area, everywhere, and I was so thrilled,
because this was Christmas-time.

And that’s an interesting little plant; I thought it was a weed, but it’s an Australian
carrot. I drove to Hattah on my own one day, I just stopped where I wanted to, and
coming back, I walked down an embankment, and as I was walking back, an Ajuga,
a pink one, was growing on that embankment. It is very rare, so I’m very pleased
about it. I haven’t used it in a painting yet, it’s a bit large.

That’s the Climbing Saltbush. I’ve used that in a painting, it’s so interesting. I
found this little blue one - it was climbing up a Mallee tree - that was in South
Australia but it was still Mallee country. I have used this because actually I count
this as a Victorian wildflower, but then it does stretch into South Australia.

As well as the particular local references - the Dampiera Rosemarinifolia is just one
element of the many meanings which may be teased out of a little plant’s name:
religious, geographical, cultural, etymological, grammatical, literary messages - Joyce’s
subjects carry many other cultural codes.

In particular, there are the many myths, rituals, and practices woven around flowers –
these derive not only from Western but also from Aboriginal and other societies - flowers
used for their healing (or harming) magical or medicinal qualities, flowers as a language
of symbols, flowers as designs in the many textile crafts from weaving to embroidery,
and flowers for personal wear or public show on a small or grand scale.

The useful flower is closely linked to women’s creativity in the past. Even when many
subjects were not generally assumed to be suitable for women or available to them
because of constricted space or time - and this assumption of suitability or lack of
opportunity is not unknown today - the flower was one subject that women could always
Flowers are small, as Yvonne Beyer says, and ‘you bring them into your house and sit them on your table,’ and they become part of the domestic domain.

Within this domain there were (and are) work - and artmaking - habits which have become attached to women’s identities. Anne Cranny-Francis writes, ‘Women’s and men’s identities tend to contain deep assumptions about what work is proper and possible for each gender.  Women’s own identity often contains a notion of “femininity”). Being so readily part of the personal and domestic sphere, and with its connotations of cyclical fertility and beauty, the flower has been a suitably ‘feminine’ topic for women’s art, providing a usually modest, but also potentially subversive topic for the female version of art work.

As well as all these interesting ‘feminine’ root-stocks, Joyce Smith’s flowers also have a particular Australian basis: the botanical painting genre which records the unique Australian flora, epitomised by studies made during the first years of the eighteen-hundreds by the great botanical artist, Ferdinand Bauer.

The artists create metaphors for the Australian ethos.

The local artists are familiar with their subjects and are at ease with the Texts that their subjects already carry. They are not tourists gazing at a picturesque landscape - perhaps landscapes are never an easy subject for amazed tourists who have not had time to grasp what they are seeing. Making paintings is like making a metaphor, a process which, Ross Gibson writes, is a kind of ceremony celebrating the instantaneous creation of an intelligible meaning where it did not exist a moment before. Gibson says, ‘Making metaphors is a process of naming - one needs to feel a proprietorial right to do it.’ And perhaps the artists feel they have certain obligations as well as rights, such as to depict their subject as well as possible, to look deeply with adoration (as Tim Winton says).

At the same time as being singular Mildura subjects, the five artists’ subjects are part of what we think of as the Australian ethos, whether it is the national emblem the kangaroo, or any of the other typical images, the corrugated iron shed, wildflowers, sheep, the opalescent colour, or gum trees. ‘A tree is a tree. Yes, of course,’ says Barthes. But it is laden with ‘a type of social usage which is added to pure matter’. The gum tree - a common name for the Eucalypt, of which there are 400-500 recorded species and many

123 Anne Middleton Wagner speaks about the twentieth-century female position which is unfixed yet closely regulated, and involves thoughts and perceptions to which women themselves fall heir despite themselves, in Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, for example p8.
125 The US artist Judy Chicago (known for The Dinner Party collaborative project) has made art and written a book about the flower as subject, emphasising its textuality as a radical and undercover symbol of female sexuality and solidarity, Through the Flower: my struggles as a woman artist, (Introduction by Anais Nin), Anchor Books/Doubleday, Garden City New York, 1982.
126 CD, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998
127 Ross Gibson, op cit, p35.
128 Ibid, p35.
129 Roland Barthes, Mythologies, op cit, p18.
subspecies, and some naturally occurring hybrids\textsuperscript{130} - is as full of cultural messages as it is of leaves. We see Hans Heysen’s great mazes of creamy limbs and Albert Namatjira’s white candelabra against pastel rockfaces; we throw a handful of gum leaves into our billy when making tea in the open, welcome the smell of a campfire in winter and dread the smell of burning bush in summer; we sing about the shade of a Coolibah Tree and decry wood-chipping. The tree is a tree, but what a tree! and the sheep is a sheep, but what a sheep! and so with the outback buildings, the colours of the land, the varied and intricate wildflowers, the kangaroo - all these already carrying Australia on their back. These are subjects significant enough for these artists.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{andre-schmidt-tree-group-1996-acrylic-on-canvas-900x1200-cm.jpg}
\caption{André Schmidt, \textit{Tree Group}, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 900x1200 cm, Photograph by Anne Hederics.}
\end{figure}

Chapter 3: The artists’ engagement in artmaking

Many social, psychological, aesthetic, and procedural Texts accompany the works of these (and all) artists. If the artists did not say very much about their art’s Text, they surely painted their messages. The first thing to do to see the Text in the artmaking of the five artists is to look at the art.¹³¹

There is a difference between art and artmaking. However, the act of making art (and of looking at art) is inherent in the art itself: the concept of art hardly has meaning without the accompanying concept of careful engagement in the process of artmaking.

‘Excellence’ is an important Text in artmaking.

A fundamental Text in artmaking is attention to correct process. The local artists share with artists in many other societies the aim to create as good a piece of work as they are capable of - to follow a correct process to a good outcome, however much the processes and outcomes may differ.¹³²

Much Aboriginal art too is created with attention to correct process - which is not only the authorised designing but also the choice of artist who may carry out the design, ‘not from particular notions of skill or talent … but as a result of certain negotiated positions within systems of inherited rights and obligations,’ as writes the ethnographer, Eric Michaels.¹³³ In contrast to a European definition, Aboriginal expertise means a joint effort in maintaining the social-spiritual system. ‘By necessity, the authority of this system would be compromised by an ideology of invention that singled out individual producers.’¹³⁴

Expertise involves predetermined procedures: the artists subsume their skills to the purpose of the design. ‘Religious images and designs, when applied to any surface … have the power to transform the nature of the thing from a mundane state to an extraordinary one, from the profane to the sacred. In ceremony, people’s bodies and objects are taken from a dull state to one of brilliance by the application of paint and designs,’ writes Wally Caruana.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Reproductions of the artworks can give an impression if not the actual presence of the art.
¹³² Correct process need not produce a great piece of work to get a result, for example the Jah Hut of the Malai Peninsula make small, crude, sticklike, wooden effigies of disease-causing beings, bes, with only a few stylised features to determine the particular species of bes, then use them in healing seances, destroying them along with the trapped soul of the bes - as described by the social anthropologist Signe Howell, in ‘Art and Meaning’, The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art, pp213-237; (introduced and compiled by Susan Hiller), Routledge, London and New York, 1993 (1st Edition 1991), p229.
¹³⁴ Eric Michaels, op cit, p147.
Careful practice, not just as a means to an end but as important in itself, is demonstrated also in the making of a Tibetan mandala, ‘an intricate circular geometric design where deities symbolically live’. For twelve days three or four Tibetan monks construct a Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) Sand Mandala, tapping narrow funnels to place precise amounts of coloured sand into extremely complex figures, observing twenty-five centuries of tradition. Hundreds of deities are invoked and pure peace is experienced. Afterwards, the sand painting is poured into a river to bring healing to its creatures. The work of art is in the ‘work’ of making, and the product is much more than a beautiful image, it is the sublimation of the meticulous effort into social and spiritual benefits.

André Schmidt sums up expertise in straightforward terms: ‘I think there is only one rule associated with expertise, and that is that you’ve got to try and get better at it. The only rule that applies is that you’ve - hopefully - got to become more of an expert.’ (André then rethinks this definition and adds: ‘Though sometimes I think it might be good to go backwards. … That’s simplifying life, isn’t it, simplifying life. Whether simplification goes with expertise, I’m not sure.’). ‘Trying and getting good at what you’re doing’ is the Text in most art forms, in the Aboriginal sparkling surface as well as the twelve days of mandala creation, and it is the invisible frame around most Western art.

While expertise inheres in different versions of artmaking for the five artists, they all assume the importance of refining their skills and knowledge, and they continue to work at improving further. The artists speak in terms of labouring, putting in time, developing skill, working hard. The pains-taking is an intrinsic part of their artmaking, and the aim of all the effort is to be good. ‘Good’ is a suitable term for the combination of integrity of purpose and the excellence the five artists demonstrate.

‘Good’ is what Peter Peterson uses in contrast to ‘rubbish’. Peter says, ‘Somebody said ‘that’s alright’, some said ‘that’s good’, but also somebody reckoned I’ve got good work, totally different, but it’s good - seeing that when I first started off it was rubbish …’. Peter ‘used to chuck the paint’ but he ‘kept on painting, kept on painting’, and now is satisfied that he can bring out his images with ‘the hand, the back of the brush, the fine brush, and scratches’, and with ‘two different styles - slow and fast’.

Yvonne Beyer’s ‘good’ is about remaining faithful to a certain reality, and ‘good’ as opposed to ‘horrible’. She says, ‘What I would really like to do when I’m really good is to sit down and work from a landscape, to be able to translate it directly into a flat plane of colour and texture, without having to diminish the realism of it, so that it is not judged as a realist painting.’ To do this well, she strives to compose a limited set of elements, especially soft fields of colour. This is aesthetic labour. Yvonne says, ‘I work hard on the colour, but that’s more of an aesthetic judgement - you obviously don’t want your painting to look horrible, because that would be completely the wrong point.’

‘Good’ for André Schmidt is an outcome of mental and emotional labour. André studies art texts, he reads and writes art philosophy, and he practices in his studio or in the landscape for long sessions:

137 Ibid, p82.
If you have a problem and then you all of a sudden find the answer - you might be feeling pretty flat and feel like you want to have a sleep - but as soon as you find something that changes your direction from not so good to really good, well then you lift up your spirits and labour on pretty well.

For Joyce Smith, being good comes from developing her knowledge of plants and her skills of depicting them. She appreciates it when her expertise is acknowledged by other experts, and uses this acknowledgement as stimulus to continue her improvement. People seemed to be interested in what I was doing, and they would chat to me about various plants, and also where I went to find my plants. Especially if I talked to someone who went bush the same as myself, and went to areas where I normally go - I found that very interesting - and they knew names as well as I did. Dr Dowty was one, which I thought was very helpful, and surprising. It made me realise that before I just had the Art Group members to ask about my plants and they weren’t that interested in the bush, in my plants. They liked to see my work, but I’d mention names and they wouldn’t mean anything to them. But with someone who is knowledgeable about plants, it made a great difference to me. It gave me more confidence to continue with my sketches. Therefore I think I will put more time into my sketches.

Stephen Hederics explains expertise as both as the maturing of an art person’s natural ability to focus, and as gathered through years of interested effort to respond: You pick skills up through interest. You observe, and then you copy, and then you try and see if you like the particular skill - if you’re talking about skill of what? the skill of drawing, skill of looking, what sort of skill? Art skill? The potential to look and see is always there. I think an art person is different in that sense because they have this ability to focus and to see detail, and to feel detail, and to respond to it in a unique sort of way, which is artistic. The skill develops. It develops through your years of growing up, of being exposed to different people, to different environments, situations. That’s basically how it works, I think.

As well as taking up informal learning, four of the artists have attended formal art courses. Stephen Hederics completed a Diploma of Graphic Design at Swinburne. Yvonne Beyer graduated from Melbourne State College with a four year art teaching degree. André Schmidt had Mildura High School plus Mildura Technical College art education. Peter Peterson attended a Koorie Art course at Sunraysia College of TAFE.

Despite this formal education, the artists stress that they gained their skills mainly through constant self-directed practice and informal learning. Yvonne Beyer says in answer to *How did you learn your skills?:* ‘By practice, mostly. Maybe by observation of other people’s work. I certainly didn’t learn it at college.’ Despite Yvonne’s disclaimer, formal education would have provided at least the opportunity to observe and practise.

Peter Peterson’s account of his experiences at TAFE illustrate that formal education does provide opportunities: immediate realisation of how important art is deemed to be, and introduction into the formalities of the art studio. The different disciplines in the studios struck Peter especially:
When I was first at TAFE, I didn’t know there were artists there doing that sort of thing, I didn’t know nothing about it. That’s the first time I went to TAFE, and there’s a lot of things I didn’t know. I learned a lot of things. I learned through watching all the other people painting, through watching how they paint. The main thing that got me was there were about four, five rooms of painting, I didn’t know there were skills, all sorts of skills, all artists here and there, young ones and old ones, I didn’t know there were art skills.

Whether or not formal education has had very much effect is perhaps not important because there is no stage when education stops and all has been learned. Each work, each time again, is the culmination of the informal and formal learning up to that point. Each artwork is a test, and the artist is the first and most pertinent examiner of the new work. André Schmidt says,

But you’ve never really finished of course, in painting. To a certain extent, you sneak up on that: ninety percent, then ninety-five percent, then ninety-eight percent balance. Then you might say, ‘Well I’m not going to go any further. I’ll try something new, and hopefully get to the hundred percent a bit quicker. Put this one aside for awhile, and work on it by point-one percents until it gets to the hundred percent.’ Which it never will. You never create the perfect painting. I’m sure most artists would say that. A lot of people will tell you that it’s perfect, but that doesn’t mean a thing if you don’t think it is. Because it’s my painting, I like to get it perfect - for myself.

André Schmidt explains his expectations further:

My involvement with painting is to try and get the painting to look, just simply, so that I’m happy with it, so that it’s pleasing to my eye. I think that’s what any artist does in the end. It doesn’t matter what the result is, as long as it’s pleasing to the artist. That’s what counts.’ Each artwork has a particular point when it is ‘right’. André Schmidt explains how important is the finishing of a work, how much concentration goes into getting close to the ideal.

The other artists too speak about the measures they take to perfect their work and of how they are the most fastidious viewers of the work. Yvonne Beyer is the first judge:

You kind of hope that somebody looking at it will think, “Oh that is nice”, that it will be famous, but you please yourself. ... If I thought that I was going to live by myself in the desert, I would still do it. ... The stuff that sells the best is the stuff that I’m happiest with to start with, and if I start to do stuff that I think will sell, it doesn’t. In no way do those ones sell better than the other ones. I’ve tried to do things just for a commercial reason, to make money, but I’m never happy with it. I’m not happy with the quality of the work and it generally takes a long time to sell, if I’m brave enough to sell it.

It is for her own satisfaction that Joyce Smith goes to great lengths to paint the Mallee flowers. To a question about her choice of the small Mallee wildflowers, Joyce says,

Yes, but not to the extent of the actual detail, full detail, not a full botanical study, because I would have to use a magnifying glass, which I don’t want to do. I just paint what I can see with my glasses, because I’m not painting for it to be sold, for people to go out in the bush and look for their flowers, to use my painting and
check it for accuracy I suppose you would say, because I’ll never be doing that, I’ll just paint for pleasure. And as near as possible, which is difficult because I use very, very fine brushes. It is very hard. ... I try to be as exact with my colours as I can, that’s one rule. It’s important to me, but whether it’s important to anyone else, I don’t really know, because a lot of people couldn’t see these flowers, they wouldn’t know them - if they looked at them in books they’d be a completely different colour anyway. It’s just that I try to do that.

Stephen Hederics talks throughout his interviews about how necessary it is for an artist to be intensely involved in the process of making art. This involvement reflects the artist’s emotions as well as intellect:

I guess anything that involves emotion I respond very well to, whether it is a happy situation, like here at the Show, or out in the sticks; whether it is a flying bird - still birds aren’t any good to me. I’ve got to have them flying, I’ve got to have a moving target, I’ve got to have maximum saturation for my art character ...

And somewhere along the line if you find a genius who lets go, undoes the bungey rope, and flies, that’s the real artist. Everything else, you know is going to happen. Even though its a thrilling sensation, it’s when you let all of those ties go, and start making your art, it’s a wonderful feeling. And that’s the feeling I was trying to express before: when I get into the flight of the bird, when I get into the rhythm of the horses, beyond the image of the horse, I’m feeling the heartbeat almost, drawing them and painting them like that. That’s when fantastic art happens. You don’t even question it.

‘Fantastic art’! This is Stephen’s aim, and the aim of the other local artists and probably of artists everywhere. Whatever form ‘fantastic’ might take at any time, it is the expectation of art schools, the topic of art writing, and the condition of art prizes.

Even a postmodernist who may reject other aspects of art tradition assumes the need for taking care. In a conversation between Jenny Holzer and Diane Waldman, Jenny Holzer presses the point:

... The posters had to be brightly coloured and to be pure squares so that people would want to come up to them. It’s just taking care.

DW: And it’s seduction.

JH And seduction. Careful seduction.138

‘Careful seduction’ is a sign – and a Text - of art taking place, and the careful seducer is the artist at work.

**Engagement with art is a reward in itself.**

Satisfaction derives from engagement with artmaking as it absorbs the artist’s time and concentration. It can hardly be performed with anything less than full concentration.

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Rudolph Arnheim has written a complete book, *Visual Thinking*, in praise of the activity of seeing. He describes the work of visual activity:

It is in works of art, for example, in paintings, that one can observe how the sense of vision uses its power of organisation to the utmost. ... More clearly than any other use of the eyes, the wrestling with a work of visual art reveals how active a task of shape-building is involved in what goes by the simple names of “seeing” or “looking”.139  

Arnheim describes the ‘long and toilsome process’ of artmaking, the ‘power of organisation’ and ‘elaboration’ that is applied to it, and the accomplishment: ‘When ‘the exploration is successful, the work is seen to repose comfortably in a congenial structure, which illuminates the work’s meaning to the observer.’140  

The differences of visual activity from other activities may result from the brain’s asymmetry, most of our vision being dealt with in the right hemisphere - though the left hemisphere, set up for language among other things, also caters for aspects of vision such as the right half of the visual field,141 plus the ability to recognise and imagine shapes defined by arrangements of parts, (as compared to the right hemisphere’s ability to measure whole shapes).142 Betty Edwards has proposed a learning technique for artmaking, summing it up as: *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. This technique is based on an assumption that the asymmetry of the brain leads to asymmetry in concentration during different activities.143  

Intense concentration has been noted by many artists. Giorgio de Chirico writes, ‘Profound statements must be drawn by the artist from the most secret recesses of his being; there no murmuring torrent, no birdsong, no rustle of leaves can distract him.’144 Jackson Pollock writes, ‘When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of “get acquainted” period that I see what I have been about.’145  

Such descriptions are also perceived as part of the problematic image of the great master, a myth of the artist as heroic, singular, white and male, a myth from which most women are excluded. Linda Nochlin, a US art historian and critic writes, ‘It is only by adopting, however covertly, the “masculine” attributes of singlemindedness, concentration, tenaciousness, and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake, that women have succeeded, and continue to succeed, in the world of art.’146  

Yvonne Beyer says that: ‘The thing with art is it’s quite egocentric’. It is egocentric but not necessarily in the heroic manner of the mythical master. *All* artists and artisans may experience rewarding engagement with their ideas and materials. During this  

140 Ibid, p35.  
141 Steven Pinker, *op cit*, p271.  
142 Ibid, p422  
144 Giorgio de Chirico, ‘Mystery and Creation’(1913), Herschel B Chipp (editor), *op cit*, pp401-2.  
engagement, the self (body and mind) is absorbed as the artist responds to the topic, the medium, and the play of the formal elements.

The rituals of many religions use this engagement to make the experience of composing an image significant. During the making of the Tibetan Kalachakra, the soothing, rhythmic sound of the iron funnels being lightly stroked and the slow building up of the intricate composition with richly coloured sands becomes a contemplative experience and induces in the participants and even anyone who is present an experience of pure peace.\(^{147}\) The engagement is the goal - the finished image is poured into a river.

In Aboriginal art, too, the ‘ordered nature of creation is echoed in the structure of ceremonies and the composition of paintings’.\(^{148}\) The artmaking is the crucial experience. ‘Paintings made for particular purposes were either destroyed or discarded once their secular or ritual function was fulfilled … the process of making art was often more important than the finished product.’\(^{149}\)

The Mildura artists speak about the preoccupation of mind and body during artmaking with terms such as: relaxing, drifting off, naturally, flow, pleasure, internal, chemical vibrating quality, soft, emotion, good, subconscious, love, imagination, flexible, play.

It is not all play however, as the artists struggle with materials and compositions, trying to solve practical and formal problems. But they relish the challenges and the moments of Eureka! when the elegant solution is found. The words used to describe these experiences include: frustrating, involved, shut out, a long time, achievement, thrilled, difficult, very hard, exact, try, achieved, really got somewhere, concentrated, experiment, a lot to think about, interested, possibilities, continuing, absorbing, progress, perfect, exciting, fun, trial and error, seriously, mucking around, learning, stimulating, different, respond, express, focus, to see detail, visualise, powerful, heighten awareness, fantastic, in bursts, thrilling sensation.

Engagement and significance connect during artmaking. Yvonne Beyer describes the experience as ‘very, very meaningful to my inner feelings and to where I’m coming from’. Such expression is in contrast to the busyness that Stephen Hederics calls ‘knitting’, which may also lead to a form of preoccupation but one which would perhaps not satisfy purpose and meaning as do the Tibetan and the Aboriginal experiences.

Peter Peterson speaks often about drifting off (like his beloved river): ‘What I paint, with my colours, I like to just drift off, I like to block everything out.’ Later he says, ‘I still want to express my feeling out in my painting, let it all go out, let it all drift off.’

Peter’s engagement begins before he touches the canvas. He creates his pictures when within the environment, but does not depict the actual scene in front of his eyes. When asked why he goes down the river to find such images, Peter Peterson tells how he sees his images when in the natural, peaceful surroundings of the river:

\(^{147}\) Richard Lewis and Susan I. Lewis *op cit*, p82.
\(^{148}\) Wally Caruana, *op cit*, p130.
Because down the river it’s nice and quiet. You can listen to the birds. You can listen to the wind. Watch the water flowing. Look up there, you see the clouds, laying on your back you can see the clouds just going that fast. And then it gets all swirling around, the cloud, and you can see a picture in it, in the clouds. Just laying there, relaxing, looking around - you see that sort of thing.

Joyce Smith is engaged in a different way. Joyce speaks about painting as pleasure: ‘I’m still just painting for my own pleasure,’ but her pleasure is not always related to a state of relaxation: ‘You can’t say it’s really relaxing, because you can tear your hair out at times.’ Partly, it seems, the enjoyment for Joyce means at the same time working towards attaining greater skills: ‘I’m just painting for my pleasure - what I want to do. Each year, I can see with my work that I am improving.’ And she says, ‘It keeps me busy, and I think it stimulates my brain.’

Stephen Hederics ponders often during the interviews on how artmaking engages him, speaking about the ephemeral moment to which he responds with tender emotion: ‘Art is an ongoing thing. It’s always soft. The moment you’ve done it, it’s gone. It reflects your life, and it reflects your experience. It’s the way that you respond to things, emotion. Yeah, emotion has got a fair bit to do with it too.’

André Schmidt describes a sort of preoccupation which bypasses deliberate effort and goes straight to the mind-and-body, resulting in an apparently simple and direct response:

I think it’s all a part of learning, it all goes together. When you can paint without the brain getting too much involved, that’s when you’re getting pretty good. All the information is stored away up there, it’s all in there, but it doesn’t require effort to draw it out. So it just comes out naturally, and that’s when you can relate to the landscape or to whatever you’re painting - you can relate just purely to that. You can look at it and everything will flow from that straight to the physical part of you that wants to show it how it wants to show it.

This easy response is described by Stephen Hederics as ‘ ... that ultimate statement, that succinct, simple, minimal, just-enough-to ..., so it’s like a breath, it’s like breathing in’.

It may be that this ‘succinct, simple, minimal, just-enough-to …’ response is a learned response, as romantic love is said to be, a cultural Text written on the act of artmaking as romance is written on the act of lovemaking. But it is a real experience, whether or not it is learned. The concept of art embodies extravagant engagement. It is an activity that preoccupies the artists, and the pleasure of artmaking seems to lie at least partly in this preoccupation, when the engagement with materials, art elements and principles, subject matter, and the physical and mental reaction that is called aesthetics all come into play.

**Artmaking takes time.**

‘I make art,’ is easily said, but not so easily done. Even a full-time artist finds that it takes effort to begin and to persist with artmaking; for part-time artists it is even more difficult to find time and become involved. Time, energy, and materials are the main commodities for the role of artist, but time is considered the most precious.
In Stephen Hederics’s experience it takes time - to get started, to find a subject and then to become involved in the process of seeing:

   And it’s not that easy to just walk out and find something. You need to spend a little bit of time with it, and see its generality, and then start to focus on the ticking parts of that generality, the things that make it function. To try to get underneath it, not only the structure - whether its a landscape or whether it’s a pen-full of chooks - but that under-structure, that life-force that enables things to exists, that enables you to see them in a particular way. You need to spend a fair bit of time to heighten your awareness of those fundamental elements, but not only the elements but the very essence of the elements.

It also takes time to develop a body of work, to follow a train of thought, or to unfold the possibilities of a technique or style. Stephen Hederics says,

   I am particularly frustrated by the time factor. I’m making quick art, and not being allowed the time to develop, you know, the greater sequence in my artwork. It’s a difficult one to try to explain, because whilst I appreciate the process of painting, and the planning of a really good painting, I think I’d rather do lots and somehow assemble them.

The concept of art as an ongoing, serial commitment is evident in each of the artists’ comments, and possibly underlies all artmaking. It seems unlikely that an artist would produce only a single work, although Stephen Hederics seems to be considering the concept of the artist’s output as one long work which makes sense in its entirety.

Joyce Smith is working on a series, painting all the Mallee wildflowers. She is therefore especially aware of time passing as she finds and secures her subjects - in the fridge till she can paint them, and on paper till she can combine them in her large compositions. Then she needs time for the careful process of depicting each specimen clearly while attending to the overall composition. Joyce does not like to work in a hurry. She says, ‘I painted in a hurry for the exhibition, but I should have put more thought into it, and perhaps made the flowers a bit larger and stronger to make them stand out more.’

It has not taken Joyce Smith very long, a few years only, to produce her body of work. Now that she has some time to herself Joyce can cultivate her painting talent and delight in the way her artmaking skills keep growing. She answers a question about her latest wildflowers:

   You’ll never run out of subjects.
   No!
   Do you get more and more excited?
   Yes I do. Because it’s another achievement. When I think what they were like when I first started, when I look back at my earliest pieces, I think how dreadful they were, but then again, you have to start somewhere, don’t you?

While time is a precious commodity for these artists, the experience of time is relative, especially in artmaking which becomes absorbing so that any amount of time seems not to be enough. André Schmidt speaks about how his portion of time has grown while nevertheless he still uses up that time which is available to him - his engagement grows to fill the available time. André says,
When I was working full-time, it was perhaps just a little bit frustrating, thinking, ‘I could be painting now. I could be doing something productive with the artwork.’ But in the end, my spare time was taken up the same percentage with painting and exploring art as what I spend now. It’s just that I’ve got more spare time, you see, so I spend more time doing it.

The period of concentration lasts till some point is reached when the work is satisfyingly complete. André Schmidt says about his concentration,

I suppose that might apply to anything I might do, much to the annoyance of the people around me. If I’m involved with painting, that’s all that I do. I shut everything out. It’s very hard to get my mind off that and think of something else. Until you reach a point where something is finished. And then you either just have a little bit of a rest or perhaps not concentrate quite as heavily on a subject, or get straight into something new.

There are long periods when André’s attention is on other activities, when the art waits in the background till once again a concentrated burst of effort fills up all available time.

Yvonne Beyer too does her artmaking in bursts of energy and inspiration. She says, ...

... I painted at home, after work, in bursts when I painted one or two or more paintings in a row. There was space when I did nothing for weeks or months. These days, my painting habits are the same: if I have the chance, I’ll have a burst, then do none for a while.

Temporality seems different during artmaking as compared to the nine-to-five of routine work when time may seems detached from us, not transporting us in our activity but becoming a line along which we must move. The artists experience artmaking-time at full throttle then stop completely. There is no halfway speed, no half-hearted art.

Peter Peterson claims his artmaking time when he is ready for it - when the time is right - and cannot push himself or he loses his inspiration:

My time - I eat when I want to eat; I paint in my own time; I do my own thing in my own time. I come home and get a couple of beers, I’ll sit out in the shed and I just drift off with my own things. I paint when I want to paint; I can’t push myself - I don’t want to push myself to paint, because I’ll lose it, I’ll lose the way I paint. I can’t paint everyday, I can’t draw everyday, I’ve got to have a rest, and get back when I want to drift back into it again.

All the artists seize time in quite different ways; Peter Peterson’s approach is more laid back, than for example Joyce Smith’s. But generally, time is what the artists wish they had more of, especially as it has an elusive quality even when there is enough apparent time. And they find that they work in bursts of concentration with breaks, even long breaks, between work sessions. But the breaks are just that: pauses between the sessions of artmaking which occupy time meaningfully, and the future is seen as providing time for continued engagement with their art, not as a holiday from it.
The artists’ lives contain a Text of artmaking.

The role of artist is a Text written on the artists’ lives. Art is part of their self-definition and they define their future selves as continuing to engage in artmaking. The artists anticipate a future which will allow them time to concentrate on their artmaking.

Yvonne Beyer says, ‘At the moment my artmaking is restricted, because I don’t have any time. One day when I’ve got some time, I’ll just keep painting.’

Peter Peterson too has more to do: ‘I still want to give more out. There’s something’s been holding me from my work. I still want to express my feeling out in my painting, let it all go out, let it all drift off.’

Preparing for the exhibition gave Joyce Smith justification to concentrate on painting, and she hopes she can continue that. She says,

> It made me work through all the hot weather. Yes, it made me work, whereas I would have been out in the garden, or doing something that I normally do rather than work. And I found that by sitting down and working that I really got somewhere. I concentrated on it and I really got somewhere with it. I hope that I can continue to do that.

Joyce’s valued work is her art, the rest is occupation that keeps her from what she prefers to be doing, and the future holds hope for further time at the preferred work of artmaking.

Thinking about the future, André Schmidt sees many paths he would like to explore yet. André says, ‘That’s probably something I’d like to do more in the future: have figures in the paintings. There’s a lot of things, really. Sculpture .... It’s all part of putting things together, and getting something that you like yourself.’ André has already taken the major step of giving up regular employment so that he has more time for his artmaking.

Stephen Hederics sometimes considers giving up teaching and until that is feasible he steals a few bits of time here and there for his own art:

> Yeah, people ask me, and they say, ‘Why aren’t you doing more?’ Anne says, ‘Why aren’t you leaving TAFE and doing more art, accept the challenge?’ Well, I look at it this way: it’s all art to me, and if I steal a moment or if I can concentrate on the making of art in a more continuous sense, like I do on these camps, if I can have half a day somewhere, resolving some artistic thought, responding in a truly more artistic manner, rather than being ruled by the daily jobs, chopping wood, or cleaning the guttering, those functional things that you’ve got to do ... . Feeding the chooks. Now! ...

Stephen Hederics, like the other artists, is unable to escape some feeling of frustration at the elusiveness of artmaking opportunities, external as well as internal, time as well as concentration. Talking about his love of the egg shape, Stephen defines his potential:

> Could be my art: it’s in the egg, the potential. I’m always saying, ‘That’s the potential; you’re only seeing the egg, you haven’t seen the chicken yet.’ Maybe that’s my frustration: I haven’t been able to develop the chicken, let alone the chook.’
The artists’ comments testify to various Texts. The most important one is also the most unspoken one, that artmaking is worth the time and concentration of purpose that are necessary for any phase of the activity. The artists indicate different approaches to the work of artmaking and to other work - for which Stephen Hederics and Joyce Smith have terms like ‘those functional things that you’ve got to do’, ‘the daily jobs’, and ‘something that I normally do rather than work’.

During artmaking the time is personal, relevant, filled with absorbing activity, and it becomes an inconspicuous matrix wherein valuable creative gems may be unearthed. For the desirable work of artmaking Stephen and Joyce use terms which indicate the value of the outcome: ‘the potential’ and ‘the challenge’, while acknowledging the difficulty of balancing priorities (so that they need justification, or to steal bits of time). Despite not giving anything like an adequate economic return for time and materials, artmaking is valuable in the eyes of the artists themselves - as taking them to a meaningful moment: ‘I really got somewhere’. The ‘continuous present’ of artmaking carries the artists along till they arrive at that juncture of ‘somewhere’.

**Art is one Text in an integrated life.**

The social roles of the artists, though they claim these have little bearing on their art, nevertheless influence the activity of artmaking. Each of these artists has an extended family life which nurtures and invigorates their art but which also has many claims on their time and energy.

Sometimes the artists may regret the feeling of lost opportunities. Stephen Hederics says about one of his roles, that of full-time teacher, ‘That’s the sad part about teaching, I guess, that you can’t commit yourself to your art for any length of time.’ The other artists too have roles that preclude full commitment of time to their art.

Stephen Hederics sums up the restraints he feels as a result of obligations and everyday responsibilities and the constraints even of his own physical stamina:

> More powerful would be the immediate effect of family and responsibility. That affects my art. You’ve got to compromise with yourself all the time, because of your other immediate obligations as a husband and as a father, and I guess as an adult, but immediately as a husband you need to work with the compromise of a relationship. Any relationship is a compromise - even with yourself. That makes you compromise. You go to sleep, or you’re tired, you’ve got to compromise there; if you’re drawing and you arm’s tired, you’ve got to slow the strokes down, so you can only keep that up for a certain amount of time.

For Joyce Smith the challenge of the task she has undertaken in finding and painting Mallee wildflowers competes with physical constraints as well as with domestic tasks. About her painting of the wildflowers Joyce says,

> They’re all so different. I think I’ll run out of years.

> **How long do you take to sketch each one of these flowers?**

> Oh, ages, because I can’t sit all day. I get a pain in the neck through bending over. Plus I don’t have the time to sit all day.
The inspiration, ‘the essence of the art’ as Stephen Hederics says, is a finite quality, often used up in the necessities of making a living, leaving little for his own artmaking. Stephen says,

But I would love to not have the necessity of having to get up at a particular time in the morning and be regimented throughout the day: now you eat, now there’s a class for you, now you stop, now you come home, and now you go back and do a night class. It’s draining. By the end of the week, I’m arted out. Most of the essence of the art, the gems of the ideas, have all been exercised, I’ve got nothing left, all the gems are gone.

The tangible materials for artmaking are a necessity that is taken for granted by most of the artists except perhaps by Peter Peterson. In his roles as provider and friend in an extended family group, Peter may not always have art materials at hand to replace those used by himself or by others. Peter says,

I’ve still got a lot of pictures inside my brain, I mean in my head. I want to do that, but I’ve run out of board and canvas, I’ve run out of paint, I’ve run out of brushes. I lent some people my brushes, and never got my brushes back, so I’ve got about two, three brushes, and I’m just painting with them.

Yet domestic life does not only make claims, it nurtures and invigorates the artmaking. Joyce Smith’s family, and especially her daughter, Sue Smith, share the passion for native plants which have become the focus of Joyce’s art, and the other family members too have left their creative imprints on the house and garden. Peter Peterson’s family experiences have given him his bond with the local area and have provided support for his artmaking and filled the house with art. Yvonne Beyer’s family are involved in her artmaking, art of all sorts fills the house, and the children may be found in the studio alongside Yvonne or their father, Brian Alexander. André Schmidt’s wife, Jeanie Schmidt, and children too, are involved in artmaking and André is very proud of their talent and he in turn is supported by them in maintaining a studio as a professional artist. Stephen Hederics is strongly family minded too, and feels that he depends on the emotional warmth of his clan of family and friends, most of whom are creative, most notably his wife, Anne Hederics. Stephen says, ‘I think I’d always need to come back for social interaction, to feeding and drinking, and singing, that sort of thing. They’re the source of my energy. That’s where I get my power from, from relating to people.’

For Stephen Hederics, family life and art are interconnected, with the family not only claiming his strength but also providing the self-esteem that energises his artmaking:

I love my family very much, that’s always there. I would drop my art for my family any time. It’s all part of me just the same as that other childhood relationship. The family inspires me to do art ... No, no, that’s part of my ego, to realise that I’m looking after them reasonably well, and that immediately gives me self-esteem, and that self-esteem feeds into the ego, and then I have the strength to make art.

The artists’ social roles define in large part who they are, with the role of artist fitting into this identity. In particular, the familial role, while requiring time and energy, also engenders support. The family is the first viewing audience, the patron of the arts, the home base, the emotional and physical support, and the minister of the self-image and
self-esteem the artists require. All the artists would say that they would drop their art for their family any time. But after the family requirements are provided for, and that embraces nurturing, career, travel, and recreation, that time which is left is given to the role of artist. The notable fact is that the artists persist in finding time to wind art into the many strands of their life.

The art is part of their life. This is in contrast to the myth of the ‘great’ artist, who is a European man or, occasionally, woman, uninterested in the niceties of life or even in the necessities, concerned only with the muse, ignoring spouse, children, social relations, and any demands that would interfere with the practice of art. The reality for most artists is a much more fluid and changeable interaction between roles. These five people are probably no different from most other artists. Picasso’s domineering role is more an aberration than the epitome of an discerning lifestyle, a specimen of self-interest rather than an example of an integrated life. That is what these artists demonstrate: through thick and thin, their art is one Text in an integrated life.
Chapter 4: Artists and their context

As in the parable, art thrives when the ground is prepared and accepting, as compared to the stony ground of indifference. The rich ground is made up of family and friends in the intimate sphere, but also of important peers and interested viewers in the public sphere – a receptive con-Text for the making of art.

Gertrude Elias, a Viennese/British artist, says in a conversation about successful artmaking: ‘Recognition is very important and you need somebody whose opinion you respect, otherwise you feel as though you are swimming in the open sea.’\(^{150}\)

Yvonne Beyer, in discussing the explosion of talent in early twentieth century Paris, says that ‘they still had to fight public acceptance, they still had to penetrate mainstream thought, before their art was seen by themselves as relevant.’

Artists work in a con-text.

Viewers complete the process of making art relevant. Who the viewers are depends on the group of family and friends in the first place and, when reaching a larger public, on variables such as venue, publicity, and not least the sort of art which the artists make.

Martha Rosler writes: ‘The “audience” … is a shifting entity whose composition depends not only on who is out there but on whom you want to reach with a particular type of work, and why.’ Rosler then recommends: ‘We must … ask ourselves what the point of our art is (despite the injunction against this). For instance: to entertain, amuse, divert, confuse, defuse, inculcate, educate, edify, mystify, beautify, satisfy, tickle the sensibilities, alienate, make strange, terrorize, socialize. Some of these are incidental to other art-world purposes, such as turning a profit, getting grants, or making a reputation.’\(^{151}\)

The Mildura artists are less specific in their ambitions. Generally, they would wish their work to be recognised as their seeing, thinking, and feeling made visible, to have their creative and technical skills appreciated, and thus to have their role as artist validated - that ‘somebody looking at it will think, “Oh that is nice”, that it will be famous …’, as Yvonne Beyer says.

This aim flies in the face of ‘the unsympathetic mass-culture view of the artists as a kook and a misfit, or at best a lucky (because financially successful) fraud’, as Martha Rosler writes.\(^{152}\) This view is related to ‘the Romantic figure of the artist as utterly alone’ and ‘without responsibility to any audience’.\(^{153}\) An equally bleak picture of isolation is the


\(^{151}\) Martha Rosler, op cit, p322.

\(^{152}\) Ibid, p321.

\(^{153}\) Ibid, p321.
bewildered audience which knows ‘that there is a restricted body of knowledge that must be used to interpret the codes of art’ but which has little access to this knowledge, hiding their ‘outsider status’ behind ‘an apologetic and self-derogating “I don’t know anything about art but I know what I (don’t) like.”’154

Both these models may be more mythical than categorical155, but nevertheless may have bearing on the exchange between these artists and their viewers. The artists do appreciate knowledgeable viewers, but then the viewers do appreciate art that they can respond to and understand. Communication does not happen in a void of dissociation.

As well as liking to exhibit, most artists are not averse to ‘turning a profit’, and some viewers buy art, possibly so that they can continue to engage with it although there are other considerations in buying art as well. Rosler matches reasons with buyers, from the very rich collectors, including corporate collectors who can engineer ‘the historiography of the medium to suit their financial advantage’, to many people who buy art for decoration, entertainment, and status, and for its investment value.156 In our culture, the artwork, whatever else its purpose, carries a Text of exchange value. Art is usually exchanged for money though sometimes in barter, especially with another artist - it is often another artist who buys an artwork, and then the investment is in more subtle forms of exchange such as ideas.

However, most artists do not make a lot of sales, certainly not enough to live on. Virginia Trioli comments in ‘The art of unionism’, that there are 15,567 full-time visual artists, and of those ‘not even an élite few can earn enough of an income from this strange occupation for it to be justifiably termed a profession’.157 Local experience supports Trioli’s article. Very few Mildura artists expect to make even a bare living from their art, and many would not even cover the costs of materials and framing. Only one painting, by Yvonne Beyer, was sold during the exhibition - although some works that were not for sale could have been sold, for example Joyce Smith’s sketches and paintings.

For the five artists, selling their work seems not to be very important. They view money as a sign of the viewer's appreciation rather than as exchange for skill and talent. The artists speak about selling their work as ‘an added bonus and the ultimate compliment’, as ‘reassurance’, as ‘encouragement’, and as ‘one part of the process of artmaking’.

Yvonne Beyer concurs with Anne Hederics who opened the exhibition On Our Own Ground158; (after sorting through her own ideas about painting for an audience during her first interview). Yvonne says about showing her work:

I have to agree with Anne Hederics that the process isn’t complete until you’ve found an audience. And I quite enjoy seeing my work framed and hanging in a row on a wall, in an environment where it will be appreciated by most people that come

155 Martha Rosler herself reviewed her ideas. In ‘Postscript’ in ‘Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: thoughts on Audience’, Rosler reflects on the changes in the art world since 1979 when she wrote the original article, her new conclusion being that we still need even the beginning of a theory of motivation in the production of art; op cit, pp 335-9.
156 Ibid, p318.
158 See Anne Hederics’s speech at the end of Appendix 2: Exhibition and publicity: ‘On Our Own Ground’.
along. And it’s an added bonus if someone buys a work because, in a way, it’s the ultimate compliment if they’re prepared to part with money to have it in their house.

Although Stephen Hederics has concerns about devaluing art by showing it indiscriminately, he feels reassured by the implied compliment when people want to buy his work:

We go to Port Willunga once a year for a couple of weeks ... which is a fishing village. I quite like the attention I get from people there. The ego is at play again. I like to have people come up and reassure me that I’m ‘doing a good job’, ‘That looks great’, ‘Can I buy that?’. I like to say, ‘No-o. I’m only mucking around, you haven’t seen anything yet.’

Joyce Smith’s viewers appreciate her paintings so much that she cannot keep up with the orders for them. Joyce says, ‘I’ve never had any to put in our exhibitions down at the Art Group. I’ve got orders for paintings but I doubt if I’ll ever do them all …’. Joyce says that selling a work gives her confidence to continue with her studies of wildflowers.

About one of her first Mallee wildflower compositions she says,

... I hung that down at the studio, the Art Group studio, and someone walked in and bought it straight away. I felt quite happy about that. I thought, ‘Well! That inspires me!’ ... It gave me confidence to put more study into what I was doing, to think about it more. Particularly when I sold that one, I thought, ‘Well, I can’t be so bad after all.’

André Schmidt acknowledges that showing his work, and perhaps selling a painting now and then, is part of the artmaking purpose:

Yes, that’s right. It gets back to the reasons for painting, in many ways. I suppose that’s why I’ve got a gallery here. ... And then, well I have got it advertised, so I expect people are going to come out and have a look at the same time. And perhaps buy a painting, every now and then. And that’s part of it as well.

Peter Peterson speaks often during the interviews about the act of looking which connects viewers with the artist, and the next act of connection is Peter’s giving away most of his work. Peter Peterson says,

I paint on boards, and then what I do is I take photos of them. Because I usually give them away; I usually don’t sell them, I give them away. I gave a lot of paintings away.

Whatever purpose the artists have in mind for their work, their art gains meaning when it is shown to interested viewers, when placed in a con-Text. Viewers add meaning by their engagement with it, even merely by looking at it. The act of looking is the most important one that the viewer performs as part of the transaction with the artist. It is this act to which Roland Barthes gave such prominence in his essays, ‘The Death of the Author’, and ‘From Work to Text’.159

Yet this looking is not easy. The author Jeanette Winterson writes about the challenge of looking at a work of art, especially art in a gallery which has many works on view. Jeanette Winterson felt she needed to teach herself to see art, to visit public galleries and

159 Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ and ‘From Work to Text’, op cit.
‘to ignore everything about them, except for the one or two pieces with whom I have come to spend the afternoon.’\textsuperscript{160} This seems to go against many viewers’ inclinations in the midst of the wealth of visual delights: it is tempting to act like a tourist in a glorious landscape, trying to see as much as possible before the opportunity is lost, taking in quickly snatched impressions.

Artists, of course, dislike the instantaneous consumption of their work. For example Peter Peterson says,

I want someone to sit there and after five minutes or half-an-hour, they read the whole lot. That’d be a good thing. Before they get a piece of paper and start to read it they’ve got to read it first. Eyes contacting with the work.

