



ESSAY

# Dots on the landscape

Our relationship with the eucalypt has had a profound impact on Australian art and literature. However, **Drusilla Modjeska** writes, sometimes we can't see the trees for the forest

*It's the gum trees' country. They had it before we came. They'll have it again when we're gone.*

Douglas Stewart

THE NOSE OF LAND THAT forms one side of Farm Cove, pushing into Sydney Harbour between the Opera House and Garden Island, was once covered in red forest gums: *Eucalyptus tereticornis*. There are red gums there still, but hardly a forest. The grass grows lushly inside the loops of road that run past the Art Gallery of NSW to Mrs Macquarie's Chair; wedding cars and tour buses snake their way to the end to photograph or be photographed. It's one of Sydney's premium sites. When Mrs Macquarie waited there for the ships that would bring news of England, Sydney Town's forest gums were already being cut down — you can see the devastation in early paintings — though from the vantage point of the Pinchgut prisoners out in the harbour on their island prison, there must have seemed a lot of trees between them and any hope of inland escape.

The gum tree. Our history began with an uneasy relationship to it. Our literature and art is full of it. It's almost a matter of legend that our first artists, struggling to find a form for the lugubrious trees that made them uneasy, hid their gawky branches under the shapes of European trees. Follow the art market of the 20th century and see the shift from the money going to the painters who made gum trees look like gum trees to the moderns who caught the light to give the impression and feel of the trees.

In our novels, babies and wives and mates have been buried under eucalypts; women and girls have had their backs broken by falling branches; love affairs, adulteries and elopements have been conducted beneath the trees. When there were strikes by loggers and timber workers in our literary past, sympathy was rarely with the trees. The bush hero became a cliché of nationalist rhetoric until Patrick White wrote *The Tree of Man* and gave us the more difficult idea that our relationship with the trees might have more to do with poetry, even the sacred, than with our own identity.

IN JUNE LAST YEAR A SCULPTURE — if that's the word for it — entitled *Veil of Trees*, created by Janet Laurence and Jisuk Han, went up in the first of those grassy loops on the road down to Mrs Macquarie's Chair. A hundred red forest gums have been planted and among them glass panels rise, tall and thin, as elegant as trees. The glass is smoky in places, speckled with ash, traces of minerals and indigenous seeds. Lines of Australian poetry — and a few of prose — are engraved into the glass. Les Murray and Judith Wright are there, of course, as well as many others going right back to Henry Kendall and Charles Harpur. Some panels simply list the names of trees: *Eucalyptus argillacea*, *Eucalyptus*

*intermedia*, *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*, *Acacia cowleana*, *Casuarina glauca* ... "It is your land of similes," a quotation from James Maccauley reads, "the wattle/scatters its pollen on the doubting heart."

This sculpture — "this passage of reflection where memory is gathered" — is very beautiful. It has a modest calm, a meditative quality that, like the trees, does nothing to vie for our attention. Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley's *Edge of the Trees*, in the forecourt of the Museum of Sydney, has a similar calm

it be that there is too much guilt for us to want to stand among the trees and reflect? For this sculpture — this work of art — seems to ask us to reconsider our relationship to the eucalypt and a past that is entangled with it.

The optimistic view would be to say that after 200 years in the country we are finally understanding the value of the environment we have crashed into; there are signs of ecological consciousness all around us. The gloomy view would be to say that the ecological consciousness doesn't extend far if there's a conflict

over profit or our comfort. We might argue over it, but still fell the forests and pulp the trees.

Of all the fellings, perhaps the most contentious has been that of the river red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*). If the red forest gum is the most prolific of the eucalypts growing along the length of coastal eastern Australia, the river red gum is the essential tree of the arid south and centre.

And it is the river red gum that is the subject of Karra, an exhibition, curated by Vivonne Thwaites, which opened this month at Adelaide's Artspace as part of the arts festival. Karra is the name given to *E. camaldulensis* by the Kaurana people of the Adelaide plains.