Paul Klee writes, ‘Does a pictorial work come into being at one stroke? No, it is constructed bit by bit, just like a house. And the beholder, is he through with the work at one glance? (unfortunately he often is).’\textsuperscript{161}

But this rapid looking probably says more about the nature of looking than about the nature of a painting (although a painting’s construction as well as its beholding depends on the sense of sight). But while it is built up bit by bit like a house, the finished work has become a single event and has a ‘pictorial text’ which ‘has one advantage that only painting possesses: one can see and take in the work at one glance.’\textsuperscript{162}

The feat of looking is so potent that most of the image may be seized in one glance. It is actually difficult to look (with concentration) much longer than a few seconds at a time. A longer gaze can only be managed with attentive scanning, with language perhaps coming into the picture (a dialogue, an external or internal monologue, or a caption) pointing out aspects of subject, technique, composition, links to another work, and so on. Then the attention focuses on one aspect after another in a more or less conscious scanning. A drawing of the work takes even longer, with much more scanning; even a minimal sketch takes a different kind of concentration, making plodding progress compared to the swift glance that assimilates the completed picture, but resulting in a deeper knowledge, especially of the work’s formal qualities.

That is perhaps why other artists are more interested in art than those not in ‘the art-world audience’.\textsuperscript{163} Martha Rosler quotes tables which show that more than half of the visitors to contemporary US galleries in 1972 were connected with the art world. She sums up the findings: ‘Hans Haacke’s surveys at various locations indicated that the audience for contemporary work seems to be made up of a very high percentage of people who are occupationally involved in art - museum and gallery professionals, artists, art teachers, art students, critics, and art historians.’\textsuperscript{164} Artists may have a more penetrating look, have a longer dialogue with the work, analyse it in language or drawing terms, understand it almost physically. They may feel what it has achieved and how that was achieved,

\textsuperscript{160} Jeanette Winterson, \textit{Art Objects}, Random House (Australia Pty Limited), Sydney, 1995, p8.
\textsuperscript{161} Paul Klee, ‘Creative Credo’ (1920), Herschel B Chipp (editor), \textit{op cit}, p184.
\textsuperscript{162} Raymond Bellour quoted in Mary Kelly, ‘Re-viewing Modernist Criticism’, in Brian Wallis (editor), \textit{op cit}, p 102.
\textsuperscript{163} Martha Rosler, \textit{op cit}, p321.
\textsuperscript{164} Martha Rosler quotes Hans Haacke, ‘Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience’ in Brian Wallis (editor), \textit{op cit}, pp312-7.
perhaps finding echoes of their own struggles there, and solutions and new approaches, connecting the experience of looking with their experiences of making.

Shared knowledge is what makes artists insiders, appreciating what an artwork is trying to achieve. Perhaps some people do claim, ‘I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like’, but anyone, artist or not, who knows more gets to like more. This situation is not a straightforward process of looking, learning, and liking, Martha Rosler points out. There are opportunities given and denied; the artwork, especially when on the wall of a gallery, represents the tip of an iceberg of cultural codes that may sink the viewer in an icy sea of ‘high culture’.

Those people who participate in high culture, who possess ‘taste’, have shares in a form of wealth which the French theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, termed ‘cultural capital’. Bourdieu’s ‘high culture’ viewers and artists are positioned in a superior class, inevitably different from people without the artist’s sensitive tastes. ‘Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference’, writes Bourdieu.

Martha Rosler writes about the Text of taste:

The widest audience is made up of onlookers - people outside the group generally meant by the term “audience.” They know of high culture mostly through rumor and report. The vast majority of people in the traditional working class are in this group, as are people in most office, technical, and service jobs; they were probably taught the “value” of high art in school and retain a certain churchly feeling about art but have little real relation to it. Yet their knowledge of the bare lineaments of high culture plays a part in underlining the seeming naturalness of class distinctions - that is, in maintaining capitalist social order - for the transcendental loftiness that is attributed to art artefacts seems attached as well to those who “understand” and own them, the actual audience. It helps keep people in their place to know that they intrinsically do not qualify to participate in high culture.

But while art taste is political as Rosler points out, it is also dynamic, involving habits, interests, and relationships which may or may not cross boundaries of ‘high culture’. As Michael Newman says, the ‘tendency to read all cultural products as “texts” has led to considerations of the structure and function of representation outside of high art.’ This may lead to an appreciation of the multiplicity of meanings possible in all forms of art and a demystification of ‘taste’.

Thus, cultural capital may be re-interpreted as a form of social wealth in which anyone may claim a share, artists and viewers. The artists and viewers take part in the construction of the art’s many meanings, which are not fixed but changeable and always incomplete and multiple.

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167 Martha Rosler, *op cit*, p313.
169 From categories by Judith Solsken and David Bloome, *op cit*, p3.
The artists make use of the exhibition to see their work anew.

Artists are viewers too. They are the most particular viewers of their own work. They look with intensity, to see it with a fresh eye, to catch themselves by surprise, overcoming the familiarity which dulls judgement, using tricks such as looking in a mirror or through a lens that reduces the image. They want to see it as a stranger would. The context of an exhibition can help in this. The Mildura Arts Centre provides such a context.170

Yvonne Beyer mentions the experience of looking at her own art in the Mildura Arts Centre, ‘... it’s nice to see a collection of your own work on display, in an uncluttered environment, so that you can make some visual judgements.’

Joyce Smith has shown her art before but never a collection of her work in a large gallery space. Joyce was startled by her art in the exhibition, seeing the works hung in new juxtapositions as compared to the familiar sight of them in her studio or in her sketch book. ‘I thought it was very well done. My own display, I thought, was very good. The sketches stood out and looked quite startling on their own in the formation that you had them; I thought that was very good.’

André Schmidt likes having his works hung around him so that he can ponder over them. André’s own large gallery has the double purpose of studio and display space. He explains its use: ‘It is a dual thing. It gives me a place where I can put my paintings, hang them around and look at them when I want to and ponder over what needs to be done. Just take it slowly as is my way.’

About the experience of viewing his paintings at the Mildura Arts Centre exhibition André Schmidt says, ‘It allows you to look at them in a different environment, and often you can see things that you straightaway want to change in a painting, as I did. I brought it home and did some more work on it. You can look at it from a different angle and look at it in a different scale, also different lighting, I think.’

Apart from efforts to re-see the work’s formal qualities, the artists try to experience the Text of the artwork in the manner of an engaged viewer. The work may be seen but the Text is ‘experienced only in the activity of production’, as Roland Barthes writes.171

Peter Peterson speaks about the value of going around and looking at each artist’s works in turn, seeing the works concurrently so that their difference is revealed:

And I enjoyed the other artists’ work up with my work. I enjoyed that. And I enjoyed walking around with the artists, with them, and looking at my work and their work, and that other work, the three of them. It was good, just looking at their work and my work, to see the difference.

Stephen Hedricis too considers the implications of showing work in a formal setting, realising that viewers have the power to produce a Text according to their own conception of exhibited artwork. Stephen is worried about some of these readings: ‘No, I

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170 The exhibition, catalogues, and publicity are described in Appendix 2: Exhibition and publicity: On Our Own Ground.
don’t make art for viewing! Not real art! Because then, you see, you cheapen it. You compromise tremendously.’ He goes on, ‘Let’s think about that one.’ Perhaps what Stephen objects to in exhibiting is a glib appreciation of his work. He acts out some of the commentary that disenchant him:

‘It’s lovely work! It’s wonderful to see you exhibiting.’ What else do they say? ‘You’ve done a lot of work!’ and ‘It’s different, it’s different!’ I’ll just go and have another look.’ ‘I’d really like to buy it but ... ‘ They’re just fresh out of money or something like that. ‘It wouldn’t go in my lounge.’ That’s the worst one. If they’re buying for that, it’s terrible. Or, ‘Can you do me one in green?’ I think the general person doesn’t understand an artist. Only art people understand art people.

But Stephen Hederics, like the others, feels the need to ‘confront his work’. Earlier in the interview his comment on exhibiting is:

I think it’s essential for a serious artist to exhibit periodically. I think more for themselves, as much as for other people. They actually confront their own work by exhibiting.

An exhibition is more than display. It is where artists become relevant, not only for viewers but also for themselves. The exhibition becomes a frame of textual reference.

**The venue affects the interaction between artists and viewers.**

Art carries a great pile of trappings: scraps of codes, traditions, assumptions, myths, internalised attitudes, political manoeuvring, capitalist restraints, romantic ideals, racial, national and gender chauvinism, and a good deal else. Art is a flexible system of communication - intended and unintended, as Barthes says in ‘From Work to Text’ - and when the artwork enters the exhibition system another set of Texts is produced.

Mary Kelly writes that ‘the exhibition system marks a crucial intersection of discourses, practices, and sites which define the institutions of art within a definite social formation. Moreover, it is exactly here, within this inter-textual, inter-discursive network, that the work of art is produced as text.’

The meeting between artists and viewers occurs at the intersection of the artwork, the meeting place (usually) being a gallery. The gallery is ‘a space apart from any concern other than Art, just as art’s only rightful milieu is Art. The gallery is a secular temple of Art, just as the art within it is the secular replacement for religion’, writes Martha Rosler. Rosler describes the circumstances: ‘the paradigm is one in which work is made apart from an audience and in which a space is then secured, at the sufferance of an intermediary, where the audience may “visit” the work (and where the few may appropriate it physically).’

A public art organisation such as the Mildura Arts Centre, as Mary Kelly and Martha Rosler say, affects the general art discourse, its influence depending on the size and status of the organisation. Public and corporate support can have great impact on artists and 

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172 Mary Kelly, ‘Re-viewing Modernist Criticism’, in Brian Wallis (editor), op cit, p100.
173 Martha Rosler, op cit, p323.
174 Ibid, p323.
viewers. Many artists and viewers accept, accommodate, or negotiate the criteria emanating from important art institutions.

However, a lot of art does not meet their criteria or other contemporaneous vogues. Yvonne Beyer says:

I would guess, that through every period in art, there would be those that were doing stuff that didn’t fit in with everyone else. In fact, there were probably more people doing their own thing than there were doing the so-called style of the moment, or the supposed style of the moment.

Even where art is acceptable beyond the artist’s front door, the domination of certain art styles caused by the centralisation of influence can result in less fashionable art rapidly disappearing from public view and off the cultural record. Noting the effort that is necessary to accomplish the satisfactory conception, perception and reception of the artwork, Terence Grieder writes,

Certainly, there are adverse outcomes of the influence of large art institutions. Many works of art - most, perhaps - are never seen by anyone but the artist and disappear from the historical record. The works of art that make up what we call our culture have entered the social life of the community by being products of many individual efforts. The artist, the patron, the critic, and the audience must all play their parts or the work slips away into that limbo of undelivered messages.¹⁷⁵

There are increasing public efforts to deliver the art messages - although much more could be done to support the arts (and artmaking) the way sport (and playing of sport) is supported, for example.¹⁷⁶ Galleries are becoming more inclusive, showing greater varieties of old and new media. This is a result of market forces as well as of changing philosophies. The Mildura Arts Centre Gallery hopes to attract viewers from various demographic groups by trying out a wide-ranging program of events and exhibitions, and so strengthen attendance figures and claims for local, state, federal and corporate funding. On Our Own Ground, with its diverse works, fitted in with the Gallery’s rationale.

One result of such efforts to expand participation in the arts is an increasingly interested and informed viewing public. Yvonne Beyer has thought about some of the to-ing and fro-ing of influences on art: the artmakers, some of the public, critics, independent galleries, and the ‘establishment’:

Well, I think there’s a new class, I think there’s a very well-educated middle class, who will go out to exhibitions - and they’ll be exhibitions in galleries that may or may not have set ideas about what’s real art - and they’ll buy what they like. And they’ll buy something that appeals to them because they like the idea, or they like the aesthetics. And I think there’s a lot of by-passing of the critics going on. The only problem that remains is that there are galleries whose notions of real art are so prescriptive that they are strangling themselves because they’re not allowing innovation, because they can’t see it. They think they know what an innovative

¹⁷⁶ Robin Usher writes that Australian Bureau of Statistics research indicates that in 1996-7, some 22700 businesses sponsored sport, to the value of $281.9 million, but that, in the same year, only 2900 companies sponsored arts and cultural activities, to the value of $29.2 million, ‘PM leads push for business sponsors’, in ‘Artsbeat’, The Age, Tuesday May 4 1999, p17.
piece of artwork is. They choose what an innovative piece of artwork is - which is backwards. You’ve got to be open-minded. You can’t say, ‘No that is not a good piece of art, because it doesn’t have three columns, and it doesn’t refer to text, and it doesn’t have political feminist overtones,’ etcetera. But luckily there’s enough life in independent galleries, and there’s enough life in the art-making community to paint on regardless. And some of these people end up making it into the - what would you call that? - yeah, the establishment, where you can start asking for a lot of money, and where people start recognising your name. Some of them are good, and some of them are not so good. So that prevents art from dying.

There are also other means of reaching viewers. Yvonne Beyer has exhibited in unconventional venues, including a ground-site visible from the Westgate Bridge.

Stephen Hederics also considers that artists have options for exhibiting their work. The artist writes the Text:

… if you want it to be viewed in a particular light and at a particular level, it becomes an orchestrated event. You can choose to exhibit in your garage or you can choose to exhibit at the gallery, and therefore that’s an orchestrated move on your part. That’s a statement at a level that the community can refer to and say, ‘This person has exhibited in the Arts Centre fourteen times, or something, rather than in a garage once a week’. I think we play to the audience.

Stephen Hederics has impromptu exhibitions during artists’ camps, with ongoing exchanges plus a summing up at the end when everyone comes together to see their work as one part of the whole creative, co-operative, and interactive output. A public gallery cannot have such direct relevance to artmaking; it serves a wider audience but one that is not quite so appreciative of the circumstances of the artmaking.

Electronic venues too may be an option for Stephen Hederics and fellow artists soon, as the art-camps he organises will be linked into the World-Wide-Web with scanned images of the art produced. This opens up another sort of communication with viewers, at once more intimate and more wide-ranging.

André Schmidt too has mixed thoughts about the implications - psychological, practical, and social Texts - that result from exhibiting:

It’s probably important and it’s not important at the same time. It’s one of those things that’s not really directly connected to making paintings, but in some ways it is. It’s got some sort of psychological connection. It has got practical connections as well, seeing your paintings in different spots, different places, and with other paintings, as this exhibition was. ... I suppose you can’t avoid people talking to you about your paintings when you’re having an exhibition and when there’s a lot of other people around - and I hope that not only the people that like paintings, and are nice as far as comments go, I hope they are not the only ones that spoke to me. I don’t know if anyone actually was terribly critical in a way that was saying they didn’t like it. I can’t recall it, perhaps I shut them out and didn’t listen to them very much. That part of it, gives you, I suppose, if they say they like your paintings, and some people appreciate, can see what you’ve actually put into them, and perhaps they relate to it more than others … they all get different things out of the painting.
Peter Peterson’s sphere of influence is his extended family, of whom he says, ‘my family are the judges’. Peter has set up his studio and house to display his work, and he appreciates the benefits of showing in a big gallery like the Mildura Arts Centre. He enjoys the space, the fact that many people can come along: ‘You’ve got a lot of space, you’ve got people coming from all over the place looking at it, coming looking around the gallery.’ After being in On Our Own Ground, Peter plans some changes. He intends to build up his stock of works and to expand his audience:

And when somebody wants an exhibition or an opening, they won’t be taking seven or eight, they’ll be taking fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, or twenty, even twenty. I want to also get a shop for myself, a gallery for myself, just to put the whole lot in it. Yep. That’s what I want. I want an exhibition in one big giant room, I want to fill the room up with the whole lot of them. And I want to invite a lot of people if I can.

Joyce Smith too appreciates being included in an exhibition at the Mildura Arts Centre. Joyce has exhibited with the Mildura Art Group, having her work noted and bought. Yet Joyce thinks of the more solemn exhibition venue as a new opportunity. ‘It was a great honour to be included, to have my work hanging at the Arts Centre, something I will never forget … . It’s a beginning.’

The overt links of communication with and about art are relatively easy to follow in a city such as Mildura, and even if this is a only a brief accounting of the various interactions, it nevertheless highlights the organisation by ‘the artist, the patron, the critic, and the audience’, who ‘must all play their parts’, as Terence Grieder says, to allow ‘the works of art that make up what we call our culture’ to enter the social life of the community.

Artists are makers, but so too are viewers as Roland Barthes pointed out. The five artists and their viewers – a lot of people, coming from all over the place looking at the work, as is Peter Peterson’s ideal - confirm through such projects as On Our Own Ground that art is what everyone makes it.
Chapter 5: The artists in the art

The artmaking of these five people is part of their way of life. The other facets of the artists’ lives - their relationships, interests, making a home, garden, and income - are all more or less bound up with their art, which in turn demonstrates some of the artists’ personal characteristics.

The art reflects personal characteristics.

The Italian art historian Giulio Carlo Argan writes, ‘Of all real materials ... the pictorial is the most sensitive and impressionable, the quickest to absorb the inner impulses which the artist, by handling it transmits.’ And he adds, ‘... but it is not the underlying layer of the unconscious, it is the artist’s entire physical and mental existence that is involved in the rhythm of this action.’

It is an exaggeration to say that the art is the man or the woman but there are many personal attributes that are to be seen both in their art and in other expressions. The self is not all that goes into a garden and a way of speaking, there are also the givens of materials (a Norfolk Island pine, a missing tooth) and culture (a gardening style, the local dialect). Yet into each of these and other forms of expression the ‘artist’s entire physical and mental existence’ is placed to make the expression personal.

The materials of pictorial communication, as Argan says, are sensitive to rhythms of handling, and it is easy to visualise the hand working the art materials - a pencil on a sketchpad, a brush washing watercolour, a cut-off brush dumping dots, a bristle brush stroking oil paint - in a rhythm that accords with the physical and mental temper of the artist. Stephen Hederics sees the person in the process: ‘You have an existing image, it’s there, and you change it, and the process of change suddenly becomes your expression.’

The emphasis on the mark of the artist’s hand has developed from the Renaissance Text of the individual’s importance. Added to this is the twentieth-century’s fascination with the individual’s psychology. The premise is that the artist’s emotional and mental state may be expressed in the artwork, the work, like the Freudian dream, containing private messages. This theory has given rise to the early twentieth-century European period of Expressionism, the mid-century US period of Abstract Expressionism, and the recent Neo-Expressionist movement in Germany, the US, and Australia.178 But the idea embraces more than the rhythm of manipulation which reflects an emotion.

Further to the handling of the materials is their combination, the composing of elements such as colour and shape. Lewis Mumford writes: ‘Art uses a minimum of concrete

178 For example the work of Vicki Varvaressos such as I Followed the Bus in a Taxi in the exhibition Young Australians, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne, July 1987.
material to express a maximum of meaning.'\textsuperscript{179} The media, for example the paints, consist of a few piles of raw material which count for little without the judgement that guides the process of making the paint communicate something. The artist orchestrates with deliberation; even wild emotion is not best expressed in wild paint. Georges Braque advised, ‘Emotion should not be rendered by an excited trembling,’\textsuperscript{180} Rather, expression is an ‘intense assertion of the painter’s own vision, expression consisting of the total composition of the picture, the relationship of all its various elements, which, in turn, rests on the artist’s sensations.’\textsuperscript{181} All the formal qualities of an artwork assert the artist’s vision, even something as apparently straightforward as the relationship of the image with the space of the canvas. Yet it is undeniable that the malleability of paint allows the artist’s gestures to be impressed upon it, leaving the mark as witness to a moment and a thought.

The artworks in the exhibition vary greatly, and the marks of the individual’s treatment are particularly disparate. The artworks are an indication of the differences in the individuals, especially differences in personal histories, age and gender. Yvonne Beyer wonders about the wide variation in artists and in their style, method, and subject: ‘I’d like you to explain to me why the five artists in your exhibition were the most different range that I’ve ever come across in my life. ... How can five people be so different?’\textsuperscript{182}

The link between person and art is a subject of great interest to art writers, who research the minutiae of an artist’s history, the assumption being that understanding the shapes of the art is made easier when we know what shaped the artist. As Barthes indicates, one of the influences on the concept of Text was psychoanalysis, which views the conscious ego as a thin veneer on a well of id (primal drive) and superego (cultural conscience) subtexts. Whether or not this is clearly established, there are certainly traces left in the work by the person and the personality.

\textbf{The artists reflect on the link between person and painting.}

The artists like to consider the connection between the person and the painting. André Schmidt speaks about the link between person and painting, how the artist’s other expressions throw light on the art, and how the art throws light on the person:

I like to try and connect it to the person, the person you see when they are not painters. I think that is interesting to look at them and say, ‘Yes, they are a family man’. That came out of the interview, when you were talking about art. And then you look at them again, you look at the expression on their face, and the way they stand, and how they approach people, and the way they talk, and that’s all part of it as well. That’s interesting - to try and understand the person and the starting point is their art, and how they actually approach their art. It can be very enlightening in that respect.

\textsuperscript{179} Lewis Mumford, \textit{op cit}, p20.
\textsuperscript{180} Georges Braque, ‘Thoughts and Reflection on Art’ (1917), in Herschel B Chipp (editor), \textit{op cit}, p262.
\textsuperscript{182} My answer to Yvonne during the interview is: ‘I think the whole business of diversity came out of my ideas that I was going to do ‘artists on the periphery’ … So I was going to have a naïve artist, an Aboriginal artist, a young woman maybe, a landscape painter, and that sort of thing.’
During the interviews, the artists are asked whether who they are has anything to do with what they paint, and they give various versions of the importance of the connection. Peter Peterson says succinctly, that No! ‘A father with three kids, that’s got nothing to do with nothing’. Nor do any other of his roles or circumstances have a bearing on his art, says Peter. And even if his Aboriginality leads Peter to paint particular subjects and styles, he nevertheless feels that his choice is deliberate, an outcome of making visible the images he has seen in his mind’s eye rather than any effect of a generic Dreamtime or inclination bestowed by his culture. Yet Peter Peterson’s art does make a statement about Peter Peterson the man, his preoccupations, and style of acting in the world.

Apart from the subjects that find their way into his art, there is a demonstrative style that is characteristic of Peter Peterson, a richness of colour and texture, and an abundance of story-telling imagery. Peter tells stories about some of the experiences that go into his art. Among these are what he sees as he travels through the countryside, another story of the night-time road:

You go along at about a hundred and twenty miles an hour, you see posts; and from a long distance back you see little shiny things off the posts. They’re little glares of dots - from a long distance. You’ve got trees, weird looking trees over, shadows, sunset, shade. When you look at that, you still see the posts with the little dots coming towards you again. That’s how I see it.

Both oral and visual stories - painted and told by Peter - are accompanied by expressive gesturing, a third form of expression. As André Schmidt says, ‘you look at the expression on their face, and the way they stand, and how they approach people, and the way they talk, and that’s all part of it as well.’

Peter Peterson dramatises all that can happen when you get on the road, either driving, or walking as he must have done when young, and he makes us feel his apprehension of the familiar that becomes strange along the road, and in the dark:

As soon as you get on the road, anything can happen to you, anything can happen. There’s no water, there’s water there but it’s hard to find. And when you walk along, you get frightened. It’s very frightening at night-time. ’Cause you’re all alone and your mind is just turning and turning and turning, and as it keeps turning you are thinking of all these things, ‘What’s going to happen to me? Am I going to get there next day or am I not going to get there? Or...’

The images in his paintings loom in layers like the various presences in the landscape, not connected to the ground, or incomplete, just a head or some eyes, sometimes as an outline, sometimes merely as texture. Peter Peterson is the most autonomous of the artists in his taking for granted the freedom to place and condense, to disrupt and move around the forms in his paintings: they are loosed from considerations of gravity and mimesis in the same way that night-time events are loosed from their day-time reality.

Despite disallowing a connection between the person and the art in his own case, Peter Peterson reads personal attributes of the other artists in their imagery. Peter says, ‘It’s like you’re reading other people’s works and instead of talking to them, you’re looking at the pictures. The pictures tell you.’ For Peter the characteristics of the artmaking and the
Peter explains his liking for André Schmidt as at least partly determined by what he sees in his paintings:

André’s. I like his work, huge work but it’s lovely.

How did you read that?

By the bush way - bush walks, you can see he’s bush-walking, do you know what I mean? That’s very nice, I like André.

Similarly with Joyce Smith; Peter mentions her subject and style as representing her personality:

She’s a soft-hearted sort of person. She’s really about emotions, flowers … she’s special. She’s special with flowers and things. That’s her main thing, she just loves drawing plants and flowers. She’s just really got it so soft and tender, you look, you can see it move, it all comes alive. Then when you look at it, and you draw it, and you put that expression on a piece of paper and paint it, that’s the way you see it, do you know what I mean. That’s how I read people’s works.

Peter finds Yvonne Beyer’s work harder to describe, but it is still legible:

Her work is nice. It’s very … (gestures straight up and down and across), with trees. It’s more flat, the way she sees things, she sees it in her way. She just drifts off and she paints it there, and that’s how she’d see it. She thinks about trees and things, how she wants to do her trees and paint her trees. That’s her ways. That’s her way of painting.

Stephen Hederics’s work is easier to describe, as Peter has worked alongside Stephen, and had discussions about style and colour with him. Peter relates Stephen’s manner of manipulation:

Steve? His bird one, that is good. I love his bird one. Guess, you’ve got to guess where the birds are. Steve works very quick, he’s a very quick worker. He’s good, he’s very good. He’s very emotional about his work, his little things and big things. He works from big and small. He’s a nice artist, he’s a good artist. His work is very colourful, not too much colourful, but he loves using water. I see a lot of water in his pictures. So he likes painting water, not much oil. He loves painting with water paints, because it’s more easy, quick. He’s a quick painter. A soft sort of man with his work. Soft with his little paintbrushes.

‘Soft with his little paintbrushes,’ nicely catches Stephen Hederics’s movements and temper as he works.

Now that he has explained the other artists’ works, Peter Peterson speaks, not about the person who might be read in his own work, but about the communication that can happen when a work is read:

What I think about, what I see, I just put on a bit of canvas and let everyone else see it. A lot of people read it, too. That’s what I like about a lot of people, if they are artists, they can read it. I’ve come across a lot of people like that. I’ve come across a lot that didn’t, yeah.
Peter sums up how he would like to be read in the work itself, where the viewer can join him in his world: ‘I don’t want people asking questions about my painting, mainly just eyes contact. If they can read it they’ll be in the world I’m going through …’.

Stephen Hederics has an explanation of ‘the person in the art’: it is the sum of early experiences, and the responses which are learned from the examples of parents; these go into the ‘pot of self’:

I think your life’s experiences contribute a lot to how you respond, whether you’re responding to a challenge of another person, or a work challenge in the manual sense like building a fence. I think of how Dad might have challenged that sort of problem, and think when we used to build fences, how we’d go about it: we respond in that way, we get the job done, and get on with the next one, we don’t waste time. That affects you. Cooking too, you think back to how your mother cooked. There are memories associated with your experiences, you work with those for your art. You’re the sum of all those experiences, whether they are visual or tactile or other sensory experiences, they stay with you. And altogether they make up a pot of ‘self’, which you can dip into it and say, ‘Let me make some art now, with all those helpers’.

Stephen Hederics answers the question Does who you are have anything to do with what you paint: your sex, your roles, your status, your circumstances? by agreeing, but then says that while roles and so on have an effect, they are not the cause of artmaking. In his reflecting on the connection, Stephen separates the effect of social roles, which can put constraints on artmaking, and the vital, inevitable internal response to art which, in contrast to the constraint of roles, provides energy for artmaking:

On the surface, I think that’s right. On the surface, that is a daily commitment to your discipline of art. I think that’s true. But ultimately I don’t think it does matter. All those things affect your art, but the way that you respond to your art is an internal, almost chemical, vibrating quality. The energy is there, so you have to try and harness that energy and direct it towards a certain solution. So in everyday stuff, the expectation of people of your art, in the context of their life, and the way you pay for yours, that controls the way you manipulate your art - because you are ultimately interested in surviving. But if you discarded that … when you just play and release art energy, you can’t put labels on it, you can’t say it’s this that or the other thing, it’s just unleashed energy.

Stephen Hederics points out twin needs which motivate the artist. There is the need to direct energy for the survival of self and others, and there is the need to play, to unleash energy and give expression to that ‘internal, almost chemical, vibrating quality’. The idea of the artist as an individual who needs to be free to unleash creative energy, as compared to the constrained social being, is that which underlies most of the twentieth-century art. Stephen’s description is an echo of André Salmon’s description of Picasso at work:

Picasso was then leading an admirable kind of existence. Never had the flourishing of his untrammelled genius been so dazzling. He had questioned those masters worthy of reigning over souls that were troubled and seized with fervor, from El Greco to Toulouse-Lautrec. Now, truly himself and certain of his powers, he let
himself be led by a vibrant fantasy which was at the same time Shakespearean and Neoplatonic.\footnote{André Salmon, ‘Anecdotal History of Cubism’ (1912), in Herschel B Chipp (editor), \textit{op cit}, p199.}

That which Stephen Hederics does not want to put labels on is here described in terms of wonder at the artist’s flourishing genius as ‘truly himself’. This is an attitude relished not only by André Salmon, it is the inclination of much modern art criticism. Such attitudes are a matter of concern for feminists, for example Whitney Chadwick, who calls this ‘the view of the modern artist as a heroic (male) individualist’.\footnote{Whitney Chadwick, \textit{Women, Art, and Society}, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1992, p265.}

Most people are moved by feelings of exultation when giving play to their creative energies. And many artists do experience feelings of being led by their creative urges, and develop habits that allow them to focus so closely on their art. Stephen Hederics and many other artists would recognise Jeanette Winterson’s need to find a clear mental space for art in the midst of everyday concerns: ‘To do something large and to do it well demands such observances, personal and peculiar, laughable as they often are, because they stave off that dinginess of soul that says that everything is small and grubby and nothing is really worth the effort’.\footnote{Jeanette Winterson, \textit{Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit}, Vintage, London, 1991, pxii.}

But the language that is used by Salmon, linking Picasso to Shakespeare and attaching to him a Neoplatonic label, make it seem that such experiences of doing something large are those of only a few exalted masters who are linked in a noble chain of genius. Whitney Chadwick describes a chain of associations that lead from God to the master, from divine power to the one, true, artwork. She speaks of the ‘long cherished views of the writer or artist as a unique individual creating in the image of divine creation (in an unbroken chain that links father and son as in Michelangelo’s God reaching toward Adam in the Sistine Chapel frescoes), and the work of art as reducible to a single “true” meaning’.\footnote{Whitney Chatwick, \textit{op cit}, p11.}

The real experiences of artists, let alone the fact that artists are women too, are overlooked in such a narrow view of what it means to be an artist. Descriptions such as Stephen Hederics’s come closer to reality. Creative effort is juggled for the necessities of making a living versus the joy of play with unleashed art energy.

Yvonne Beyer too says, yes, there is a connection between self and art. She speaks about expressing her physical self and her inner feelings:

> Definitely femininity and sexuality - female sexuality - has a lot to do with the more figurative work. I’m not interested at all in painting the male body because I’m expressing inner feelings and that’s engendered in my physical self which is manifested in boobs and bottoms, in arms and hands, and hugging, a nurturing feeling, which is often expressed with rounded arms. ... I choose things that express my feelings when I’m doing the figure …

For her landscape art Yvonne Beyer has similar criteria: that the subject has meaning for her, that she likes the look of it, and that she can add or subtract to the look or the meaning by the act of painting. She says about landscape:
I choose things that I like the look of. And then, when I’m painting, I add and subtract just for the look of it, or maybe sometimes I add and subtract for meaning. ... It’s got to be something that is meaningful for me. I could easily paint anything I wanted to, but it would mean absolutely nothing - it would have no relevance to me. It’s got to be very, very meaningful to my inner feelings and to where I’m coming from.

Yvonne Beyer’s artmaking about ‘where she is coming from’ is an indication of the new impunity of women choosing imagery relevant to their lives. Linda Nochlin writes that ‘the sense of the creative self as a woman may play a greater or lesser role in the formulation of pictorial imagery.’ Nochlin attributes this to ‘the rise of a powerful and articulate women’s movement’ of which a result is a ‘conscious feminine identification’ in the work of many women artists, ‘who have begun to define themselves more concretely as women, and to identify their feelings and interests with those of other women…’ 187

Yvonne Beyer’s titles characterise her fondness for small and large - yet intimate scale - natural subjects, giving abstract ideas a prosaic reality, and prosaic subjects an abstract preciousness. She lists the titles of some early works:

I’ll tell you some of the names of them, that will give you some idea of what they were about: Dark Busy Pond, The Land is Delicate With Golden Light, Two Tadpoles, Lightning Frog (lots of frogs in here), Dancing Colours, River View, River Edge, Rich Sky, White Window.

Not only does Yvonne Beyer’s style express who she is; it is her intention to make her art expressive of her whole being. Yet like the others Yvonne Beyer does not think that her roles have any bearing on her art. She says,

I don’t think my roles come into it, because the sexuality in it is not a manifested sexuality - it’s not people bonking or anything - it’s just a feeling, and that has very little to do with my relationships.

André Schmidt too says yes, who he is has a bearing on what he paints:

Yeah, of course it does. It does have a big effect - like if you have long legs you can cross the river or you can jump over the ditch to get to the other side. And you can paint from the other side of the ditch rather that stay on this side. Physically, who you are, yeah. Physically if you’ve got bad eyesight, well you are going to paint something different.188

But apart from the physical person, roles and responsibilities are not a matter of expression so much as time: ‘Only perhaps in the time you have to spend, and want to spend with the rest of your family. That takes time from painting.’ André Schmidt thinks that his familial roles could have an effect on subject matter, and he is considering such a new direction in his art. André says,

188 The idea that bad eye-sight may improve artmaking is the theme of several anecdotes, for example those about El Greco’s astigmatic elongation of figures and Kandinsky’s short-sighted patches of colour; El Greco’s story is hearsay; Kandinsky’s short-sightedness is cited in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1980, p300.
But I think it could make you think differently about what you’re painting at times, if you look at new ideas, or if you want to follow a certain theme that might be different from, say, landscape. Often you see landscape artists paint landscapes with their family in the landscape, either as a big part of the painting or as a minor part.

André Schmidt observes that there may be indicators of the person in the art, in choice of subject for example. What André paints may at first be an ad hoc decision, but once made, this choice takes on its own meaning for him:

I suppose if you get a certain reputation, it does tell you something about a person if you paint a subject because you have a reputation for painting it fairly well. It does say something, but it’s not the complete reason why you paint something. But it’s probably there at the back of your mind - why you might continue to do it. And often it may be a matter of luck, or fortune, or how things pan out in your life right from the start. Why did I start painting Mallee, right at the beginning? Just because everyone was painting river scenes, and I didn’t want to paint river scenes, I was sick of looking at river scenes. So I painted the Mallee. That was the reason initially.

During the first interview, however, André Schmidt explains that he has not thought about any strong connection between his art and who he is:

I haven’t thought about myself as who I am and how that relates to what I do in art. I haven’t got an answer. Tradition, that sort of thing. Or causes. No, I don’t think my paintings have much great story-telling in them. They might end up having something to say to other people, but I don’t want to be pretentious and say that I as a person am putting something into them, to tell a story. ... They perhaps might only be saying, ‘Well, this fellow is trying to do this, is trying to paint a tree.

This may seem so transparently obvious that it is overlooked as indicative of the person. That is just what he does, try to paint a tree. But again, what a tree! André Schmidt’s trees, though inanimate, are full of character so that what he calls his ‘people-less landscapes’ are nonetheless filled with the personalities of tree-trunks. In the same way, the style of the art is so very much part of the artist’s everyday conduct that it is transparent and not seen as having any connection to personal characteristics. How André paints the tree - with finely rendered textures, light and shadow, colour, and form - is as even more an indication of who he is than is his choice of the tree as subject.

During the second interview, André Schmidt himself surmises that the people and their art are closely linked. The characteristic style of the paintings of the five artists is an element of their characteristic persona:

I think that Steve, he obviously is an artist who expresses himself in his paintings. He’s not so much expressing what he is seeing in front of him - that’s just part of a means of expressing himself, that’s the way I see it anyway - he is more interested in showing himself on the paper or on the canvas, or whatever, in his use of different materials. You know, you can see him, his physicality perhaps more than anything, in his paintings. Because often they are not really recognisable as what he might be painting, you have to look at it a bit harder. I suppose the things that
you don’t readily see as, say, a fish, or a leaf, or a person, those are the parts of him that are on the paper.


André Schmidt slots Stephen Hederics’s persona into the space between mimesis and abstraction. In that space Stephen is able to express himself while giving credence to the leaf. Its single brushstroke has Stephen’s gesture impressed on it; its curve represents many of the qualities that Stephen acknowledges throughout the interviews. Stephen often describes how he experiences the physical properties of world around him. For example he says, ‘I enjoy whittling, I enjoy that process of rounding things off, taking the rough edges off. I don’t know what that is - it is almost like a prayer with me, whittling.’ At the same time that it represents the typical asymmetrical arc of a gum leaf, Stephen is expressing how that curve might feel, how that leaf might move. As Stephen Hederics says, ‘It’s still an expression of how you’re viewing something. It’s being that close to manipulating things, manipulating elements, manipulating a living canvas.’

André Schmidt develops the idea of expression to include the effects of the artist’s background:

I suppose we’re all that way. Peter was a bit that way. His, perhaps, is a bit more connected to him being an Aboriginal, and his culture. Yes, that’s interesting, because it all comes somehow from the way you’ve been brought up and what you must have seen as a child, and I suppose what you’ve made a decision to hold onto. I imagine if he was brought up … as I was, he might be completely different. He
wouldn’t paint Aboriginal symbols - he wouldn’t know about them. They come from him knowing about them. As far as Peter goes, it would seem unusual in some ways if he painted like I did.

André wonders wherein lie the differences between artworks. He sees Yvonne Beyer’s style as very different from his own, much more abstracted. André spends some time to surmise what Yvonne might think and feel about comments on her work’s appearance compared to what he would think and feel in her place:

To me it seems that she would prefer to paint in a simpler way. She refined the objects down and that was enough for her. The interesting thing is, and the big difference is, that she was just completely relaxed with the result that she came up with, whereas I couldn’t do that. I would think, ‘Well, it looks good, having trees as just straight sticks out of the ground, more or less.’ But I couldn’t stop at that, whereas Yvonne could stop at that. That’s the thing, I suppose, it’s about being comfortable with what you do, and not worrying about the fact that other people mightn’t understand it exactly the way that you understand it. That probably says a lot about the person: that they can be open to, they can accept a lot more people saying ‘I don’t understand this, why did you do that?’ and they are going to have to either say, ‘Well, that’s just how I wanted to do it,’ or explain it in some way that they might have rationalised for themselves through their thinking about art.

Whereas I perhaps don’t leave anything to chance in some ways. Even though my paintings are not photographic, there is not as much left to chance, not as many questions left for people to ask me.


André Schmidt continues with this line of thought, also putting himself in the place of a viewer reacting to Yvonne Beyer’s work. André here also notes his own concern about a hypothetical viewer’s reading, the main question in this viewer’s mind being about the reality of the bush depicted in his work as compared to the reality depicted by Yvonne:

I might be looking at it in the wrong way, but I think Yvonne would - people would look at her paintings, and this might just be me! - people might look at her paintings and say, ‘I’m not sure exactly, it says it’s a painting of a lake up the bush,’ and they might say, ‘Mm. Maybe. Maybe I can see it that way, or maybe not.’ Perhaps it might be easier for people to see that it’s the lake that she’s described it as. It might
be easier than people looking at my painting and seeing that it’s a painting of trees by the river here in Mildura. It just depends on who looks at it. It depends on the viewer.

André is approaching Barthes’ idea of the viewer playing in the work’s Text. Even if he is more comfortable with art that closely represents the landscape, there may be viewers who find Yvonne Beyer’s work easier to interpret.

André Breton writes about the quandaries of visual language:

> Why is it that I am so much at the mercy of a few lines, a few colored patches? The object, the strange object itself draws from these things the greatest amount of its force of provocation, and God knows whether this is a great provocation, for I cannot understand whither it is tending. What does it matter to me whether trees are green …?189

The tyranny of a few lines and coloured patches as seen in Yvonne Beyer’s work may have a different rendition in Joyce Smith’s work. Getting the lines and colours as close as possible to reality was discussed by Joyce Smith and André Schmidt:

Joyce said, when she heard me speak to her, you know, just in the crowd, that she felt that she was a bit like me. She couldn’t leave anything to chance so she had to be very descriptive and study things carefully, and get it right, have the colours as close as she could, and have it so that it actually looked like the plant. She has a botanical interest in things, so that was probably the only way that it could work out for her.

However closely descriptive the work is, there is still room, as André Schmidt says, for the artist’s licence, or freedom to diverge for the sake of expression. Joyce Smith, he says, ‘did give away certain things that she did to achieve a composition, changing the natural position of things in her paintings. I suppose all artists make that concession to nature in their artistic licence.’ This artistic licence varies between artists. André says, It might not be as obvious in Joyce, just in looking at the person. … Steve, he is naturally talkative and things come out, and it’s the same with Peter, he’s like that, and I suppose that is reflected in their paintings. Whereas Joyce, she spoke about her paintings in a more technical way. That might be the difference.

It is the opinion of four of the artists, (Joyce Smith did not comment on this topic during the interviews) that the person may be ‘read’ in the artwork. As Giulio Carlo Argan says, ‘it is the artist’s entire physical and mental existence that is involved’ in the process of artmaking. Even at the first glance the artworks present a dual Text: about the person and about the topic.

**The artists’ style is composed of subject, materials, and traditions.**

Although the landscape provides subjects for each of the artists, their particular subjects vary greatly. There are André Schmidt’s huge sections of landscape filled from foreground to background with tangible tree-trunks, foliage, twigs, and grasses, and

189 André Breton. ‘Surrealism and Painting’ (1928). in Herschel B Chipp (editor), *op cit*, p403.
Joyce Smith’s small colourful wildflowers composed into intricate designs against creamy paper. There are Peter Peterson’s creatures and spirits set into dotted or mottled watery, earthy, or tarry contexts, and Yvonne Beyer’s minimal trees and patches of light, richly coloured against black, red or ultramarine. And there are Stephen Hederics’s various drawing marks, light or vigorous, loosely washed with colour, depicting the creatures and places of outback farms.

The styles of painting match the artists’ subjects and are as dissimilar as the subjects. To describe the works means almost to describe the techniques the artist used, although no description will do justice to the diversity and character of the marks in each artwork, only the eyes can judge that - which is the point of the exhibition, to see scale, colour, and texture.

Yet though each artist’s style is different, each is understated. Where there is emotive expression it is not expressive style per se. There is no slashed paint, no trembling brush mark, no style for its own sake. The style is part and parcel, it is part of and parcels the subject.

Emotion is there in the choice of subject matter as well as in the manner of application - which is traditionally subordinate to the task of depicting the subject. That is, each artist has a predilection for a certain painting style, and part of the pleasure of that style is that it has roots in a respected tradition. For Joyce Smith it is the style of botanical studies. For André Schmidt it is the Australian Impressionist rendition of sections of bush. For Stephen Hederics it is the immediacy of graphic illustrations of outback farm scenes. For Yvonne Beyer it is abstraction with simplified notations in lush colour. For Peter Peterson it is Aboriginal dot and pattern design, gathered by him, not so much from Barkindji tradition as from a more general indigenous background, incorporating those aspects of the European tradition that are useful to him. Each person’s style though individual, is part of a recognised tradition, and the pleasure is partly derived from sharing this acknowledged tradition with viewers.

Another emotion is the intellectual and sensual pleasure of creating the work’s form, when aesthetics come into play and the techniques and materials are manipulated. The physical involvement with their materials is exciting for these artists as it is for all artists who forge their alchemic matter, pigments and oils, on paper and canvas, with brushes and pencils. When artists get together, the topic that is almost always discussed is the engineering question, how the art materials respond when handled. Handling the material is a process that is almost indistinguishable from the process of artmaking. Georges Braque said, ‘I work with the materials not with ideas.’ Artists are artisans. The essence of making remains in the work of art; to a greater or lesser extent the work is an interpretation of the materials. Style therefore is a result as well as a manifestation of the manipulation of materials.

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190 Georges Braque, ‘Observations on his Method’ (1954), in Herschel B Chipp (editor), op cit, p262.
191 Even those artists who devise conceptual art are visualising, and feeling tremulous echoes in their nerves or muscles as they do so, a physical or phenomenal extension of their ideas somewhat like the way Beethoven would have savoured the ghostly music of his imagining when he became deaf.
Stephen Hederics talks about the cycle of doing, viewing, responding. Tactile and kinetic responses are important to him and he keeps coming back to the idea that art is inherent in the process of living, and living means vivid sensual experiences. In his descriptions Stephen equates living and artmaking:

So it’s a recycling process, the living process, the viewing, the art process of doing it, is a cycle just as much as life is. You see it and you respond to it, depending on the time. You respond to it with certain media. And then you’ve got something else to respond to, because you’ve extracted something out of nature, for example, and then placed it in front of you and then it’s a little bit natural, and then it’s a little bit of you as well.

André Schmidt has thought and written about his materials and their possibilities and effects. He describes the variety of the physical processes of painting:

To some extent just the physical process of painting is a habit, even though you might not like to admit it too much, mixing paint and the way you dab the paint on. I wrote in my diary once that there are so many possibilities in the actual physical process of painting, mixing paint, the way you hold your brush, whether you’re right or left-handed, the distance you stand from the painting, the size of the brush, the thickness of the paint. There are so many varieties in the way you can apply the paint, a dab, a slash, the paint smooth on a smooth surface, all that variety.

Technique comes with a set of cultural meanings attached. ‘Skill is a social process,’ writes Anne Cranny-Francis. Techniques are passed on from old master to new master within the ‘guild of painters’. Linda Nochlin writes that ‘art making traditionally has demanded the learning of specific techniques and skill, in a certain sequence, in an institutional setting outside the home,’ (which is why few women in European cultures had access to art). And vice versa too: Cranny-Francis writes that skill is ‘defined and organised as the product of collective or concerted actions of whole groups and people in ways that then give shape to individual understanding and experience.’ The art made by women in their homes was generally not defined within the regulations of the guild of artists, and the work’s status in the wider world (compared to its appreciation within the domestic sphere) was much less great than that of the master’s work. ‘Thus the relevant question to ask is not which workers have skills, but which skills get selected for recognition and reward and which do not,’ writes Cranny-Francis. (Some of the handiwork of women, for example quilting, is presently being re-defined as worthy of being shown in galleries.)

André Schmidt defines his artmaking at least partly as belonging within the European process of skills transmission, so that when he works in oil paints he has a connection via the traditional oil paint with masters of the past, particularly Rembrandt: ‘I suppose that I’m a bit of a conservative and like to feel that my paintings might be tied in some way to the masters of the past. You know, all those paintings and self-portraits - I had in mind Rembrandt when I was painting them.’

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192 Anne-Cranny Francis, *op cit*, p17.
193 Linda Nochlin, *op cit*, p163.
194 Anne-Cranny Francis, *op cit*, p17.
Subject, style and technique can become inextricable. Peter Peterson’s style is also his technique, a form of paint application which breaks up the surface into dots, swirls and patches of colour. His applications of marks can also be his subject, such as the lines of movement, swirls of matter, and dots that light up the side of a dark road. About his way of working Peter says,

I’m very loose. I’ve got a very loose style. I come in, splatter the paint, very quick, then I smooth it with my hand, back to fast, slow style afterwards. Yes, so I’ve got two different styles - slow and fast. I like to use my hands, fast and slow, but also, I like to bring the brush in afterwards when I’ve finished using my hands. I like to use the back of the brush, scratch it in, scratch it with the back of the brush, then use a fine brush. So I use the hand, the back of the brush, the fine brush, and scratches.

Tradition plays a part in Peter Peterson’s technique, too. He places paint with the end of a match in formations of dots, one of the distinguishing marks of Aboriginal style: ‘Dots. Little dots, match dots; not big dots, just very small dots. A lot of dots make it bright, you can make your picture stand right out - it jumps at you with the little dots, I mean.’ Peter is happy with whatever materials are at hand, including his hands, again duplicating an Aboriginal technique of making marks in the sand with whatever is available. Peter uses whatever he finds with enthusiasm and confidence:

I paint on any sort of boards, card-boards. But canvas, I like painting on canvas, yeah! I like painting on anything. But I really can’t afford the canvas, that’s why I paint on boards. I like painting with water-based paints, because you can use them with water. I just use hands, handprints, brushes, back of the brushes, matchsticks, leaves, just everything, everything I can put my hand on. I use what’s there.

In contrast, Joyce Smith plans her approach and carries it out with attention to correct watercolour and botanical art techniques, which she has studied wherever she could find information. Joyce works from her sketches to build up her composite designs, using the characteristics of the plants, tall or low-growing, stems curved or curly, and so on, to achieve a satisfying composition, especially of the many lines twisting in and out like a Celtic design:

I work from my sketches, I don’t work straight onto a painting ... I rough it out with a pencil first. As I establish a little bit of colour, I finish it off with brushes then. I do all the actual outlines with the brushes. I just get an idea where I want to place the plant, then I draw it with the brushes. It takes a long time.

Joyce Smith finds that fine quality materials are necessary for her meticulous watercolour painting. Like Braque, Joyce enjoys using and discussing materials, investing in them as the source of effective artmaking:

I like good quality paper. And paints - I use Windsor and Newton tube paints. And brushes - for a painting like that I mainly use a triple 000 and a 10-0. A golden sable I find that quite good for the triple 000, but anything larger than that I’ll go into maybe a 1, an 0 or a 1, sometimes a 2, but nothing larger than that because you don’t need them. And the paper, I’ve never used the hot-press. I like it fairly smooth, but I like a little bit of tooth. I used to always use Arches when I was landscape- painting. I’m having a lot of trouble getting the right paper.
Compared to Peter Peterson’s technique, Joyce Smith’s technique may be seen as painstaking. In the second interview Joyce describes just how finely she works:

You wouldn’t get a fine line with pencil, as fine as that. It’s the 10-0 brush, and I don’t know what I would do without it. The earlier days I never used anything as fine as that. A triple-0 I used for many years, and then I happened to find the 10-0 brush at Anderson’s, which they use for the china-doll painting. As I said, you wouldn’t get that very fine line with a colour-pencil. You couldn’t get the point as fine as that. I have to more-or-less stand the brush upright to do that very fine work.

When discussing her working style, Yvonne Beyer talks mainly about the colours she likes and how she likes to use them. Texture is another concern, coinciding with her love of worn, faded patinas, some of which she applies rather than represents. Her apparently easy-going style may be summed up by her comment: ‘I was taking things, fabric or colour, that appealed to me, and I was putting it together to make something that was an art object on its own …’.

Yvonne’s comment applies equally well to all the artists. They take things, whatever appeals to them, put them together, and there is the art object newly created. It is in the putting together where we can most easily see the five artists’ wonderful diversity.
Chapter 6: The artists and the elements of art

The artists put together very different paintings, but they all start off with the same basic ingredients: the elements and principles of art. Even these basic components may carry textual messages.

The artists abstract in various degrees from reality.

Of ‘the most different range that I’ve ever come across in my life’, as Yvonne Beyer says about the artworks in the exhibition, the most immediately apparent difference is the degree of abstraction from reality - reality as interpreted in this time and place.  

Yvonne Beyer’s paintings are obviously not representational but simplified interpretations of a place, and similarly, Peter Peterson’s paintings are symbolic and semi-realistic representations of places and experiences. Stephen Hederics’s work is recognisably of certain places and events, but loosely represented, showing the gestures that created the marks. Joyce Smith’s works are realistic in their colour and form, but even in the sketches, is clarified by their abstraction into two-dimensional curvilinear design. André Schmidt’s subjects are most recognisable as specific places though, even in this realistic style, his framing of the subject, for example of a series of tree trunks or of a track moving horizontally up the middle of a canvas, enhances the abstract composition.

Abstraction as a concept fills thousands of pages in art books, perhaps because of its paradoxical emptiness - a completely abstract work is not about anything. Subjectless art has always existed however, as decoration, as symbolic design such as in Aboriginal art, or as a sign from the real or the spiritual world such as red as a sign of fire or hell. But the idea that a painting can create a self-sufficient realm of colour, form, and line without mirroring a thing-out-there has been a revelation for Western art.

The concept of abstraction has set Western art along several paths, one of which is simplification of form. This is the style that Yvonne Beyer likes to employ, and she does so quite consciously. She simplifies for several reasons, knowing that her choice has Texts, for example about ‘bad’ and ‘good’, realism and play, symbolism and arbitrary markmaking:

I don’t attempt realism unless I’m prepared to do it properly. I would never do a bad realist painting. And that is probably why my landscapes are so abstract, because that allows me to play with the paint, and just to include the colour; it’s almost symbolic design but it’s not really symbolic - it’s quite arbitrary, but in the end they might look like symbols, they are kind of representative line or representative dots.

André Schmidt broaches the subject of abstraction and simplification several times: ‘The abstract view, or the simple view - I don’t know about abstract, but the simple view - simplicity is, again, just building block, basic shapes, basic colours. That can lead to abstraction.’

The building blocks pose a challenge for composition:

Well, just composition or not being able to work out if I’ve got too much weight on this side, or whether it’s balanced, whether the colours work together well. I suppose that’s telling you something about what I look for in a painting. The solution is perhaps reading something. Close observation of what’s happening in nature, perhaps. Just trying something different maybe, with colours; to choose a different colour relationship.

Realism (which in our culture comes via nature) and abstraction (which is what the artist does with the components of nature) take the artist into two different directions. André explains:

With the composition, that’s another thing that can be frustrating, because when you’re painting landscape especially, you often tend to be a bit literal for a start. Nature can be very absorbing, and it can hold you to what’s there in front of you because it looks good. It mightn’t be perfect, but you’ve got to find that out after a little while. When you’re working on a painting, you’ve got to work that out. I think, with me anyway, I perhaps get sucked in a little bit doing what’s in front of me - and I work away and work away happily, and all of a sudden, after a little
while, I realise that it’s not quite how it should be. Then I’ve got to work out what to do.

And what is the ‘should’?

Well, the ‘should’ might just simply be as banal as being balanced.

All painters abstract. Even the most realistic subject is taken from its source and reconstituted in pencil or paint on a two-dimensional surface. Like Yvonne Beyer, painters like ‘to play with the paint’ and any subject allows such play, only the degree of freedom differs. André Schmidt likes to look at ‘what’s happening in nature’ and then might try ‘something different maybe, with colours’.

Realism and abstraction are ambiguous terms. However realistic a painting is, it never begins to partake of the three-dimensional phenomenal world - except as a physical object. As Steven Pinker says, ‘… paintings are only partly illusory: we see what the painting depicts, but we simultaneously see it as a painting, not as reality. The canvas and frame tip us off.’197 (There are some challenges for artists in this state of affairs.) 198

André Schmidt says,

If someone can decide what abstract means - can you tell me what it means?

Abstraction doesn’t exist, because as soon as something is made, it is real. It is itself, it’s a thing, it’s a physical item, like a cup or a glass. They might have been abstract once in someone’s mind, but as soon as it’s put into physical form, then it’s not abstract.

Format affects style and composition.

The format of the work plays a role in composition; aesthetic choices are limited by the boundaries of paper and canvas. Format may be carefully organised as by Joyce Smith’s oval mountboard, conveniently bought or made as are André Schmidt’s, Peter Peterson’s, Yvonne Beyer’s, and Stephen Hederics’s supports; or consisting of the fluid ground of the environment itself, such as the pool in Stephen’s hypothetical model and Yvonne Beyer’s example of the infinite negative space of a sculpture as compared to a painting which obviously is ‘on a surface, so negative space has got to finish’.

Stephen Hederics explains format as the frame into which his energy is concentrated:

I think format is instilled in you … Format I am conscious of, yes. Yes, as soon as it’s placed in front of me, I know the parameters that I’m going to work in so therefore I concentrate my energy into those, and I’m bouncing off the format, off the sides of the format, to create my art work.

Joyce Smith composes her plants within the givens of the mount, which is often oval:

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197 Steven Pinker, op cit, p217.
198 Marcel Duchamp, for one, challenges the division between the work of art and the object in the world with his Readymades, see for example, Fountain by Richard MNgTT (a urinal), illustrated in Marcel Duchamp, The Portable Museum: The Making of the Boîte-en-valise de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rrose Selavy, (Inventory of an Edition by Ecke Bonk, Translated by David Britt) Thames and Hudson, London, 1989, p31.
There are a lot of plants - where I’m using an oval mount - that I can find where the stems naturally curve. A lot grow straight upright, which I can use in the centre, the main features, but for the outer edge to fall into that oval or round, you must get them so they will curve, or use a creeper that you can twine down to hang down the sides. And also a small, delicate plant at the base. Some stems look quite good at the base, but then others need a small delicate plant to give variety at the base of the painting.


André Schmidt points out how format is allied to custom and convenience:

It certainly is something that can be part of your rule, or just part of your habit perhaps. Or just what you can buy at the supermarket to paint on - a three-by-four bit of masonite. You look at any well-known artist, an Australian artist generally, in any of the art-books and they all, just about, painted on three-by-four bits of masonite. There are so many format sizes there: ‘three-foot-by-four-foot’, ‘three-foot-by-four-foot’, because that’s the size of the masonite that you buy from McEwans. You just buy a bit of masonite from McEwans, gesso it over or undercoat it, and start your painting. You don’t have to cut it or anything. It’s very easy. And the stretchers are made twelve-twenty by nine-ten or whatever.

Yvonne Beyer considers that ‘format is just physical: if it’s not a circle, it’s got to have four sides, doesn’t it?’ Size, however is much more of an issue for her:

Sometimes size is controlled by economy. If I had loads of money, I would probably feel happy about spreading a lot of paint around, but sometimes I like to work small because it is very controllable. I do feel a pressure to work big, that’s for sure, because many people have said to me, gallery people, lecturers or whoever, that I’ve got to work bigger. I think that it is definitely a fashion at the
moment to work big, but I don’t think that will last. I think good work will endure, that it will last. I think it’s to do with intimidating your viewer: if you can’t show that you’re good with talent, well, make it so big that it follows the same theory that people who build churches use, make it big and high and imposing.

Size for its own sake is more than fashion, as Yvonne says; it carries Texts about power and distance as compared to affinity and nearness. A large work is costly and difficult to produce while a small work is modest in its demands of money, time and energy, and hence available to more artists.\textsuperscript{199} A large work imposes on the viewer an expectation to react with awe.\textsuperscript{200} In contrast, the small work may be handled (in theory) and closely inspected. The mere size of a work of art may carry Texts of power or intimacy.

But for Peter Peterson, it is the size which \textit{allows} for intimacy. Peter sees a lot of promise in a big-sized canvas. He would use the large format so that he could fit in all the details of his life:

Yeah, so I want to do a big one, and I’m want to put it in a gallery somewhere for everyone to see. Sort of show the life, and the roads. I started up here first, then I drifted here, and I drifted there, and all the places …. I’m going to do a big one of myself. Yeah, a nice one. It’s going to be mainly black and white. I’m going to try a black and white one. So I want to work on that one, a large one. So that should come in a couple of months time. I have to go to Ivan and get him to make me some works up, so if he listens to me, he’ll make me some big frames up. I’ll go and give him a hand. One about two sizes up from this, that’s a nice size. Big like André’s. I love his frames, I love his frames! Nice big frames. Be good to have big ones like them ones. Put in all the detail in one.

Even in something as apparently basic as format there are various possibilities, and each time an artist solves a problem about composition and style we find an accompanying Text, interpreted as problematic for Yvonne Beyer and as an opportunity for Peter Peterson.

\textbf{Perspective is a strategy to represent natural space.}

The \textit{space} of the natural world is the antithesis of a painting. It is unending, transparent, and open, as is time (or even more than time which is experienced as one-way), to endless transit or occupation. Most two-dimensional art does not try to tackle space, or if it does, it keeps it simple with devices such as scale and overlapping. But as part of the Renaissance urge to understand and explain the natural world, Brunelleschi, Masaccio, and Alberti refined a system of depicting perspective using the eye level as horizon and the direction of a hypothetical gaze as the point (or points) on the horizon at which

\textsuperscript{199} Imants Tillers, for example, says about the small canvas-boards he paints and exhibits - as compared to ‘Kiefer-size canvases’: ‘There isn’t the artistic economy to support that kind of transport cost. It had to be something small that I could really organise myself and do cheaply.’ In Sandy Nairne, \textit{State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980’s}, (in collaboration with Geoff Dunlop and John Wyver; Photographs by Geoff Dunlop), Chatto & Windus (in collaboration with Channel Four Television Company Limited), London, 1994, p204.

\textsuperscript{200} Large works such as those of the New York Abstract Expressionists inspire awe, for example Jackson Pollock’s \textit{Blue Poles} (1952) strikes visitors to the Australian National Gallery with both its conspicuous size and cost.
parallel lines meet. Renaissance perspective captures distance in converging lines - add some atmospheric dimming of tone and colour and a realistic imitation of space results. The most elemental matrix of nature is installed in the surface of the painting.

André Schmidt is aware of the tensions between the artificial surface and realistic space (André prefers the term natural rather than realistic). Linear or more subjective perspectival devices mean work:

... if you are hoping to achieve a realistic type result, I don’t like using that word ‘realistic’, you’ve got to follow the laws of perspective to some extent.

What would you use instead of ‘realistic’?

Well, natural, I suppose. That’s probably closer. You have to use perspective. You’ve seen it yourself, the paintings of the Murray River, where you are looking with normal viewing point at, say, the far bank of the river or at a tree in front of you, but you’re looking at an aerial view of the river - two perspectives at once, which just doesn’t work. That might be right: the person that painted it might have thought, ‘Well this is what I want. I want to have those two perspectives.’ But if they were trying to achieve something a bit more realistic - in inverted commas - then they haven’t achieved what they were trying to achieve.

Atmospheric perspective?

All of it you have to work at, it’s not just a matter of doing it. Linear perspective - atmospheric perspective is the same thing, although it’s not as cut-and-dried. There’s more subjectivity there than in linear perspective.

Stephen Hederics describes the relative subjectivity of perspective as ‘the way you view things’, but is also aware of learned formal strategies:

Perspective I am conscious of. Perspective comes in many areas, many facets, the way you view things, the way you understand stuff, and then there is linear perspective, and then there is tonal. There is also our conditioning with regard to perspective, you talk about distance factors, you do see in scales or overlapping to suggest the relationship of one shape to another one. If you want to say something about a subject you can then put it into certain visual perspective, whether it is in shape form, line form, or colour. I am conscious of perspective.

Yvonne Beyer too is conscious of perspective but is more concerned with the relationships of form and colour:

I don’t use perspective. I’m not naïve in that I don’t know that something in front of something overlaps, and if I have a background interior, I don’t use tone but I do use things like objects in the background are smaller, or try and use duller colours if I don’t want it to come forward. They’re just basic painting rules, aren’t they?

The basic painting rules however, like the jargon of any profession, carry Texts about any number of cultural meanings: Renaissance centrality of the individual human being, Cubist excitement with shifting viewpoints, and ineptness - which Yvonne Beyer avoids

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201 Brunelleschi, it seems, formulated the mathematical laws by which objects diminish in size as they recede, with Masaccio being first to use the mathematical means in a painting (though the Greeks had known of some of the principles of perspective); E H Gombrich The Story of Art, the Phaidon Press, London, 1966 (1st Edition 1950), pp163-5. Alberti then codified the principles in Della Pittura (1436); CD, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998.
by simplifying and which André Schmidt gently defends (in his example of a double horizon line) with: ‘the person that painted it might have thought, ‘Well this is what I want. I want to have those two perspectives.’

**The two-dimensional surface is the ‘field of action’**.

Most art is concerned with surface rather than depth, from Eastern art to Aboriginal art, and from decorative and applied arts to naïve art. It is also again (after a deep space interlude begun by the Renaissance re-discovery of linear perspective) the two-dimensional vector of much Western art of the past one hundred and fifty years. The French art writer Jean Clay writes,

> Surface is no longer an area in which preconstituted forms find their place or even a neutral screen on which the sign of the object is projected with complete independence. It is the place that *produces* this form or that figure. The plastic components are an important part of an overall structure that makes them interact. This structural economy overrides the “logic” of denotation.”

The illusion of deep space is one form of denotation that at least three of the artists rarely aim for. But all of the artists compose a two-dimensional surface - and all use the same formal elements, which André Schmidt speaks of as ‘balance of colour, balance of weight, balance of shape, balance of texture. All those different things. It’s how you can have a two-dimensional surface of shapes, and colours and things.’

The two-dimensional surface is ‘the field of action on which all artists do battle’, say Richard and Susan I. Lewis. They describe the contest: ‘The challenge for an artist is to select and organize the many possible elements into a design that most suits the artist’s intentions and is also visually satisfying.’ Underlying the rhetoric of aesthetics is the human being’s ‘limited tolerance for disorganized things’, our discomfort with chaos and preference for order. Order and chaos may be perceived quite differently, for example by Aborigines and early Australian colonists, but for the Western ‘rhetoric of aesthetics’ there has been devised a set of formulae: ‘While there are any number of possible strategies for a successful design, almost all incorporate at least some of what can be called the principles of design. These have proven over time to be capable of organizing a coherent work of art from the wide range of ingredients at an artist’s disposal.’

Stephen Hederics unravels some of the qualities which may come under the heading of aesthetics:

> See that’s very subjective isn’t it - aesthetics. But I am conscious of it looking reasonable, perhaps understandable. That’s not quite aesthetics though, is it? Aesthetics is to do with the beautiful. I think it’s subconscious with me, the aesthetic part. Although ultimately I’d like it to be impressive. In the end ‘impressive’ encompasses aesthetics.

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203 Richard Lewis and Susan I. Lewis, *op cit*, p34.
Stephen here touches on just one of the many Texts in composing a painting. To be impressive is an important aesthetic element. (Would any artist aim to make an unimpressive work? Not Freya. She says, ‘Mummy, how about that!’)

**Line is ‘a force borrowed from the energy of the one who drew it’.*

Many of ‘the ingredients at an artist’s disposal’, can go into the aesthetic formula. Stephen Hederics describes some of what goes into his recipe:

> There’s the power of the line, the power of the colour, and that’s aesthetics too - like the egg shapes. The quality of the line too is aesthetics - I’m very conscious of that. Yeah, I am, I am. I’m there, but I usually move so fast that I don’t have a lot of time to question it; but I am conscious of where I finish my line off. I’ve got some control there, not just random scribble.

The quality of line, its effortlessness coupled with control, its transfer from artist to ground, is summed up by Henry van de Velde[^206] who said that line is ‘a force borrowed from the energy of the one who drew it’[^207].

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[^206]: Henry van de Velde’s 1902 teachings became the foundation of the Bauhaus curriculum; in Jean Clay, *op cit*, p271.

Most artists know Paul Klee’s description of a line taking ‘a little trip into the land of deeper insight, following a topographical plan’. The many versions of line - simple line, broken line, counter-movement, a sheaf of lines, series of curves, converging, parallel, and separate lines, a plane traversed by lines, the wheel, corkscrew movement, zigzag line, and scattered dots - are charged with excitement: energy, expression, dynamism, and emotional qualities.

Speaking about dandelions and dead gums, Joyce Smith describes their formal elements and their effect on her:

Yes, I think they’re great. There’s just a beauty in them. It’s just the same with trees. I know a lot of landscape painters who don’t like dead gum trees. But I love them. I think they’re beautiful - a gnarled old gum that is dead, I see beauty in that. I love the limbs, the lines, the shape. You don’t have to put leaves on it, you can just look at the shape.

Peter Peterson too gives personal relevance to the aesthetic elements and transforms them into palpable delights: a wave is both a woman’s hair and the wave behind a boat: ‘You see the waves behind the boat, that reminds you of the woman’s back of the hair: it’s all wavy.’

Dots are the shining lights at the edge of roads, as Peter describes several times:

Dots. ... Like, you look at something from a plane, you look down, what do you see? Light with dots! You look down, what do you see? A big road - its all dots. You look at highway, that’s dots. An airport, that’s what it is, dots. Road in the middle, lights on the side, you got dots at the side alongside the road. It’s a picture.

Yvonne Beyer also feels shape, texture and line as almost physical elements. She often applies real pieces of textured and coloured and patterned scraps to her surfaces:

Yes, I do that a lot. That’s a very immediate way of getting some of those elements into my painting. Then I tend to disguise them a bit by painting around them, by incorporating them into a particular object. That’s just because I like the things I pick up and I want to use them in my art.

Stephen Hederics says, ‘An art person is always arting … rearranging stuff, working with all the languages of art: space, volume, shapes … manipulating elements …’.

**Colour is a mixed blessing.**

Freya and Yvonne Beyer talk about colour:

Mummy, which colours do you want?  
Just lots of different pretty colours. I like the red, and the yellow. And I like the black, and the green. That’s enough.  
Red, green, yellow. And black. …  
Yes.

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208 Paul Klee, ‘Creative Credo’ (1920), in Herschel B Chipp (editor), *op cit*, p183.  
And that’s black ...

Colour is the only one of the elements which is a common and popular topic in everyday conversation (apart from the light of which they are part). Colours brighten not only Freya’s paintings but all her world, and like most people she reacts differently to different colours (she loves pink).

Colours ‘have the potential to influence our emotions’, writes E. H. Gombrich. ‘We need only keep our eyes open to see how these potentialities of the visual media are used all around us, from the red danger signal to the way the décor of a restaurant may be calculated to create a certain “atmosphere”.’ Not only does red signal danger, it can signal passion, warmth, sex, comfort, richness, and so on. The potential of colour to function as a variable but powerful signal is readily used in all cultures.

Yet colour is as difficult to describe as smell. Colour seems to be an extravagance of nature. Colour is one of the most important elements for Yvonne Beyer, she speaks about it several times: ‘I was taking things, fabric or colour, that appealed to me, and I was putting it together to make something that was an art object on its own...’ She wants to ‘paint like an opal’ and ‘play with the paint, and just to include the colour’.

Yvonne Beyer, Lake Victoria II, 1996, oil on canvas, 80x110 cm. (not in the exhibition).

Yvonne considers limiting colours to brown and black and white in order to focus on ‘getting it right’ but realises that she really prefers to use other colours too:

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210 See Appendix 1: The artists in the project: The artists’ histories.
212 Ibid, p49.
With the landscape, I’ve really limited my colour, but that aim I’ve imposed on myself, because the fewer things you’re working with, the easier it is, the more colours you put in, the harder it is to get it right, but also I find that the brown and the black and the white is more appropriate for that subject matter. Oh, no, that’s not true. I would really like to put in other colour. I did some small ones which worked, which had all colours in it, a lot of muted colours. I was very pleased with those.

Colour can also fill up space, representing something instead of emptiness. Instead of pattern, Yvonne may use worked and rubbed colour for the voids of negative space till they become a rich element of the composition:

I find that if you use black and brown, you can use them to fill up a large space, and it doesn’t look empty. But I don’t always want to fill up every corner of the canvas, and I don’t always want to have pattern or texture.

Nor is Joyce Smith fazed by empty space. The paper becomes a creamy field:
A lot of people, when I first started to paint, said I should put a background behind my wildflowers, a background colour - which I didn’t agree with. I think the off-white paper shows the wildflowers off to an advantage, and I’ve always argued with people over this. … I just like the white - not white, I like off-white.


Against this off-white, Joyce interweaves the variously coloured plants:
Yes, I like painting all the different plants, and I like them because of the colours of the stems, because the stems and leaves are so different, and I can’t use all little flowers that have grey stems or leaves. To combine them, I need to look for
flowers which have a reddish-brown stem, which some of the little paper-daisies have, there’s a real good combination of stem colours. Plus the leaves, they’re all different. And I quite like finding plants where the leaves are starting to colour near the base of the plant, where you get lovely autumn tones into the leaves instead of just greens all the time.

Traditional European art, which is to some degree a descriptive language, imitates colours in the real world. Colour was carefully investigated in the late eighteenth centuries, for example by Michel Eugène Chevreul. This led to a period of colour experiment in painting, notably French Impressionism and Post Impressionism, especially by the artist Georges Seurat who evolved his own systematic colour theory, decomposing the colour of each object into five components which he applied independently: the local colour of the object, the colour of the light, the colour of the consequent light reflected by the object, the light reflected from neighbouring objects, and the colour produced by the illusory effect known as Chevreul’s law. Increasingly such studies led to colour being used for its own qualities rather than as a realistic description of the world.

In traditional Aboriginal art the colours used for a description of the world are the colours of the world, ‘red and yellow ochres, white kaolin or pipeclay, black charcoal or manganese’. And they are the pinks and blues of flowers, greens of oxides, purples of plant dyes, and the various fluffy pale seed heads, and iridescent shells and feathers, and the rock or sand and, not least, the skin of the people which is the real ‘ground’ upon which the designs are made.

Because the colours are those of the world, they have layers of meaning - or perhaps it is better to say that the same meaning imbues both the imagery and the land and its Dreaming, that penetrating meaning which Eric Michaels calls a ‘transubstantiation of the medium in the process of becoming part of a graphic image’. Indeed, as Michaels says about Western Desert artmaking, the word for the place, material, and colour is often the same: ‘karku means the place where red ochre is mined, red ochre itself, and the color red’.

Wally Caruana writes of the denotations which have common Texts: ‘Colours and the substances from which they are made are symbolic in themselves. White clay is used in mourning, red ochre is associated with the blood of the ancestor-beings who now reside

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215 Chevreul’s law holds that ‘When two different colours are placed side by side an optical illusion causes each to produce a zone of its complementary hue on the other side of the dividing line. The same is true of value.’ Henri Dorra, *op cit*, p192.
217 Seen in many descriptions of Aboriginal artmaking, for example, Eric Michaels, ‘Bad Aboriginal Art’ (1988), *op cit*; and Wally Caruana, *op cit*.
in the earth.’ The meaning of the materials is linked with the meaning of the sites at which they are quarried, these also have great ritual and political significance.  

This is not to say that colours other than natural ones are not welcome; Aboriginal artists may ‘seek similar qualities in the synthetic paints that are available today,’ writes Caruana. Michaels also notes such flexibility: ‘I suspect there may well be some traditional sources influencing acrylic usage,’ he writes. The colour ‘once extracted’, by whatever technology, becomes: ‘isomorphic with the design element to be painted …’.  

Peter Peterson speaks of his delight in colour. Partly Peter’s delight lies in colour’s associations with the world: ‘that sand, that real desert gold’, and partly in colour’s pleasing effects when he mixes and superimposes a changing play of colours:

All colours. I mix all colours. I like to change my work around. I like to be different. Not just one dot, a couple of dots. I like to mix all my colours. I like to play with all the colours. But I think I play with colour too much. I’ve been told I play with colour too much - but I love mixing my colours, I love playing with colours. That’s just the way I am with my paints. I love paint. Nice green, dull sort of colours, brown, blue, apricot-yellow, maroon, that real sand, that real desert gold colour, I love that colour. I love white, and brown and black. I like basically all my colours, yeah.

More than any other element, colour has an urgency which is hard to ignore, especially if it is not kept in the confines of naturalistic representation - and even then. ‘The object, the strange object itself draws from these things the greatest amount of its force of provocation…’, as André Breton says. Colour can undermine the descriptive power of the objects which constitute the work’s topic. Jean Clay writes that ‘color confuses the perspective order and the delineation of objects, and it reverses the subordination of the pictorial field to logocentrism.’ Colour used as primary object of a painting tears ‘color away from the descriptive functions in which Classical art wished to enclose it.’

Stephen Hederics describes the power of colour to confuse - by overriding the work’s design and by thwarting our interpretation of its message. Colour says a lot, but not really:

I am a bit wary of colour. I think colour is an enhancement. Personally, I feel that colour is probably the last of the elements that I would resort to. It’s very convenient, colour; like red blood, it’s sensational. So I guess that when I want to be sensational, I resort to colour, if I want that immediate impact. But colour to me is not easy. I don’t really work well with colour. Limited palette. Just as with teaching: I find that when I introduce colour, I find that colour just confuses them, they just get lost. It’s a very difficult element to work with, but one that people are attracted to, because of its visual impact, because it is immediately beautiful and

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220 Wally Caruana, op cit, p24.
221 Ibid, p100.
222 Eric Michaels, op cit, p58.
223 André Breton, ‘Surrealism and Painting’ (1928), in Herschel B Chipp (editor), op cit, p403
224 Jean Clay, op cit, p25.
powerful, and says a lot, they think, but not really. Colour without all the other fundamentals working, is nothing, it’s just a runny nose.

André Schmidt too is ambivalent about colour. He calls colour ‘pretty ordinary stuff’ yet one of the most important parts of painting. It is exciting yet does not mean much. Like Stephen Hederics, he may limit his palette, or exaggerate it for fun. Yet it defies explanation:

I suppose colour is not that important. Colour doesn’t mean much really. It’s one of the most important parts of painting, but you can’t explain it. Often you are limited to what you start with on your palette. You can do a lot with one colour, or you can do a masterpiece with one colour and white. It makes it a bit more interesting, though, with a variety of colours. I think it just comes down to the artist and what he is looking for in the finished painting. If you are not able to mix a colour that you want in the painting, that you are looking for in the painting, you just have to search out basic colours, search out a tube that will do the job, and use that ... but it’s not a terribly subtle thing. ... Colour is perhaps part of the fun bit of painting. Because you can do a lot of exciting things with colour. It doesn’t necessarily have to end up being realistic and true to nature, as long as, in the finished painting, it follows that rule that you’ve set up of it being pretty to look at.

Colour is both fun and terribly serious, sensational and confusing. It is studied by psychologists, communication technicians, optical scientists, designers and artists, and it is one of the first set of categories with which children are taught to perceive the world: ‘What colour is this?’ Colour may be a signal, may be used as symbol, and has many Texts (for example Freya’s favourite pink) but these effects are difficult to separate from subjective reaction, perhaps because colour is so evanescent a component of light.

Each of the artists orchestrates the formal elements and principles of design, abstracting, simplifying, emphasising, describing illusory deep space or highlighting the surface, and playing with line and colour in their painting. Each set of the artists’ works - and most of the works are consistent enough to be called a series - is very different from that of the others, each with its own manner of composing what André Schmidt calls ‘building blocks, basic shapes, basic colours,’ into a unique image, in each of which we can read traditions of style and technique, and the experimental ideas of artists, within the parameters of cultural capital.

Peter Peterson, The Spirits of the Road, 1994, acrylic on board, 51 x 82 cm, (photocopied detail; next page).
Chapter 7: Cultural capital

Not everything has to be newly invented when an artist puts together a painting. There are many resources, a stock of styles, methods, topics, compositional devices and other conventions, symbols and Texts, from among which artists select the means of artmaking. This stock of resources is that component of ideational culture which here is termed cultural capital (though it has little of Pierre Bourdieu’s connotation of ‘exclusive taste’).

The term cultural capital could apply to the built-up stock of all cultural products, but it especially suits the visual arts. One of the aims of most visual artists is to enlarge upon the existing visual language, and hence the visual arts build up a repertoire of conventions.

A stock of visual conventions is built up as ‘cultural capital’.

Artists necessarily avail themselves of the cultural capital already in existence, but only a small portion of the global stockpile will ever be accessible for any one artist. Many concepts, techniques, styles, topics, conventions, and symbols are simply unknowable.

André Schmidt considers Peter Peterson’s knowledge of Aboriginal symbols, and recognises that if he had a different cultural background, Peter ‘wouldn’t paint Aboriginal symbols - he wouldn’t know about them. They come from him knowing about them.’ The same could be said about any one of the artists. For example, André grew up within Western art traditions and had little contact with Aboriginal art, and therefore did not avail himself of the riches of Aboriginal cultural capital. And even had he known and used these riches, there would have been problematic complexities. Complex issues were raised by Elizabeth Durack (as ‘Eddy Burrup’) ‘who painted versions of the Kimberley Dreaming under a Aboriginal man’s name’226 Ray Beamish, another person of European background, raised similar issues when he claimed to have developed ‘the distinctive “sacred women’s dreaming style” which was attributed to his former partner, artist Kathleen Petyarre’.

The problems inherent in such use of Aboriginal cultural capital, as contrasted to the apparently less problematic Aboriginal artists’ use of European styles, topics, or media, lies mainly in the art’s purported effect, which in Aboriginal culture is often profound, similar to the Roman Catholic Eucharist or the Eastern Church’s icon, in its power to bring about a sacred consequence. Aboriginal art, and all art, consists of ‘symbolic artefacts … only explicable within the cultural context in which they are produced’, as

227 Ray Beamish furthermore claimed that he, not Kathleen Petyarre, won the 1996 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Award with Storm in Atamangkere Country 11, as reported by Susan McCullough, ‘Revealed: Black art scandal: White man claims credit for prize-winning Aboriginal painting’, The Weekend Australian, November 15-16 1997, p1.
Signe Howell writes. Eric Michaels explains this context as the world of mundane, daily events contrasted to the world of sacred things, which ‘have their sources in, and refer to, the “Dreaming” world, in which ancestral and cosmic spirits create the land, populate it with plants, animals, and people, and establish the proper relationships between these.’ In this context, ‘plagiarism is impossible … What is feared, instead, is thievery - the unauthorized appropriation of a design, as well as the potential for such stolen designs to convey rights and authority to the thief.’

We may be aware of the existence of such Texts, but remain largely unenlightened: ‘most of us are verging on illiterate when it comes to “reading” the culturally embedded meanings’ of the cultural productions of other societies. Without parallel experiences we may not be able to apprehend all that is in front of our eyes.

Yet artists often find themselves stirred by the formal qualities of the cultural productions of other societies, and seek to imbue their own art with them. Even if only a fragment of an original work is left, its formal elements may be appropriated for some new use. Pueblo Indian potters mine the past: ‘I go down to the ancient village and pick up pieces of pottery and try to put them together and get the line of the design.’ Some artists mine other cultures, aiming to incorporate aspects of them in their own art in order to break into new ground - for example, Margaret Preston’s ‘strong linear technique’ was ‘developed out of her knowledge of Aboriginal Art’. There may other stimulating ingredients, even an attitude. Jon Molvig was impressed by the empathy towards the land and its people which he saw in Aboriginal images: ‘I was doing some Aboriginal paintings and trying to do something with it. Trying to ally it with European painting and make a new school, if you like to call it that,’ achieving such an aim only later, when in the desert, ‘…not in painting a landscape of Central Australia, but in having an attitude … towards the country and the people I painted.

For the Western modernist, exotic art-forms have provided plentiful inspiration, for example tribal African sculptural abstraction copied by Picasso. There are often double standards operating in such interactions. It is a much voiced opinion that

228 Signe Howell, op cit, p236.
231 Immants Tillers, under the influence of Bell’s Theorem (the principle of local causes is false if quantum theory is right or vice versa) makes a case for global ‘regionalism’ as against the common sense theory of local actions having local causes; thus there may be a connection between events in different ‘space-like separated’ places, making for an interesting world in which the local artist does not have the suffer the limitations of making local art which reflects local conditions; ‘Locality fails’, The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art, pp314-325; (introduced and compiled by Susan Hiller), Routledge, London and New York, 1993 (1st Edition 1991), p229.
234 James Gleeson, op cit, p14.
236 Signe Howell, op cit, p233.
Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (to use a well-known example) is evidence of a newly invigorated direction in art, and the painting would bring millions of dollars if sold while the original tribal sculpture would fetch a fraction of such celebrity and price.

Signe Howell points out some of the complexities of appropriation. The Malayan Jah Hut, who traditionally make crude bes effigies, have recently started to make large, well-carved sculptures, elaborating the features of the different bes beings - although only the original little effigies are used in the healing ceremonies. Howell explains the cause of the new artmaking: the Jah Hut had been shown ‘a motley collection of photographs of wooden sculptures from New Guinea, Oceania, and various parts of Africa’ by an English official from the Malayan Department of Aboriginal Affairs, who suggested that the Jah Hut set up business, carving sculptures in order to have an income as they became more and more exposed to the outside world (which pounced on these latest ‘primitive art discoveries’).

Howell suggests that ‘the introduction of pictures of sculptures from other cultures to the Jah Hut is similar to the exhibitions of African sculpture in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century.’ She also notes ‘a tendency to assume that is only westerners who appropriate art from elsewhere.’ Accompanying this assumption there is the tendency to regret the adulteration of ‘pure’ traditional practices. Howell asks: ‘Who then is to say that in the case of cubism and expressionism the influence was beneficial while in the case of the Jah Hut it was destructive?’ The Jah Hut carvings are ‘an extension of the traditional ideological framework’ as much as is Picasso’s cubist period.

Yvonne Beyer talks about the positive aspects of appropriation and invigoration of cultural capital in answer to a question about innovative, non-prescriptive art and Aboriginal art:

... it’s taken a long time for all of us to come to appreciate the inherent value in that kind of art, because its aim is so incredibly different to Western art, and for us to start assimilating those aims is going to inject a fantastic new dimension to Western art - and indeed, the Aboriginal art itself, when they take on board Western ideas, is also given new life. I daresay, when you bring two cultures together, you’ve got potential for wonderful things to happen. Because it’s an education on both sides. In a way, artists feel the urge to create, and in a way, they are searching for a way to express themselves. So if they can be given a fresh approach, if they can be shown that you can be decorative and symbolic at the same time, and that you can throw perspective and depth out of the window and still create a picture with meaning, that you can duplicate the colours of the earth that may once have seemed to be boring, that you can limit your palette to two or three colours, don’t bother about textures, have plain areas, that’s a massive education for people coming from a background of European modern art, and even contemporary European art. Indeed, the influence of Aboriginal art world-wide will be significant.

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237 See for example Jean Clay, op cit, pp135-140.
239 Ibid, p231.
240 Ibid, p232.
Yvonne defines such exchanges as ‘the dialogue between artists’. She sees that it is an interaction, not a one-way learning process, but a complex exchange that keeps art viable. She says,

Well, I mean that I don’t think that artists really paint in isolation. You get to see what other people are doing and you take that on board, and they get to see what you’re doing and that goes into their thought processes, and that changes their criteria a little bit. And on and on it goes, and it keeps art changing.

Peter Peterson too explains the building up of cultural capital as a form of dialogue. He speaks about the experience of exchanging understanding with other artists:

… when you go around to the exhibition with the other artists and their work and your work. That’s good, that’s good. It’s like, you’re reading other people’s works and instead of talking to them, you’re looking at the pictures. The pictures tell you. If you can read the pictures, you’re seeing all their work, the feeling of it. With the other artists, it you’re looking at their work, you can see how they’re feeling, how they figured things out, do you know what I mean?

The exhibition allowed Joyce Smith to look at her art in the context of a variety of other styles and topics, as part of a dialogue between bush paintings of various sorts:

I’ve been to other - not many, a few other - exhibitions, but I think with this one, there was such a great variety of talents of all the other artists combined into one. It made it a very interesting exhibition. That was my personal opinion of it. They were all so diverse - from the smallest, my own work, to the largest, André’s work. It was still the bush but it was so different.

Later, Joyce Smith sums up the experience of seeing her work in the context of others:

I’m very happy with the exhibition, because it has brought me into contact with other artists. I find this very fulfilling. I know different artists from down at Art Group, plus I feel I’ve made new friends by getting together for the exhibition. And I think it will add something new into my life, and probably my art.

André Schmidt defines cultural capital as built-up knowledge. This knowledge may be unconscious as well as conscious:

It’s all just observation and gaining knowledge about painting, from fairly technical, in technical books - that’s not the physical process of painting, it just adds to it in the end - and just simply looking at pictures, looking at prints of artists. It all goes together into the build-up of knowledge, conscious or subconscious.

Speaking about reasons for exhibiting, Stephen Hederics describes how artists make their thoughts visible to the public, and how the context of an exhibition allows artists to reassure themselves about their directions and attitudes, and to get feedback, especially from important peers:

You’re putting yourself up for display and therefore you’re more or less confessing to those around you - verbalising, and picturising, and making your thoughts concrete, and I guess reassuring yourself through exposure to your own peers, to other people, you’re reassuring yourself of your directions and attitudes. I guess basically an exhibition is important for that reason. I think it happens every time
someone exhibits. ... Selling is a very small part of an exhibition. ... I think it’s more important to get some feedback, to get some new feedback, not the sort of feedback that you expect, that you can conjure up anyway, because if you’ve been arting for quite some time, as we have, you can set things up. ... The feedback from your important peers is most important - not just anybody.

This feedback takes the form that Stephen Hederics uses to make his thoughts concrete: ‘picturising’ and ‘verbalising’. Apart from looking and comparing their work, the artists were interested to talk shop. And the artists’ comments in the catalogue were perhaps of even more relevance to the other artists than to the public. André Schmidt found the extracts from the interviews interesting:

... that short bit of information about the artist from the interview with each artist, that was good to read. It is very interesting to see what the artist had in mind, and what their reasons for painting were. Sometimes you don’t even think why other people are painting; perhaps you assume they are painting for a certain reason. You might think they paint for similar reasons to why you paint, but often it is not the way it works out. They might have similar paintings to me, but their reasons for doing it might be completely different. Just reading about what the artist actually said, then it becomes a bit clearer. That’s interesting.

The exchanges between artists have the ‘potential for wonderful things to happen … it’s an education on both sides’, as Yvonne Beyer says, and even within this small group of Mildura artists there were exchanges which they found worthwhile. Yet, however stimulating the ideas of others are, artists still always aim to make an original contribution to cultural capital.

**Artists aim to create original art-cultural capital.**

One of the main aims in Western artmaking, it seems (going by thousands of books and articles), is to create art which is original. There is a continual search - if not for new ideas in exotic art then for innovation within the artist’s own tradition, and own style.

The concept of originality has a range of virtues for the five Mildura artists. Most significantly, originality and honesty are considered to be almost synonymous. In addition, they say, originality can mean a special quality, stuff that is purest, integrity of purpose, enhancing human development, using only one’s own skills and efforts, exactness of representation, expression of one’s real feelings, and finding images in one’s own imagination.

The opposite of originality is the outcome of dishonesty. The five artists reject unoriginality as it denotes the inverse of principled behaviour, and they use for it terms like trickery, tracing, guilt, lie, commercialism, compromise, prostitution, duplicates, rubber stamps, cliché, pretending, copying, wrong. Originality has different connotations for the five artists but each feels it is a requisite for the *sincere* artist.

Joyce Smith always finds her own specimens of Mallee wildflowers, and records them from life, never depending on other illustrations or photographs. Joyce tells a story about her ‘worst word’ which illustrates the impact of a challenge to her originality:
What’s the worst word you can imagine being applied to your art?
Immediately I read that, I thought, Ah! One of my sisters-in-law ... came in, and she said - I can’t think if it was a flower painting or one of my landscapes - she looked at it and said, ‘Well! Did you trace it?’

André Schmidt uses the work of past masters as an example of original expression, and says that one of the most important elements of artmaking is that special quality that comes out of the combination of originality and honesty:
Yeah, ... some people have a more original view of what they are doing. Hopefully the ones that survived, for whatever reason, maybe not all of them unfortunately, good paintings, they had something special going for them. Even though they might have changed a little bit over time, over the ages, they came from a different spot than some of the other paintings that were being produced at the same time. It’s got nothing to do with subject matter, it’s just something - well you mightn’t be able to see, but it’s nice to think you can see - something special in an artist’s work that is original, and honest.

André explains, that however skilful it may be, art that is copied is pointless. Honesty is the only point in making art:
Original, I like the word, original. I like it because that’s what it’s all about, I think - originality. It’s one of the most important things. Originality, with honesty. Which combine together pretty well to make something special. Who wants to be like anyone else? Even though it’s fantastic, you don’t really want to be like anyone else, do you? You want to be original. You might be able to paint exactly like the greatest artist in the world, what’s the point if you’re producing someone else’s paintings? So originality and honesty - even if you’re just honest, that’s a big thing. It doesn’t matter what you make, it’s your intentions of being completely honest ...