It once grew all along the Torrens; it grew in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens, where there is still "a remnant tree"; it grew in north Adelaide, where the smart shops are; it grew where the golf course is. It grows

along rivers and taps into underground water systems so successfully that the early explorers travelling inland to the centre rejoiced to see it. It was so common that we hacked away at it for years. Its hard water-resistant wood was felled for bridges and barges, fence posts and railway sleepers. There was so much of this mighty tree — it could grow to a more than 30m and last half a millennium — that we also felled it to burn in our grates and to fuel the engines that pumped the water out of the rivers.

Cut down, the river red gum could no

longer play its part in the regulation of the water table. With water taken out of the rivers to irrigate shallow-rooted crops, with dams built and river banks eroded where trees once stood, the water table has changed; the land is growing salty, the water with it. The states along the Murray-Darling system, where the karra was once supreme, argue over how much more water can be pumped out, how many more trees cut. The NSW rice and cotton growers and their communities depend on the water. There's no federal law to stop logging on freehold land even as land management schemes hasten to replant. Some estimates say that 30 per cent more trees are needed. Adelaide depends on water that reaches down to the far end of this great waterway. If it turns to salt, what happens to the city and its parks and gardens? You can't boil the salt out of the water as we did the bugs that got into Sydney's water supply.

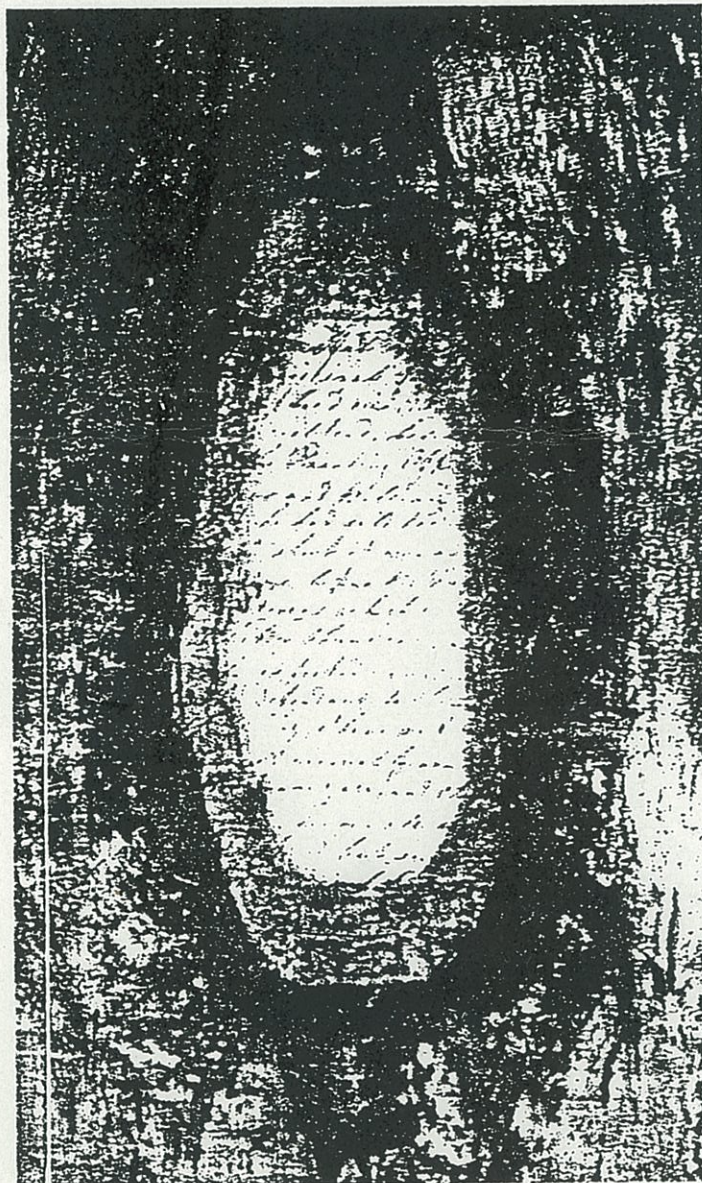
Sydneysiders might be too busy to stand among young trees and reflect, but perhaps the citizens of Adelaide's will be more inclined to visit an exhibition given to a single eucalypt. It might draw their attention to the river red gums that are still standing in their city, some of them 500 years old and marked with unobtrusive plaques.