Peter Peterson speaks for much of his interview about the images that originate in his imagination. Peter says, ‘What I see is what I draw - what I see is what I draw.’ Peter’s explanation of his images is that they already exist in his mind and by relaxing he can see them. The pictures are associated with natural forms such as clouds, although sometimes Peter sees them from the corner of his eye or at night. Perhaps, as I proposed during the interview, the images are thought of by Peter as given by his Aboriginal Dreamtime, thus regarded by him as traditional or prescriptive. But although Peter accounts for some of his pictures as being part of a Dreamtime, he gives the matter-of-fact explanation that the Dreamtime is his own because he dreamed it:
A lot of people have a Dreamtime. A lot of people are getting Dreamtimes. Well, I got my Dreamtime. My Dreamtime is my woman with the back of the hair. All the ones I’ve done, you don’t see the face, you just see the moom, and the hair, and the side of the breast. That’s what you see. ... This is mine, yeah. Because I dreamed it once. I dreamed about it once. What I dreamed, I’ve done it, and I kept on doing this, this woman.

Peter Peterson’s spirit woman is his own creation. His other subjects are specific to him too, whether spirit or place or animal, because each has had a role in his life.
Although there is little evidence left of local Barkindji art style after years of deliberate or careless repression of the visual components of the culture, Peter Peterson has developed a mix of patterning, mark-making and dots that taps into what is generally available to local Aborigines through formal and informal education and the influences of Aboriginal galleries. With this style he creates his own creatures. When his subject is more generally that of Aboriginal art, such as the kangaroo, Peter points out that he uses his own style in depicting it:

As long as I don’t copycat off people. Like people whose work comes from up Northern Territory, or people whose work comes from Sydney: you never copy off other people’s work. You never even try to do it. Because that’s wrong. That’s their work - that came out of their self. But mine, that came out of what I think. I just do my own.

In another discussion, Yvonne Beyer supports Peter Peterson’s comment that art ‘comes out of the self’. She enlarges on the idea to argue that only when art is from within and has its first, its original meaning in an intimate sphere can it communicate meaning in a larger sphere:

... with Aboriginal art, because they’re not trying to be universal, because their themes are quite ... it’s the spirits, and everything relates directly to the doer: the doer’s totems, the doer’s things that are meaningful to the artist and to that tribe, depending on what tribe they come from, etcetera. And when you do, when you look within, when you bring something to everyone else from within, your work is a lot more meaningful than when you try and encompass universality in your work. Because each person is really only interested in something that’s meaningful to them, and they don’t want to be bombarded with grand ideas. They don’t want to
be bombarded with political theories. They want to see what someone else thinks about something, or they want to see what’s meaningful to somebody else, or the stories that someone else can tell through their art. And from that, from that, stems ideas and stems communication that can then be taken onto a broader platform of meaning.

Yvonne tells about working closely with other artists and the strain between co-operation and the ownership of ideas:
I wouldn’t mind having other artists who were trying to do similar things to me, but then it gets a bit dicey when you don’t know who came up with what image first. When I worked closely with people in college, sometimes you felt guilty that they hit on something and you incorporated it into something to express what you were trying to do. It was not necessarily an image, it might just be that someone has discovered that a large area using a lot of empty space with an image in the middle was an effective way to portray an image - something as simple as that. You should avoid making it obvious that you are using someone else’s established methods.

Yvonne continues the explication of originality and comes to the conclusion that most artists are indebted to someone else’s ideas, that indeed originality may not really matter and may not even exist, given innate and social constraints:
However, if you research the work of most artists who are known as being very clever, you can find many, many sources. Even though this is something I don’t want to admit to, I know that most artists do it, if not all. And even for people like Aborigines, it is blatant: they all share in the same totem, one family will all use the same totems and the same symbols. Our culture has begun to worship the idea of originality even though it is totally hypocritical: because originality is a concept, but to come to the point of originality you need inspiration, and you are aware of a history. Perhaps the only truly original people are people that are mad, or that are children, in which case, if you have a look at children’s art, they generally come up with exactly the same images anyway: they arrive at the same point from a point of originality. So contrived originality is in fact a paradox.

Stephen Hederics, like Yvonne Beyer, wonders if originality is possible. He wonders if an artist can create ‘truthful imagery ... with all of the experiences that you’ve had to date, and in the situation that you’re in’. Stephen concludes that truthful art is a ‘flexible, liquid quality of people, ... a process of development’. He speaks often about ongoing, responding, soft edges, fluidity. Artist have integrity when they acknowledge their flowing nature, adjusting themselves as they develop a responsive visual language.

Stephen links commercial art and clichéd statements to trickery and lack of integrity, saying this sort of artmaking devalues the human quality of ongoing development, and cheats it of worthwhile experiences:
I don’t think commercial statements have a lot of integrity. What would they have, not integrity, it’s not even honest. Because to be commercial is to be tricky, and to be tricky is not to be honest. It’s like a magician: you conjure up something for pleasurable gains. Commercial art is selfish. It’s motivated by selfish gratification. It’s money; commercialism means money, multiplication of things. It actually devalues stuff. You’re really devaluing human qualities with commercial
statements, forcing people into accepting pretty landscapes, clichéd tree on the right, a little bridge on the left, a cottage, a stream meandering up there. It’s sort of ‘Isn’t it lovely!’, comfortable, art that’s not art, duplicated so many times by people.

Stephen sums up worthwhile, truthful, original art as the ongoing expression of artists’ potential to see the world, and to respond however they may. Art is a life-long process. Stephen says,

I think if we interviewed any of the masters, they would agree, that at the end of it all what have you done with your talent, with your potential to see things that way? What have you done? The poets, the writers, have you materialised that? Have you verbalised that? It’s a process of development.

This development includes cultural capital, all that has been internalised about topic, materials, style, techniques, and application, and all the habits of looking. Additional to those givens is the essence of the artist’s ‘handwriting’.

Each person alters the given cultural capital in one of infinitely possible ways. Just as handwriting varies between people, so too can art expression be infinitely varied - yet always ‘readable’ too, or there would be no point in it. When we are familiar with an art form, for example Japanese wood-block prints, we are able to pick up many subtle differences, such as those between the prints of Hiroshige and Hokusai which to an unaccustomed eye have an over-riding effect of similarity. There is room enough in each art style for the uniqueness which originates in an individual.

André Schmidt says about the scope amidst the restrictions of rules, that ‘there are so many ways you can interpret what whirls around you, like visual subject matter - there are simply so many different visual images around you - that the rules can stay the same forever and ever’.

Originality, then, may be thought of as the differences that the person brings to the cultural capital, the expressions, within the style of the culture, of the ever-newly-revised way of seeing. Stephen Hederics gives a definition of originality. It is the flexible, liquid quality of people ... a process of responding, adjusting and developing their potential to see things in a new way.

**Originality is a paradox.**

Originality is a paradox because, however much an innovation feels like an individual invention, it works within bounds, which include accepted styles. The research of the anthropologist Ruth L. Bunzel is informative in this regard. Referring to art in the Pueblo Indian culture, but also alluding to art as a constant form of human behaviour, Bunzel writes, ‘Like all other forms of human behavior, art forms are not the direct response of the individual to the esthetic impulse, ... even the individual of marked originality

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242 To follow the gist of writing while perceiving the differences in the formation of letters we use a faculty that notes and accommodates changes within the accustomed style. In the same way we recognise familiar faces and can read the finest flickers of expression in all sorts of lighting conditions: TV Documentary ‘The Face’, ABC TV, July 23 1998.
operates within narrow limits, limits much narrower that those set by the exigencies of the technique ...".243

Bunzel discusses the shapes of Pueblo pots and their painted designs which are stylised representations of natural phenomena: plants, animals, clouds and rain. Yet even within the strict limitations of these traditional designs, the potters have a strong feeling that each pot is an expressive, individual creation.244 Bunzel writes that each potter ‘in all sincerity reproduces a familiar type of ornament, believing it something derived from her own consciousness.’ 245 Bunzel quotes a potter: “I make designs out of my head, things I have never seen before”.246 She writes that the potters condemn copying the designs of other women, and that most potters disclaimed repetition of their own designs.247

The inspiration, whatever its source, is limited to the reigning cultural style. Bunzel writes, ‘Whenever dreamed designs were shown to me they were in the traditional, or more correctly, popular style in the village. When Hopi potters dream designs they are always in the accepted manner, just as twenty years ago they would have been in the style prevailing at that time.’248

But there is a constant, gradual shifting of the limits, with a rare artist causing major shifts of the limits with her originality. Bunzel writes that ‘the limits of acceptable expression, though always clearly definable, are constantly shifting, gradually stretched’, or, rarely, remapped completely by a gifted individual.249

In the creation of art the limits are conceptual. In Pueblo art the conceptual boundaries are fairly firmly set and kept, and sometimes and gradually stretched, and rarely extended far. In contemporary Western artmaking we tend to see artists as having not only the potential but also the responsibility to test the conceptual boundaries, and so to keep the art culture dynamic. Yvonne Beyer speaks of this:

Well, some people think that the artist as an individual has the responsibility to push the limits of art every time, and that it’s our responsibility to come up with new ideas, to keep contemporary culture alive and kicking and to come up with great new viewpoints.

Even though Pueblo art culture is so dissimilar to Western art culture with its accelerating innovation, artists in both cultures share the aim of being original. But one striking aspect of Pueblo culture is that every woman pots, each taught by her mother, each considering herself capable of original and expert work. Compared with our own culture, the Pueblo art scene is inclusive of a large part of the population, whereas modern Western artmaking is a specialised profession, a result of division of labour, capitalist economics, and particularly the Renaissance Text of distinction and status to which few could aspire, with historians and critics and many artists themselves taking on the task of

243 Ruth L. Bunzel op cit, p1.
244 Ibid, p52.
245 Ibid, p53.
247 Ibid, p52.
248 Ibid, p57.
249 Ibid, p1.
vetoing the products of artists and adding Texts which have kept most people, in particular women, from participating.

Yvonne Beyer considers some implications of the edited view of art:

There are those who are very good at reading into art a lot of meaning and importance. I’m not so sure that they haven’t actually overstepped the mark on occasions, in making art out to be more important than it is. One very famous one, for example, would be Robert Hughes, who holds art, and some artists, way above the rest of the population in importance, especially the men ones - in fact only the men ones. And they’re not interested in art that they can’t use as a tool to show off their intellectual life, even though that some of the most famous poets and authors, their best work is only to do with simple emotions such as love and other domestic feelings. But in art you need to be universal.

The networking surrounding the exclusivity of art extends to subject categories as well as to style and often pertains to the artist’s status, largely defined as being able to provide - or not - a generalised universality but ignoring the universality of domestic life. Yvonne Beyer’s example pertains to the use of flowers, reflecting her own and Joyce Smith’s experiences:

Domesticity is not particularly popular to the critics. I was going to say domesticity and personal ... do you know what I mean by domesticity? I don’t really mean in the home, because wildflowers aren’t actually in the home, although you could argue that they’re small and you bring them into your house and sit them on your table, and therefore domesticity might be a good word.

Such editing of categories that do not fit into the ‘universal art theory’ results in proportionally fewer idiosyncratic and localised styles, in the globalisation of a few dominant Western styles and, in spite of this world-wide spread of dominant styles, in a proportionally smaller artmaking circle.

Yvonne Beyer surmises how categorical contexts serve conveniently to fix art in time and place, and allow for easy generalisation about sources and effects, while effectively disqualifying anyone working outside the canon:

Well, you get very used to adapting a particular style on a time scale. You can put Joyce’s paintings in with the scientific drawings that were first done when the English came to Australia. And you can fit André’s in about that time, too. And if they were set in that context, it’d be different. But I guess it’s just convenient for the historians to only focus on the work that makes sense historically, that makes sense in context with the time, so that you can generalise about their influences, and you can generalise about why they were doing this at that particular time. And if there was an artist doing something at that time that didn’t fit in, well then they probably ignored them.

How many artists have been ignored as compared to the artists selected to be part of art history’s canon? Is abundant participation in various art forms only possible in small societies? Ruth Bunzel worked within several communities, each of which had developed a distinctive Pueblo style. She compares the survival of different styles, and conjectures that there may be an influencing factor both in the number of artists engaged
with a certain style and in the quality of the style itself. Of the disintegration of the Laguna style, she says ‘... there is something inherent in the decorative style that encourages or inhibits originality, irrespective of the endowment of the particular artist’ and that the facts ‘... would seem to indicate some sort of relation between the number of individuals engaged in pottery making and the vigor and variety of the style.’

A small but not too small a group may well provide the fertile conditions for animated artmaking.

A similar idea of a ‘virulent environment’ is mooted by Yvonne Beyer when she compares the coming together for On Our Own Ground to what could happen and has happened when groups of artists exchange ideas and aim to generate a vigorous cultural climate where artists’ perceptions are accepted and art-cultural capital grows prolifically:

Just like the rebels’ salon in France, in the early nineteen-hundreds, where all the new work changed the whole direction from academic to modern and contemporary art. Many of the artists that exhibited in that salon - what was it called? the Salon des Refusés - they had already been working together before they showed their work, but they still had to fight public acceptance, they still had to penetrate mainstream thought, before their art was seen by themselves as relevant. Because artists really don’t want to be on the periphery, they do want to influence the mainstream. ... But I do say it can happen anywhere. You do need a little bit of history and a little bit of time, though. Obviously France was a melting pot of artists, including artists that were refugees from other parts of Europe, so it was a very virulent environment of artmaking with lots of themes to explore, and lots of to-and-fro-ing in the cafés, and sharing ideas. I think you’d be pushed to get that happening anywhere else. I suppose that also happened in America post-second world war and that’s why you probably had a lot of fairly influential and strong movements happening in America then, taking the emphasis off Europe, from the late forties on.

The development and survival of art styles may depend not only on the artmaking itself, but also on the process of making connections within some form of animated group, whether of artists or interested viewers. These artists or viewers appreciate not only the observable content of the work but the work’s Text which gives a much more intimate message about the shared participation in the culture. In this way the work of bringing art into being and into society is a joint effort. And this work does require coherent effort, as Terence Grieder says, or the art ‘slips away into that limbo of undelivered messages.’

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251 Terence Grieder, op cit, p3.
Conclusion

‘Thanks to art, instead of seeing a single world, our own, we see it multiply until we have before us as many worlds as there are original artists’, wrote Marcel Proust.252

The five Mildura artists, Yvonne Beyer, Stephen Hederics, Peter Peterson, André Schmidt, and Joyce Smith, depict five very different worlds even though each artist goes out into more or less the same landscape to select from it a topic for artmaking. ‘Well, I must get that,’ Joyce Smith says, yet each artist’s ‘must’ is a different one.

Artmaking is never a straightforward getting of the topic (even a photograph is never a simple capturing), never a single rendition which most truthfully represents the local landscape, never objective, nor super-humanly inspired, nor the single culmination of an art historical movement. Art communication is always of the moment (but the moment imbued with memories), of the place (but the place learned by experience), of the artist (but the artist with a life outside artmaking), and of the group within which the artmaking is practised (but a group which is made up of disparate and changing, influenced and influencing people, and great or small size from the family to the global sphere).

Such a multiplicity of meanings is that which postmodernism attempts to grasp. Postmodernism deliberates on the complex cultural sphere, framing events in past and present time and small and large domains. ‘Postmodernism, like Freudianism, which it has resuscitated, is a total system of explanation,’ writes Eric Michaels.253 But using such a total system to explain, for example, artmaking at the end of the twentieth century in a country-city in the island continent ‘South of the West’254 is as perplexing as having no explanations at all. Michaels writes, ‘Whatever postmodernism is, it isn’t a thing, and the attempt to capture it has proved challenging to aesthetics in a very interesting way, requiring practitioners to operate on many more levels of description than was done in the past. … Because it describes a relationship between subject and object, rather than identifying particular subjects or objects, nearly anything could conceivably be positioned in a postmodernist discourse.’255

One such relationship between subject and object is the ‘radically symbolic’ message: the Text. The theory of the Text, as propounded by Roland Barthes, is the basis of many postmodern writings on representation, and it underlies the view of this paper that artmaking is a process with multi-layered significance. Focussing on the Text we realise that even a dot on a canvas, or the artwork’s presence on a gallery wall has connotative messages. Some of these messages are peculiar to the artist, made not only with favourite colours on a palette but with a life filled with examples and experiences: ‘a pot of self, which you can dip into and say, “Let me make some art now, with all those helpers”,’ as Stephen Hederics says. The pot of self adds to the art’s distinctive

252 Marcel Proust, quoted in Richard Lewis and Susan I. Lewis, op cit, p33.
255 Eric Michaels, op cit, p179.
differences, but the art’s influences are also more widely cultural and may be understood and grasped, consciously or unconsciously, by the ‘interested bystander’.

The interested bystander is myself, the writer and curator, plus any other receptive viewer whom the artists draw to their art. Knowing that there are ‘secret messages’ in artmaking ought to captivate any viewer, (and delights me enough to undertake the grand task of decoding the messages). The critic Anne Middleton Wagner has a dream of a viewing public whose acts of critical vision are not ingrained with the notion of ‘geniuses and greatness’ but who begin the act of interpretation where such prejudices leave off.256 That is what this paper aims to do: begin to interpret where The Story of Art257 leaves off, begin to see the stereographic plurality, as Barthes says, of each story of art.

There is so much in an artwork, and yet so little: ‘a few colored patches’.258 But this patching is so hard won! This Text runs through the artists’ explanations: the difficulty of artmaking. ‘You put the picture on canvas with paint,’ says Peter Peterson. Yes, but how does an artist even begin to imagine a picture? Where are the starting points and finishing line? With what means does the artist achieve the artwork? Why is artmaking different to everyday ‘work’? How does an artist reconcile social and personal aspirations?

This project has recorded the words and works of the five Mildura artists and learned from them some answers to such questions. The artists know what they are talking about - as André Schmidt says, ‘Artists do put a lot of thought into their paintings, and a lot of time. It’s not something that’s done casually.’ The artists have filled the project with discoveries which have come out of their dealing with the real thing, the actual artmaking, the delving in the pigments and symbols which are the rich lode where artists labour for ‘the essence of the art, the gems of the ideas,’ as Stephen Hederics says. This essence, says Stephen, goes further than the physical work: ‘The process of skill, or the act of making, isn’t the art. It’s the continuation of that statement. It’s the question mark that act leaves behind, after you’ve done it, rather than, ‘You’ve done it. Well, that’s it!’.

The question mark is the clue. Lucy Lippard says, ‘The power of art is subversive rather than authoritarian, lying in its connection of the ability to make with the ability to see - and then in its power to make others see that they too can make something of what they see … and so on.’259 This cultural enriching is one of the charters of artmaking, another Text.

It is perhaps also a reward. Yvonne Beyer speaks about a sympathetic reception: ‘I feel there is a very sympathetic aspect of the public, not all of the public but one aspect of the general public … who relate to some of those very personal paintings and that’s a nice feeling if you do a painting - it’s not just you, it means a lot to them. In a way, your feelings are universal. It’s not other artists, it’s only people.’

256 Anne Middleton Wagner, op cit, p184.
257 E. H. Gombrich, The Story of Art, The Phaidon Press, London, 1966 (1st Edition 1950), is a favourite textbook, but prejudiced, for example in the fact that out of 384 illustrations, none is (known to be) by a woman.
258 André Breton, ‘Surrealism and Painting’ (1928), in Herschel B Chipp (editor), op cit, p403.
If some postmodern art discourses have ignored art which is sympathetic to people, suggesting that painting is now a pointless or a questionable activity (everything that could be done has been done, and what has been done has not led to the deliverance of troubled people anywhere on the globe), these artists remind us that art is not only black and white. There are a hundred shades of grey and a rainbow of colour besides, and these do lighten the burden of living. Our visual sense has marvellous power to connect us in the most intimate way with our world. ‘We are primates - highly visual creatures - with minds that evolved around this remarkable sense,’ says Steven Pinker, and, as he adds, ‘Humans have made pictures for at least thirty thousand years.’ These Mildura artists continue to connect us to our world.

Roland Barthes’ concept of the Text may be used to interpret the Text of this text, to detect the clues in this paper. For example, just as Text leaps into an artist’s choice of a familiar topic at the moment of decision, so too do various Texts leap into my decision to choose the work of five familiar people: Joyce Smith, André Schmidt, Peter Peterson, Stephen Hederics, and Yvonne Beyer. The selection of these close-by but disparate artists, each with a different story, may be as full of messages as is the kangaroo, the sheep, the colour of the land, the little climbing saltbush, and the gum tree. As Ross Gibson says, ‘Indeed, the collection of the data has already proceeded, consciously or unconsciously, through selection, exemption, and combination in the instant of recording … the evidence is already shaped subjectively precisely because it has been called evidence … so that interpretation may proceed.’ My interpretation proceeded from the moment I began to make those early choices, and has resulted in an exposition which is individual - within theoretical and cultural boundaries (the way art is individual within social conventions such as cultural capital) – hoping to add to the postmodern discourse my gradually shaped (and involved) conclusions about the value of artmaking.

The project is like a photograph taken by Ross Gibson’s hypothetical anthropologist: the representation is captured, stored, and then ‘reinserted (regrafted? refertilized?) in a culture of events, aspirations, and actions.’ The exhibition and the paper ‘trap and possess’, and plant in a new culture the images as ‘a discourse - an essay, a lecture, or an argument with conclusions’.

The themes of Our Ground: Artmaking and Landscape in Mildura will potentially take root in new cultures - in academia and also in the local ground as the artists re-read their own words, now maturing in the context of the words of various theorists and of their counterparts, the other artists.

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260 Steven Pinker, *op cit*, p214.
261 Steven Pinker, *op cit*, p215. In Australia this may well be a conservative figure.
262 Ross Gibson, *op cit*, p115.
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Appendix 1: The artists in the project

The artists taking part in the project, Our Ground: Artmaking and Landscape in Mildura, are five skilled painters of the Mildura landscape: Yvonne Beyer, Stephen Hederics, Peter Peterson, André Schmidt, and Joyce Smith. These five people are a small sample of thousands of artists painting in Australia (two-and-a-half thousand professional painters as counted in the last census, 1996, plus many times that number who would not have claimed painting as their profession).

The artists had not been grouped together before, but once they were grouped a more interesting and diverse cross-section of local artmaking could hardly be imagined. However, had the selection been inspired by another theme or made by another person, or at another time, the choice of artists would have been different - there is no single answer to the question of ‘What is local art and who is a typical local artist?’

In the same way that other artists could have taken part in the project, so could these artists have made art somewhere else. To the question Is where you are an important issue? André Schmidt says concisely: ‘Perhaps not. If you lived somewhere else, you’d do something different, paint a different visual image.’ When asked, ‘Do you think that there is something happening in Mildura, is there any sort of movement or centre of art?’, André explains his ideas on the matter of chance associations:

I think there’s always going to be people coming and going and trying to get things started, like art groups, and have thoughts of painting in a community of painters. I feel it’s just chance. There might be a certain number of artists in a town at some time, and they get together and have a bit of a chinwag and then paint. And then a few years down the track there mightn’t be any artists, because people don’t want to paint, and there’s no artists in the town. I don’t know if the town particularly makes artists - or if the atmosphere or the country have an effect on people who want to do that sort of thing.

It is outside the aims of this project to investigate if there are special properties of a place that result in a lively art scene. Rather this project takes as given that almost any setting can be a stimulus, the cultural setting being more of a catalyst. Indeed, the natural setting is part of the cultural context.

The artists’ histories

The histories of the five artists are diverse, yet there are similarities - of special interest for this project is the fact the artists are ‘locals’. Peter Peterson, Joyce Smith, and André Schmidt were born here and Stephen Hederics and Yvonne Beyer came as children. All but Yvonne continue to live here. Yvonne Beyer is the odd person in this group, coming ‘home’ now only for holidays. All the artists are ‘odd’ in relation to each other really. They are different, for example, in the length of time they stay away from Mildura. But, however far they travel, Mildura is home to all the artists.
Peter Peterson has the strongest claim on calling the place home, being an indigenous Australian, a River Man. His mother’s people have lived near the waters of the Murray-Darling Basin for at least eleven millennia (carbon-dating of middens) and perhaps for fifty millennia (at Mungo, a hundred kilometers to the north-east, where there were once fertile lakes, were recently found 50,000 year old remains of a woman, her skeleton marked with ochre). Peter explains: ‘I’m a Barkindji, through my Mum’s side. That means - Barkindji - the River Tribe. The Murray River.’

Peter Peterson in his studio, with Anjelie Beyer. Photograph by Anne Hederics.

Peter speaks about his bond with the river:
We’re always running along the river, we love the river, laying down the river bank, every fortnight, every week. I just love, it, I love it, I love it - it’s good. We used to live on the river-bank, at Dareton, at Namatjira Way, behind the Golf Club, we used to live there for years, used to live there for years. And, going back toward Wentworth, we used to live down there too, on the river bank, when I was a kid. Yeah. I am a river man.

Peter has been away from Mildura many times but always returns back home after his times away. Peter says,  
I’ve lived all my life here. I’ve travelled around but I always ... I’ve been away most of my life, been away travelling around, but I’ve always headed back home. I’ve settled down, now I just want to paint off and on, off and on. ’Cause I’m back home.

Peter recounts the many things about the area that make it a good place to live:
I just like the place. I’ve had good times, I had bad times, and that is why I stay here, stay right here. It’s a warm place, a hot place, cold place. Also we’ve got a lot of work here, fruit - mainly all fruit, that’s what I like about it. ... The river is nice and big, it’s a lovely big river, it’s a nice river. And it’s clean. ... The countryside is lovely and green. You’ve got plenty of fruit around, plenty of oranges, plenty of grapes, plenty watermelon. It’s a real fruity sort of place. ... Nice people around here, pretty close. I mean, it’s not a big town but it’s big enough; you know a lot of people. When you get to know them - you know all the people around the town - not much to be known. And you never get lost in the town, no you can’t. No, no. It’s good, a good place, yeah.

Peter Peterson has settled with his family in town close to work and schools, and set up a studio in a large garage to suit the uncluttered conditions he prefers when working on his often large and complex works.

Joyce Smith has lived in Mildura for nearly eighty years. She says, ‘I was born in Mildura, 1920. I’ve lived here all my life.’ Joyce is descended from colonial families, some of whom came to this district nearly a century ago.

Joyce Smith, resourceful and creative, makes her living and her art out of what the land provides. Joyce gives a summation of her life before she took up art:

I travelled around Australia quite a lot after 1975. Too busy in my early married life to paint, it wasn’t until my husband retired from the dried-fruit block, we built a new home in Irymple. So I helped to build that, it took us two-and-a-half years. ... The three of us built it - well, my husband is a builder as well, he is a builder and blocky. I didn’t know native plants at all until then, and then Sue, my daughter, and
I started thinking about natives so we planted up our acre with native trees and shrubs, which is quite a large garden. By the time the house was built, the garden was established as well. After Sue went to Melbourne, I thought, ‘Now, what am I going to do with myself?’ and I started propagating plants. I had a small backyard nursery. I propagated natives and fuchsias. People came in, of course it grew and grew and grew, and I was so busy. Then my husband retired, and he said, ‘Well, we are going to travel. You’ll have to sell all those plants.’ I did, because I wanted to travel too. So after that I drew flowers.

Joyce Smith lives with her husband, Wop Smith, in the house they built in Irymple. She paints in her studio overlooking the garden at a desk organised for watercolour work. Joyce also spends a lot of time in the garden. She says, ‘I think living within all my native plants is important, because I probably wouldn’t have the same feeling for plants if I lived in a little unit in Mildura.’ Contact with native plants maintains Joyce’s enthusiasm for painting from live specimens.

André Schmidt is descended from German immigrants who settled as wheat farmers in South Australia, and then came upriver to Mildura.

André Schmidt too has lived in Mildura all his life and, like Joyce Smith, has built a family home and grows wine grapes. He has also built a studio and works full time on his two interests: the vineyard and his art.

Stephen Hederics came to the area as a child in an extended migrant family, having left Hungary after the 1956 uprising and aftermath. Stephen explains the circumstances that prompted his parents’ move to Australia:
Dad was a bit of a political sort of person, not heavily, but he had a political point of view which wasn’t favoured at the time, and so he thought it better to go. They used to round people up - I remember that - just before we left actually, that may have prompted the move, the authorities would just roll up at about four in the morning. They’d have a number of people on their list. With a cattle truck they would drive down the village. They would have soldiers, and a half dozen would rattle at the door and have to be let in, and served notice and took the men away. And then they interrogated them about certain things; it was fairly petty stuff, but it was used as a conditioning, or a stick for the people, to keep them in line. Just an authoritarian exercise. But it did frighten everyone - that this sort of system could stay with us for a long time. So we decided to go. Maybe if my uncle hadn’t been here we may not have gone to Australia, we may have gone to England, or Belgium.

Stephen Hederics at the old pumping station at Nichols Point, where he organises Life Drawing.
Photograph by Anjelie Beyer.

Stephen has come to love Australia; like the other artists he has travelled throughout the country. He delights in all the Australian landscapes, but is at home especially in the sparsely settled country around Mildura. Stephen lives in one of the early Mildura settlement houses and has a studio which he shares with Anne Hederics, who is also an artist. But however well set up the home studio is, Stephen usually works within the landscape, often on art camps which he organises.
Yvonne Beyer was the last of the group to arrive in Mildura; she was four years old in 1969 when she came from Melbourne with the author and her husband who had both, separately, migrated as young people from the Netherlands after World War Two. Her parents’ background may account for the fact that Yvonne Beyer still feels ‘different’ yet without being able to claim a second entire culture as backstop. Now Yvonne looks to life in Melbourne to provide a cosmopolitan existence with access to many cultural events, and she is more inclined perhaps than the other artists to settle away from Mildura. Yet she also loves the outback countryside, and many of her paintings, even when she is in the city, are about the Mallee. Yvonne says,

The outback, Mallee, desert area inspires me as does most of the Australian landscape, especially the vastness; the way a tree trunk or rock or winding creek bed stands out, and the way colours vary so much from white on brown, to black in soft yellow. Also the human-made patterns such as tracks, or rows of vines.

Yvonne Beyer’s recent exhibitions in Melbourne have had as central theme the moods of the outback, for example thirty works in *Black Night Rain* (Solo exhibition at The Gabriel Gallery, Footscray Community Arts Centre, 4-22 June 1998) in which many of the works achieve her desire to paint ‘like an opal’.

The five people seem to take quite for granted that they are artists, except perhaps Joyce Smith who expresses surprise at her late-flowering success. Joyce has been accomplished in skills as diverse as go-kart racing and propagating plants, so perhaps her surprise comes from finding that she has become successful in yet another field.
Psychoanalytical explanations are out of place here, but social/psychological explanations may be gleaned from the artists’ stories. For example early displacement from home, hardships of other kinds, or even everyday social interactions as described in the interviews may have various influences on a person’s eventual decision to make art.

One social influence is early example, the family providing the most congenial art guild. These five guild members began their training young, some remembering role models and all with memories of early artmaking. All five artists drew as children and paper was a precious commodity. Yvonne Beyer grew up with art around the house, drawing on smoothed out butcher’s paper from about the age of two, and continuing her art during years of school, college, and rearing a family. It is fascinating to see Yvonne Beyer’s daughter following even more closely in her mother’s footsteps than Yvonne did in her mother’s. During the second interview the young artist adds her comments to the exchange about art, the transcript below demonstrating some of the myriad scraps of experience which influence the potential artist. The almost absent-minded replies that Yvonne Beyer makes to her three-year-old daughter are giving the little girl many messages about artmaking. The most important one probably is the unquestioned acknowledgement that artmaking is a normal part of family life.

(I did a painting and a drawing. That’s for umm ...) Many of the artists that exhibited in that salon - what was it called? The salon of the refused, des refusés. (That’s pretty.) Was it? That’s what I was going to say, yes, that’s what came into my mind - des refusés, (Oma Beyer. That’s for Oma Beyer.) … the Salon des Refusés.
(That’s for Oma Beyer. Is it? Okay, that’s pretty abstract. I’ll put it over here to dry. Is it beautiful? Yes, I’ll put it over here to dry. I’ll go and make another one. Okay? ... Mummy, how about that! Oh, that’s even more beautiful, that’s very beautiful. That’s under water, and that’s a fish. Oh, I like the fish! I like that one. Do you want me to do another one? Oh. Yeah. Mum. do you want me to do another one? Mmm. Okay. Do one for me. Okay, this one will be for you. All right.)

... (Mummy, which colours do you want?) Do you know, one thing that could come out of Mildura could be Aboriginal-based movements. (Mummy, which colours do you want? Just lots of different pretty colours. I like the red, and the yellow. And I like the black, and the green. That’s enough. Red, green, yellow. Huh?)
And black.
Yes.
And that’s black ...

The background of art activities, of images, of talk, which surrounds Yvonne Beyer’s daughter will possibly go into the making of another artist. At the moment the subject matter and style of the child’s drawings are largely governed by a mental art-grammar, the stages of which are manifested in all children as are the stages of development in other areas of cognition. But soon the topic and style of her art will reflect the influences of school, of advertising, of peers, and later of the art culture of her time, just as the art of the five Mildura artists reflects the experiences of their visual culture.

Joyce Smith does not remember having anyone as a role model when she was young, she just found herself always drawing, like Yvonne using ‘real’ butcher’s paper. In answer to the question about the source of her talent, Joyce says, ‘I don’t really know. As a child, a young teenager, I was always drawing on the white butcher’s paper. I used to sit in front of the house and draw the house and things like that ...’. It was to be many years later that Joyce Smith would have the opportunity to realise her early interest in artmaking.

Stephen Hederics also remembers paper with pleasure as he recounts his early art experiences, and there was at least one role model for the young Stephen:
I can recall arty things when I was about five. I had a cousin who showed me how to draw a horse, and he did the head and neck of the horse and the mane, and I was impressed with that. That’s about the first image that I can recall. Then, in Yugoslavia, on the way, I remember being fascinated by the toilet paper, we never had toilet paper in the village, we only had newspaper and corn cobs and whatever, because it was a very simple and poor village, and so, to go into what is now a prime hotel-motel and find paper there! Paper was just precious. I guess that’s probably what affects my concern about paper at school these days - that the students don’t appreciate the value of it, waste it, throw it away, just a little scribble and it’s gone. Yet here I was, as a little kid sitting on the toilet, and just the pleasure of it - it was one of those dispensers where you get sheets of toilet paper out - and I’d pull one ... it was almost like money, I’d count it, I’d have a wad of this toilet paper, and I felt rich. I used to draw on that.

Stephen’s fascination with the physical properties of his materials continues to be evident, not just in his art but also in his everyday life. Being brought up on the land he has learned to appreciate the sensuous qualities of natural elements like earth and water: I guess it’s no different from using a shovel in the earth. That’s another medium for me. Because I was brought up on the land, I enjoy earth, the relationship I have, or have had, with the land, and I try to maintain that. Just the smells from the earth when you turn the sods over. When we used to water on our block, the process of changing the furrow over - it wasn’t for me just from one to the other side. I looked at the water, and the water glistened. And then I moved some earth and it became a mound, and then it flowed, and I redirected it. And all of a sudden I was making - that’s the sort of line I was talking about - I was making lines, and then made shapes; and it ran down the row and other things started to relate to it.
An important influence in the development of these artists is the society’s and the family’s attitude about art and artists. Throughout our socialisation we absorb attitudes about art. André Schmidt describes what goes into the developing artist:

Certainly, we are people before we are artists. We were developing the way we are going to be as an adult, we were developing that before we even thought of being artists. There is a point in your life when you decide that you want to be a bit more serious about painting, but all these other things have more importance in your life before that point, although there are parts of you that are developing alongside the eventual fact that you are going to be an artist. It all can come out in the way you paint. The way you’ve grown up.

André does not view this as an entirely preordained process; he bears in mind that we can make decisions too. André says, ‘... it all comes somehow from the way you’ve been brought up and what you must have seen as a child, and I suppose what you’ve made a decision to hold onto.’ André as a child is already practising what the mature artist has as goal for his artmaking: it is a means of enjoying and expressing himself, and doing it so well that people praise his skill. André Schmidt says,

I don’t know if I was always good at it. I always enjoyed it. People probably said I was reasonably good. Some people liked what I did when I was a kid; they liked the drawings I did. But I enjoyed doing it. I suppose that’s the answer to it: as a means of expression. I don’t know why I do it. ... I suppose it was a means of putting images in front of myself.

Peter Peterson remembers making art when young, and, like André Schmidt, he too had encouragement from someone who appreciated what he was doing, which no doubt affected his continuing to make art:

I was drawing and sketching one day, and I started mucking around with a bit of paint and mucked around with paintbrushes, and I was bringing all these pictures out of me. So I was learning, and I wanted to keep on learning. As I kept on painting, someone said I could paint, so what I done is I kept on painting, kept on painting.

Peter too links the idea of making art with the making of pictures:

... I’ve been painting for a while. I’ve been painting from the day I got shifted off - when I went to Melbourne. When I left school, the teachers asked me to do my work; I couldn’t do it, ’cause I was too busy drawing pictures, pictures, pictures. That’s the time when I was in the Boys Home, and I had nothing to do, so that what I done, I done this, I just drewed and drewed, and done sports and drawn pictures. Yeah, I’ve been drawing for a while.

This account shows the importance that artmaking had for the young Peter, and art continues to be important for painting all the stories. Peter hopes to use his art almost as a visual history to record his and many Aboriginal boys’ experiences at the hands of the police and the welfare system, which took them away from their families and placed them in care, in boys’ homes or in gaol. Peter says,

I want to do one of an old house that’s up here. I was there back in the seventies, when I was a little fellow. When the police and the welfare took me away, they took me to this house. I want to paint all that there. I want to put in all stories. I
want to paint the whole lot of it. And I’m going to put it on a big canvas, put hands, fence, kids, a lot of - mainly all - womans in there working, old and young. A lot of kids was coming and I want to do roads going out, roads going everywhere.

The artists’ presence in the project is chance, but chance underlaid with the patterns of family and social history, spanning from the grand patterns of fifty centuries of indigenous culture in Peter Peterson’s case, to a dozen or fewer decades of colonial and immigrant culture in the case of the others. I, the author, have also found myself in Mildura, my patterns meeting and merging with those of the artists - intimately in the case of Yvonne Beyer - like ripples in a pool of water.

**Interviewing the five artists.**

The five artists have provided the primary data for this project through interviews and an exhibition. At the start, the rights of the artists as subjects of the project were explained with a ‘Plain-language statement’, which was accompanied by a list of interview questions. Though the artists were given the questions before the interview, no-one had ready-made answers and each person discovered new thoughts during the process of answering questions.

The first interview was conducted with Yvonne Beyer, my daughter and therefore easiest to call on. This initial interview tested the suitability of the questions and method, and some changes were made as a result. Instead of video recording, audio recording was used in the later interviews, as this was less intrusive and made less work of transcribing.

The artists responded in different ways to being interviewed, leading the interviews into different directions. Therefore, it eventuated that each person was interviewed quite differently, with different questions and a different style, so that the interviews were not particularly consistent in method or content.

Then each interview was transcribed and given to the artist to read and edit and potentially to change or delete any statement. Because the artists had the right to influence the results of the interview, there seems to be an issue of giving up ‘control’ to the subjects of the study. Information could be altered or deleted, and in terms of scientific practice this would seem to adulterate the data and the results.

But these are real people being involved in a research study, and the emphasis is on gathering experiences and opinions - which may be masked by more rigorous data gathering. Many apparently objective art histories, however exquisitely written and researched, show glaring omissions when read carefully. For example, E. H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, mentioned in this paper, has not one illustration (out of 384) of a work by a woman, unless the anonymous creators of book illuminations, cave paintings, church buildings and carvings, and so on, were women - Gombrich does not consider such an eventuality. Many histories of art are told without more than token reference to the artmaking of anyone deemed not to be of the art élite. Only recently have other art histories (and histories of other arts) been making their way into the meaning of art, with the realisation that there is a less undeviating history and a less consistent rationale of artmaking behind each *story of art*. 
The five Mildura artists tell their own stories and explain their own rationales, and while
the art’s meaning is social, carrying traditions and ideologies centred in the artist’s
culture (and therefore able to be appreciated by most viewers who share the artist’s
culture) some of the meanings are peculiar to the artist. It is their privilege to reconsider
their ideas, polish their language, and add or delete information about their artmaking.
However those changes the artists did make were small, and the interviews remain almost
exactly as they were first spoken.

The artists were fascinated by the project and feel that it has enriched them. The artists
indicated that they were amazed by their own ideas, the interview providing the stimulus
for exploration of their thoughts. Stephen Hederics said during the wind-up interview,
‘... you find it stimulating to make artists open up, to encourage them to open up and
verbalise. I think that’s a fantastic thing to do … all those questions you asked me
before: I haven’t contrived those things, they were in me all the time.’

Each of the artists has supported the project with enthusiasm, providing ideas and images
which have become the foundation of the project. Without the artists there would have
been no exhibition and no paper.
Plain Language Statement

RESEARCH PROJECT WITH MILDURA ARTISTS:
INTERVIEWS AND EXHIBITION

AN EXPLANATION OF WHAT IS INVOLVED IF YOU PARTICIPATE.

The researcher is Angela Beyer, [etc].

My Supervisor is Dr Scott McQuire, [etc].

The thesis topic is Postmodernism and Place: Artists in Mildura.

I plan to interview a number of local Mildura artists during 1996 as part of my research for an MA at Deakin University. I will be happy to visit you at your studio, or to invite you to my own place. I hope that the interviews will be informal and enjoyable.

In the interviews, you will be asked questions about your art, your inspiration, your style, and your environment and so on. The list of questions is attached. Other questions may be asked to make an interesting point clear, and you may add anything you wish to say, or decline to answer any question.

The interview will be recorded on an audio tape, and a transcript will be made. Then you will be asked to check the transcript and to add other thoughts to it, or change your comments in any way you wish. The comments may be used wholly or partly, and be woven into the thesis for the MA.

The time commitment will vary according to your wishes. The interview may last an hour, possibly two hours. It may take another hour or so to read and revise the interview. If you would like to participate in the hanging of your work at the Mildura Arts Centre or in the taking down of the exhibition, this will involve several hours, and some physical effort of lifting and carrying paintings.

There will be costs involved in exhibiting your paintings if you wish to frame your work. If you want to sell your work from the exhibition, keep in mind that the Arts Centre charges 25 per cent commission.

Some photographs will be taken of the paintings in order to illustrate the thesis. These photos may be taken during the interview time or when convenient.

The exhibition of selected works will be held at the Mildura Arts Centre during the last two weeks of April, 1997. A catalogue will accompany the exhibition, and will include artists’ comments selected from information gathered during the project.
The finished thesis will be lodged with my Supervisor, Dr Scott McQuire, in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University, Geelong. The information will be made available to other supervisors and committee members such as the Board of Examiners and the Ethics Committee. I am expected to give oral presentations about my project to other students and faculty staff, and may use the information you have given in these presentations.

Any artist involved in the research project, including anyone who withdraws at any stage, is welcome to discuss any part of the research project with me and to read and view the data that results from your input. You may have information about the progress of the project at any stage.

You will be asked to give your written consent to participate in the project. This will be on a form authorised by the Deakin University Ethics Committee. If in the future I would wish to use the information for any purpose other than those stated above, such as further research, I would not go ahead until you again gave your consent in writing.

You will be free to withdraw from the research project at any time without adverse consequences. Any information that refers to you will not be used and will be deleted from the data and destroyed.

**List of questions for first interviews**

- Where and when do you paint? What are your art-making habits?
- How did you learn your skills?
- Who do you have in mind as looking at the finished work?
- How do you choose your subject matter?
- What rules are your conscious of when working? For example, re aesthetics, re expertise, re format, re subject, re perspective, re colour etc. (Give these separate questions.)
- Does who you are have anything to do with what you paint - your sex, roles, status, circumstances, place of residence, climate, time, etc. (Use several questions.)
- Is who you are an important issue to you or to other people? (re society and politics, if not brought out in previous question.)
- Is where you are an important issue?
- Regarding your choice of materials and techniques - do you see this as being an issue, as being important to your values?
- What is the worst word you can imagine being applied to your art?

**Wind-up Interview Questions**

- Do you have any comments on the business of exhibiting?
- Have you got some new ideas about your art after showing your work in this exhibition?
- Do you have a question for me to answer, or for me to ask you?
- What will happen now regarding your artmaking?
Appendix 2: Exhibition and publicity: *On Our Own Ground*

The exhibition is the central event of this project: it is a culmination of the artists’ ideas, work and histories; it is the visible extension of the verbal interviews; it provided a marker in time and space from which to follow the artists’ contributions; and it brought together the artists and their Mildura public.

The exhibition *On Our Own Ground* was shown in the Mezzanine Gallery at the Mildura Arts Centre from Friday April 18 till Wednesday April 30, 1997. It had been booked as a fortnight’s exhibition about one-and-a-half years before, and had appeared in Mildura Arts Centre publicity and planning brochures.

Arts Centre staff hung the paintings in a few hours. The artists each had a section of wall to themselves, all works having a common eye-level running through their middle.

André Schmidt’s paintings proved too big to fit into one gallery. After hearing about the problem, the gallery director organised for two short walls just outside the Mezzanine Gallery doors to be used for two of André’s smaller works as well as a large wall in the foyer for one of André’s large canvases, incidentally providing additional publicity for the exhibition. The works were united in style and content; they were of two different sizes only; and all were framed with the same framing, a heavy, double row of gold and cream framing. (André had already realised the problem of space and left out one painting from his list of works.)
Joyce Smith’s works posed another puzzle. Joyce had clipped twenty pages from her sketchbook behind glass, and also had seven mounted and framed works. To hang these in a line would use up more than one wall, so the twenty works were grouped into four rows of five, making a shape to match some of the larger works in the exhibition. Having a single topic of Mallee wildflowers gave a satisfying unity to the arrangement.

Peter Peterson’s paintings were on canvas stretchers and boards. These boards had been given a solid wood edging, and all the works’ edges were painted black so they needed no frames. And because of Peter’s richly detailed surfaces and also because works of a
similar style had been selected, his work had a coherence, almost like a series, despite the variety of sizes. Peter Peterson was the only one to have one whole wall for his works.

Yvonne Beyer framed her small works on paper behind glass, all the same size. The oil paintings, two pairs more or less, had been framed with a thin wooden edge to define them. In effect, Yvonne had two sets of works, with the topic of Lake Victoria as unifying element.

Stephen Hederics’s work was the most varied. His outback works were the main subject, chosen because they were recently made - indeed *Crutch 3* was borrowed from the outback station owner mentioned in the interview. The rest of Stephen’s works were newly mounted and put into old frames. The use of a corner of the Mezzanine Gallery
was a useful strategy to present the works in two more or less unified groups, with apparent weight, colour, and the fact of the works being behind glass with mounts, balanced and matched against Joyce Smith’s works on one side, and Yvonne Beyer’s on the other.

Even though the works by the five artists were so dissimilar, the lined-up hanging plan gave the exhibition its atmosphere of aloofness from the mess of studios and domestic interiors, with light played onto the works, and no other items sharing the space.

Five separate catalogues, designed by Anne Hederics, gave a two-page statement for each artist, a photograph of the artist, and a list of numbered works with each painting’s size, medium, and price. The statements were condensed from the interviews held with the artists, giving the public the opportunity to read some of the artists’ methods and ideas.

An album containing a photographic essay by Anne Hederics also accompanied the exhibition. Anne used as prop for some of the photographs lengths of black and white fabric - Anne enlarged one of these for the first page of each of the artists’ catalogues. Some of Anne Hederics’s photographs were also used in the Sunraysia Daily articles, and many of the photographs in this paper are also Anne’s.

Joyce Smith gives her impression of the exhibition opening:

I think people were interested in the variety of work from all artists. I’ve been to other - not many, a few other - exhibitions, but I think with this one, there was such a great variety of talents of all the other artists combined into one. It made it a very interesting exhibition. That was my personal opinion of it. They were all so diverse - from the smallest, my own work, to the largest, André’s work. It was still the bush but it was so different. I think everyone that I spoke to, there and afterwards, really enjoyed the exhibition - from all walks of life.

The exhibition ran for a fortnight. A wind-up party served as a debriefing as well as a thank you, and a second interview provided an opportunity for the artists to have a final say about the project.

Publicity for the project

In Mildura it is relatively easy to organize publicity for an exhibition. The Sunraysia Daily newspaper ran three separate articles about the exhibition, each with a photograph, the last one taken by the social-pages reporter during the opening of the exhibition.

The television station WIN TV has a local news segment, and it reported the exhibition during the week after the opening, using a video-tape of the exhibition as background to the newsreader’s commentary. Thirty seconds is allotted to such news items about art.

The radio stations were also keen for news. The commercial station 3MA put the item on their Community Board a few days before the opening, and repeated it in their news for two weeks. The local ABC Radio station slotted in an interview on the run, with rapid questions during A Walk Through the Exhibition.
There is also a formal invitation mailed by the Mildura Arts Centre to people listed as art patrons. And in a small city like Mildura, word of mouth is important in disseminating information. All the artists had an interested public.

The process of exhibiting provided a valuable experience for the artists, a convergence of their efforts and contributions. Their comments are recorded in their wind-up interviews.

**Anne Hederics’s speech for the opening of *On Our Own Ground***

[The speech is taken from Anne Hederics’s notes.]

The opportunity to view the response of five artists to an environment most of us are already familiar with doesn’t come often.

Each of the artists broadens our knowledge by offering their own. Each allows us the choice of viewing our environment with a more selective eye. Each encourages us to gain strength from our isolation and feel confident in establishing our own identity.

Anjelie Beyer, as curator of this exhibition, has selected the artists for the diversity she knew their work would bring to the collection. The subject matter, media, size of work and the backgrounds of the artists themselves cover an extremely broad range but despite their differences all remain firmly on their own ground.

I believe artists need an audience to complete their work. One of the advantages in being the audience for the opening of the exhibition is to use the opportunity to meet the artists, discuss the work with them or even just put a face to a name if your haven’t met before.

[Anne introduces the artists, and declares the exhibition open.]
Appendix 3: Interviews with Yvonne Beyer

Interview with Yvonne Beyer, April 27, 1996

Where and when do you paint?  What are your art-making habits?
First of all, I used to paint when I was at college, but I didn’t make any exhibition paintings at college.  And then, I painted at home, after work, in bursts when I painted one or two or more paintings in a row.  There was space when I did nothing for weeks or months.  In my first year of teaching, I made figurative little whimsical figures and creatures, people-in-bed pictures, very brightly coloured, that was the exhibition I had at Port Melbourne, in the Mission for Seamen building.  Actually, before that, I had another exhibition, with Sam (Sam Corneille, friend from college, Printmaker), at the Lizard Lounge, and that was all smallish gouaches of figures, and oil paintings of nude females, very flat and stylised.  I started off doing textiles: I had two exhibitions at least that had textiles in them - they were based on the landscape.  They were textile collages with machine embroidery, quite colourful and textural.  I’ll tell you some of the names of them, that will give you some idea of what they were about: Dark Busy Pond, The Land is Delicate With Golden Light, Two Tadpoles, Lightning Frog (lots of frogs in here), Dancing Colours, River View, River Edge, Rich Sky, White Window.  That was for Spirit and the Land.  These days, my painting habits are the same: if I have the chance, I’ll have a burst, then do none for a while.  But I’ve done hardly any paintings since I’ve had the kids.  I touched up a few old ones for the recent show at the theatre (Napier Street Theatre, South Melbourne), and I did a few landscapy ones earlier.

How did you learn your skills?
By practice, mostly.  Maybe by observation of other people’s work.  I certainly didn’t learn it at college.

No?
No, they offered very little - that’s why I had a disagreement with them: they didn’t have any curriculum.

Who do you have in mind as looking at you finished work?
You kind of hope that somebody looking at it will think, ‘Oh that is nice’, that it will be famous, but you please yourself.

How do you choose your subject matter?
I choose things that express my feelings when I’m doing the figure, but, when I’m doing a landscape, I choose things that I like the look of.  And then, when I’m painting, I add and subtract just for the look of it, or maybe sometimes I add and subtract for meaning.  They are the only things I ever want to paint.  Oh, yes, and tables.  Domestic things, figures and landscapes.  It’s got to be something that is meaningful for me.  I could easily paint anything I wanted to, but it would mean absolutely nothing - it would have no relevance to me.  It’s got to be very, very meaningful to my inner feelings and to where
I’m coming from. Some artists find something they can do and they just stick to that. I find the figure very comfortable to paint. I battle with some pictures, and some of them are disastrous, but to me that’s the price of putting something on the canvas that is meaningful to me. The figures stem from an inner need to express, and the landscapes are something I’m trying to capture. They are two different things, really. Although with the textiles, they just came from a fairly primitive desire to create. I was just being creative and that was the medium I used, because that was suitable - with the patches of colour and some small details, and you could look at it from what would appear to be an aerial perspective. You didn’t have to worry about tone or perspective, because it was just textures. I was taking things, fabric or colour, that appealed to me, and I was putting it together to make something that was an art object on its own and that then, when other people looked at it, they shared the narrative I’d created and further indicated with a title.

That’s what I am thinking about: when you’re making art, would you often have in mind that there is an audience that’s going to eventually make a judgement?

If I thought that I was going to live by myself in the desert, I would still do it. What I just described, that’s what happens afterwards, but that is not the reason why. Perhaps that’s what inspires you to keep going a bit, but perhaps it puts you off.

Maybe it stops you doing certain subjects and certain things - if you’ve got a choice-when you’re putting an exhibition together and you know that certain things will look good and maybe sell?

No, that’s not true at all. The stuff that sells the best is the stuff that I’m happiest with to start with, and if I start to do stuff that I think will sell, it doesn’t. In no way do those ones sell better than the other ones. I’ve tried to do things just for a commercial reason, to make money, but I’m never happy with it. I’m not happy with the quality of the work and it generally takes a long time to sell, if I’m brave enough to sell it.

What rules are you conscious of when working? The first one is subject matter: are there things you are not allowed to paint?

I don’t attempt realism unless I’m prepared to do it properly. I would never do a bad realist painting. And that is probably why my landscapes are so abstract, because that allows me to play with the paint, and just to include the colour; it’s almost symbolic design but it’s not really symbolic - it’s quite arbitrary, but in the end they might look like symbols, they are kind of representative line or representative dots. People aren’t judging whether I’ve properly drawn a gum tree or not. What I would really like to do when I’m really good is to sit down and work from a landscape, to be able to translate it directly into a flat plane of colour and texture, without having to diminish the realism of it, so that it is not judged as a realist painting. I think some painters have done that, like Fred Williams, and Brett Whiteley, and John Olson. I’m not confident enough in my painting yet, but I think I’ll get there one day.

There might be more rules. I don’t like doing anything really soppy. When I’m doing someone’s face, I try to avoid some expressions. I’d rather have a blank expression than the wrong expression.

I work hard on the colour, but that’s more of an aesthetic judgement - you obviously don’t want your painting to look horrible, because that would be completely the wrong
point. With the landscape, I’ve really limited my colour, but that aim I’ve imposed on myself, because the fewer things you’re working with, the easier it is, the more colours you put in, the harder it is to get it right, but also I find that the brown and the black and the white is more appropriate for that subject matter. Oh, no, that’s not true. I would really like to put in other colour. I did some small ones which worked, which had all colours in it, a lot of muted colours. I was very pleased with those. I find that if you use black and brown, you can use them to fill up a large space, and it doesn’t look empty. But I don’t always want to fill up every corner of the canvas, and I don’t always want to have pattern or texture.

Do you care about the rules regarding depth and perspective?
I don’t use perspective. I’m not naïve in that I don’t know that something in front of something overlaps, and if I have a background interior, I don’t use tone but I do use things like objects in the background are smaller, or try and use duller colours if I don’t want it to come forward. They’re just basic painting rules, aren’t they? I suppose some people don’t use them.

Format?
Sometimes size is controlled by economy. If I had loads of money, I would probably feel happy about spreading a lot of paint around, but sometimes I like to work small because it is very controllable. I do feel a pressure to work big, that’s for sure, because many people have said to me, gallery people, lecturers or whoever, that I’ve got to work bigger. I think that it is definitely a fashion at the moment to work big, but I don’t think that will last. I think good work will endure, that it will last. I think it’s to do with intimidating your viewer, if you can’t show that you’re good with talent, well, make it so big that it follows the same theory that people who build churches use: make it big and high and imposing.

Rectangular format?
When I’m doing my textiles, I let the fabric choose the shape. It is usually a four-sided shape but it may not be straight-edged. I’ve never wanted to work in a circle, I don’t like that at all. I think format is just physical: if it’s not a circle, it’s got to have four sides, doesn’t it?

What about your sculpture?
As soon as it comes off the flat surface, then it doesn’t have four sides. When you do sculpture, you don’t have an edge, so it doesn’t matter what shape it is because when it is put in front of a wall in a room, it is framed. The negative space on a sculpture is infinite: it just goes on till it hits whatever space it’s inside, but when you do a painting, obviously it’s got to be on a surface, so negative space has got to finish.

Your surfaces are not always flat, you also stick things to your surface, don’t you?
Yes, I do that a lot. That’s a very immediate way of getting some of those elements into my painting. Then I tend to disguise them a bit by painting around them, by incorporating them into a particular object. That’s just because I like the things I pick up and I want to use them in my art.
I want to ask you about things that you pick up: regarding your choice of materials and techniques - do you see this as being an issue, as being important to your values? I’m thinking of when we went to the sandhills, when you pick up junk, and it’s really treasure. The thing with art is it’s quite egocentric, but, if you look around you, a lot of what you want to achieve has already been achieved accidentally in nature, or in nature interfered with by people, and in a way, that is what photographers cash in on: they come along and find something and take a photo of it. I’ve done photography and I found it extremely easy to find good things to take photos of, and there was absolutely no more challenge there, so I didn’t take it any further. There is a bit more challenge in finding something on the ground which you can remove, or at a tip. There is also the issue of stopping something going to waste by giving it a new life, and that appeals to me a lot: something that people might think is just complete rubbish and not even look at. And you can re-enter it into the world as an object of interesting visual impact. I have a certain disrespect for brand-new things and for dismissing used objects or broken objects, but I think our appreciation of aged objects is a bit of a fashion at the moment. It started off with people looking in countries that they thought were really cute, like Prague, or Mexico, and then examining what’s nice about them - and what’s nice about them is their stuff is repainted, or it’s all worn, or it’s preloved, fixed up. It’s very personal, very human. I think probably people overdosed on factory-produced or very slickly produced items, and it’s got a more human touch. People want these objects in their home; they want their home to look like it’s been there for a little while; it makes you feel better if you think it’s got a bit of history. It makes it look more permanent. It’s more relevant because it’s got a past.

Does who you are have anything to do with what you paint?
Definitely femininity and sexuality - female sexuality - has a lot to do with the more figurative work. I’m not interested at all in painting the male body because I’m expressing inner feelings and that’s engendered in my physical self which is manifested in boobs and bottoms, in arms and hands, and hugging, a nurturing feeling, which is often expressed with rounded arms.

Roles?
I don’t think my roles come into it, because the sexuality in it is not a manifested sexuality - it’s not people bonking or anything - it’s just a feeling, and that has very little to do with my relationships. I once did a painting that was to express some feelings I had, which I called Feeling Guilty - there were a few, one was about Greed and one was about Guilt, but they were fairly quick sketches - I just did them because it was something I couldn’t talk about with anyone. But generally they are to do with quite primitive feelings of sexuality.

Status?
I don’t know what status has to do with it; I can’t imagine what status I am. I’m confident, so I’m not ashamed of anything I feel. I don’t have to disguise it in symbols unless I choose to. I feel there is a very sympathetic aspect of the public, not all of the public but one aspect of the general public - I’m referring to my audience again which contradicts what I said before - but if you’re talking about my status, there is a sympathetic element, particularly with women, who relate to some of those very personal paintings and that’s a nice feeling if you do a painting - it’s not just you, it means a lot to
them. In a way, your feelings are universal. It’s not other artists, it’s only people. I wouldn’t mind having other artists who were trying to do similar things to me, but then it gets a bit dicey when you don’t know who came up with what image first. When I worked closely with people in college, sometimes you felt guilty that they hit on something and you incorporated it into something to express what you were trying to do. It was not necessarily an image, it might just be that someone has discovered that a large area using a lot of empty space with an image in the middle was an effective way to portray an image - something as simple as that. You should avoid making it obvious that you are using someone else’s established methods. However, if you research the work of most artists who are known as being very clever, you can find many, many sources. Even though this is something I don’t want to admit to, I know that most artists do it, if not all. And even for people like Aborigines, it is blatant: they all share in the same totem, one family will all use the same totems and the same symbols. Our culture has begun to worship the idea of originality even though it is totally hypocritical: because originality is a concept, but to come to the point of originality you need inspiration, and you are aware of a history. Perhaps the only truly original people are people that are mad, or that are children, in which case, if you have a look at children’s art, they generally come up with exactly the same images anyway: they arrive at the same point from a point of originality. So contrived originality is in fact a paradox.

Is where you are an important issue?
I think there is a definite Australian influence, not only in visual aspects but also in attitude. There’s an easy-going attitude, and that comes across in paintings, because there’s an openness, a freeness. If you look at painters working in Berlin or somewhere where they feel a lot of pressure, where they feel pressure about pollution, overcrowding, and race issues, a lot of the work is emotional to the point of hysterical, but in Australia people seem to be relaxed and they can work more on developing the colour of the work, the aesthetics of the work within the subject matter or within their emotional storyline or whatever is in the picture. Then there are the colours of the earth and the skies and the vegetation and the minerals - for example an opal. A lot of my colourful works are very like an opal and that would be something I’d like to achieve with paint too, eventually: to paint like an opal. It’s also difficult to eliminate your knowledge of artists who have interpreted the Australian landscape before you. There’s the Western-style ones I’ve mentioned and there’s the Koorie-style ones I’ve also mentioned: you can’t help noticing their emphasis or their colour choices.

Does Mildura offer you anything?
The thing about Mildura would be that, because of the dryness and the heat, you get those very worn, large areas where people have thrown rubbish or left rubbish lying around and because it’s dry, it is easy to wander around and pick things up and they don’t stink or anything because they’re dried out, so they are very sterile. You wouldn’t want to pick things up if they are half-rotten and stunk which sometimes they are, for example in Melbourne, if you walk along the river or along the beach, you might find something that is nice but you would not use it because it might be wet or whatever. But that is not Mildura as a city, but as the environs of that kind of semi-outback area.

You are talking about Mildura providing materials for sculpture. What about providing images?
The outback, Mallee, desert area inspired me as does most of the Australian landscape, especially the vastness, the way a tree trunk or rock or winding creek bed stands out, and the way colours vary so much from white on brown, to black in soft yellow. Also the human-made patterns such as tracks, or rows of vines. Although, the landscape paintings that I was talking about, where I was happy with the colour, were actually done around the Bacchus Marsh area in autumn. That was in the mornings when the mist made all the colours very pastel: the greens, the reds, the olive-greens, and the yellows of the grass, the whites of the bare tree trunks, and the blacks of other trees.

*What is the worst words you can imagine being applied to your art?*
That’s a good question. People have said something to me that I found very insulting. What was that? oh yes: that it was flat, that my painting was flat.

**Wind-up interview with Yvonne Beyer, June 8 1997**

*Do you have any comments, Vonne, on the business of exhibiting?*
I find it quite a rewarding process. I have to agree with Anne Hederics that the process isn’t complete until you’ve found an audience. And I quite enjoy seeing my work framed and hanging in a row on a wall, in an environment where it will be appreciated by most people that come along. And it’s an added bonus if someone buys a work because, in a way, it’s the ultimate compliment if they’re prepared to part with money to have it in their house. Also, when you’re exhibiting, you can be assured that you are participating in the dialogue between artists - artists that know what the process of art making in a historical sense is all about.

*What do you mean about that dialogue?*
Well, I mean that I don’t think that artists really paint in isolation. You get to see what other people are doing and you take that on board, and they get to see what you’re doing and that goes into their thought processes, and that changes their criteria a little bit. And on and on it goes, and it keeps art changing. Just like the rebels’ salon in France, in the early nineteen-hundreds, where all the new work changed the whole direction from academic to modern and contemporary art.

*Do you think anything like that would be happening in Mildura?*
Many of the artists that exhibited in that salon - what was it called? the Salon des Refusés - they had already been working together before they showed their work, but they still had to fight public acceptance, they still had to penetrate mainstream thought, before their art was seen by themselves as relevant. Because artists really don’t want to be on the periphery, they do want to influence the mainstream.

*Can something like that happen in Mildura?*
 Doesn’t that answer the question? (laughter)

*I suppose that’s my main question.*
The answer is - you’d probably need a force of artists. In which case, you would probably need for them to be working both independently and then an exhibition would have to be as a result of some working together rather than drawing separate strands together only at that point of exhibition. But I do say it can happen anywhere. You do
need a little bit of history and a little bit of time, though. Obviously France was a melting pot of artists, including artists that were refugees from other parts of Europe, so it was a very virulent environment of artmaking with lots of themes to explore, and lots of to- and fro-ing in the cafés, and sharing ideas. I think you’d be pushed to get that happening anywhere else. I suppose that also happened in America post-second world war and that’s why you probably had a lot of fairly influential and strong movements happening in America then, taking the emphasis off Europe, from the late forties on. Surrealism was really the last movement to come out of France, wasn’t it? - that went till on till about the forties.

Do you know, one thing that could come out of Mildura could be Aboriginal-based movements.

*But only Aborigines have access to that, haven’t they?*

Its a little bit hard to anticipate art-movements. (laughter)

*Vonne, has the exhibition given you any insights into your art? Did it make you think about your art at all?*

Well, again, its nice to see a collection of your own work on display, in an uncluttered environment, so that you can make some visual judgements, and it’s also good to see them in the context of other people’s art. You can assess your niche. You can check out whether anyone else is achieving what you’re trying to achieve, and see if there’s anything there for you. Or sometimes, seeing what other people do encourages you to keep on doing what you want to do, because you don’t particularly like what they’re doing. (laughter)

*Do you have any questions you’d like to ask me, or one that you’d like me to ask you?*

Alright, I’d like you to explain to me why the five artists in your exhibition were the most diverse range that I’ve ever come across in my life. (laughter) And justify that in terms of *On Our Own Ground*. How can five people be so different? And is that a good thing, or is that a problem?

*I think it’s a problem. It’s all very well being in a different context, but when it’s so diverse, there’s hardly any conversation between the works and you’ve got five mini-exhibitions happening. And it’s like you say, they just came together at that moment, never been together before. You know what would be a good idea? You could possibly get us to work together on a theme. That’d be great, to all work together and do something, or just even discuss it, come up with our own theme, and then take the individual approach to it. Because our subject matter ... No, the subject matter was pretty similar actually, wasn’t it, it was just the approach.

*Each approach was so very different. I think the whole business of diversity came out of my ideas that I was going to do ‘artists on the periphery’, not only the periphery of Mildura, but also the periphery of the art-world. So I was going to have a naïve artist, an Aboriginal artist, a young woman maybe, a landscape painter, and that sort of thing. So by definition they don’t fit styles? They don’t fit recognised styles?*
Exactly. By definition they are not in that little front movement where people call themselves as working on the edge, the legitimate, ground-breaking edge. But as Joyce pointed out, the people that I chose were all well-known. I thought they were all pretty much on the periphery, but she said, ‘All apart from me are really well-known people’. So certainly in her eyes and in the mainstream eyes they were pretty well-known. I think the whole point of my exhibition has shifted, the whole purpose has shifted, and I have to recognise that these artists are not periphery, that they are pretty much mainstream-appreciated, and that mainstream-appreciated type art is the art that is not in fashion, that is not on the leading edge. Until twenty or thirty years later, or fifty.

Can this sort of popular art ever be the art that gallery directors want to show in their gallery?
Oh that is popular to start with - oh, I see what you mean. So you only know that you’re going to be on the real edge if you start off unpopular? (laughter) If everyone likes your work you’ve got no hope!

That’s kind of happened. There’s people like Brian Dunlop who paint really realistically. It’s taken a while for the art-world to appreciated the stuff that he does because it’s easy for ordinary people to like as well. That’s the whole point of what I’m trying to do: make it all weld, meld together, and the only thing that welds and melds them together is the fact that they are all in Mildura, and that I chose bush themes. And even then, that’s not really all that typical of the artists. Like, I chose your bush themes, because it’s one of your themes, but you also do a lot of figures, and so on.
I think that you’ve proven that art is a personal response, and it’s very individual. And that’s what art should be.

Some people think that the artist as an individual has the responsibility to push the limits of art every time, and that it’s our responsibility to come up with new ideas, to keep contemporary culture alive and kicking and to come up with great new viewpoints. There are those who are very good at reading into art a lot of meaning and importance. I’m not so sure that they haven’t actually overstepped the mark on occasions, in making art out to be more important than it is. One very famous one, for example, would be Robert Hughes, who holds art, and some artists, way above the rest of the population in importance, especially the men ones - in fact only the men ones. And they’re not interested in art that they can’t use as a tool to show off their intellectual life, even though that some of the most famous poets and authors, their best work is only to do with simple emotions such as love and other domestic feelings. But in art you need to be universal. Domesticity is not particularly popular to the critics. I was going to say domesticity and personal ... do you know what I mean by domesticity? I don’t really mean in the home, because wildflowers aren’t actually in the home, although you could argue that they’re small and you bring them into your house and sit them on your table, and therefore domesticity might be a good word.

Don’t you think Robert Hughes is a misogynist? He’s clever, but his tone is so patronising.
There’s a few people who are gurus who set the tone for the art-world, and everybody bravely follows along, and if you’ve got money you go and buy the stuff that they point out to you. And I suppose my point is that all these people who are making wonderful stuff that you’re saying is called domestic stuff, wildflowers - did you finish talking about that? - I think what they do is just as legitimate, and just as fulfilling, and even more acceptable to more people, than some of the avant-garde stuff.

Well, I think there’s a new class, I think there’s a very well-educated middle class, who will go out to exhibitions - and they’ll be exhibitions in galleries that may or may not have set ideas about what’s real art - and they’ll buy what they like. And they’ll buy something that appeals to them because they like the idea, or they like the aesthetics. And I think there’s a lot of by-passing of the critics going on. The only problem that remains is that there are galleries whose notions of real art are so prescriptive that they are strangling themselves because they’re not allowing innovation, because they can’t see it. They think they know what an innovative piece of artwork is. They choose what an innovative piece of artwork is - which is backwards. You’ve got to be open-minded. You can’t say, ‘No that is not a good piece of art, because it doesn’t have three columns, and it doesn’t refer to text, and it doesn’t have political feminist overtones,’ etcetera. But luckily there’s enough life in independent galleries, and there’s enough life in the art-making community to paint on regardless. And some of these people end up making it into the - what would you call that? - yeah, the establishment, where you can start asking for a lot of money, and where people start recognising your name. Some of them are good, and some of them are not so good. So that prevents art from dying. That prevents the mainstream galleries from completely dying out (laughter), stop them from turning themselves inside out and stuffing their heads up their bums. And then, of course, you have the fringe festivals, which also allow a little bit of freedom, but they’re in danger of becoming prescriptive as well. Certainly the major art institutions in Melbourne are fairly prescriptive. They move slowly.

Can I ask you: How does the idea of Aboriginal art fit in with the business about being non-prescriptive, innovative?

I think that many people that buy Aboriginal art don’t particularly like it. I imagine that they just buy it because they know that it’s now being deemed relevant, and it’s a good investment, and it’s not too offensive. But I dare say if they saw an Aboriginal painting at a market without being educated to its value, they would probably spit on it. They would certainly trip over it! (laughter) But then, it’s taken a long time for all of us to come to appreciate the inherent value in that kind of art, because its aim is so incredibly different to Western art, and for us to start assimilating those aims is going to inject a fantastic new dimension to Western art - and indeed, the Aboriginal art itself, when they take on board Western ideas, is also given new life. I daresay, when you bring two cultures together, you’ve got potential for wonderful things to happen. Because it’s an education on both sides. In a way, artists feel the urge to create, and in a way, they are searching for a way to express themselves. So if they can be given a fresh approach, if they can be shown that you can be decorative and symbolic at the same time, and that you can throw perspective and depth out of the window and still create a picture with meaning, that you can duplicate the colours of the earth that may once have seemed to be boring, that you can limit your palette to two or three colours, don’t bother about textures, have plain areas, that’s a massive education for people coming from a background of European modern art, and even contemporary European art. Indeed, the influence of
Aboriginal art world-wide will be significant. And also with Aboriginal art, because they’re not trying to be universal, because their themes are quite ... it’s the spirits, and everything relates directly to the doer: the doer’s totems, the doer’s things that are meaningful to the artist and to that tribe, depending on what tribe they come from, etcetera. And when you do, when you look within, when you bring something to everyone else from within, your work is a lot more meaningful than when you try and encompass universality in your work. Because each person is really only interested in something that’s meaningful to them, and they don’t want to be bombarded with grand ideas. They don’t want to be bombarded with political theories. They want to see what someone else thinks about something, or they want to see what’s meaningful to somebody else, or the stories that someone else can tell through their art. And from that, from that, stems ideas and stems communication that can then be taken onto a broader platform of meaning.

And that would then also incorporate, when you say what’s meaningful to someone, the work of Joyce, the work of André, all of them, because that’s so meaningful, all of them. I find it difficult to slot those people into the art scene, myself. Well, you get very used to adapting a particular style on a time scale. You can put Joyce’s paintings in with the scientific drawings that were first done when the English came to Australia. And you can fit André’s in about that time, too. And if they were set in that context, it’d be different. But I guess it’s just convenient for the historians to only focus on the work that makes sense historically, that makes sense in context with the time, so that you can generalise about their influences, and you can generalise about why they were doing this at that particular time. And if there was an artist doing something at that time that didn’t fit in, well then they probably ignored them. I would guess, that through every period in art there would be those that were doing stuff that didn’t fit in with everyone else. In fact, there were probably more people doing their own thing than there were doing the so-called style of the moment, or the supposed style of the moment. But people do need to categorise though, that’s the way we work. We like to find a little place to catalogue something before we can be comfortable with it.

What’s in the future now, regarding your art? (laughter and groans) I don’t know. At the moment my artmaking is restricted, because I don’t have any time. One day when I’ve got some time, I’ll just keep painting.

You haven’t lost your interest in painting? Painting is still the way-to-go for you? I still have lots of separate issues that I pursue through painting, three of four separate issues - ranging from very personal emotional ones to purely aesthetic issues to do with the land and landscape - not that those ones don’t have any personal meaning.
Appendix 4: Interviews with Stephen Hederics

Interview with Stephen Hederics, October, 29, 1996

Where and when do you paint and what are your art-making habits?
Paint - or draw: I do a lot of mine at school, because I am a teacher. In any case I believe
in demonstrating a fair bit of my artwork, so a lot of it is expressed in the classroom.
Outside of the classroom, I draw around the district if I feel inspired. Sometimes I
organise groups and we go out the bush and do a bit of art out there - art and other things,
draw and paint - it just depends on the people. If they’re painterly, or we inspire each
other to paint, we paint, if we draw, we draw. Usually we begin drawing, just scratching
and making marks. Even before then, we gather - we seem to get to a place and gather
information visually, and in a tactile fashion. I walk, and feel, and smell. I let it speak to
me, I guess. And then I respond to something. I usually find something that interest me
first, something that’s obvious, whether it be a building, or an animal, or the river, or
some humorous situation. It varies from time to time. I paint and draw any time, all the
time; just the degree of commitment to each work is different, according to the time. As
a family man, you don’t always have lots of time, so any moment you can grab, you do a
bit of art, whether it’s helping your kids, or talking with someone. I talk mostly in
pictures, not in words. Yes, I express myself in pictures and reinforce it with words - a
combination of both.

How did you learn your skill?
I think … in a natural way. You pick skills up through interest. You observe, and then
you copy, and then you try and see if you like the particular skill - if you’re talking about
skill of what? the skill of drawing, skill of looking, what sort of skill? Art skill? The
potential to look and see is always there. I think an art person is different in that sense
because they have this ability to focus and to see detail, and to feel detail, and to respond
to it in a unique sort of way, which is artistic. The skill develops. It develops through
your years of growing up, of being exposed to different people, to different environments,
situations. That’s basically how it works, I think. You can advance that development or
you can become a bit more abstract about it later on - probably to break the boredom of
the process rather that just copying something for the sake of it. You tend to realise you
can twist things around. It’s external first, and then it becomes internal, and then goes
out again. So it’s a recycling process, the living process, the viewing, the art process of
doing it, is a cycle just as much as life is. You see it and you respond to it, depending on
the time. You respond to it with certain media. And then you’ve got something else to
respond to, because you’ve extracted something out of nature, for example, and then
placed it in front of you and then it’s a little bit natural, and then it’s a little bit of you as
well. Which is also natural. I think the unnatural part is where the person starts to
analyse it, and rationalise it, and relate it to other things. You start to twist it. And it has
a new meaning then. Like the elements of art. Line has a certain meaning - when you
view it, you know, they are verticals, horizontals, diagonals, but then in certain
circumstances, line can be representative of the way you feel. You can feel calm, or you
can feel apprehensive, and so it has a different vibe about if, and if you’re using it, say with oil pastel or something, its different to making a statement with ink, which is liquid and keeps on running. So with increased knowledge of that medium you ride on the edge of its characteristic - the liquid ink, or the pastel, the way it slips and vibrates up your arm. You work with that.

I guess it’s no different from using a shovel in the earth. That’s another medium for me. Because I was brought up on the land, I enjoy earth, the relationship I have, or have had, with the land, and I try to maintain that. Just the smells from the earth when you turn the sods over. When we used to water on our block, the process of changing the furrow over - it wasn’t for me just from one to the other side. I looked at the water, and the water glistened. And then I moved some earth and it became a mound, and then it flowed, and I redirected it. And all of a sudden I was making - that’s the sort of line I was talking about - I was making lines, and then made shapes, and it ran down the row and other things started to relate to it. I think an art person can’t escape the nature of their character, it’s just there. They just have a different way of looking at things. You are always arting. An art person is always arting, not always consciously, but certainly rearranging stuff, working with all the language of art: space, volume, shapes - that you make with your hand (I’m gesturing with my arm) - just the way the fingers relate to one another, making quick art, instant art. Pointing. You can visualise where the finger is going and it makes contact. It’s gone in an instant. It’s still an expression of how you’re viewing something. It’s being that close to manipulating things, manipulating elements, manipulating a living canvas. We respond to that daily. The air. The wind blowing in your hair moves your hair around. That has an effect on you.

So it’s not just eyes?
No way! No way! It’s everything. It’s touching. You know, you can go to the toilet and you can feel good - if you’re fairly normal you should feel reasonable when you go to the toilet - but, you know, just that process can be related to things, if you’re tuned in. You can sand a bit of wood. You can plant plants in the soil. The division, like I was saying about the water, you make shapes straight away. You have an existing image, it’s there, and you change it, and the process of change suddenly becomes your expression. To some people, because they’re not focussed, to them it’s just, ‘Ok, I’m going to plant this tomato into the ground. I’ll make a hole, and the tomato’s in.’ They haven’t given it a second thought. Whereas I might look at the tomato and think, ‘Look at the height of the tomato, and the width and the balance of the tomato!’ and you place it into this receptacle. You visualise the space that you’re going to take up with it, and you dig it, and it’s a satisfying feeling when you plonk it in and it’s just nice, you don’t have to adjust it. That to me is growing art. It’s advanced art. It’s what happens when you grow older. It’s practised, and you have a certain sureness about the statements that you make. I’m still learning, it’s not how you learn, it’s the time that it takes to learn. We’re always learning. It’s very true about art. You’re more aware as you get older, as you get more experience. You’re more aware of how you can express yourself in other ways, other that the obvious ones. On pieces of paper, or canvas, or on wood or through other mediums.

For you, learning is the same as making art?
Yes, I think so. If you were more specific and wanted to define art, you might trigger off some other thoughts. We’re assuming we’re at the base level of art now, but it’s a level of sophistication if you like, in our society. Like children’s art has a level and then adult art has another level because of some of the things I’ve talked about. So if we’re talking about art at base level, it’s manipulating, it’s making, it’s creating without any preconceived notions about it. These preconceived ideas come later, because you get tired of things, or you’re bored. So you change it because you like to see the ongoing process, the creative process, and never being shut. I think the worst thing you can do with art is to block it, to shut it, to put it on paper and say, ‘That’s it. That’s the end.’ To work in parameters or formats, and say, ‘That’s it. That’s my art.’ That’s only a very small segment of what you experienced when you were doing that. It’s limited by the thing that’s placed in front of you, and then you’re asked to make art on that. You know, if I said, ‘Ok, make art in that pool,’ - if I gave you a bag of coloured inks or something and you could colour the water - it would be totally different to me giving you a piece of this A4 paper, and say, ‘Ok, there’s the ink. Do something artistic there.’ There’s a heap of things that suddenly start whirring around inside your head, and your whole body, and you start adjusting your response to what I asked, to the medium, to the format. Art to me is flexible. It’s always soft. It’s always soft and ongoing.

How do you choose your subject matter?
We touched on this a bit before. There are different ways of choosing subject matter. If you’re thinking commercial, then you choose according to what you think will sell. If you’re making art for yourself, you just start somewhere. As I said before, you probably pick something that intrigues you, that you enjoy. Like when I went sketching, drawing shearsers at work, I elected to do that because I like the excitement that the action of the shearsers and the whole process of shearing created. So I knew I was going in there to draw shearing-type images, of men at work, of sweating, of sheep, of bleating, and of frightened eyes, and smelly wool, and barking dogs, and swallows flitting about the rafters, and the pinging of the corrugated iron roof. In that situation I’ve preselected it, and then I work with whatever happens in there. Initially, I might go in there to do a shearer shearing, but then I might glance down and I might see a dog underneath the classing table, or something, and I’ll find that a little bit humorous so I might focus on that and do that. Or I’ll go for a bit of a walk, and perhaps get that swallow in the corner, in its nest feeding the young - if they’re around at the time. Or the abstract nature of the whirring wheels might do that for me. Other times, if I think I’m going to do art for a specific function, like say, the rose festival, then naturally, I’m not going to be painting guinea pigs. I’ll go and find some lovely roses and then decide what medium I might do them in. More that likely it will be watercolour because it’s spontaneous and fairly quick. I like to work like that, because I can capture the essence of the subject and also retain that softness that I speak of, that art should have.

I guess I do my art like I live. I live with soft edges all the time. I have to conform to time schedules, but even there, I try to keep them soft, interpretative. Yeah ... What was question?

How do you choose your subject matter?
Sometimes I choose it, and sometimes it chooses me by its being there.
You often go out into the landscape, and are so excited by it that you take groups of people, and pass on your excitement to them.

Yes. I enjoy the bush. I enjoy all the elements, the elements of the bush, that is. All the birds singing and that. I think I like the open spaces, being brought up on the land, and always being outside - probably arting outside - because we had to work. I had to make my physical work my art, almost. Whenever we did manual work, it was as artistic as I could possibly make it and still do the job, whether we were putting in posts or trellising vines, just the way the wire might have rolled out, or you twirled the wire, fitting into a situation like that. Going out into the bush, it’s living the outdoors life that I’m fond of. I can’t escape my background. I don’t particularly want to, either. I like the honesty of the bush, and I like the spontaneity of nature. I like the instant nature of the rabbit jumping out - although there’s not that many rabbits around at the moment, but other things - the surprise factor. I love the surprise factor, the wow factor. You’re driving along, and ‘Wow! Look at that! What’s that giraffe doing out here!’ It’s not knowing, it’s that lovely quality. So I go out to the bush and like to share that with people - usually people who have been bottled up, and need to get out and touch nature a little bit. I guess I try and express, or get them to sense what I sense, to feel what I feel out there - to be on the water and to think about what they’re looking at. To respond to it in a slightly different way. Most of the people I take out there are locked into their daily routines of ... almost instant spaghetti art, if you like. It’s very commercial. For them to get back there, to a very fundamental tree-root level, to find themselves - I find that very satisfying. I love to see people connecting back to their natural roots, and then responding.

Are people your subject, your tool? You work with people.

I think I do. I think I do.

You make a lot of effort to gather people, always.

Yes, I think just people, as I said before - this is new to me, thinking about whether or not people are my art. Maybe they are. I’ve been teaching for a few years now. In people too, I find that soft, changing quality. I enjoy that too. Maybe that’s why I like to go out there, and I don’t do a lot of art myself, initially. When I see them launching themselves, or finding somewhere to play, then I’m happy. I’ve done my job - I don’t know what that stems back to - and then I feel ok. I’ll leave them for a while. And then I see them being bored or something and I’ll introduce something to them. It might be something as silly as red balloons on the water. I took half a dozen red balloons.

When?

A couple of months ago I took a group of commercial artists up to a place called Willow Point. They loved just getting out of the city, and then getting to Willow Point, that was exciting, so the apprehension was there. I love that chemistry, the chemistry of a mass of people wanting to get somewhere, and wanting to do something. ‘Let’s go!’ It’s the promise. That’s the excitement, isn’t it?. It’s the promise, always. And then we get there, and ‘Ok. You promised us this, and it’s larger than life.’ It’s totally new to them. I knew how they’d react. They’d buzz around like little kids, and it was fine. They ate and drank and they were happy just looking. And then I encouraged them to go walking, rather than starting art straight away. They thought, ‘Ooh, I’ve come all this way, so should I do some art?’ ‘No. Have another glass of red, instead. Then go for a walk. Touch a few trees. Familiarise yourself,’ - the usual thing, piss on a few trees like an
animal does, you know. It finds its parameters. It needs to feel where it is in relation to everything, if there’s any dangers or why he has to feel good with all these qualities around. You need to go out and do that. You need to go out and find bottles and bits of tin. And already it started to get their creative energies flowing. And they came back and they had to eat and that was good. By then it was nightfall, and then they ate and drank and so it looked like it might just turn into another night, and so I then brought out some song sheets. I got the overhead projector and projected those up on the wall, and suddenly there’s a new image for them - these people are used to images. And it didn’t take long before they were into a few songs. They were just common, general songs. So we sang. We sang for a couple of hours. Whilst you’re singing, you don’t drink much and it’s all a joyous, bonding, lovely thing to do. And then you just gradually sing yourself hoarse, you run out of songs, and ‘We’ve sung that one again,’ and so the night goes. And to bed - they were well and truly tired. And the next morning, yes, they wanted to go out. Then I took them out further, beyond the pissing-post parameter. We got the trailer, and we put hay on there so it had the station smell, and we went wide then. I got hold of Margaret who was the station owner’s wife. Margaret loves nature. She knows a lot about it, and she knows a lot about her area. I sat her in the back, and put the dogs in front with me, and a couple of them sat on the top of the Landrover, like kids, and out we charged into the wilderness, with the wind whistling through our hair, and again the promise of the next hill, and the next one. So we took them around and Margaret explained that was Old Man Emu Saltbush and this was Portulaca something-or-other, and this was Erection Hill, or Orgasm Hill or something. That was a bit intriguing.

So we spent half a day looking and the landscape started to flood into them then. They saw this panorama, and of course they started to see clichéd paintings straight away. So after lunch a number of them elected to start painting; that was ok. So I let them do that. They painted, and we went to the salt-lakes. We didn’t know what we were going to find out there. We took mediums, watercolour and pads and charcoal and whatever, and just headed across the salt-lake. Just darted across, and on the way back we encountered cattle, and thought we’d draw some cattle. And because we’d stopped, and had hay on the back, a heap of horses bolted up and so we drew horses as well. So, you know, this sort of thing happens, and I love that. I love the creativity. I guess you’re right, I do enjoy creating with people, with people’s feelings. I’m not sure that I play with them. I’m not sure that you’d call it playing. I think it’s good for my soul to see people happy rather than sad. They reckon I’m an optimist, so if I can get a bit pleasure in their life, that pleases me.

Back at the station, Vince and I went over to the wool shed, and we found an old ram that had been brought in, and he was on his last legs. He was a magnificent beast, old Number 36. They burn a brand, number ‘36’, into their horn so they can keep track of them, and I guess for breeding purposes too: ‘36’ has done this much, and they’re his progeny, all of those things. Anyway, he was Number 36. We drew him all afternoon, just sat there near the sick ram, near water. He was well enough, just his eyes were a bit sad, an old ram. And again, you know, you respond to the animal and you think what they’ve gone through, and see the sadness in their eyes and the wrinkles on their nose, and they’re half of what they were, or could be. But these things happen, so you try and capture that quality in the subject. And I did really good drawings. I guess anything that involves emotion I respond very well to, whether it is a happy situation, like here at the
Show, or out in the sticks, whether it is a flying bird - still birds aren’t any good to me; I’ve got to have them flying, I’ve got to have a moving target, I’ve got to have maximum saturation for my art character - so a moving something is good, whether it’s moving outside of me, like a flying bird or a swimming fish, or whether it’s moving me inside. I respond to both. So I can look out, or look in as well, and do my art like that, look into myself as I did with the ram, and I connected to the beast that way.

And I extended on that. Just by chance, because we’d stuck around. The station owners, Malcolm and Gus, were rounding up more rams. They were going to crutch rams, and about forty rams were going to come in. Perfect subject matter! Got together some paper, and organised myself where I knew they were coming, because I’d been there before, in front of the shearing area, where all the shearing pieces, and the whirring machines, and the pens were. I did three large, three-by-three-foot, preparatory drawings of the stuff that was there already: the boardwalk and the shearing machinery and some of the pens, so you had the stage set for the bleating rams that were coming. And all of this excitement is building up inside of me - I’m getting ready for the performance. That’s another quality in me, I guess. I like to perform, to get it out, to make every moment something. And then I was ready. I had actually placed a clock - you see how conscious I was of these rams coming in? - I’d placed a clock in each one of the drawings, it was very conspicuous, and as the rams came in, I started drawing. I labelled them Crutch 1, Crutch 2, Crutch 3. I used the stencils that were there - they had crutching and grading stencils: those stencils identify lots of things, they’re instant graphics. So I got these stencils, Crutch 1, Crutch 2, Crutch 3, and that was all ready on the paper, you see. It was exciting for me visually, straight away. All I had to do was perform that last operation, put the flowers in the vase, if you like, decorate it like that. It turned out very well.

That’s the sort of quality I like to work with. That’s why I like to take people out the bush, because I enjoy the bush life, the quality. And I think, I still reckon, that most men especially, romantically connect themselves to the land, to the wide open spaces here, rather than pigeon-holing in the cities. It’s only a place that they have to be.

**Interview with Stephen Hederics, continued, November 1, 1996**

*What rules are you conscious of when working? For example, aesthetics.*

Aesthetics. See that’s very subjective isn’t it - aesthetics. But I am conscious of it looking reasonable, perhaps understandable. That’s not quite aesthetics though, is it? Aesthetics is to do with the beautiful. I think it’s subconscious with me, the aesthetic part. Although ultimately I’d like it to be impressive. In the end ‘impressive’ encompasses aesthetics. There’s the power of the line, the power of the colour, and that’s aesthetics too - like the egg shapes. The quality of the line too is aesthetics - I’m very conscious of that. Yeah, I am, I am. I’m there, but I usually move so fast that I don’t have a lot of time to question it; but I am conscious of where I finish my line off. I’ve got some control there, not just random scribble.

*And expertise? Are there rules about expertise that you are conscious of when you’re working?*
No, I don’t think so. Let’s see now, rules about expertise. Just the way of applying, the way not to, the way to move the line, those sort of rules? No I think that is personal. The expertise of application, I think that’s a reflex, pretty much.

*Format?*
I think format is instilled in you, like I was talking about yesterday. Format I am conscious of, yes. Yes, as soon as it’s placed in front of me, I know the parameters that I’m going to work in so therefore I concentrate my energy into those, and I’m bouncing off the format, off the sides of the format, to create my art work.

*There’s also the subject, perspective and colour, but I think you did those yesterday really. Unless you want to talk about: ‘Are you conscious of any rules about subject, that you may or may not paint, or do or do not want to?’.*
I select subjects, most of the time. Most of the time it’s something that appeals, something that intrigues, something that inspires, something that stimulates my artistic temperament. What’s the rule there? It’s not a conscious rule: ‘Draw that! don’t draw that.’

*I’m thinking about outside rules as well. What’s allowed you as a subject?*
Yeah, I think that comes into it. Because, with your upbringing, there are certain taboos and the conscious morality of church, and your upbringing. That’s got to be incorporated in your work. It’s there, it’s a little bit like undressing in public, you can only go so far and then you feel awkward. I think with subject matter too, with stuff that you know that is going to be exposed to other people, yes, you are conscious. With stuff that isn’t, I think not. There are times that I know that I’m going to tear something up, then I might go all silly and do all sorts of strange imagery, and it’s probably a nice release. With stuff that is to be viewed by others, knowingly, I think that does have subconscious rules governing.

Perspective I am conscious of. Perspective comes in many areas, many facets: the way you view things, the way you understand stuff, and then there is mathematical perspective, and then there is tonal. There is also our conditioning with regard to perspective, you talk about distance factors, you do see in scales or overlapping to suggest the relationship of one shape to another one. If you want to say something about a subject you can then put it into certain visual perspective, whether it is in shape form, line form, or colour. I am conscious of perspective.

I am a bit wary of colour. I think colour is an enhancement. Personally, I feel that colour is probably the last of the elements that I would resort to. It’s very convenient, colour; like red blood, it’s sensational. So I guess that when I want to be sensational, I resort to colour, if I want that immediate impact. But colour to me is not easy. I don’t really work well with colour. Limited palate. Just as with teaching: I find that when I introduce colour, I find that colour just confuses them, they just get lost. It’s a very difficult element to work with, but one that people are attracted to, because of its visual impact, because it is immediately beautiful and powerful, and says a lot, they think, but not really. Colour without all the other fundamentals working, is nothing, it’s just a runny nose.
Does who you are have anything to do with what you paint, your sex, your roles, your status, your circumstances?

On the surface, I think that’s right. On the surface, that is a daily commitment to your discipline of art. I think that’s true. But ultimately I don’t think it does matter. All those things affect your art, but the way that you respond to you art is an internal, almost chemical, vibrating quality. The energy is there, so you have try and harness that energy and direct it towards a certain solution. So in everyday stuff the expectation of people of your art, in the context of their life, and the way pay for yours, that controls the way you manipulate your art - because you are ultimately interested in surviving. But if you discarded that, and that was that other avenue I was talking about, when you just play and release art energy, you can’t put labels on it, you can’t say it’s this that or the other thing, it’s just unleashed energy. And that energy level varies daily. Sometimes you feel really powerful, and you can push elements around hard, and fast, and with a great deal of understanding. Yet other days you fumble, your mind is a bit confused, your energy levels are down, your batteries are flat. Living daily affects your batteries - the way that people treat you - they can flatten you, flatten your ego. I think the ego is one of the strongest driving forces in a person; ego leads to self-belief, and greater development. If somebody bruises your ego, makes you feel second-rate, or less than you believed before, it does affect you for a while, but in time the energy level builds up and you forget that, you slot that behind, and your energy level rises above it.

Is who you are important to you and to other people?

It is important to me that I know who I am. Not a lot of people do know. I think that you may be reminded. This is getting back to those rules and regulations. You are reminded that you are a certain person within a certain environment, social structure, upbringing, and so therefore you are expected to perform to a certain level - like we do at school: you can’t just go silly, you’d love to, you’d love to just put the stuff down and get stuck into it and not really care about where you are putting your artwork, and how people are being affected by it, you would love to do that - I would anyway - but the system won’t allow you. The environment that you work in, all the rules and regulations, cages, they thwart you constantly, and you go to make a move and you say, ‘I can’t get involved in that, because I’m nearly out of time, and these people have to move on.’ So you round it off to an acceptable level for that particular class so that they are satisfied, or you convince them that supposedly you know what you’re doing. Like when I demonstrate my drawings, I’ll start but I take it as far as I feel they can cope with it. When I see them starting to fidget and look away I realise that they want to get into it themselves. So I am conscious of that time element in getting a certain amount of information across.

Also you’re Hungarian, does that have any bearing on your art?

That too, I think. It’s a bit like religion: it’s strong, you’ve got your ways of looking at things, ways of looking at life, treating people, and food - and the way people respond to life is different in the European sense. My childhood, see I was nine years old when we came here, so I was affected pretty well by many things, and I remembered a lot from my childhood, and they were powerful, emotional experiences that I’m conscious of now, forever. You can’t escape all those things. It certainly does. And the trip across. You know all those very powerful energies that I was speaking of before, like the escape - escaping at eleven o’clock, twelve o’clock midnight, and my family just leaving their village behind - I was conscious of that move that my parents were making, not totally,
but I knew that it was a very difficult thing to do. Then the journey across the snow, the nervousness of the people, the anxiety at being caught, and the wind and the snow and the cold, and the holes in the ice, they were pretty scary for an eight-year-old at the time. Those sort of things stay with you. Often those images pop up in my mind. I think they act more like sensational stabilisers for me, and my art too. It gives me strength to know that I’ve survived that. That’s reassuring. But it is difficult too. Coming here, we couldn’t speak the language - the embarrassment of that, that also affects you. It’s all those fundamental things that chink your ego. And you have to compromise, and swallow hard, and bear it, and live through it, and then try and make something of yourself. Those emotional things are difficult to come to terms with. Every day you can eat, and sleep, and walk with others, and talk with others, and so seemingly everything is fine, but deep down the scars are still there from the experience. That certainly does affect my response to people. I’m conscious of it, many times, many times. I’ve revisited Hungary, and reinforced a lot of those sensations. It will always be there, it will always either support or not support. Hopefully I’ll get the positive out of it, and use it as a strength factor.

When did you start making art?
I can recall arty things when I was about five. I had a cousin who showed me how to draw a horse, and he did the head and neck of the horse and the mane, and I was impressed with that. That’s about the first image that I can recall. Then, in Yugoslavia, on the way, I remember being fascinated by the toilet paper, we never had toilet paper in the village, we only had newspaper and corncobs and whatever, because it was a very simple and poor village, and so, to go into what is now a prime hotel-motel and find paper there! Paper was just precious. I guess that’s probably what affects my concern about paper at school these days - that the students don’t appreciate the value of it, waste it, throw it away, just a little scribble and it’s gone. Yet here I was, as a little kid sitting on the toilet, and just the pleasure of it - it was one of those dispensers where you get sheets of toilet paper out - and I’d pull one ... it was almost like money, I’d count it, I’d have a wad of this toilet paper, and I felt rich. I used to draw on that.

One of the spectacular images was the first night in this hotel, there are others as I think about it, but in this particular hotel where the toilet paper was, I was looking out at night - we arrived in the day - and looking out at night, there were ships out in the harbour and just a large ship was way out to sea. It was calm and all you could see was lights, an incredible image that still is imprinted in my mind now; the only thing that comes close to it is a large aeroplane in really blue sky, it’s that sort of an awesome image. Plus then, I was anticipating us going on a large ship to come across here.

Mum wasn’t well, all the time we were travelling, what was it? twenty-eight days, and we had to look after ourselves. It was fun for us kids. I used to love getting up on the top deck in a storm, and moving about the boat when it was stormy, and there was no-one there. I’ve always loved a challenge, loved to be with nature right at that dangerous edge, where you could either fall in or be saved. I knew I was reasonably safe, but it was exciting - it’s that sort of stuff that my ego needs, I think, to create with. Anything that is ordinary I’ll go to sleep, it’s got to be extraordinary, and away I go. It’s the spectacular stuff I enjoy.
I’ve got images of the village, of childhood, of playing in the dust, and some of the special things we used to do as family; it was a fairly close group, our family. We had my grandmother living with us, who we left behind. My grandfather had just returned actually, just four years before, returned from Australia; he was here since 1927. He came here in 1927, leaving six children to a young wife, and didn’t return till 1952 - can you imagine that? - so my father was brought up by my mother and pretty well by himself; he was three. And then my uncle came later, in 1937. He is still here.

*He lived in Mildura, did he, your grandfather?*

Yes, he worked at Renmark for four or five years, Waikery and Morgan. He returned in 1952, and we left in 1956, and came here in September third or fourth in ’57; we were in transit a fair while. We crossed the border on my brother’s birthday. That was in January. I can remember the bells pealing just as we came across, the sun shone on the snow and the village church bells were ringing. They were ringing for a special ceremony, people would stop and say a little prayer, it was seven in the morning. We were closely regulated by the church bell in that sense - it was a deeply religious village too. The old ladies especially, go to church two or three times a day, they go in the morning, they go in the evening and then they go at night. In the village it was an area where they caught up with things, with the news, they were given advice on certain matters, up and coming events. There, when someone died, pretty well the whole village turned up, because you knew each other. The whole village is over a thousand people. The church bell rings in a particular way when someone dies, and by then people knew who was on their deathbed anyway, so people said. ‘Oh well, poor old Joe is dead. His funeral will be tomorrow.’ So that was another powerful occasion that sticks in my mind, the procession of those old women in black and most of the men, I guess, were in black, the children wore greys, perhaps a white shirt or something clean. Then you would go to the cemetery, and the priest would deliver the last rites, then they would lower the coffin down, there would be grave-diggers there to bury the coffin and on top of the coffin they would lay wreaths of fresh flowers, and candles. There would be wailing. As a kid there were powerful things inside me - I haven’t brought those things out yet, maybe I should - experiences have got to come out somewhere, as a release.

The transit was exciting, just the trains. I think I had been on a bus, but never on a train, as an eight-year-old. We travelled across Yugoslavia, hundreds of kilometres, by train south to Italy where we caught the boat. We went through some very spectacular scenery, pine forests and gorges. Just the rocking of the train, the people, the smell of the people - that chemistry of people is a very strong thing. I’m very conscious of that. When I walk into a room I can sense whether the people are at ease or not. Maybe that’s where it came from, because I was very conscious of how they were all feeling. Then we stopped in several places during that time where the Red Cross would help out. Just the sharing of the allocation of food and the clothing through the Red Cross. I felt very special about the Red Cross, I didn’t understand then what the Red Cross meant, I thought they were just people in heaven, people who sent clothes. I couldn’t understand why they would send shoes, shoes that would fit me, storehouses full of shoes and clothes, things that we’d never had before. I had one pair of shoes, I think, that were made for me, and here I was with two pair of shoes, and special shirts. I thought it was a great thing on the surface, but at the same time I was missing the village a little bit.
I missed it more later, because I realised just what had happened. During the journey it was just exciting. Every day was new, every day was a challenge.

I had a terrible experience with a dentist. I had a tooth extracted. I had a hole in a tooth, it was abscessed, it was throbbing, it was so painful, they didn’t have any anaesthetic and he pulled it out without any anaesthesia. I can still feel the pressure of the pliers and the pain. But the pain eased quite quickly afterwards. This was in Yugoslavia, in one of the camps. I’d have to look at the map. I haven’t actually recorded the steps of the journey, I must do that with Mum and Dad, so that I know exactly where we went, each stop and how long we spent there. I’ve never done that.

Of course, all of that must affect you. The daily routine is an adaptation to life, but the fundamentals are all linked back to your childhood. I think that if your childhood is pretty strong, you end up being able to bear your adulthood so much better. I’ve been back twice. First time with Mum and Dad, which was a nice link. I went back after twenty years. There was an amnesty. Dad was a bit of a political sort of person, not heavily, but he had a political point of view which wasn’t favoured at the time, and so he thought it better to go. They used to round people up - I remember that, just before we left actually, that may have prompted the move - the authorities would just roll up at about four in the morning. They’d have a number of people on their list. With a cattle truck they would drive down the village. They would have soldiers, and a half dozen would rattle at the door and have to be let in, and served notice and took the men away. And then they interrogated them about certain things; it was fairly petty stuff, but it was used as a conditioning, or a stick for the people, to keep them in line. Just an authoritarian exercise. But it did frighten everyone - that this sort of system could stay with us for a long time. So we decided to go. Maybe if my uncle hadn’t been here we may not have gone to Australia, we may have gone to England, or Belgium. In hindsight, it would have been better to have stayed on the same parallel, if we’d gone to Canada. The winter is very similar there, or a bit more severe than the Hungarian one - still, there’s snow in winter, and that was so special, to see the seasons there changing from Autumn to Winter. It doesn’t happen here, not so noticeably. It gets cold but you don’t have the complete visual change, you don’t have the snow, and heaps of it so you would have to wade or struggle your way through. Or you would be snowbound sometimes - in the evening it would be barren, it’d be soil, no snow, then you’d wake up in the morning and everything has just gone white. It was amazing. The difference is like night and day. I miss that, I miss that contrast. But you adapt, don’t you?

That’s the basis for your art, all those experiences?

Yes, all of that. I think your life’s experiences contribute a lot to how you respond, whether you’re responding to a challenge of another person, or a work challenge in the manual sense like building a fence. I think of how Dad might have challenged that sort of problem, and think when we used to build fences, how we’d go about it: we respond in that way, we get the job done, and get on with the next one, we don’t waste time. That affects you. Cooking too, you think back to how your mother cooked. There are memories associated with your experiences, you work with those for your art. You’re the sum of all those experiences, whether they are visual or tactile or other sensory experiences, they stay with you. And altogether they make up a pot of ‘self’, which you can dip into and say, ‘Let me make some art now, with all those helpers.’
Is where you are an important issue?
More powerful would be the immediate effect of family and responsibility. That affects my art. You’ve got to compromise with yourself all the time, because of your other immediate obligations as a husband and as a father, and I guess as an adult, but immediately as a husband you need to work with the compromise of a relationship. Any relationship is a compromise - even with yourself. That makes you compromise. You go to sleep, or you’re tired, you’ve got to compromise there; if you’re drawing and you arm’s tired, you’ve got to slow the strokes down, so you can only keep that up for a certain amount of time.

I love my family very much, that’s always there. I would drop my art for my family any time. It’s all part of me just the same as that other childhood relationship. The family inspires me to do art ... No, no, that’s part of my ego, to realise that I’m looking after them reasonably well, and that immediately gives me self-esteem, and that self-esteem feeds into the ego, and then I have the strength to make art. To go to Lake Victoria, to do a bit of art. I know that everything is ok, so every now and then I sneak away. I am going with someone else. It’s a hard thing to work by yourself, I’ve only done it that once, at Penola, where I was on that lake for a week. That was a wonderful experience, because you let go of all the guide ropes; you must. There’s nobody there to turn the television on for you, or the air-conditioning. Conversation was nil, because it was between me and me. I could hear the birds outside. I was very close to nature there. I had to come to terms with that. I went walking and tried to find a starting point. Initially I did resort to rules, to doing clichéd little images of birds in reeds, and birds in flight. I think that’s all part of the stimulus of the starting of the creative process in the context of that certain environment. I didn’t realise what I wanted to paint there. I wanted to go to Bool Lagoon, and Bool Lagoon was a bird place, so I had that in mind. But the images that I had in mind before, and during my first days there, were nothing like the images that I ended up with. I ended up playing quite a bit with the imagery, abstracting it, getting the humour. I actually humanised it. I humanised the bird-life, and even the trees. For comfort maybe. The ducks were a family unit. There were swans with cygnets alongside. There was a mother and father situation. There were little ducklings playing in the water. I guess through that image I was making an interesting day with my art, my painting. That was a good challenge.

We go to Port Willunga once a year for a couple of weeks, but there I am daily connected back to family, so I only escape for a short while, and then feed off the environment, which is a fishing village. I quite like the attention I get from people there. The ego is at play again. I like to have people come up and reassure me that I’m ‘doing a good job.’ ‘That looks great.’ ‘Can I buy that?’ I like to say, ‘No-o. I’m only mucking around, you haven’t seen anything yet.’

That’s the sad part about teaching, I guess, that you can’t commit yourself to your art for any length of time. I’d love to be able to have the security for family to be able to art for ever, for a year. I think I’d always need to come back for social interaction, to feeding and drinking, and singing, that sort of thing. They’re the source of my energy. That’s where I get my power from, from relating to people. But I would love to not have the necessity of having to get up at a particular time in the morning and be regimented
throughout the day: now you eat, now there’s a class for you, now you stop, now you come home, and now you go back and do a night class. It’s draining. By the end of the week, I’m arted out. Most of the essence of the art, the gems of the ideas, have all been exercised, I’ve got nothing left, all the gems are gone.

And it’s not that easy to just walk out and find something. You need to spend a little bit of time with it, and see its generality, and then start to focus on the ticking parts of that generality, the things that make it function. To try to get underneath it, not only the structure - whether its a landscape or whether it’s a pen-full of chooks - but that under-structure, that life-force that enables things to exist, that enables you to see them in a particular way. You need to spend a fair bit of time, to heighten your awareness of those fundamental elements, but not only the elements but the very essence of the elements. If I can whittle away, visually, and mentally, and every other way, whittle away all the unnecessary decorative things, like colour and so on, and just make that ultimate statement, that succinct, simple, minimal, just-enough-to ..., so it’s like a breath, it’s like breathing in.

I’ve done that, and its very satisfying. I hate to overwork stuff, to just start knitting. And once I stop, that’s it. Throw it away. I just love the experience of finding it, and placing it down. It doesn’t matter to me. I forget most of my art, I just enjoy the act of doing. It’s like that with most things. I love acting, eating, rather - probably acting too, because that’s immediate; I like to work with an audience, to get a response - but I love the anticipation of food and I love the anticipation of art too, of going somewhere. ‘What will I do now?’ You’re not really sure. Once you touch the paper, you’ve then got to ride the horse, you’ve got to go with whatever is happening; you’ve committed yourself so you have to see it through. Most of the time you’re disappointed, but sometimes you’re pleasantly surprised - lovely things can happen. It’s like that week - when you feed off other people, that’s a lovely exchange: somebody will do a little bit of art and you can see what you could have done, and you can pick that up.

Which week?
The week we went out the scrub, to Willow Point.

The one with the red balloons?
Yes, I didn’t tell you about the red balloons, did I? They were into other things, they were lounging around with their cans of beer, and were getting a bit lethargic. They’d been out and had done a drawing, and a painting, and they were feeling quite pleased with themselves, but not knowing what to do tomorrow. So I gave each one of them a balloon and I said, ‘You blow your soul into that, and I shall place it somewhere.’ And then, while they all were there as a group, sitting outside facing the water, we organised a boat, and one person to carry these dozen or thirteen balloons, all on a stick so it had the wow sensation of a carnival - balloons in a carnival are just wonderful things, bubbles too, they have an immediate sort of powerful, light, and joyous quality to them - and they were red balloons. I’d tied little weights on these balloons, and I organised them so it didn’t seem haphazard, it appeared as though I’d gone to great length, which I hadn’t - I probably had, but quietly, I didn’t lay it down on paper, I’d been thinking about ‘What can I do with these to excite them?’ and then I worked with the landscape and placed these balloons on the water. I got one of them to direct the boat from the shore, you see,
so the shore was participating with the water. He said, ‘Right, drop it down there,’ and I
had one of the more engineer-types calculate the space between the balloons so that they
would span the water so that it was a visually exciting thing. And then we dropped them
in. They didn’t align because the water was deeper in some parts - I hadn’t thought of
that. That’s the way it went, if it was meant to happen, it did. And the balloons started
drifting; the blokes on the bank would say, ‘There goes my balloon, typical, can’t stick
with the group, want to be out on your own.’ And so it excited them to thinking other
things. And then one of the lawyers, I think, by chance happened to have a blue balloon,
and it was huge, you know, one of those big weather balloons. So he stuck this huge,
cerulean balloon right in the middle of the stream. So you had these red balloons and this
great big blue one, and then you had the moon there as well. At night, you saw the subtle
hint of red, and then this blue balloon in the moonlight. It was wonderful. In the
morning each day after that, this was about day two, the balloons were lined up against
the reeds on the opposite bank, there were about four still in line with the edge initial one,
so we had the base, and about four had lined themselves up at the opposite bank, two had
gone way down the bottom, they were escapees. That was a source of ideas, too. They
did other things. They started doing star-light paintings, and found found-objects, bits of
tin, and would play over those, sticking things together, doing precious stuff, like a bit of
rusty tin - they would put the wow colour with it, whether it was shells or glass, and then
stick it around, and then paint over those. It inspired them to go off the canvas, and into
the landscape, in amongst it. They were whittling spoons, painting and creating on skins
then. It got them off the traditional paper, and just wonderful creativity happened. And
then we had the wall chart too, that was fantastic. I did a map of the region, and it was
like a diary; it turned out to be like a daily diary of what people did, and said, and had
thoughts on tomorrow, and how they felt about the whole process. That was ours, that
was a nice thing: we flew our own flag. And left it there - it’s still there, it’s cherished
by the station people and I’ve been back a couple of times and enjoy seeing it there too.
That’s the story of the red balloons. Later, to extend on that, I had got bits of fabric from
Shirley, little triangular bits, we were going to have an exhibition that weekend and
Vincent and I went along the fence and at each fence-post - it was probably a kilometre
of fence we had enough flags for, a significant part of road - at each fence-post I tied a
flag of coloured fabric and so the fabric turned the fence into a piece of art. We were
fanning out. We started close and then started to work with the environment as well. I
think next time we’ll do more of that.

Regarding your choice of materials and techniques, do you see this as an issue, as being
important to your values?
Surface doesn’t mean that much to me. I can artwork on tin. Or I can whittle. I enjoy
whittling, I enjoy that process of rounding things off, taking the rough edges off. I don’t
know what that is - it is almost like a prayer with me, whittling. I just sit down and
occupy myself. Maybe it’s a guilt thing, maybe instead of just sitting, I whittle.

You knit.
I knit, just about knit. Maybe it’s to do with Anne because she can never sit down and
watch television, she has to be crocheting, she knits or does something. I’ve always
whittled, ever since I can remember I’ve whittled. I used to make those willow whistles
as a kid, and I was always impressed by the whittlers in the village: they used to whittle
chess-sets out of willow. I was always intrigued by the cleverness of the boys - boys
mostly - who used to whittle those during winter. During the three months of winter they
would whittle a couple of chess set, tiny little pawns, it was very impressive. I haven’t
done that; I wouldn’t mind doing that, to do a chess set, because I’ve got access to this
wriggly willow now. I’ll do a chess set just for the fun of it.

*Distorted?*
Maybe. The wriggly willow is already distorted, so it’s stimulating, it’s not like a straight
stick, it has its shapes. I whittle eggs, too. I love the shape of the egg, I don’t know what
a psychologist would do with that. Egg-shape: it might be insecurity, I don’t know.
Maybe it’s a starting point. Could be my art: it’s in the egg, the potential. I’m always
saying, ‘That’s the potential; you’re only seeing the egg, you haven’t seen the chicken
yet.’ Maybe that’s my frustration: I haven’t been able to develop the chicken, let alone
the chook.

*What’s the worst word you can imagine being applied to your art?*
‘No.’ ‘Can’t do it.’ Or ‘You must do it.’ ‘Must’ is hard in art, because then you are
restricted straight away, or you’re required to perform immediately. Then you’ve got to
compromise tremendously and ‘Go!’ I used to hate exams in Art; I couldn’t see any
sense in them at all. That’s why I hate the assessment the way it is now too. ‘You must
be assessed.’ ‘That piece of art must be worth something.’ We don’t have exams so
much in Art as we used to. We used to have life-drawing exams, as you know, and fifty
percent of your marks was for that particular two-and-a-half hour exercise, and if you
didn’t have a good day, if you got the proportions out of whack, then your mark would be
way down, whereas some of the stuff in between was far superior. To me, what should
be assessed is the development and the culmination, getting to there and not the end
statement. People will on occasion fail, and they won’t always perform to an optimum
either. Champions in any field can discipline themselves to perform above average, but
the Olympic performers probably have better performances before the Olympics. Just on
that day something slips, the wind blows the wrong way, and you’re forever judged,
assessed, and remembered for that one performance. Nobody remembers all those
records you broke beforehand.

The restriction of art is what I don’t like, the formality. I guess that’s all concerned with
pigeon-holing, although I work within the pigeon format. It’s a big compromise, but it
does give some satisfaction. You can produce to an acceptable level, not feeling, not to
get total satisfaction for your art-character. You need to be free. It’s very difficult to be
free. I know a lot of people would argue that you need some sort of restrictions to
perform well. By saying that, I think they pigeon-hole you already, because they say that
art is something, that good art is this, the ones that have that philosophy. ‘That’s good art
because all these criteria were met.’ Art is an ongoing thing. It’s always soft. The
moment you’ve done it, it’s gone. It reflects your life, and it reflects your experience.
It’s the way that you respond to things, emotion. Yeah, emotion has got a fair bit to do
with it too.

I don’t know what it is about this lie business in art. It’s pretending that you’re doing
good art because other people like it. That’s probably the lie: that you’re conforming to
expectations instead of just doing your own truthful imagery, if that’s possible, with all of
the experiences that you’ve had to date, and in the situation that you’re in.
Commercialism is a huge compromise for art. I go through the motions in commercial art because I know I’m going to get paid for it; I put a time limit on it. It’s prostitution. When you start prostituting your art, that’s the lie. That’s the lie, when you are doing it for money, when you are doing it for other people’s favour. The truthful art is when you are doing it for yourself. That’s the stuff that is purest and that will represent you forever - not those other duplicates, they’re rubber stamps like everyone else’s, almost: ‘That’s like someone else’s.’ ‘That conforms to certain rules, so therefore it’s good.’ It’s like all the people doing landscapes around here - gum-tree on the left, little house on the right, hill in the background, and then some sheep in the middle-ground. That’s a lie, you see, that’s pictorial commercialising, prostituting your art so that you’ll sell it. And then you pretend, a lot of people will pretend that’s good, and hide behind it: ‘I’m a good artist.’ It’s typical, the lie of art.

Where does this idea suddenly come from - we hadn’t really talked about lying, or truth - why did you suddenly think about that?
I was thinking about the way I approached it, and how I hate people copying, too. That’s another quality, that is probably closer to the truth, the copying, and those clichéd images that I talked about are copies. We can’t think past what they were painting five hundred years ago. We can’t think past the perceived beauty of then, and apply it now. We seem to think that we have to repeat the sins of our forefathers. It’s like that with everything else, we’re almost destined to do it, to repeat it. And somewhere along the line if you find a genius who lets go, undoes the bungey rope, and flies, that’s the real artist. Everything else, you know is going to happen. Even though its a thrilling sensation, it’s when you let all of those ties go, and start making your art, it’s a wonderful feeling. And that’s the feeling I was trying to express before: when I get into the flight of the bird, when I get into the rhythm of the horses, beyond the image of the horse, I’m feeling the heartbeat almost, drawing them and painting them like that. That’s when fantastic art happens. You don’t even question it.

Wind-up Interview with Steve Hederics, May 24, 1997

Do you have any comments on the business of exhibiting?
Struth! I think it’s essential for a serious artist to exhibit periodically. I think more for themselves, as much as for other people. They actually confront their own work by exhibiting. You’re putting yourself up for display and therefore you’re more or less confessing to those around you - verbalising, and picturising, and making your thoughts concrete, and I guess reassuring yourself through exposure to your own peers, to other people, you’re reassuring yourself of your directions and attitudes. I guess basically an exhibition is important for that reason. I think it happens every time someone exhibits. You get a little bit of support. Human beings as we are, you need a bit of physical reassurance, you need that pat on the back that does the ego good. It launches you to the next stage of your art.

Have you got some new ideas about your art after showing your work in this exhibition?
Currently I’m working on the ‘Artists in the Bush’ again, so my ideas have been preoccupied with that. Because I exhibited a lot of stuff from the previous art encounter at Willow Point, this particular one I’m linking to the previous one, so I’m picking up on the level I was at there, with those artists. I’ve got some ideas. I’ve visited the
Grampians where the new venue is, and it’s different, so I’ve got things in my mind. You know, I’ve looked at the place and its visions have come into my head. I’ve read the light, and got some idea of some of the possible responses I might have to the environment. It depends on the week, whether it’s overcast, whether it is fine, whether we can get out, you don’t know, and what the group’s like. In that sort of a situation, the group chemistry plays a very important part in your art work. Competition sets in if they’re keen. If they’re good, it tends to raise your level of commitment. And also performance as well; if you’re performing to a mediocre crowd, you just put it down a couple of notches. I guess we’re like that, aren’t we? We perform to the occasion. I’ve got new ideas ticking in my head, because of that. But one was linear, the next one is going to be surface, maybe line as well. It may be that fleeting moment, it may be the shadows, it may be the texture of rock, it could be the texture of the soupy atmosphere during that week. (laughter) If it’s overcast, and it can be in the Grampians, we might do a lot of indoor work. See, I get a lot of pleasure out of organising the group, or doing something with the day, so that the group can actually make something with the art as well, I accept the challenge of a bad day, and then work out something as a group, so that it’s a meaningful way. So in a sense, that’s my art already. After that it’s a bonus if I touch paper or canvas. Canvas is a very ambitious thing to attempt on an occasion like that. Sometimes I think that paper is quite ordinary and ok, but canvas is a huge challenge. And some of them did that, accepted the challenge of a canvas, and did quite a good job. But there, you’ve got to be locked into the job and say, ‘Well, I’ve got to do a painting today.’ You’ve got to look for the painterly things and latch onto them, whereas, because I’m so preoccupied with the group, I tend not to overburden myself with things like that. I’ve got more spontaneous mediums. And the most spontaneous is the group itself. After that is my own artwork.

I don’t know why I get so much pleasure from the artists in my life, out of creating art with artists, with the people themselves by, not so much manipulating them, stimulating them. That’s the challenge. Maybe it’s the Leo quality, sitting back and seeing the situation, watching them coming, the anticipation of the bottle of red, or the meal. You know, that meal thing is very artistic to me - the process of the meal. I really look forward to the meal. And I anticipate doing something with them too. There’s the drink, and after the meal I’m thinking, ‘What’s going to happen then? Are we going to be playing cards, or are we going to be singing?’ Something to keep the continuity, the chemistry going in a positive way, not allowing it to get sour in any sense. I’m arting all the time.

Do you have a question for me to answer, or for me to ask you?
Ask me if it’s important to sell your work at exhibitions.

Steve, is it important to sell your work at exhibitions?
I wish you hadn’t asked me that. (laughter) I think in today’s climate, well, the set-up I’ve got at the moment, the paying job, I don’t feel the pressure’s there to sell the work at exhibitions. Selling is a very small part of an exhibition, I think, if you look at it in that way; but then again, I think you’re up the wrong passage if you’re exhibiting for the purpose of selling, primarily. We have to make dollars, but I think it’s a pity if people think it’s a great exhibition because you sold a lot of work. I think it’s more important to get some feedback, to get some new feedback, not the sort of feedback that you expect,
that you can conjure up anyway, because if you’ve been arting for quite some time, as we have, you can set things up. You can orchestrate a selling exhibition. That’s totally different - that’s bartering, or a living concept, an existence factor. For a true artist, it’s not important that you sell at exhibitions. The feedback from your important peers is most important - not just anybody. When you’ve been arting for thirty or forty years, you can amaze people with your imagery, and therefore in their naivety they can bestow all sorts of accolades on you, praise your work, and there’s friends as well who feel obliged to say, even if they don’t understand it, ‘It’s lovely work! It’s wonderful to see you exhibiting.’ What else do they say? ‘You’ve done a lot of work!’ and ‘It’s different, it’s different! I’ll just go and have another look.’ (laughter) ‘I’d really like to buy it but...’ They’re just fresh out of money or something like that. ‘It wouldn’t go in my lounge,’ that’s the worst one. If they’re buying for that, it’s terrible. Or, ‘Can you do me one in green?’ (laughter) I think the general person doesn’t understand an artist. Only art people understand art people.

So that makes art a bit exclusive?
Oh, very exclusive. True art is very private, and yes, I think it is exclusive. And that’s why it’s often misunderstood, misinterpreted. That’s why you have artists living their whole life in frustration, because they are trying to find the level between the now, and the after - between the consequence and the process, where you are going with your work. Because it is constantly changing.

What makes it exclusive, then?
Your private thoughts, that’s the exclusive bit. And those private thoughts, only you know them, really. The artist in the know, a well-tuned artist, will sense what you’re on about, but will never really know your private thought of what went into that particular work, or where it was sourced from originally. They only get one little slide, if you like, of the movie that went into making that picture. It’s only an instance, like that. (snaps fingers) It’s exclusive for that reason. It’s as private as your religious beliefs. You verbalise your religious beliefs, to a certain level, but that fundamental stuff is private and exclusive. The inner-sanctum. Those sort of things you don’t even share with your nearest and dearest, your closest. Art is almost that private, isn’t it?.

But doesn’t that deny the power that art has for other people? the whole point of it - for the viewers?
As I said before, if you’re making art for viewing, that’s a different art.

So you don’t make art for viewing?
No, I don’t make art for viewing! Not real art! Because then, you see, you cheapen it. You compromise tremendously. Yeah. Let’s think about that one. We make art all the time, we said that. We make art from the moment you get up. You’re thinking art, you’re not actually making it, but I guess in thinking, that you are already making that extended movie, and every now and then you pop a picture out to keep yourself going. It’s almost like an animation of your thoughts. You bring out the single pictures and then you put them together, and I guess, at the end of it all, hopefully it makes some sort of a cartoon of your life. (laughter)

So art equals your life? Art is an animation of your life?
Pretty well. Absolutely. It’s not different to a person working on the land. When you think about what your father perhaps did, the shoemaker, the path that he might follow, or she, the path that he might follow in a life-time, the influences. In the end they were a shoemaker. Always a shoemaker. They went to school, they had friends here and friends there, and then they were apprenticed to this that and the other thing, but in the end they were a shoemaker. When you go, in the end you will be remembered as an artist, not as a wife. As a wife by your husband at a certain level, but when you think about what you did whilst you were on this planet, it was all to do with art. Artistic person. An art person: you weren’t a dancer, you weren’t an engineer. What do you think?

What will you do now regarding your art?
Yeah, people ask me, and they say, ‘Why aren’t you doing more?’ Anne says, ‘Why aren’t you leaving TAFE and doing more art, accept the challenge?’ Well, I look at it this way: it’s all art to me, and if I steal a moment or if I can concentrate on the making of art in a more continuous sense, like I do on these camps, if I can have half a day somewhere, resolving some artistic thought, responding in a truly more artistic manner, rather than being ruled by the daily jobs, chopping wood, or cleaning the guttering, those functional things that you’ve got to do … . Feeding the chooks. Now! (laughter)

Thanks, Steve.
Good. That’s all right. We can keep on. We’re making art now. We were just talking, and so we’re creating with words, and I’m trying to think back to where we started, and see if I can pull it all together now to make it a good picture.

I’ll type it up and give it to you.
Yeah. What about the other parts? Are you wanting to collate this with that; are you going to make this as a statement with your Masters?

Yeah. All the bits go in with it; all your statements, and my comments on what happened during the exhibition, and my comments about your life, bringing in your own quotes. Now, are you going to do that with a little bit of doctoring of all that we’ve said? It’s not going to make a great deal of sense.

Yours makes an amazing amount of sense! I’ll put your whole interview in the back, in the appendix, and then put parts of it into the text. And also it’s been doctored to put into the catalogue. I daresay they’ll be wanting to read it all - but if you think of it as a book, then I suppose many people wouldn’t be wanting to read every single detail of the interviews, though I do think they are interesting. And, by the way, when I kept going to the gallery, people were reading those interview extracts, and looking at the paintings. They were really interested in what artists have to say. That’s how I feel too, I really like to know what artists think.

Yeah, I think it was a good move. We have been too long secretive about our thoughts. I think if you exhibit your pictures, you should exhibit your feelings as well, not just the chosen cartoons, as we referred to them before, but also the extended, associated things, words, thoughts, that went prior to, and after - and that’s what you’re doing here, I think.

What have you got out of this? May I ask you that? Out of the exhibition, out of interviewing that many artists - what’s it done for you, now?
Apart from the practical exercise of getting my MA, it’s beginning to satisfy some questions I had about the importance of local art. Because I could see that it wasn’t important in the eyes of important peers. That it’s sort of second rate. And I couldn’t understand it because it is being made, and being made beautifully, by quality people like yourself, and André, and Joyce, in her own genre. I never quite understood what all that was about. And it’s about power, isn’t it, and status, and importance.

Yeah, if you want it to be viewed in a particular light and at a particular level, it becomes an orchestrated event. You can choose to exhibit in your garage or you can choose to exhibit at the gallery, and therefore that’s an orchestrated move on your part. That’s a statement at a level that the community can refer to and say, ‘This person has exhibited in the Arts Centre fourteen times, or something, rather than in a garage once a week. I think we play to the audience. You like to think you are accepted at these levels, but you can pull them off in the sense of being appreciated - not so much awe-inspiring, as in awesome, but not confusing people. If your artwork can make the viewer question, question their own process of analysis, of understanding art things, then I think you are doing good things. Just like when you are asking me questions. If you can make me think, rather than just idle glass-of-wine chatter, if you make me think about the complexities of my work, the abstract bits, those sensitive, personal ones we were talking about, if you make me think about those: ‘Why?’ It’s important to question ‘Why?’, why you do your stuff, not just do it, because you can do it - we clever possums, we can train ourselves to perform very well - you can turn things in wood, or you can make things in clay, in a very clever way, but there’s not a great deal of thought after the cleverness, it’s just pure skill, and skill to me isn’t art. The process of skill, or the act of making, isn’t the art. It’s the continuation of that statement. It’s the question mark that act leaves behind, after you’ve done it, rather than, ‘You’ve done it. Well, that’s it!’. That’s not the art. Those bits that we exhibit are not your art, really. That’s just a very small fragment of you. If you can leave behind this question of ‘I wonder what the person will do next? And isn’t it exciting!’ This person has come from there, and had gone up a new road now, and they’re making some sort of a meaningful, progressive statement about subjects, about themselves, primarily. After all, subject doesn’t matter, it’s the way that you interpret the subject: what you do with it. The integrity of your statement is probably most important.

How can your statement not have integrity?

Well, I don’t think commercial statements have a lot of integrity. What would they have? Not integrity, it’s not even honest. Because to be commercial is to be tricky, and to be tricky is not to be honest. It’s like a magician: you conjure up something for pleasurable gains. Commercial art is selfish. It’s motivated by selfish gratification. It’s money; commercialism means money, multiplication of things. It actually devalues stuff.

You’re really devaluing human qualities with commercial statements, forcing people into accepting pretty landscapes, clichéd tree on the right, a little bridge on the left, a cottage, a stream meandering up there. It’s sort of ‘Isn’t it lovely!’, comfortable, art that’s not art, duplicated so many times by people. That’s clever: the skill in making the imagery as close as possible to reality, it can be admired, but it’s not art. That’s not art - as we said. That’s probably the closest we’ve come to analysing art: as a flexible, liquid quality of people. It’s the ongoing statement. I think if we interviewed any of the masters, they would agree, that at the end of it all what have you done with your talent, with your
potential to see things that way? What have you done? The poets, the writers: have you materialised that? Have you verbalised that? It’s a process of development.

Anyway you didn’t really answer. Personally what did it do for you? You told me it’s good for your MA. You told me all the bits that go in. (laughter) I want to know what it did for you, for your ego.

*I think my ego is probably pretty gratified. But ... not really. Much more than that is really getting close to artists - in the interviewing process, and the being with them process, and putting their stuff up and seeing their work.*

So you’re a little bit like me in that you like to see other artists be seen. You know, there’s the teacher quality coming out in you: that you’re finding these people with potential, in the community, ones that have been ‘not seen’ - let’s say that - you know they’re not being ignored, they’re seen by a lot of people, but to make the general community understand the sort of people that are around.

*Yeah. And then what I really like is getting right into their head. And it has made everything else that I read far more interesting. I read other artists’ interviews now, and follow all those connections back to what you people are saying - like processes, and all the rest of it.*

But what about you, has it reassured all your thinking too? You’re not pinching ideas, are you? It’s not a bad ploy, actually for an artist to do that. Just to go and interview other people and listen ...

*No, it’s a bad idea, because you get totally involved in that and you’re not making your own art. And I just can’t wait now to stop doing all this and start again doing some real stuff. But I do enjoy this interviewing process and writing process.*

Yes. That’s what I’m saying. You’re finding a creative wand in your make-up. Because of your circumstance and upbringing and psyche, and your intellectual quality ...

*Yes, that’s the word. Like you say, it’s a very intellectual exercise.*

... you find it stimulating to make artists open up, to encourage them to open up and verbalise. I think that’s a fantastic thing to do.

*All those ideas are in there - that haven’t been heard.*

I haven’t verbalised them like this, ever. Nobody’s taken any interest in me like this, nobody of your calibre, anyway. You get friends say they enjoy your art, or ‘What have you done, lately? Let’s see some of your work.’ Not ‘Why do you do it?’ Nobody really asks, ‘Why do you do it?’

*You have to have a fairly strong stimulus to be able to sit down and give all that time, don’t you, to sit there and think so hard, as you do, and put away a time slot.*

Well, all those questions you asked me before: I haven’t contrived those things, they were in me all the time. I haven’t verbalised them very well, because they’re just spontaneous answers, just within the framework of my vocabulary, I guess. You know, there’s only a moment you can think about and then respond. With practice you can have clichéd answers, and they sound wonderful; it’s not the same thing. And, I think, in your cleverness if you can take the essence of what I’ve been saying, of what the other artists
have been saying, and be able to put them together, that’s a culmination of your artistic act here. Because your ability to see through those pauses and question marks and so you can pick up and carry on.

*I don’t have to see through them! I put them in and that’s what makes it sound so fabulous. … You have practised you know. You’ve practised because you stand in front of a class all the time, and have to verbalise your ideas.*

No, well, maybe I do. Because when I draw, I talk. I talk my way through my work when I’m painting. That’s only ... (I shouldn’t be saying this, somebody might be listening) (laughter) just to reassure myself, and to remind myself, because I have so many different areas that I do, I need to talk about it to keep me focussed as to what I’m doing. ‘I’m not doing design now, I’m doing painting. I’m not doing painting, I’m doing drawing.’ You know, the elements of drawing are different from the elements of painting. Before I started painting, I really didn’t understand what painting was about. Just over the years, seeing works like yours, and Neil’s, to see the paint quality .... . Neil used to say to me, ‘Oh, that’s not a painting, that’s a drawing,’ and I couldn’t see the difference. And now I can, now I can. Because I used to draw with paint. I paint a bit more with paint now, but I still draw a lot. Yeah, I’m more of a drawer. That’s why I love the spontaneous, the spontaneous moment doesn’t allow me to paint that much. I think the Impressionists, the Van Goghs in the later stages of their life, drew a lot with their paint. They didn’t paint a lot. If you have a look at their work, the paint quality itself is very thin. You can see the raw canvas showing through. You can see the urgency of their brushstrokes, and that urgency doesn’t allow the time to savour, and model, and really make the recipe elastic and luscious. Luscious! You know, the Rembrandt luscious paintings, they were layer upon layer of pre-calculated stuff and it was a process they went through to make an end statement, to make a monumental picture - they knew it was going to last for hundreds and hundreds and thousands of years, and they had to make that as monumental as possible. That picture was their last - until the next one. That was the attitude.

*Yes, that’s right. We’re a bit more throw-away, aren’t we, toss-it-off.*

Ours is too. I am particularly frustrated by the time factor. I’m making quick art, and not being allowed the time to develop, you know, the greater sequence in my artwork, It’s a difficult one to try to explain, because whilst I appreciate the process of painting, and the planning of a really good painting, I think I’d rather do lots and somehow assemble them. … So maybe we’re talking about a book here by you, by Anjelie Beyer.

*I don’t know what I’d write about ... ‘Mildura Artists Revealed’.*

No, no. Perhaps write about how artists work. You’ve talked to me, and you’ve talked to André, you’ve talked to Peter; and so you’re getting an insight into the artistic temperament, the artistic psyche. You know: why people make art.

*Yes, exactly! Exactly. That’s what’s at the foundation of it all. And isn’t that fascinating. Nobody’s really answered it. I don’t know that you can.*
Appendix 5: Interviews with Peter Peterson

Interview with Peter Peterson, October 11 and October 23, 1996

Where and when do you paint?
I paint in the afternoon. I paint in my little shed, and I paint any time through the daytime. There’s no time, I just paint, I just keep painting, and it just comes naturally out of me. I listen to music to go along with my painting.

How did you learn your skills?
My skills ... I was drawing and sketching one day, and I started mucking around with a bit of paint and mucked around with paintbrushes, and I was bringing all these pictures out of me. So I was learning, and I wanted to keep on learning. As I kept on painting, someone said I could paint, so what I done is I kept on painting, kept on painting.

When did you start?
I’ve been painting for a while. I’ve been painting from the day I got shifted off - when I went to Melbourne. When I left school, the teachers asked me to do my work, I couldn’t do it, ’cause I was too busy drawing pictures, pictures, pictures, pictures. That’s the time when I was in the Boy’s Home, and I had nothing to do, so that’s what I done, I done this, I just drew and drewed, and done sports and drawn pictures. Yeah, I’ve been drawing for a while. Now I’m just starting back up, but it looks like I never drewed before. I’ve been drawing for ages, but for five or six years I stopped drawing. Now I’m just starting back up again. I’m just trying to get my own style back in my painting.

I thought you started at TAFE...
When I was first at TAFE, I didn’t know there were artists there doing that sort of thing, I didn’t know nothing about it. That’s the first time I went to TAFE, and there’s a lot of things I didn’t know. I learned a lot of things. I learned through watching all the other people painting, through watching how they paint. The main thing that got me was there were about four, five rooms of painting, I didn’t know there were skills, all sorts of skills, all artists here and there, young ones and old ones, I didn’t know there were art skills. When I was watching everyone over there painting, they were also painting nude people, naked womans and naked mans, and I didn’t know that they do that sort of thing, do you know what I mean, paint a person in the nude, didn’t know that. Except for now. When Steve asked me to come into his class, wanted me to come into his class to do a naked woman, I felt real funny. It’s so funny standing there, looking at a life model, a woman, standing there naked, you know what I mean? Plus he put me right up close to her, that close that I could touch her, I didn’t really want to be in there. I was too frightened to sit there and do it, frightened to be there, just looking at her. It was something different, do you know what I mean, to do a naked woman.

Who do you make your work for? Who do you think might look at your work when you finish it?
I usually go back to my family. I go back to the family. They’re my judges, my family are the judges. I show my work, they say ‘Oh, that’s good!’ My sister, she paints a bit, my brother, he paints a bit - they look at my work. And we all have totally different work to him.

*How do you choose what to paint?*

In my mind all I’ve got are pictures. I’ve got pictures of things. When I look at a cloud, I can make a picture of it. When I go down the river, I will look around and I’ll see pictures of things, what I want to. What I do is, I lay back and quickly draw pictures, and then I paint it. When I’m down the river, thinking about the pictures, I’ll keep the picture in my head, and when I come home, and when I start painting, I’ll draw that same picture that I’ve seen down the river.

*Are these pictures about what you see at the river, are they to do with the trees and the land and the sky, or are they something that’s only in your head?*

They’re only in my head. What I see is what I draw - what I see is what I draw.

*Why do you go to the river to see those things?*

Because down the river it’s nice and quiet. You can listen to the birds. You can listen to the wind. Watch the water flowing. Look up there, you see the clouds, laying on your back you can see the clouds just going that fast. And then it gets all swirling around, the cloud, and you can see a picture in it, in the clouds. Just laying there, relaxing, looking around - you see that sort of thing. And when you draw a picture, you put the picture on canvas with paint. All you see is blue and white, but when you paint it you make colours, you bring it out with your colours, ’cause I love my colours. I love my colours.

*What sort of pictures are they?*

Mainly with girls - with the back of their hair, like angels - you get people who look like angels. I’ve never seen their face, so I just draw the back of their hair. I like a woman’s back of the hair, going down, like in this picture here: so you get the hair down to here, you get a moom, you get the foot, the lizard, and the hand, you get walkabout, hands, tears, goanna. That’s all about myself, that’s on my skin (tattoo): walkabout, tears, woman with the angel’s, with the woman’s hair. You know a paddle-steamer when you see the waves coming by? That’s what it looks like. When you go on a boat and you see the waves behind the boat, that reminds you of the woman’s back of the hair: it’s all wavy, down to the moom. You see some hair and it’s nice and straight, but when you see a wavy one, wavy right down to her moom, that’s nice, you know what I mean, that is nice. ’Cause you’re looking at the back of a boat, it’s a wave - or you’re looking at the back of her hair, it’s a wave, same thing. So if you go down to see a paddle-steamer, you see nice waves behind the paddle-steamer that remind you of hair.

*What have you got in your tattoo?*

It’s like a butterfly, it’s got four diamonds, four diamonds and a little circle, it’s a pattern.

*Do you put that into your own paintings?*

No, I put that in my sketches. That’s the one I’ve done up the back here, of that woman, and her moom and long hair, and just the side of her breast. But you don’t see her face.
Why don’t you see the face?
One day ... I’ll probably wait to see her, wait to see her one day. That’s my imagination - what it’s going to be like, what I’m waiting for - somebody special, a nice person.

Will you see a person in the real or will you only see her in your imagination?
I’ll see it in my imagination - the way I’ll see it, I mean. But one day I seen a true person, with the hair long, what I’ve sketched, along that theme, a very nice sort of a person.

Is it a spirit person or a real person?
It is a spirit person. It’s my spirit person, my spirit woman, my dreamtime woman, do you know what I mean?

Is this related to your being Aboriginal?
Yeah. It’s like - you get some people in imagination that are with someone - all year, a long time in the imagination. That’s my person, my spirit person.

Is that given to you by the people in your past?
No. No. This is for me, this is for myself. It comes from me.

Does it come from you because you are Aboriginal and you’ve got a dreamtime?
A lot of people have a dreamtime. A lot of people are getting dreamtimes. Well, I got my dreamtime. My dreamtime is my woman with the back of the hair. All the ones I’ve done, you don’t see the face, you just see the moom, and the hair, and the side of the breast. That’s what you see.

So this is a really special image for you?
For me - it is. This is mine, yeah. Because I dreamed it once. I dreamed about it once. What I dreamed, I’ve done it, and I kept on doing this, this woman.

Would you say most of your subjects are people?
No, no. I like to have a woman in my picture sometimes, in my work, but not all the time. Only if it’s a real strong one about myself. What I’ve seen in my past. That’s how I do it.

What sort of other pictures do you paint?
I paint goannas ... . All colours, I mix all colours. I like to change my work around. I like to be different. Not just one dot, a couple of dots. I like to mix all my colours. I like to play with all the colours. But I think I play with colour too much. I’ve been told I play with colour too much - but I love mixing my colours, I love playing with colours. That’s just the way I am with my paints. I love paint. Nice green, dull sort colours, brown, blue, apricot-yellow, maroon, that real sand, that real desert gold colour, I love that colour. I love white, and brown and black. I like basically all my colours, yeah.

What rules are you conscious of when working? What do you have in mind as controlling you, what you should be doing, what you want to be doing?
What I paint, with my colours, I like to just drift off, I like to block everything out. And what I’ve got on my mind, like I said before, I think back to what I’ve seen. I paint all
that. I mix all my colours, because when I’m around places there’s a lot of colours there, and I put all the colours together, and I want people to read all the colours in the work, see in my work where I’ve been.

_Are you allowed to use any style at all since you’re a Koorie painter? Are there any rules about what style you use?_

No. As long as I don’t copycat off people. Like people whose work comes from up Northern Territory, or people whose work comes from Sydney: you never copy off other people’s work. You never even try to do it. Because that’s wrong. That’s their work. That came out of their self. But mine, that came out of what I think. I just do my own.

_Sometimes, you use dots._

Dots. Little dots: match dots, not big dots, just very small dots. A lot of dots make it bright, you can make your picture stand right out - it jumps at you with the little dots, I mean. Like, you look at something from a plane, you look down, what do you see? Light with dots! You look down, what do you see? A big road, it’s all dots. You look at a highway, that’s dots. An airport, that’s what it is, dots. Road in the middle, lights on the side, you got dots at the side alongside the road. It’s a picture.

_You see lots of things at the side of the road._

Yeah. You go along at about a hundred and twenty miles an hour, you see posts; and from a long distance back you see little shiny things off the posts. They’re little glares of dots - from a long distance. You’ve got trees, weird looking trees over, shadows, sunset, shade. When you look at that, you still see the posts with the little dots coming towards you again. That’s how I see it.

_You painted that._

Yeah, I painted that, and I’m still painting it. I painted that one in there too. Same one, with the face on the ground, the face on this side, the face looking up, and the road coming straight through the middle of it, and an eagle beside it.

_What are the faces?_

The faces? As you’re driving along the highway by yourself, you think somebody is looking at you all the time, you feel weirdy, you feel real spooky like somebody is watching you all the time. You see the trees. You see a bird, you always see a bird when you are driving, always eagles, or crows. Every time you see something on the road, splattered. You see somebody sitting there looking at you as you are driving along. You see trees and branches, everything fallen down funny - like on a real hot day, there’s no wind - you see trees cracking down, fallen down, blown over. Where it’s fallen, there will always be a bird around it, or next to a signpost. When you travel, when you’ve got a long way to go, you think: ‘I hope nothing happens’, so you drive along, and you feel yourself tensing up, all goosey. It’s a strong spirit sort of thing.

You see a lot of kangaroos coming back across the road, they never make it off the highway. People hitchhiking. Cars broken down on the highway. Everything is always happening along the highway.

_It’s almost as if that is your topic, the highway._
The highway is my road! The reason I done that was because when I was in Brisbane, I hitch-hiked back from Dubbo to here; it took me two days to hitch-hike back, and that gave me enough time because when I was on the road I was singing, just looking around, camping here … I was a lost man on one part of it. I was trying to get home. And then when I started painting, it took me right back to that road. That’s when I wanted to start to paint, right from there.

Everything I do, you look at it, everything is around you, all the things I’ve got, all the work - I’ve got a couple of works around here - everything’s got the road spirit sort of thing in them. I’ve got a couple round here, those spirit sort of ones. This one’s weird, very weird, but it’s still the same thing, it’s the road again. As soon as you get on the road, anything can happen to you, anything can happen. There’s no water, there’s water there but it’s hard to find. And when you walk along, you get frightened. It’s very frightening at night-time. ’Cause you’re all alone and your mind is just turning and turning and turning, and as it keeps turning you are thinking of all these things, ‘What’s going to happen to me? Am I going to get there next day or am I not going to get there? Or…’ And so what I do is I paint it. I paint it, that sort of thing - it doesn’t happen to me, but I’m still stuck alongside the road.

*Does who you are have anything to do with what you paint? A man, Koorie, married man, father, living in Mildura, the climate, the time and so on. Does that have anything to do with it, the fact that you are a man, a father...*

A father with three kids, that’s got nothing to do with nothing.

*Your circumstances?*
No.

*Your place of residence - where you live?*
No

*The climate?*
No.

*The time?*
My time - I eat when I want to eat; I paint in my own time; I do my own thing in my own time. I come home and get a couple of beers, I’ll sit out in the shed and I just drift off with my own things. I paint when I want to paint. I can’t push myself - I don’t want to push myself to paint, because I’ll lose it, I’ll lose the way I paint. I can’t paint everyday, I can’t draw everyday, I’ve got to have a rest, and get back when I want to drift back into it again.

*You’re an Aborigine; what do you call yourself?*
I’m a Barkindji, through my Mum’s side. That means - Barkindji - the River Tribe. The Murray River.

We’re always running along the river, we love the river, laying down the river bank, every fortnight, every week. I just love it, I love it, I love it - it’s good. We used to live on the river-bank, at Dareton, at Namatjira Way, behind the Golf Club, we used to live
there for years, used to live there for years. And, going back toward Wentworth, we used to live down there too, on the river bank, when I was a kid. Yeah. I am a River Man.

That’s probably why you like the waves.
Yeah. When I was a little fellow, I used to sit there, yabbying, and see the old paddle steamer come past, see all the waves that’s getting you, up against the water, you know what I mean, and you’d lose all your yabbies, and lines - you’d lose your little lines. That’s why I like the river, cause you just sit there, waves here, possums there. We used to eat a lot of possum, yeah, it’s good, I love it. We’d chuck em in a hole full, sit there and wait - it tastes nice, like chicken. I reckon it tastes like chicken.

Is the fact that you live here important to your art?
Yeah. I’ve lived all my life here. I’ve travelled around but I always ... I’ve been away most of my life, been away travelling around, but I’ve always headed back home. I’ve settled down, now I just want to paint off and on, off and on. ’Cause I’m back home.

What’s special about Mildura?
All my kids going to the school I went to, they’re all going to the school I went to. Plus, my kids are here with me now, we’re all together. I just like the place. I’ve had good times, I had bad times, and that is why I stay here, stay right here. It’s a warm place, a hot place, cold place. Also we’ve got a lot of work here, fruit - mainly all fruit, that’s what I like about it.

And what about Mildura’s river?
The river is nice and big, it’s a lovely big river, it’s a nice river. And it’s clean.

And what about the countryside?
The countryside is lovely and green. You’ve got plenty of fruit around, plenty of oranges, plenty of grapes, plenty watermelon. It’s a real fruity sort of place.

And what about the people?
Nice people around here, pretty close. I mean, it’s not a big town but it’s big enough; you know a lot of people. When you get to know them - you know all the people around the town - not much to be known. And you never get lost in the town, no you can’t. No, no. It’s good, a good place, yeah.

Do you care about what sort of materials you use, and style, do you think about that?
No. I paint on boards, and then what I do is I take photos of them. Because I usually give away them away; I usually don’t sell them, I give them away. I gave a lot of paintings away.

I paint on any sort of boards, cardboard. But canvas, I like painting on canvas, yeah! I like painting on anything. But I really can’t afford the canvas, that’s why I paint on boards. I like painting with water-based paints, because you can use them with water. I just use hands, handprints, brushes, back of the brushes, matchsticks, leaves, just everything, everything I can put my hand on. I use what’s there.

What sort of style do you use?
I’m very loose. I’ve got a very loose style. I come in, splatter the paint, very quick, then I smooth it with my hand, back to fast, slow style afterwards. Yes, so I’ve got two different styles - slow and fast. I like to use my hands, fast and slow, but also I like to bring the brush in afterwards when I’ve finished using my hands. I like to use the back of the brush, scratch it in, scratch it with the back of the brush, then use a fine brush. So I use the hand, the back of the brush, the fine brush, and scratches.

Why do you use a fine brush afterwards?
Because I can get in where I put my pictures. I like to do my background with my hand, and when I scratch it in, I’m scratching the picture into the canvas, into where the white is, and with a brush I’ll paint round to bring my work out, to stand my work out more. That’s how I like it.

What is the worst word that anyone could call your art?
If somebody said to me that my work is Shit! Somebody said, ‘That’s alright!’; some said, ‘That’s good’, but also somebody reckoned I’ve got good work, totally different, but it’s good - seeing that when I first started off it was rubbish and I just chucked the paint off. But after awhile it was quite good - they liked my work afterwards. But even though somebody reckoned I work too much with colours - that’s why I say my work is shit - but I don’t mind it, what people say about my work, I don’t mind it. You get some blackfellows say your work would be shit, your work would be good, your work would be bad. But some of them say it’s alright - they all say it’s all right: ‘That’s not too bad, that’s alright’. But you get someone say it’s shit, or bad, doesn’t mean it’s not good when they say that. That’s why I say it’s ‘shit’, but I reckon it’s good, myself.

What sort of people comment on your work?
Well, I get some people from TAFE - some of them say it’s all right, some of the teachers there, they reckon it’s all right, and you get some students, they reckon it’s good. But in my book, I reckon that my work is ... it’s good! I love my own work. I don’t care what anyone says, I like my own work.

And where are you going to go in the future - with you work?
Well, I might be still in my shed. I’ll be still stuck in my shed.

Wind-up Interview with Peter Peterson, May 28, 1997

Have you got any comments on the business of exhibiting? Do you want to make any comments about the exhibition?
The exhibition: it was good, I enjoyed it. And I enjoyed the other artists’ work up with my work. I enjoyed that. And I enjoyed walking around with the artists, with them, and looking at my work and their work, and that other work, the three of them. It was good: just looking at their work and my work, to see the difference. You could see the difference. Yeah. I enjoyed it.

What about all the getting ready for the exhibition?
You get a funny feeling in your guts. You sort of get it running around, and running around too when you go around to the exhibition with the other artists and their work and your work. That’s good, that’s good. It’s like, you’re reading other people’s works and
instead of talking to them, you’re looking at the pictures. The pictures tell you. If you can read the pictures, you’re seeing all their work, the feeling of it. With the other artists, it you’re looking at their work, you can see how they’re feeling, how they figured things out, do you know what I mean? That’s what I liked about it, yeah.

Do you want to talk about any of the other artists in particular? André?
André’s. I like his work, huge work but it’s lovely.

How did you read that?
By the bush way - bush walks, you can see he’s bushwalking, do you know what I mean? That’s very nice, I like André.

And what about Joyce?
The one who did the little ones? Yeah, her work’s good. I love her work; she’s more a soft, flower sort of person. She’s more attached to flowers.

So what do you read into her work?
She’s a soft-hearted sort of person. She really about emotions, flowers. The work - how can I put it? - I know what I want to say, but I can’t bring it out - she’s special. She’s special with flowers and things. That’s her main thing, she just loves drawing plants and flowers. She’s just really got it so soft and tender, you look, you can see it move, it all comes alive. Then when you look at it, and you draw it, and you put that expression on a piece of paper and paint it, that’s the way you see it, do you know what I mean. That’s how I read people’s works.

How about Yvonne’s?
Yvonne? Her work is nice. It’s very ... (gestures straight up and down and across) with trees. It’s more flat, the way she sees things, she sees it in her way. She just drifts off and she paints it there, and that’s how she’d see it. She thinks about trees and things, how she wants to do her trees and paint her trees. That’s her ways. That’s her way of painting.

And Steve Hederics?
Steve? His bird one, that is good. I love his bird one. Guess; you’ve got to guess where the birds are. Steve works very quick, he’s a very quick worker. He’s good, he’s very good. He’s very emotional about his work, his little things and big things. He works from big and small. He’s a nice artist, he’s a good artist. His work is very colourful, not too much colourful, but he loves using water, I see a lot of water in his pictures. So he likes painting water, not much oil. He loves painting with water paints, because it’s more easy, quick. He’s a quick painter. A soft sort of man with his work. Soft with his little paintbrushes. When we talked to him, he’d say, ‘This is what you do,’ and he’d get a paintbrush, dig it in, rub it on a piece of paper, ‘Do something small!’ But not too much colour. He’d always say, ‘Not too much colour!’ (laughter) So I done a lot of colour to see what he said about it, and he liked it. He never said I used too much colour. I broke it down. I broke it down with a lot of blue, but there was a lot of colours. Yeah.

What do you want to say about your own?
Well, I paint the way I see things, do you know what I mean? When I see things, I just put them on a piece of board and just paint them. Like with the kangaroo. I put one, but I put another one inside it to make it two, because when you see one kangaroo laying on the side of the road somewhere, you always see another one in front of you, jumping away in front of you - heaps of them. Another work - what am I up to now? I like my work, I do - what I think about, what I see, I just put on a bit of canvas and let everyone else see it. A lot of people read it, too. That’s what I like about a lot of people, if they are artists, they can read it. I’ve come across a lot of people like that. I’ve come across a lot that didn’t, yeah. It comes out good, I like it. I just express my work out, and show what I’ve seen to people, what I feel of it, with my paints.

What did you think about the Arts Centre as a place to show your work?
It was good, it was really good. You’ve got a lot of space, you’ve got people coming from all over the place looking at it, coming looking around the gallery. The people that work there are very nice. Very nice to me. Every time I get the chance I go up there, I get in for free. I can go in anytime, go and have a look around the gallery; I enjoy that. They enjoy me coming around more often, and walking around. And the space! I love the space they’ve got up there. It would be good for a gallery. The bottom part would be good for a studio. You could party: dancing, and a little beer, whatever. It’s nice there.

Have you got some new ideas about your art after showing your work in this exhibition?
I don’t want to change it too much, but I want to change some of it. I want to change a bit of it. Because there’s more that I haven’t put on a piece of a canvas yet. There’s more, I’ve got more ideas yet. I’ve got a sketchbook around here. Everything I think about I’ve got to put a picture on it, I want to draw some pictures on it. Then when I do a painting, I can look at my book, I can look at my sketches and paint it on the canvas. But I lost it. I lost it, it’s around here somewhere, it’s not far, it’s here, it’s got a lot of pictures on it. I want to do one of an old house that’s up here. I was there back in the seventies, when I was a little fellow. When the police and the welfare took me away, they took me to this house. I want to paint all that there. I want to put in all stories. I want to paint the whole lot of it. And I’m going to put it on a big canvas, put hands, fence, kids, a lot of - mainly all - womans in there working, old and young. A lot of kids was coming and I want to do roads going out, roads going everywhere. Yeah, so I want to do a big one, and I want to put it in a gallery somewhere for everyone to see. Sort of show the life, and the roads. I started up here first, then I drifted here, and I drifted there, and all the places ... I’m going to do a big one of myself. Yeah, a nice one. It’s going to be mainly black and white. I’m going to try a black and white one. So I want to work on that one, a large one. So that should come in a couple of months time. I have to go to Ivan and get him to make me some works up, so if he listens to me, he’ll make me some big frames up. I’ll go and give him a hand. One about two sizes up from this, that’s a nice size. Big like André’s. I love his frames, I love his frames! Nice big frames. Be good to have big ones like them ones. Put in all the detail in one. You could sit there for about a quarter of an hour, and you’ve got to read it. That’s what I want to do, a picture that’d be ... I want someone to sit there and after five minutes or half-an-hour, they read the whole lot. That’d be a good thing. Before they get a piece of paper and start to read it they’ve got to read it first. Eyes contacting with the work That’s what I want to do. I don’t want people asking questions about my painting, mainly just eyes contact. If they can read it they’ll be in the world I’m going through, do you know what I mean?.
Do you have a question for me to answer, or one for me to ask you? Is there anything you haven’t talked about, that you’d like to talk about?
I still want to give more out. There’s something’s been holding me from my work. I still want to express my feeling out in my painting, let it all go out, let it all drift off.

My last question is, What will happen now with your art?
Well, I’ll sell some, but I want to keep a lot of it. If I don’t keep the lot of it, I’ll sell it. I’ve got a lot of photos of my work, so what I want to do now is, I want to store them more, try and keep them altogether, put them all in one room, stack them up, put them all up somewhere. And when somebody wants an exhibition or an opening, they won’t be taking seven or eight, they’ll be taking fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, or twenty, even twenty. I want to also get a shop for myself, a gallery for myself, just to put the whole lot in it. Yep. That’s what I want. I want an exhibition in one big giant room, I want to fill the room up with the whole lot of them. And I want to invite a lot of people if I can.

In Mildura?
Yep, mainly in Mildura. Yeah, I want to do a lot of work in Mildura, mainly on the Victoria side. On the New Side Wales side they’ve all got their own artists.

You’ll be the Barkindji artist.
‘Barkindji’, ‘River’. I love the river. My Mum’s a full-blood on the Barkindji side, but to myself, I’m just a Riverman, I’m just a Riverperson. When I was a kid, that’s all I wanted, just the river. River, river, walking, river. The only way I call myself Barkindji is round here. I may just as well call myself ‘I Love The River,’ its the same thing. ‘The River Man’, it’s ‘The River Dreaming’, ‘River Spirit’, whatever.

Is there anything you’d like to say?
I’m having fun! I enjoyed it! A lot of people came up and asked me about my work; heaps of people. I had people from Sydney, they came down, and they wanted to go and look at all my work. So they all went down there and went in and had a look at my work, and they all enjoyed it. They all enjoyed my work. ‘Very different,’ they reckoned. ‘Entirely different to other Koories’.

Is that good?
Yes, that is good, because I want to be different. I just keep my own style. I can do a lot of styles; I can do lines, but I don’t want to do lines. I enjoy it, the way I do it now. I’ve still got a lot of pictures inside my brain, I mean in my head. I want to do that, but I’ve run out of board and canvas, I’ve run out of paint, I’ve run out of brushes. I lent some people my brushes, and never got my brushes back, so I’ve got about two, three brushes, and I’m just painting with them.
Appendix 6: Interviews with André Schmidt

Interview with André Schmidt, November 14, 1996

Where do you paint?
I paint anywhere, really. It doesn’t matter. As far as the physical process of putting marks on whatever, it doesn’t really matter. Some places are just more convenient, aren’t they? You’ve got your tools set up and that’s where you paint. It doesn’t really matter.

And when do you paint?
I paint generally during the daylight hours, but that’s not a necessity. That’s painting of course. That’s where you’re looking for subtle nuances of colour. But it’s not essential, of course, to paint during the day - I should paint at night. It’s all an exploration using colour and using paint. But then there’s drawing as well, and all the other aspects of art as well, which can be done at any time during the day.

What are those aspects?
It’s all just observation and gaining knowledge about painting, from fairly technical, in technical books - that’s not the physical process of painting, it just adds to it in the end - and just simply looking at pictures, looking at prints of artists. It all goes together into the build-up of knowledge, conscious or subconscious.

Are there any particular habits that you’ve got in artmaking?
Yes, just the habit of entering the studio each day at a particular time, and working away, and finishing when the light gets a bit dim. That’s one habit. There’s probably numerous habits - when you think about it there’s probably more than numerous habits. To some extent just the physical process of painting is a habit, even though you might not like to admit it too much, mixing paint and the way you dab the paint on. I wrote in my diary once that there are so many possibilities in the actual physical process of painting, mixing paint, the way you hold your brush, whether you’re right or left-handed, the distance you stand from the painting, the size of the brush, the thickness of the paint. There are so many varieties in the way you can apply the paint, a dab, a slash, the paint smooth on a smooth surface, all that variety. You probably tend in some ways to be reasonably habitual in the process of painting.

You’ve got a couple of parts in your art-making life, the first part is when you were still working and then the second part is when you are retired. Am I right in saying that?
For sure. Of course the time is the big difference there - although it doesn’t really make that much difference. It’s just that when I was working full time, it was perhaps just a little bit frustrating, thinking, ‘I could be painting now. I could be doing something productive with the artwork.’ But in the end, my spare time was taken up the same percentage with painting and exploring art as what I spend now. It’s just that I’ve got more spare time, you see, so I spend more time doing it.
What do you call spare time?
Well ... all the time. Every minute. I can paint all day. It doesn’t really worry me. It can be frustrating or it can be fairly easy, but it’s just a matter of continuing. If something’s not going well, you continue on till you’ve achieved what you wanted to achieve.

So you reckon that every minute that you can, you spend painting?
Yes. I suppose that might apply to anything I might do, much to the annoyance of the people around me. If I’m involved with painting, that’s all that I do. I shut everything out. It’s very hard to get my mind off that and think of something else. Until you reach a point where something is finished. And then you either just have a little bit of a rest or perhaps not concentrate quite as heavily on a subject, or get straight into something new. But generally with painting it’s a matter of having things running together, so you’ve got one of them going fairly intensely, and while you’re working on that, there’s another thing started. So you’ve got things overlapping all the time and it’s just a continuing process. So I don’t really relax from the painting process. I think that’s good.

It’s only something outside that stops you?
Yes. You’ve always got things you’ve got to do, I suppose. With painting, it’s not difficult, that’s the thing. It’s not physically hard to keep thinking about it, to keep painting. You know, it’s just a matter of standing there, and holding your arm up, and spreading a light brush around. And it’s the same with reading and studying. There’s not much physically involved, it’s only mental involvement. Other people might see that involvement in a different way to myself. My involvement with painting is to try and get the painting to look, just simply, so that I’m happy with it, so that it’s pleasing to my eye. I think that’s what any artist does in the end. It doesn’t matter what the result is, as long as it’s pleasing to the artist. That’s what counts.

Not tiring other than that?
It can be a little frustrating, at times, but that’s not really tiring, is it? That can make you feel weary, but it can change just like that, so it’s hardly physically tiring. If you have a problem and then you all of a sudden find the answer - you might be feeling pretty flat and feel like you want to have a sleep - but as soon as you find something that changes your direction from not so good to really good, well then you lift up your spirits and labour on pretty well.

Have you got something in mind - can you think of an example?
It’s like with any painting, you do have problems. Some paintings will give you more problems than others.

What sort of problems do you mean?
Well, just composition or not being able to work out if I’ve got too much weight on this side, or whether it’s balanced, whether the colours work together well. I suppose that’s telling you something about what I look for in a painting. The solution is perhaps reading something. Close observation of what’s happening in nature, perhaps. Just trying something different maybe, with colours; to choose a different colour relationship. With the composition, that’s another thing that can be frustrating, because when you’re painting landscape especially, you often tend to be a bit literal for a start. Nature can be very absorbing, and it can hold you to what’s there in front of you because it looks good.
It mightn’t be perfect, but you’ve got to find that out after a little while. When you’re working on a painting, you’ve got to work that out. I think, with me anyway, I perhaps get sucked in a little bit doing what’s in front of me, and I work away and work away happily, and all of a sudden, after a little while, I realise that it’s not quite how it should be. Then I’ve got to work out what to do.

*And what is the ‘should’?*

Well, the ‘should’ might just simply be as banal as being balanced. You know, I think I look for fairly traditional results, in some ways. I like a painting to have balance, not to be too heavy on one side, and not to have too many trees on this side and not enough on this side. I like to have a certain focal point, in some instances. I like to look at the painting and to recognise it as being something that was out the bush, even though you mightn’t be able to take it out there and put it alongside the landscape I was painting and say, ‘Yes these are twins, more or less’.

Of course you change too. As you progress through certain stages, your ideas on art, and on life - you change your thoughts on what you want to paint, what you want to achieve in your painting. But that’s just natural. You see things differently and you want to investigate them, perhaps in detail, or in some way.

*How do you think you’ve changed then - from seeing things realistically to seeing abstractly?*

The abstract view, or the simple view - I don’t know about abstract, but the simple view - simplicity is, again, just building block, basic shapes, basic colours. That can lead to abstraction. If someone can decide what abstract means - can you tell me what it means? Abstraction doesn’t exist, because as soon as something is made, it is real. It is itself, it’s a thing, it’s a physical item, like a cup or a glass. They might have been abstract once in someone’s mind, but as soon as it’s put into physical form, then it’s not abstract.

*You’re saying that the painting doesn’t refer to something else; it refers only to itself. It’s only itself?*

Yes, that’s right ... This requires a bit more thought.

*How did you learn your skills?*

Just by picking up my brush, and doing it. And by reading I suppose. Nothing very fantastic. You get a certain amount of information from other people, one way or another. Books mainly. There’s so much written these days, about methods and materials, methods of painting, so you can’t really not get influenced, not get information from other people. But when it comes down to tin-tacks, when it comes down to reality, the only way you really learn about materials and methods, and technique and all that, is by doing it yourself, by using the materials. It’s physical. You’ve got to actually handle the material. I had a bit of schooling, just high school. Everyone does art at high school and primary school. And we did that course at tech school that you did. With Frank O’Bryan, Ray Rumbold, Geoff Brown.

*Were you always good at art?*

I don’t know if I was always good at it. I always enjoyed it. People probably said I was reasonably good. Some people liked what I did when I was a kid; they like the drawings
I did. But I enjoyed doing it. I suppose that’s the answer to it: as a means of expression. I don’t know why I do it.

*Do you remember always drawing?*

Yeah. I suppose it was a means of putting images in front of myself. I suppose some people might say I like drawing because I was good at it and people said I was good at it, so that pushed me along mentally to do it. Because it was an attention thing. If I did good work, people would say, ‘Yeah, that’s good.’ I’m not sure if that’s the case in my instance. I haven’t really thought about that much. I haven’t thought why a person paints now, as an adult, and if it’s for the praise or for notice.

*Who do you have in mind as looking at the finished work?*

I don’t have anyone in mind. Certainly there’s no one specific. There are no fairies, or gnomes, or a figure up in the corner of the studio who is always there looking down and passing comment. Perhaps it’s myself. Yep. I’m painting for myself.

*How do you choose your subject matter?*

It just appears. There’s nothing really special about that. You can go looking for something - very rarely find it - and in the process of looking for that, you find something else. And that’s what you paint. If you do look for something, often it’s something that you’ve painted before, and you know that it’s going to work out. That’s taking the easy way out, painting something you’ve done before, or something similar. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s all part of the painting process. Probably the reason I would do that is because I’m having trouble finding something to paint. Something is not coming forward. And so I will drive to a place or go somewhere where I know there’s good subject matter - because I’ve probably painted the same thing half-a-dozen times already - and paint that, just so that I can be involved in the painting process. Which is good. That’s what an artist enjoys, I think. As much as anything, it’s the painting process. And even though you’re painting the same scene you might have painted half-a-dozen times before, the result is going to be different anyway, because so many things have happened between then and now, between all the other times you’ve painted it and now. You’ve changed so much, or changed so suddenly, or whatever, it doesn’t matter, you’re going to be different. That’s one way of finding your subject. And the other way is to just stumble upon it, and to enjoy that part of the painting process, painting something new.

*What rules are you conscious of when you are working? Aesthetics?*

Yes, I think that just comes down to what sort of person you are. You are in some ways tied to following certain patterns, following certain rules that are part of your nature. I think that some people are stuck to rules more than others, of course. Some people can’t escape from their rules - I might be a little bit like that. If you’re going to be bored by what you’re doing, obviously you’re going to try something different, but if you’re not bored, and can find something mundane, well you’re quite happy to go along, continue following those rules. Also there are so many ways you can interpret what whirls around you, like visual subject matter - there are simply so many different visual images around you - that the rules can stay the same forever and ever. You can keep using different images, different compositions or whatever you like to call it, and using the same rules. I suppose a person could get bored, and want to change the rules. Maybe, maybe not. It would have to be something pretty drastic to cause a person to change the rules. But that
depends on, as I said before, the type of person you are - some people just have to keep looking for new things, and hence have new rules, I suppose.

*What sort of rules do you have in mind when you are talking about that?*
Rules of balance. Balance is probably be a big rule - is that a rule, balance? - how to balance what you do. Balance of colour, balance of weight, balance of shape, balance of texture. All those different things. It’s how you can have a two dimensional surface of shapes, and colours and things.

*Why do you think that is personal rather than, say, universal.?*
Some people don’t want balance, I’m sure. They want something unbalanced. That’s what I think, anyway, perhaps I’m wrong. If there’s such a thing as unbalance, someone out there is sure to want to have it.

*Don’t you think most people would crave it?*
Balance? Probably. Probably more people would want balance, and serenity, peace, that sort of thing, than the other. They would want to be not visually challenged - because I suppose that’s what it is, balance: it’s not being challenged.

*Who is doing the challenging?*
Well, the artist is being challenged, and he is creating the balance, so that the other people that look at the painting would be quite happy that they would just be able to look at it and feel happy.

*As you are in the first instance?*
Well in the end. Yeah, not so much in the first instance, or in any instance up to when it’s finished. But you’ve never really finished of course, in painting. To a certain extent, you sneak up on that: ninety percent, then ninety-five percent, then ninety-eight percent balance. Then you might say, ‘Well I’m not going to go any further. I’ll try something new, and hopefully get to the hundred percent a bit quicker. Put this one aside for awhile, and work on it by point-one percents until it gets to the hundred percent.’ Which it never will. You never create the perfect painting. I’m sure most artists would say that. A lot of people will tell you that it’s perfect, but that doesn’t mean a thing if you think it is. Because it’s my painting, I like to get it perfect - for myself.

*Are you conscious of any rules regarding expertise?*
I think there is only one rule associated with expertise, and that is that you’ve got to try and get better at it. The only rule that applies is that you’ve - hopefully - got to become more of an expert. Though sometimes I think it might be good to go backwards.

*It might be, too. Maybe we should have some workshops: How To Go Backwards.*
That’s simplifying life, isn’t it, simplifying life. Whether simplification goes with expertise, I’m not sure.

*Whether it’s the opposite to it?*
Complication is the opposite of simplification isn’t it?

*Are there any rules about format?*
When you say format, you mean the shape of the painting or whatever, do you? It certainly is something that can be part of your rule, or just part of your habit perhaps. Or just what you can buy at the supermarket to paint on - a three-by-four bit of masonite. You look at any well-known artist, an Australian artist generally, in any of the art books and they all, just about, painted on three-by-four bits of masonite. There are so many format sizes there: three-foot-by-four-foot, three-foot-by-four-foot, because that’s the size of the masonite that you buy from McEwans. You just buy a bit of masonite from McEwans, gesso it over or undercoat it, and start your painting. You don’t have to cut it or anything. It’s very easy. And the stretchers are made twelve-twenty by nine-ten or whatever.

_Do you buy them? I just make mine._
Yeah, I buy them. I just tried to look a bit more professional there for a little while. And they perhaps are better. They don’t warp and twist, or they shouldn’t.

_and they’re all the same, so you can make frames to fit one and then use them for the rest. It’s convenient._
Yes. It is exactly that. Practicality.

_are there any rules about subject?_
I suppose there’s subjects that are difficult, for various reasons, to paint. There’s some subjects that are traditional, subjects that have been painted forever. They are easy to look at. And there’s no taboo associated with them. Other subjects are more difficult - more difficult to paint simply because you might be inhibited in some way in the way you think about them yourself - so you just don’t want to do them. That’s perhaps a little bit weak, but that’s probably the way a lot of us think. We don’t paint things because we wonder what other people might think. Taboo is only in your own mind, often, but then there’s taboos associated with the society. Sexual type scenes, that sort of thing. You could think of anything you like really. You could think of so many different things that you wouldn’t paint just because they are simply disgusting. Then again, a lot of people wouldn’t paint landscapes, because they think they are pretty ordinary subject matter.

_is there anything you wouldn’t paint?_
There’s probably a lot of things I wouldn’t paint. I can’t think of them for the moment.

_categories, I mean._
When you put it like that, of course there’s things you wouldn’t paint, because to you they wouldn’t appeal. To you they wouldn’t make a painting. You couldn’t imagine them being the subject of a painting.

_perspective - any rules about it that you are aware of when working?_
Perspectives is like maths, isn’t it, it is a pretty cut-and dried thing. And if you are hoping to achieve a realistic type result - I don’t like using that word ‘realistic’ - you’ve got to follow the laws of perspective to some extent.

_what would you use instead of ‘realistic’?_
Well, natural, I suppose. That’s probably closer. You have to use perspective. You’ve seen it yourself, the paintings of the Murray River, where you are looking with normal
viewing point at, say, the far bank of the river or at a tree in front of you, but you’re looking at an aerial view of the river - two perspectives at once, which just doesn’t work. That might be right: the person that painted it might have thought, ‘Well this is what I want. I want to have those two perspectives.’ But if they were trying to achieve something a bit more realistic - in inverted commas - then they haven’t achieved what they were trying to achieve.

*Atmospheric perspective?*
All of it you have to work at, it’s not just a matter of doing it. Linear perspective - atmospheric perspective is the same thing, although it’s not as cut-and-dried. There’s more subjectivity there than in linear perspective.

*Probably a bit different in Australia than you learn about in books; you know, our horizons are crystal clear.*
Yeah. If you are painting the Australian landscape and that’s your intention, you’ve got to follow the Australian landscape rules, to some extent.

*How do you find that out?*
You find that by going out in the Australian landscape and having a look. It is easy quite often for artists to think they are painting the Australian landscape, but not really to be painting it at all. Whether it is intentional or not, I don’t know because I haven’t asked the artists, but often, I’m sure, they’re painting someone else’s painting that they’ve seen, and that they like. So it’s more-or-less copying the effects that they’ve seen in other paintings, and feeling in themselves that they’ve achieved an Australian landscape. I might be wrong, but that’s an impression that I get, that they are not looking quite well enough at what’s in front of them but thinking more about what they’ve seen other artists do. And often it’s a bit of a problem. When you look at a painting that’s a hundred years old or two hundred years old - what’s happened to it in that period of time as far as the paint goes, and the colours and lots of things - and you try to paint a painting that looks like that, try to get your paint so that the surface looks like a Streeton, or a Roberts. What it gets down to is the fact that when they painted their painting, I’m sure they looked quite a bit different to how they look now.

*Also you see things differently, don’t you, because those paintings you’ve been looking at make you see it differently.*
We can’t see the painting as they painted it on the day, which was a hundred years ago or a hundred and fifty years ago.

*But still those paintings are now in our head, and they had paintings in their head.*
Yeah, although some people have a more original view of what they are doing. Hopefully the ones that survived, for whatever reason, maybe not all of them unfortunately, good paintings, they had something special going for them. Even though they might have changed a little bit over time, over the ages, they came from a different spot than some of the other paintings that were being produced at the same time. And I think that’s something often that you can recognise, hopefully you can recognise, in other artists, some special qualities which put them above others. It’s got nothing to do with subject matter, it’s just something - well you mightn’t be able to see, but it’s nice to think you can see - something special in an artist’s work that is original, and honest. Original, I
like the word, original. I like it because that’s what it’s all about, I think: originality. It’s one of the most important things. Originality, with honesty. Which combine together pretty well to make something special. Who wants to be like anyone else? Even though it’s fantastic, you don’t really want to be like anyone else, do you? You want to be original. You might be able to paint exactly like the greatest artist in the world, what’s the point if you’re producing someone else’s paintings? So originality and honesty - even if you’re just honest, that’s a big thing. It doesn’t matter what you make, it’s your intentions of being completely honest ...

*Are there rules about colour?*
Well, yeah, if you try to create something that looks like ... it’s all pretty ordinary stuff. I suppose colour is not that important. Colour doesn’t mean much really. It’s one of the most important parts of painting, but you can’t explain it. Often you are limited to what you start with on your palette. You can do a lot with one colour, or you can do a masterpiece with one colour and white. It makes it a bit more interesting, though, with a variety of colours. I think it just comes down to the artist and what he is looking for in the finished painting. If you are not able to mix a colour that you want in the painting, that you are looking for in the painting, you just have to search out basic colours, search out a tube that will do the job, and use that.

*And if you can’t find it, does it matter?*
Oh well, to some people it does.

*To you?*
No, I have difficulty enough working out what to do with all these colours that I do use. If I was having a lot of trouble getting a certain colour that I wanted, I might go and look for it - which I have done - but it’s not a terribly subtle thing.

Colour is perhaps part of the fun bit of painting. Because you can do a lot of exciting things with colour. It doesn’t necessarily have to end up being realistic and true to nature as long as, in the finished painting, it follows that rule that you’ve set up of it being pretty to look at.

*Does who you are have anything to do with what you paint. Being male?*
Yeah, of course it does. It does have a big effect - like if you have long legs you can cross the river or you can jump over the ditch to get to the other side. And you can paint from the other side of the ditch rather that stay on this side. Physically, who you are, yeah. Physically if you’ve got bad eyesight, well you are going to paint something different.

That’s physically - what about all these other things, like the fact that you are a husband and a father, and you have a particular job, and you are a Mildura person, where you live, the climate and the time. Everything that makes André. Does it matter?
Only perhaps in the time you have to spend, and want to spend with the rest of your family. That takes time from painting. But I think it could make you think differently about what you’re painting at times, if you look at new ideas, or if you want to follow a certain theme that might be different from, say, landscape. Often you see landscape
artists paint landscapes with their family in the landscape, either as a big part of the painting or as a minor part.

Have you done that?
No I haven’t, it’s been done so many times, anyway. That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t do it or shouldn’t do it. It just hasn’t been part of what I want to do. More than likely, if an artist wants to put a figure in a landscape, he’ll probably use one of the family if they’re at home: ‘Paint a landscape - I’ll grab one of the kids.’

Your status as a Mildura artist, does that have anything to do with what you paint?
I suppose if you get a certain reputation, it does tell you something about a person if you paint a subject because you have a reputation for painting it fairly well. It does say something, but it’s not the complete reason why you paint something. But it’s probably there at the back of your mind - why you might continue to do it. And often it may be a matter of luck, or fortune, or how things pan out in your life right from the start. Why did I start painting Mallee, right at the beginning? Just because everyone was painting river scenes, and I didn’t want to paint river scenes, I was sick of looking at river scenes. So I painted the Mallee. That was the reason initially.

Is who you are important - is there anything else there you want to say?
To know who you are could be important if you’re different. I’m not sure about that. I suppose if I was an Aboriginal, I would maybe have strong thoughts about that. I haven’t thought about myself as who I am and how that relates to what I do in art. I haven’t got an answer. Tradition, that sort of thing. Or causes. No, I don’t think my paintings have much great story-telling in them. They might end up having something to say to other people, but I don’t want to be pretentious and say that I as a person, am putting something into them, to tell a story.

And there’s no message or anything?
No, not that’s coming from me. They perhaps might only be saying, ‘Well this fellow is trying to do this, is trying to paint a tree.

Is where you are an important issue?
Perhaps not. If you lived somewhere else, you’d do something different, paint a different visual image.

Do you think that there is something happening in Mildura, is there any sort of movement or centre of art?
I think there’s always going to be people coming and going and trying to get things started, like art groups, and have thoughts of painting in a community of painters. I feel it’s just chance. There might be a certain number of artists in a town at some time, and they get together and have a bit of a chinwag and then paint. And then a few years down the track there mightn’t be any artists, because people don’t want to paint, and there’s no artists in the town. I don’t know if the town particularly makes artists - or if the atmosphere, or the country have an effect on people who want to do that sort of thing. If there’s a few of them there, they’ll seek each other out. Possibly. Not always. A lot of artists would rather be by themselves and work away quietly. Even though I’d like to
mix a little bit more, I’m selfish in some ways and would rather spend the time doing my own thing.

*Regarding your choice of materials and techniques, do you see this as an issue, as being important to your values?*

I suppose some people are dedicated to certain ways of doing things, certain ideas, and they follow them pretty tightly. As far as I’m concerned, I think that I’m perhaps a little bit traditional. And even though I use acrylic paints, there’s a certain amount of tradition in my work. Certain things I use for practical reasons. But the traditional oil paint, though, gives me a feeling of being involved with history a bit more, and when I use oil paints, that’s something I think of. I suppose that I’m a bit of a conservative and like to feel that my paintings might be tied in some way to the masters of the past. You know, all those paintings and self-portraits - I had in mind Rembrandt when I was painting them. The technique I used was nothing like what Rembrandt would have used, but I still had him in mind when I was painting the little self-portraits. I suppose it doesn’t matter that much what your materials are, it’s perhaps the thoughts that are in your mind.

*What is your technique?*

Put paint on canvas till you get what you want. My technique is pretty ordinary, really. It’s very trial and error - I think I’m getting a bit better. Technique is a funny thing. It’s often something you’ve got to come to terms with - with the result of your technique. I was never really happy with the texture of my paintings when I finished. After a while, things changed a little bit, and I became a bit happier with the result, with the physical appearance of it. That something you have in mind - when you first start painting, you’ve got ideas of how your paintings should look, both physically and aesthetically. But if they don’t, you think, ‘This is not right, I’ll have to try something else’. But as time goes on, it sort of grows on you and then you realise it’s perhaps not as bad as you first thought it was. You become a little more mature in some ways and realise that what you’re doing is not as bad as you thought it was.

*What’s the worst word you can imagine being applied to your art?*

The worst word - well it goes with the word - is dishonesty, a dishonest word. And also a careless word. If someone is plainly dishonest about giving their opinion of your painting or telling you about something to do with your painting, you might not know, but ... Or if someone is careless in a remark, doesn’t put a lot of thought into it. To me art has got to be looked at sincerely and honestly, and if you throw away lines when you’re talking about someone’s painting, it can be upsetting to you, or misleading. I take it too seriously for people to talk about painting like that. I hope I don’t do it. Artists do put a lot of thought into their paintings, and a lot of time. It’s not something that’s done casually.

**Wind-up Interview with André Schmidt, May 28 1997**

*Do you have any comments on the business of exhibiting?*

It’s probably important and it’s not important at the same time. It’s one of those things that’s not really directly connected to making paintings, but in some ways it is. It’s got some sort of psychological connection. It has got practical connections as well, seeing your paintings in different spots, different places, and with other paintings, as this
exhibition was. It allows you to look at them in a different environment, and often you can see things that you straightaway want to change in a painting, as I did. (laughter) I brought it home and did some more work on it. You can look at it from a different angle and look at it in a different scale, also different lighting, I think. I suppose you can’t avoid people talking to you about your paintings when you’re having an exhibition and when there’s a lot of other people around - and I hope that not only the people that like paintings, and are nice as far as comments go, I hope they are not the only ones that spoke to me. I don’t know if anyone actually was terribly critical in a way that was saying they didn’t like it. I can’t recall it, perhaps I shut them out and didn’t listen to them very much. (laughter) That part of it, gives you, I suppose, if they say they like your paintings, and some people appreciate, can see what you’ve actually put into them, and perhaps they relate to it more than others … They all get different things out of the painting. What was the question again?

Comments about the business of exhibiting.
It really can be a chore at times, because you have to get them framed. You have to carry them around, carry them in, and you risk damaging the frames. That part of it can be a little bit difficult. An exhibition can be a deadline for making you do things that you might have been delaying, or avoiding. It gets you into gear. It sets a date in the back of your mind that you know you’ve got to have things ready by. That was good for me in this exhibition, because I was doing other things not directly related to painting and it got me back into painting for a little while, which I enjoyed.

I agree with you that it is kind of connected, and kind of not connected, not necessarily the point and yet it’s the whole point, in a way: it’s so people can see your work.
Yes, that’s right. It gets back to the reasons for painting, in many ways. I suppose that’s why I’ve got a gallery here. It is a dual thing. It gives me a place where I can put my paintings, hang them around and look at them when I want to and ponder over what needs to be done. Just take it slowly as is my way. (laughter) And then, well I have got it advertised, so I expect people are going to come out and have a look at the same time. And perhaps buy a painting, every now and then. And that’s part of it as well.

Have you got some new ideas about your art after showing your work in this exhibition?
Not really. I suppose I’ve got more ideas about other people’s art than about mine. Perhaps it’s just understanding what other people had in mind, other people in the exhibition, and that was good. I don’t know if it fed back into what I was doing with my painting. It could. It could have some direct or some actual connection, and cause change. Not that I can think of at the moment. It is always interesting - what you did with the interview, and that short bit of information about the artist from the interview with each artist, that was good to read. It is very interesting to see what the artist had in mind, and what their reasons for painting were. Sometimes you don’t even think why other people are painting; perhaps you assume they are painting for a certain reason. You might think they paint for similar reasons to why you paint, but often it is not the way it works out. They might have similar paintings to me, but their reasons for doing it might be completely different. Just reading about what the artist actually said, then it becomes a bit clearer. That’s interesting.
That’s the part I found interesting as well: the insights the people gave into their ideas of art.

Yes. I like to try and connect it to the person, the person you see when they are not painters. I think that is interesting to look at them and say, ‘Yes, they are a family man’. That came out of the interview, when you were talking about art. And then you look at them again, you look at the expression on their face, and the way they stand, and how they approach people, and the way they talk, and that’s all part of it as well. That’s interesting - to try and understand the person and the starting point is their art, and how they actually approach their art. It can be very enlightening in that respect.

I’m just writing all that at the moment, how those connections are there: you are not just an artist out of context.

Certainly, we are people before we are artists. We were developing the way we are going to be as an adult, we were developing that before we even thought of being artists. There is a point in your life when you decide that you want to be a bit more serious about painting, but all these other things have more importance in your life before that point, although there are parts of you that are developing alongside the eventual fact that you are going to be an artist. It all can come out in the way you paint. The way you’ve grown up. I think that Steve, he obviously is an artist who expresses himself in his paintings. He’s not so much expressing what he is seeing in front of him - that’s just part of a means of expressing himself. That’s the way I see it anyway. He is more interested in showing himself on the paper or on the canvas, or whatever, in his use of different materials. You know, you can see him, his physicality perhaps more than anything, in his paintings. Because often they are not really recognisable as what he might be painting, you have to look at it a bit harder. I suppose the things that you don’t readily see as, say, a fish, or a leaf, or a person, those are the parts of him that are on the paper. That is just his way of expressing himself, I think. I suppose we’re all that way. Peter was a bit that way. His, perhaps, is a bit more connected to him being an Aboriginal, and his culture.

Yes, that’s interesting, because it all comes somehow from the way you’ve been brought up and what you must have seen as a child, and I suppose what you’ve made a decision to hold onto. I imagine if he was brought up in a house or in a family as I was, he might be completely different. He wouldn’t paint Aboriginal symbols - he wouldn’t know about them. They come from him knowing about them. As far as Peter goes, it would seem unusual in some ways if he painted like I did. ... Is that what we had to say there?

(laughter)

You’ve just written half my essay for me. I’ll just use one of your quotes. As long they make sense. (laughter)

It is just exactly what I’ve got; it does make sense. Do you want to comment on the other people, or is it enough to say something about those two?

I didn’t get a chance to speak to your daughter, we just didn’t get around to doing it, but it would have been interesting to talk to her. Yeah. To me it seems that she would prefer to paint in a simpler way. She refined the objects down and that was enough for her. The interesting thing is, and the big difference is, that she was just completely relaxed with the result that she came up with, whereas I couldn’t do that. I would think, ‘Well, it looks good, having trees as just straight sticks out of the ground, more or less.’ But I couldn’t stop at that, whereas Yvonne could stop at that. That’s the thing, I suppose, it’s about
being comfortable with what you do, and not worrying about the fact that other people
mightn’t understand it exactly the way that you understand it. That probably says a lot
about the person: that they can be open to, they can accept a lot more people saying, ‘I
don’t understand this, why did you do that?’ and they are going to have to either say,
‘Well, that’s just how I wanted to do it.’ or explain it in some way that they might have
rationalised for themselves through their thinking about art. Whereas I perhaps don’t
leave anything to chance in some ways. Even though my paintings are not photographic,
there is not as much left to chance, not as many questions left for people to ask me. I
might be looking at it in the wrong way, but I think Yvonne would - people would look at
her paintings, and this might just be me! - people might look at her paintings and say,
‘I’m not sure exactly, it says it’s a painting of a lake up the bush,’ and they might say,
‘Mm. Maybe. Maybe I can see it that way, or maybe not’. Perhaps it might be easier for
people to see that it’s the lake that she’s described it as. It might be easier than people
looking at my painting and seeing that it’s a painting of trees by the river here in Mildura.
It just depends on who looks at it. It depends on the viewer.

You’ve commented on three people. Do you want to comment on any more? Joyce?
Joyce said, when she heard me speak to her, you know, just in the crowd, that she felt that
she was a bit like me. She couldn’t leave anything to chance so she had to be very
descriptive and study things carefully, and get it right, have the colours as close as she
could, and have it so that it actually looked like the plant. She has a botanical interest in
things, so that was probably the only way that it could work out for her. Even though she
did give away certain things that she did to achieve a composition, changing the natural
position of things in her paintings. I suppose all artists make that concession to nature in
their artistic licence. It might not be as obvious in Joyce, just in looking at the person. It
could be something to do with ... Steve, he is naturally talkative, and things come out,
and it’s the same with Peter, he’s like that, and I suppose that is reflected in their
paintings. Whereas Joyce, she spoke about her paintings in a more technical way. That
might be the difference. That was my impression, anyway. I might have to think about
that a bit more.

A practical way, concerned with organising it all, making it happen.
Yes, rather than being spontaneous and just letting it flow without as much thought.
Which I think is a terrific thing. I could not imagine that happening with Joyce’s
paintings, being spontaneous. It might be difficult. Do you think it would?

Yes, it is not her style, it is not her genre at all.
That’s right. You’d have to be very careful in making sure the line was pretty right, and
not letting the hand run away from the brain.

Whereas you might exaggerate colour just for the delight of the colour.
Yes, that’s right. I think it’s all a part of learning, it all goes together. When you can
paint without the brain getting too much involved, that’s when you’re getting pretty good.
All the information is stored away up there, it’s all in there, but it doesn’t require effort to
draw it out. So it just comes out naturally, and that’s when you can relate to the
landscape or to whatever you’re painting - you can relate just purely to that. You can
look at it and everything will flow from that straight to the physical part of you that wants
to show it how it wants to show it. When I first started painting, this is something that
I’ve found happened, that’s how I used to paint a lot, because I didn’t have a lot of time to paint, so I just went out bush wherever, and sat down and started, and got into it as quickly as I could. But I didn’t really know what I was doing, I just said, ‘Well, I’ve really got to work this quickly and get it done, because I won’t have time to come out tomorrow,’ and would complete it. So as a result of that, I didn’t store a lot of information in my brain, I didn’t store a lot away. I was just doing things and I picked up little bits every now and then, but it was more a rushed rather than a very spontaneous thing. But when I had more time to paint after I left work, I said, ‘Well, I’d better try and really concentrate on this, and consciously try and understand how things work, how the colours mix together, and how the subject that I’m painting is actually made, how it is constructed, and how light falls on it - a bit more of the science of what it’s all about. And that was good. My paintings changed a little bit. When you can combine those two things, that spontaneous approach with the thoughtful approach, that’s when I think you can really do some good work. That might be off the subject.

\textit{It’s never off the subject. I mean, there’s no subject, just a stimulus. The questions are a stimulus to get the spontaneity going.}

Yes. Some people have that naturally. I think they are born with some sort of knowledge about how they’ve got to paint, and they don’t seem to have to try. But they might have to go through stages, just like anyone. You look at Lloyd Rees. You’ve probably seen a lot of his paintings and drawings. He used to draw, that was his job, drawing for newspapers when he was younger, and doing advertising drawings; and he did these beautiful advertising drawings, and also drawings of landscapes, very detailed, and they had this magnificent feel about them that is difficult to explain. But I think the drawing as a job for newspapers must have been the training of his mind, his technical learning, his training his brain to see things, and his hand to do it. And then painting landscapes, and drawing landscapes as well, was just that spontaneous approach where all the information just came out without thinking. He wrote in his biography, or autobiography, that he often used to go out painting, and he’d set his canvas up in front of the landscape he was going to paint, he’d start, and two or three hours later he’d be painting away, and he’d realise he hadn’t looked at the landscape. He was just painting from his feelings and what he saw right from the start. That was enough for him.

\textit{Do you have a questions for me to answer, or for me to ask you? What that really means is, Is there anything I haven’t covered, left out?}

I can’t think of anything.

\textit{You’ve probably answered this but you may think of something else. What will happen now regarding your art?}

Well, I think I’ll continue on with what I’m doing, but I’ve just had these thoughts that I’d like to do paintings with people in them, figurative paintings that tell some sort of a story. That are not like I’ve been painting for some time, people-less landscapes, that have just got interesting shapes of inanimate objects throughout them. I’d like to do something that’s got life in a different way expressed in it. I’m not sure exactly how I will approach it, but I like the idea of some of the older paintings - I’m not sure that I can think of artists to describe what I have in mind - but not just figures, not just standing figures. I think that there are probably a few paintings that Edward Hopper did. I can always remember Ernst, is he the one that painted clown-type faces, masked faces in his
paintings, he had a lot of masks in his paintings - I think he is European, German or what? - I suppose I just might like to paint expressions. Of course, I’ve done that already, haven’t I? Have people in paintings, saying something with their faces. That’s probably something I’d like to do more in the future: have figures in the paintings. There’s a lot of things, really. Sculpture .... It’s all part of putting things together, and getting something that you like yourself.
Appendix 7: Interviews with Joyce Smith

Interview with Joyce Smith, October 31, 1996

Joyce, how long have you been in Mildura?
I was born in Mildura, 1920. I’ve lived here all my life. I travelled around Australia quite a lot after 1975. Too busy in my early married life to paint, it wasn’t until my husband retired from the dried-fruit block, we built a new home in Irymple. So I helped to build that, it took us two-and-a-half years.

Physically?
Yes, physically, my daughter too. The three of us built it - well, my husband is a builder as well, he is a builder and blocky. I didn’t know native plants at all until then, and then Sue, my daughter, and I started thinking about natives so we planted up our acre with native trees and shrubs, which is quite a large garden. By the time the house was built, the garden was established as well. So I can just look out my window and see all the native plants, which is really beautiful - quite a lot of work, pruning, watering, looking after. And then Sue decided to move to Melbourne to work at a native nursery. She worked there for a few years, and then, 1980, she came home and she said, ‘Mum I’m going to go to Western Australia, have a look around for two years.’ She’s been there ever since. She’s a horticulturist now.

After Sue went to Melbourne, I thought, ‘Now, what am I going to do with myself?’ and I started propagating plants. I had a small backyard nursery. I propagated natives and fuchsias. People came in, of course it grew and grew and grew, and I was so busy. Then my husband retired, and he said, ‘Well, we are going to travel. You’ll have to sell all those plants.’ I did, because I wanted to travel too. So after that I drew flowers. I bought some children’s paints, those little water-colours, and the wrong paper, and I started messing around with those for a while. I had so many fuchsias across the back, I could draw them through the window. Sue took me to a friend of hers who teaches at RMIT in Melbourne, and showed him what I was doing and he said, ‘Well, you have to get the right paint, and you have to get the right paper.’ From there I started to go to libraries. I studied books all the time - I studied every book I could find on painting. I started with a Banksia I had growing in the garden, and just took off. Then I forgot about the Banksia and went on with the landscapes. And then we went on a trip to Mintabie opal fields - we’ve been to just about every opal field in Australia, I think - and we were camping where there were wildflowers just growing near the caravan, which were beautiful. We intended going for a few days and ended up staying two weeks. I had only a few paints, and not the right brushes or anything, but that was the start of my wildflower painting, Mintabie in South Australia, which is nearly up to the Northern Territory border. Then I came back and I didn’t worry much about them for a while and then I thought, ‘Well, if I’m going to paint the Mallee natives, I must do the right thing and see if I can get a permit to collect my specimens.’ Which I did. I went and talked to Conservation and Environment - they were most helpful and issued me with a permit which I have to renew
each year. There’s lots of restrictions - I can’t go to National Parks, I must cut every bit and piece with secateurs, I can’t break them off - there’s lots of restrictions, but I don’t mind. So I started driving around in the scrub, walking around, getting stung with spinifex and looking out for snakes. I really enjoyed it. Every new plant I found was an absolute treasure - to add to my collection. That’s why I’m more interested in my sketchbook than I am in my actual painting of pictures.

Which particular flowers are you interested in?
The little ones. I’m not interested in the gums, or bottlebrushes, or any of those. I like the small, low-growing natives. They are all unique, they really are. When I’m painting, I don’t use a magnifying glass, I just use my reading glasses. I don’t want to be sold as a botanical painter, to be published in a book. That’s not my aim. I’m just painting for my pleasure - what I want to do. Each year, I can see with my work that I am improving.

I first started really thinking about the Mallee plants, and applied for the permit in the spring of 91.

So recently!
I’ve done all this since then. I don’t spend a lot time because we travel to Perth for about six weeks every year, and I don’t paint much in winter because it’s so cold. When I find my plants in the Spring, that’s my busiest time. I’ve got them in oblong icecream containers in the fridge, they’ll keep there for a little while, and some in the deep-freeze; some keep, some don’t. When I empty my deep-freeze to go away, I have to load them onto my neighbour’s deep-freeze, to keep them till I come back again, because some do keep quite well. That’s how it started, my painting, and I don’t think I’ll ever go back to landscapes again, because I enjoy what I’m doing - plus all the work in the garden - and I feel that I’ve got a very good result. It keeps me busy, and I think it stimulates my brain.

You were telling me you collected some plants at the roadside. This painting.
Yes, just along the road from where we live. That is just the aniseed weed, and that’s the chicory which you see growing everywhere, and that’s just a thistle. I just love the colour of it. It’s probably nearly dead that’s why it’s that colour, but I thought, ‘Well, it needs colour in the painting.’ And that’s another little one, Brachyscome, that was growing in the paddock next door, so I hopped the fence and I collected that - the little mauve one. And that’s just a bit of dried onion weed. That’s Calotis, a little burr daisy. I’m not very interested in that one at the moment.

Are you interested in these plants?
Now? No. I was at the time. They were just plants that everyone would see walking down the road, they were just growing everywhere, just common weeds, I suppose. These are flowers that are weeds anywhere else, in Europe, England, America. The chicory, the aniseed, that grows anywhere. They are not the Mallee wildflowers.

Why did you want to paint these?
Probably because they are readily available. To get my Mallee wildflowers I must grow them, or get them from the bush. No - I have a little area, in Koorlong, not far from home and I pop around there occasionally, but its very, very overgrown, and I have to watch where I walk, with snakes in that area.
Have you seen any?
I haven’t seen any, no, but there’s porcupine grass growing there. But then there’s quite a variety, and its only about three kilometres from home.

Did you love them at the time - I love dandelions, and things like that.
Yes, I think they’re great. There’s just a beauty in them. It’s just the same with trees. I know a lot of landscape painters who don’t like dead gumtrees. But I love them. I think they’re beautiful - a gnarled old gum that is dead, I see beauty in that. I love the limbs, the lines, the shape. You don’t have to put leaves on it, you can just look at the shape.

The fact that everyone just walks past them, is that why you pick them as your subject?
I used to do a lot of walking at the time, down the road, through the block, yes in fact, they were all growing along our road. They were just a subject, I suppose. This one, I’d drive along the road further, and I picked this one because of the colour. Which you have to look for, and which I find with my painting is the worst part: to try to arrange the shape of the actual stems. I have to curve them around. I can’t just use all plants that will grow upright, I have to get something that will curve. Then when I start the colour I’ll know where I am. But then, of course, I do change them. I draw them in just an ordinary drawing book to start with. I rough out an oval and try to fit them into that, and the colour - I have to work out the colour scheme at the same time, and get the shapes of the stems, and the leaves, different coloured leaves. That’s what I work from.

These are true to actual plants?
Oh, yes.

And you place them really carefully so they all fit together.
Yes. They’re not actual size, they are half-size. You can’t paint flowers put together like that using the actual size, there wouldn’t be room. A lot of plants are quite large.

Are these all watercolour?
Yes, only watercolour. Some Art Group members say, ‘I don’t know how you do it! How you don’t get lost with all those little stems going everywhere!’ I rough it out with a pencil first. As I establish a little bit of colour, I finish it off with brushes then. I do all the actual outlines with the brushes. I just get an idea where I want to place the plant, then I draw it with the brushes. It takes a long time.

Do you draw each little plant right through?
No. Sometimes I start a little bit from the bottom but then I’ll come down a certain way and put stems behind other stems. And then I have to fill in the bottom, so the stems can come back down behind that. That’s my biggest problem, trying to find something low-growing to place in the foreground. Stems are alright, but I do like something to ... well that largest one, I was having trouble with this one, I didn’t want all the stems and I thought, ‘How am I going to break that up?’ so I remembered the little Brachyscrome daisy, so I put that in there and then I had a bare spot so I put a blue Dianella in there. So I quite often change what I’m doing. I draw a plan, but I don’t always stick to it.

How long do you take to sketch each one of these flowers?
Oh, ages, because I can’t sit all day. I get a pain in the neck through bending over. Plus I don’t have the time to sit all day.

The first one I painted my daughter has. Sue raved about it when she came home. ‘Oh well, take it, Sue.’ And I thought, ‘Alright, I’ll try again.’ Which I did.

That’s another one using wildflowers, but that is one of my landscapes. That’s the poached-egg daisy from the sandhills at Wentworth. The Art Group went out there for a day trip one time and that’s what I did.

From my weeds I went to that one and I hung that down at the studio, the Art Group studio, and someone walked in and bought it straight away. I felt quite happy about that, I thought, ‘Well! That inspires me!’

Did you have a change in your philosophy?
Yes, I suppose I did. It gave me confidence to put more study into what I was doing, to think about it more. Particularly when I sold that one, I thought, ‘Well, I can’t be so bad after all.’ But then again, I’m still just painting for my own pleasure. You can’t say it’s really relaxing, because you can tear your hair out at times.

I know botanical artists in Perth who are truly professional. When we arrived in Perth, which was two days before my birthday, Sue said, ‘Mum, I’ve got two invitations. The botanical artists are having an exhibition, and we’re going to the opening for your birthday.’ Their work was fantastic. It was big work. They would have one plant to take up the space. Then they might have a spray of wattle. Not like this. When I walked into the framers with a photocopy I did for Sue, the framer asked me, ‘Well! Are you one of the botanical artists?’ and Sue said, ‘No, Joyce Smith.’ And I said, ‘Yes, Victorian flowers.’ That was very pleasing. That gave me a bit more confidence.

So you started off doing it but not feeling confident about it?
Oh yes, I started off blind, not having had any experience. And there was nothing in books, really, to help me with flowers, other than, I think, Margery Blainey’s book on British wildflowers. I did buy her book, and studied it, which was helpful as far as mixing of colours; and she said to use pure colours in preference to mixing a lot of colours. That’s when I started to buy the violets, the pinks, and the mauves. I do pre-mix up a lot of greens, I mix up greens I am likely to use for the Mallee flowers, like greys, the deeper greens, and when I start the painting they are all ready. When I find my flowers, the first thing I’ll do is work out the colours of the flower before it dies, and touch in the colours of the leaves, and the stems. I mix up a lot of colours and put them on offcuts of watercolour paper, and I’ll have all those, and I just try them against the flower, and the nearest one, well, I’ll know what to use. You can’t use books. I’ve got Mallee books, but painting from a book you get a flat plane, and you don’t know what’s at the back of the flower, but when I’m drawing, I hold my specimen in my left hand and I draw with my right so that I can look at it. I find that’s better, because I can see it. That’s the way I work. And then, when I’m starting to paint, if I’ve still got the specimen I just stand it in a jar of water, take them out of the crisper, keep them alive a little longer. They don’t stay alive very long. I do get a lot of help from books. There’s Margaret Kelly’s book of the Millewa area which is very helpful, plus the Mallee book, which is
great. They help me with the names as well. But they are not true colours, and then you
only get a particular piece, you don’t get the full stem.

*Which is very important to you, because the stems make up your composition - it’s the
main part of your composition.*
That’s right.

*You’ve got a sketchbook here.*
I work from my sketches, I don’t work straight onto a painting, I do my sketches in
there. I have to rough it out and draw it to start with. The pea flowers I find are very
difficult.

*To observe?*
Yes, and the colour, the different colour in that, and the little buds, and everything - that’s
the second attempt I’ve had at this one.

*Do you choose your subjects because they are already beautiful?*
Yes. Yes, but I’m still looking for new ones all the time. I’d love to get the Mallee
Orchid. I thought they only grew in a National Park but I just found out they grow in an
area where I’m allowed to go. A friend of mine phoned me recently, and she said that
they went down to a burnt area in the Mallee scrub, quite a lot has been burnt over the
years, and she said there were orchids, little fringe lilies, and sundews - there were
orchids wherever you could see. She said a lot of the field naturalists took photographs,
so she’s going to see if they will have some copied.

*Otherwise, you’ll have to go next year.*
Yes. Or go to the Ranger at the park, that’s another idea I had, at the Hattah National
Park. I could sketch out there, take my paints and work out my colours. They are in
books, but I don’t know what height they grow, or the exact colours. That’s why I like to
paint from life.

I love this tiny little one, I use that a lot for a background. That grows down in the
Mallee. I found that growing down near Koorlong. Just a tiny little white flower, very
dainty. Wiry Podolepis. I check them out in books.

That’s the little Nardoo. The Art Group went to Merbein, to paint the river, the gums,
and all the rest of it, and I go looking for plants, and someone will call out, ‘Oh. Where’s
Joyce gone?’ I came back with the Nardoo. The next day I painted it. I love the way it
changes colour where it’s dying for lack of water. And I thought ‘Well, I must get that’.

And this is another beautiful little one I found in a burnt area at Hattah. I just love that
Comesperma.

Crimson Foxtail, that one appeals to me. I just love the shape, the shapes of the stems. It
was growing at the edge of the road where it was getting all the dust from all the traffic.
Coming back from Mungo, my husband was driving and I said, ‘Stop! Stop! Stop!
There’s some flowers!’
I found this one - do you know the Mallee at all? the Settlement Road and the Meridian Road? - well, I found this one on the Meridian Road. It grows from a bulb so I didn’t feel so guilty about picking this one, because I knew that it would regrow. And there’s lots of that Eremophilina in that area. That’s Scoparia, it’s beautiful, it’s got silvery grey leaves.

And these I found at Bronzewing. Well, this one grows here, but the one with the pink tip only grows at Bronzewing, which was surprising. I found some of this one again, at Koorlong the other day when I went out there, so it grows quite close to home. But I think I’ll actually use the grey with the pink, because white flowers are very difficult. I have to use a lot of greys. I use Davey’s Grey, I find that’s quite good, and Neutral, that’s another good colour for flowers. They are both a couple of flower colours I read about.

Angianthus - it seems to come up a limy green, and then it seems to change to that colour, and then as it’s getting older it changes to yellow. It’s so interesting - I found a little green one the other day, and I was wondering if I should use it in my next painting, because it’s got little tiny bobbles, the green ones have them all the way down the stem. And they are very low-growing which would be great in the foreground of a painting.

The Goodenia, that was from Bronzewing as well. That’s a fascinating plant, I quite like that, I like the leaves, the colour, also the shapes. There’s a lot of Goodenias - they are everywhere - which I’d like to paint. There’s another one waiting in the fridge now which has a little fern leaf at the base. It has a stem that comes up, it branches out from the top and those three little branches with flowers on it. They’re all so different. I think I’ll run out of years.

_You’ll never run out of subjects._

No!

_Do you get more and more excited?_

Yes I do. Because it’s another achievement. When I think what they were like when I first started, when I look back at my earliest pieces, I think how dreadful they were, but then again, you have to start somewhere, don’t you?

This one: Sue came home for Christmas a couple of years ago, and we said, ‘We’ll go down to Psyche and have a look at the pumps, and we were driving along the river, Sue was driving, and I said, ‘Stop! Stop! Stop!’ and Sue said, ‘Well, Mum’s found a flower.’ This was the Eremophela that was growing along the river, it was all around the Billabong, the Psyche area, everywhere, and I was so thrilled because this was Christmas-time.

I like stems that have colour in them as well, that’s why I like these little daisies with their reddish stems, this one in particular, and that one. I think it adds to your painting - everything is not green. Instead of having all green or grey stems, you’ve got the added interest of a different colour in the stems - because the stems are not the same as the leaves. And I like the little leaves on that one as well.

_Each part of it is a treasure, each little part._
It really is!

That’s a Dampiera Rosemarinifolia. It comes in three different colours, and it suckers, which is great. I’ve got it on the edge of the built-up logs in my garden, and it’s starting to weep over the logs, it’s a beautiful pink-coloured flower. When we drove to Bronzewing, the blue one - there’s masses of it along the road, because they sucker and grow everywhere - that was on the left-hand-side of the road, and then we walked across the road to the railway line and the flowers were growing along the edge there, and I thought, ‘Oh, the flowers that are destroyed by putting a fire break along the line.’ Then I was speaking to a lady from the nursery last week, and they went to the Sunset Country where it grows, the blue one - probably all of them - and she said that the kangaroos had been eating it all. And I thought, ‘I’m restricted to getting a couple of cuttings and the Kangaroos are eating it.’

I had only one Psilotus, and that was from Settlement Road as well, and then about three weeks ago I found this one, I was quite pleased to find that in the bush. I had to use quite a bit of water there, with the washes, to get that effect, that fluffy effect, because they are quite fluffy.

And that’s an interesting little plant; I thought it was a weed, but it’s an Australian carrot. I drove to Hattah on my own one day, I just stopped where I wanted to, and coming back, I walked down an embankment, and as I was walking back, an Ajuga, a pink one, was growing on that embankment. It is very rare, so I’m very pleased about it. I haven’t used it in a painting yet, it’s a bit large.

That’s the Climbing Saltbush. I’ve used that in a painting, it’s so interesting. I found this little blue one - it was climbing up a Mallee tree - that was in South Australia but it was still Mallee country. I have used this because actually I count this as a Victorian wildflower, but then it does stretch into South Australia.

So you’ve got a rule about things that can go in and things that can’t go in; what are the things that can go in? You paint only Victorian Mallee flowers.

Yes. That’s my aim.

Your choice of subject is the Mallee flowers, exactly, is that the rule? Yes, but not to the extent of the actual detail, full detail, not a full botanical study, because I would have to use a magnifying glass, which I don’t want to do. I just paint what I can see with my glasses, because I’m not painting for it to be sold, for people to go out in the bush and look for their flowers, to use my painting and check it for accuracy I suppose you would say, because I’ll never be doing that, I’ll just paint for pleasure. And as near as possible, which is difficult because I use very, very fine brushes. It is very hard. If I find I can’t paint flowers, I’ll go back to landscapes. I will paint as long as I can. I try to be as exact with my colours as I can, that’s one rule. It’s important to me, but whether it’s important to anyone else, I don’t really know, because a lot of people couldn’t see these flowers, they wouldn’t know them - if they looked at them in books they’d be a completely different colour anyway. It’s just that I try to do that.

Who do you have in mind as looking at the finished work?
Oh, well, anyone who would like to see them, and appreciate the small flowers growing in the bush. I’ve never had any to put in our exhibitions down at the Art Group. I’ve got orders for paintings but I doubt if I’ll ever do them all, because I like to put them in my sketch book - I prefer to do that, and then also I like to put it all together as one. I just enjoy it, really.

Is where you are an issue?
It’s not an issue, but I think living within all my native plants is important, because I probably wouldn’t have the same feeling for plants if I lived in a little unit in Mildura. And our native garden is wild, I’ve got pathways going everywhere and I can look outside and see all my native plants. I think that’s really inside me, the love of plants, and Sue is the same, she just loves native plants as well - that’s why she lives in Perth - and a keen gardener as well.

The materials you use, is that an issue?
I like good quality paper. And paints - I use Windsor and Newton tube paints. And brushes - for a painting like that I mainly use a triple 000 and a 10-0. A golden sable I find that quite good for the triple 000, but anything larger than that I’ll go into maybe a 1, an 0 or a 1, sometimes a 2, but nothing larger than that because you don’t need them. And the paper, I’ve never used the hot-press. I like it fairly smooth, but I like a little bit of tooth. I used to always use Arches when I was landscape-painting. I’m having a lot of trouble getting the right paper.

What’s the worst word you can imagine being applied to your art?
Immediately I read that, I thought, ‘Ah!’ One of my sisters-in-law, she doesn’t have any hobbies but she’s a very good cook, she came in, and she said - I can’t think if it was a flower painting or one of my landscapes - she looked at it, and said ‘Well! Did you trace it?’ And I mentioned it to Jo, my daughter-in-law, last weekend when she phoned, and she said, ‘I know how you feel, because there’s a little girl in my class who draws beautifully, but,’ she said, ‘all the others are so jealous of her that they’re always making comments: Did you trace that out of a book?’ And Jo said, ‘I know exactly how you feel!’

Where did you get your talent from?
I don’t really know. As a child, a young teenager, I was always drawing on the white butchers paper. I used to sit in front of the house and draw the house and things like that, but then once I started to work, I didn’t get the time. Then when I got married, we built our home in Mildura. Peter was born there. We decided to sell, and we moved to a block at South Mildura, so with the block and two children to look after, I just didn’t have time. I was speaking to Jo, my daughter-in-law, the other day and she said, ‘Your art is something you have achieved for yourself. It’s all your own work’.

Wind-up Interview with Joyce Smith, May 29, 1997

Do you have any comments on the whole business of this exhibition, including the interview, the hanging, and so on?
Well, the first comment I would like to make is that I was very nervous about being interviewed, because I have never been interviewed before, about anything, and realised
lots of comments I made weren’t right. I’ve had second thoughts about it. But as far as the exhibiting was concerned, I thought that was very interesting. I quite enjoyed the exhibiting part of it. There was not that much expense as far as I was concerned; it was trying to get some work done.

*Did it make you do some extra work?*
Yes. It made me work through all the hot weather. (laughter) Yes, it made me work, whereas I would have been out in the garden, or doing something that I normally do rather than work. And I found that by sitting down and working that I really got somewhere. I concentrated on it and I really got somewhere with it. I hope that I can continue to do that.

*What did you get from it, from sitting down working?*
It made me go through my sketchbook, tidy it up a lot, finish off unfinished work in my sketchbook as well as some new work - which I’m glad I did, because the focus of the whole exhibition seemed to be on my sketches. People seemed to be interested in what I was doing, and they would chat to me about various plants, and also where I went to find my plants. Especially if I talked to someone who went bush the same as myself; and went to areas where I normally go - I found that very interesting - and they knew names as well as I did. Dr Dowty was one, which I thought was very helpful, and surprising. It made me realise that before I just had the Art Group members to ask about my plants and they weren’t that interested in the bush, in my plants. They liked to see my work, but I’d mention names and they wouldn’t mean anything to them. But with someone who is knowledgeable about plants, it made a great difference to me. It gave me more confidence to continue with my sketches. Therefore I think I will put more time into my sketches.

*You were surprised I liked your sketches?*
Yes, I was very surprised when you approached me at the studio and you were so interested in my sketches. Other people would just say, ‘Oh, that’s nice,’ and just walk on; a lot of people coming through the studio wouldn’t even bother to look, they would just keep walking. And I was surprised that you stopped and chatted so long. To me it was just a workbook, and I felt that my painting, my actual combination of plants, was more the focus of my work. But after talking to you, I realised that my sketches were important. So it’s given me a different slant on my sketches. Although, I will admit that my family have been interested in my sketches all along, and I couldn’t see it.

*Why are we all so thrilled by your sketches?*
Probably because there’s no-one else in Mildura, that I know of, who chases around looking for wildflowers to paint. Most people that I know paint roses. And I’m not in the least bit interested in painting roses. And I don’t like putting wildflowers in pots or glass or anything like that, I just like the natural stem combination. A lot of people, when I first started to paint, said I should put a background behind my wildflowers, a background colour - which I didn’t agree with. I think the off-white paper shows the wildflowers off to an advantage, and I’ve always argued with people over this. For instance, if you had a pale green behind it, where do you go for your mount and everything else? I just like the white - not white, I like off-white.
Do you think that our interest in your sketches, and your changing of your own ideas, is that a good thing, or a bad thing maybe?

I think it’s a good thing. I think it’s a good thing because it’s given me more incentive to look for different ways, or newer flowers to be shown off to advantage, better colour. I just wonder, perhaps with my sketches should I use a stronger colour, because there was so much said about my painting of the weeds, and my Banksia; the stronger colour. People liked it because of the stronger colours. But then, the little Mallee wildflowers have such delicate colouring. Their stems consist of lots of greys, and grey greens - very pale colouring, and if I’m going to make them stronger, I’m going to take away from how they actually grow. But it is a thought, that perhaps I could add more colour. But I paint them as I see them, from life, that’s just my way of painting them.

So it’s really a confrontation between your own ideas, and the praise of others, which goes against your own ideas.

Yes.

That makes it difficult.

It does, but whether I should try and use colours that are a bit stronger ... I think with that last painting with the combination of flowers - the newest one - I should have made the flowers a bit larger, and the colour a bit stronger. I’ve realised this. I painted in a hurry, for the exhibition, but I should have put more thought into it, and perhaps made the flowers a bit larger and stronger to make them stand out more.

And would that please you, yourself?

Well, I’d have to experiment with it before I could say, but it’s worth trying, to see what would happen. Looking at other artists’ work, some of their work is very, very pale, paler than mine, and then others have very strong colours. But then, whether that is the photography or the way they paint them, I’m not quite sure. Some of them are over-bright - as I said, I don’t know if it’s the photography or not - but then that might be just their way of painting. Of course, the weeds down the road were bigger plants, and much stronger colouring, which I could let myself go with. I didn’t know anything about the little wildflowers then, when I painted those. I guess you just change with time and experimenting. It’s given me a lot to think about.

That’s actually part of the question: Have you got some new ideas about your art after showing your work in this exhibition? I think that probably covers that. Are there any other comments on the business of exhibiting that you’d like to make?

I thought it was very well done. My own display, I thought, was very good. The sketches stood out and looked quite startling on their own in the formation that you had them, I thought that was very good. Perhaps the oblong one I shouldn’t have had in the exhibition, but it was one of my newer ones and I wanted to show the little groundcover ones, that’s why I put it in. Of course, when I included that with my listing, I thought that they were going to go horizontal, and that’s why I put it as number one, because I thought, ‘Oh well, that would start after the main paintings,’ but it didn’t work out that way.

No, the place was smaller than I had visualised, really.
And when you first asked me about exhibiting my sketches, I said, ‘Well, probably about eight or ten will be good enough,’ and I managed to find twenty in the long run.

(laughter) One of my friends commented on that she could see the difference in the years when I did my sketching, from when I first started. She could see how the work had improved through the years - which I think was quite a nice comment for me, and which makes it all worthwhile: to know that each year my work is improving, even if I am getting older. (laughter)

I think the exhibition was very well received. You could tell by the crowd, the excitement, and I myself, I was walking around in a daze. I didn’t know what was happening - whether I introduced people. (laughter) I was talking to a lot of people, especially to that man who had just moved here from Melbourne, and he made the comment about my work being equal to an exhibition in Melbourne - a lady’s work in Melbourne - and I found that quite good to hear that from a complete stranger, not just from one of your friends. That really started the afternoon, but I couldn’t remember afterwards who I introduced, whether I did or didn’t. (laughter) I think people were interested in the variety of work from all artists. I’ve been to other - not many, a few other - exhibitions, but I think with this one, there was such a great variety of talents of all the other artists combined into one. It made it a very interesting exhibition. That was my personal opinion of it. They were all so diverse - from the smallest, my own work, to the largest, André’s work. It was still the bush but it was so different. I think everyone that I spoke to, there and afterwards, really enjoyed the exhibition - from all walks of life. It was a great honour to be included, to have my work hanging at the Arts Centre, something I will never forget, Angela! If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t have had my work hanging there. It’s a beginning. Even Ian’s comments - he stopped to take the time to discuss my work with me, which I thought was very nice of him, and rewarding as well - his comments. Firstly he asked me did I use a pencil as well as the paint, and I said, ‘No. It is all brushwork’. And he said that I should put my sketches into book form - which surprised me, and which I couldn’t afford to do anyway, I’m too old to go into that. But it was nice to think that he thought my work was good enough to do that with. So that was a highlight of the evening as well, for him to make that comment, for he must see so much artwork about. So that was a good comment, that I will treasure.

Was he talking only about your sketches or about your complex works too?

He was just looking at the sketches, I think he just meant the sketches, because he didn’t walk along to look at the others - I guess he had seen them. It was the sketches he was looking at when he said I should put them into book form. Firstly he asked me about the pencil, as I said - which I don’t use: colour-pencil. You wouldn’t get a fine line with pencil, as fine as that. It’s the 10-0 brush, and I don’t know what I would do without it. The earlier days I never used anything as fine as that. A triple-0 I used for many years, and then I happened to find the 10-0 brush at Anderson’s, which they use for the china-doll painting. As I said, you wouldn’t get that very fine line with a colour-pencil. You couldn’t get the point as fine as that. I have to more-or-less stand the brush upright to do that very fine work.

That is a feature of your work, isn’t it, a very strong feature: the wonderful delicacy and intricacy of your line. I really think that comes out in your complex works. Did you want to say anything else about your collections? You explained in your other interview how
Yes, I like painting all the different plants, and I like them because of the colours of the stems, because the stems and leaves are so different, and I can’t use all little flowers that have grey stems or leaves. To combine them, I need to look for flowers which have a reddish-brown stem, which some of the little paper-daisies have, there’s a real good combination of stem colours. Plus the leaves, they’re all different. And I quite like finding plants where the leaves are starting to colour near the base of the plant, where you get lovely autumn tones into the leaves instead of just greens all the time. There are a lot of plants where I’m using an oval mount, that I can find where the stems naturally curve. A lot grow straight upright, which I can use in the centre, the main features, but for the outer edge to fall into that oval or round, you must get them so they will curve, or use a creeper that you can twine down to hang down the sides. And also a small, delicate plant at the base. Some stems look quite good at the base, but then others need a small delicate plant to give variety at the base of the painting. I quite enjoy doing them, but they do take a long time to do. In the Spring, when I find new flowers, I just haven’t got time to paint the actual pictures then, because I’m trying to get more new ones for my sketch book, to work from - because I must have new ones, I can’t just paint from the old ones all the time.

And then, you have to combine your colours as well. You don’t want to use the colours in flowers that are going to clash, or have two colours the same together, more-or-less the same together. If you use the smaller oval one, it’s a good combination just to use pinks, mauves, and yellows, which are quite a good combination together without adding any strong colours. For instance, the last little oval one, which everyone seemed to admire, I just started off the main feature, the pink Dampiera, at the front, and then worked from that. I added a blue as well, but they were all the bluey-mauves and pinks combined. I think this is what you have to do: instead of having your pinks and mauves and your bluey-mauves, if you put a stark red or orange with it, it would completely spoil it. Even a delicate yellow through it is quite good. But this is just my idea, I don’t know how other people work, at all. I haven’t seen other completed works, I’ve just seen sketches in books of other artists. A lot of artists just paint one specimen per painting, which a lot of people have told me to do, but I don’t agree with that. I would rather have more flowers. It gives people a better insight into what’s growing in the bush, by having a combination of different flowers, instead of just one, for instance a painting of wattle. People can see wattle anywhere, but as far as walking around in the scrub, they wouldn’t be doing it. I do it, because I know what I’m looking for, but people wouldn’t go looking for flowers. If you’re driving along the edge of the road, you just see them as you go driving past, but you wouldn’t realise what they actually look like. That is why I like to combine a lot of flowers together. I’ve had as many as thirteen in one painting, which is quite a lot, trying to fit them all in.

Would you say you’re a scientist or an artist? or a combination, or what? Just an artist I think. A botanist, you mean? Yes, I’m very interested in botany. I am finding it difficult remembering all the names offhand, with a lot of plants. There are Australian natives, but then there is a big difference between those plants and the little wildflowers, a complete difference. They have different names. For instance, when you think about a bottle-brush tree, a Banksia tree, they’re natives, but they’re so completely
different from the little wildflowers which just pop up every spring, they wait for the rain to grow.

You’ve specialised, haven’t you? You’ve become a specialist in your area.
I love the natives. As I said, my garden’s full of natives, but not wildflowers; there’s a complete difference between them.

What is it you try to do when you make a painting of these wonderful things? Why do you feel a need to do these?
Probably because one day our flora will disappear, and I would like to have paintings of it so my grandchildren can look back, and think, ‘These plants grew in the Mallee at one time’. It’s for the future I’m really doing it. Plus the enjoyment of painting them. Which I do, I wished I had more time.

I would like, Angela, to ask you if you were satisfied with the exhibition. Is it actually what you aimed for? Was is as good as your expectations? And is it going to help you, as well, for your Masters?

Is it what I aimed for? I think I was a bit open. I think I started it all happening and I was open to having all that input coming in, and then seeing what resulted. So my aim was fairly open. I didn’t have set ideas, or at least, if I did have some set ideas, they were changed by the time it all happened. For example, I thought I might get a woman, and I might get an Aboriginal, and I might get a naïve painter, and so on, but that didn’t really happen. What started to happen was that everybody was about ‘our area’, and then I started calling it On Our Own Ground. So I did change my aim from the very beginning when I started thinking, ‘Who can I have in it?’ and so on, and then the people’s interests started to make me realise that there was a common theme, and that the local scene that was sort of at the back of my mind, that was the connecting link between everybody, that really started to take over. And that’s why it all ended up being about the bush. And having this theme. And people weren’t really all that easy to put into categories, although everybody was very diverse, and did have a different genre, like you are a painter of botanical studies, and Peter has got a very strong Koorie influence, and each person seemed to have a different style, really. But it wasn’t really that easy for me to categorise in the way I had planned to categorise it.

The second bit was: Was it as good as I thought? I seemed to be very lucky with the people I picked. It suddenly seemed to me that ‘I’ve got the classiest people in that particular field, the classiest painter of Mallee wildflowers, and the classiest painter of the bush, in André, and so on, that I could have possibly found in Mildura’. Either I was very lucky ...
They were all well-known names, apart from me.

Yeah. You were all so skilled in your area, and I was pretty amazed how lucky I was in my choice of people. But maybe I should give myself a pat on the back for recognising talent so quickly, like when I walked through the exhibition that you had on that day and I just saw your stuff and was stunned by it. I suppose I should give myself a pat on the back for recognising the skills of people.
And the last one was, Is it going to be any help, the exhibition? The exhibition is so much help to me, Joyce, that I’ve really started writing now, and I’ve really begun to understand what I want to say, and what I want to say is that the whole thing is just a part of a big process, or a different lot of processes. There’s the process that leads you to do your painting, and it’s all part of your life. I want to talk about that. And there’s the process of curating, and the whole business that has ended up with me doing it, but then it goes on, to me trying to understand it and writing about it. And then there’s the context. The Arts Centre being set up in Mildura, and the whole philosophy and history of art, all coming into that business of how you fit into that. So there’s these three major processes. And the exhibition suddenly made me see all that. It all came clear. So, although the exhibition was a delight in its own right - I really enjoyed it and loved seeing all the work up - it’s really only the end point, not only the endpoint but the starting point, or a point in all these three processes. Does that answer your question? Yes, very well, thank you. Very good.

Thanks, I’ll use that and write it down. (laughter) What’s going to happen now regarding your art? Just continue as I’m going, I guess. There’s nothing else in sight. I’m very happy with the exhibition, because it has brought me into contact with other artists. I find this very fulfilling. I know different artists from down at Art Group, plus I feel I’ve made new friends by getting together for the exhibition. And I think it will add something new into my life, and probably my art. I don’t really know what the future holds at the moment.