"The new out of the old" is the theme for this year's Adelaide Festival. Passionate about the tree — its history and its redemptive potential — Thwaites approached photographer Agnes Love, sculptor and ceramicist Jo Crawford and printmaker Chris De Rosa with the idea for Karra, an exhibition in a performance space that "would say what a poem or a song might say". The artists spent a year researching and photographing the karra, collecting bark, visiting the sites where the tree still stands, tracing records, reading pioneer diaries and letters, looking at paintings, drawings and photos, learning its ecology. The result will be at Artspace in the Playhouse until April 20: "a repository for memory and history" and a prayer for the future.

"Over time," Murray Bail writes, "the River Red Gum has become barnacled with legends. This is only to be expected. By sheer numbers there's always a bulky Red Gum here or somewhere else in the wide world, muscling into the eye, as it were; and by following the course of rivers in our particular continent they don't merely imprint their fuzzy shape but actually worm their way greenly into the mind, giving some hope against the collective crow-croaking dryness. And if that's not enough the massive individual squatness of these trees, ancient, stained and warty, has a grandfatherly aspect; that is, a long life of incidents, seasons, stories."

This quotation from *Eucalyptus* stands, with Les Murray's *The Gum Forest*, as a kind of prologue to Karra's

Continued Page 4



AGELESS: Excerpt of a 1839 letter from Mary Thomas, Adelaide, to her brother George in England overlaid onto a detail of a red gum tree, with coolamon scar. Composite etching on cotton by Chris de Rosa

FROM THE KARRA EXHIBITION, ARTSPACE, ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE

and in the middle of the city their poles are hard to miss. *Veil of Trees*, tucked on the edge of the city, doesn't seem to be getting the notice it deserves. People park along that road in a hurry to get to the gallery or are too busy lugging their picnics into the Botanical Gardens to notice glass panels growing among saplings.

Our art and literature might be full of gum trees, but day by day we hardly notice them. Is it that they are so much a part of us that we need something more dramatic to jog our attention? Or could

From Page 3

catalogue of four essays. Words are as much a part of this exhibition as images and paintings.

Botanist Martin O'Leary tells a story worthy of Bail, but it comes from a *Eucalyptus* published in 1895. Drawing 19th-century America's attention to the many benefits of the genus, the author, Abbot Kinney, reported a widespread Spanish belief that the eucalyptus had healing properties for conditions as diverse as typhoid, incontinence, gangrene and gonorrhoea. "In Cordova the young eucalypt trees were stripped of their leaves, and guards had to be posted to protect the trees." In other Spanish towns, "permits were issued for the picking of leaves, if evidence of medical need could be shown". Kinney also reported that "an Aboriginal man whose intestines were hanging out from a wound made a complete recovery with no inflammation after *E. camaldulensis* leaves were used as a dressing".

*E. camaldulensis* is a remarkable tree. O'Leary tells of its capacities to endure fire and flood, and to hollow out its limbs and even its trunk in order to take advantage of the droppings of the birds and animals that live in these convenient hollows. It is an adaptation in "nutrient-poor environments", he says that "at the very least takes about 110 years to begin". "No wonder the willows are weeping", goes a line from Nelson Varcoe's *Song for the River Red Gum* that is also part of the exhibition, "they weep for those old gum trees".

In the catalogue, linguist Rob Amery traces its history in language and Stephanie Radok its history in image and art. The Karra took the wood of the karra into their culture as containers, artefacts, weapons, canoes and music sticks, its richness spreading into their language and also into ours when the bark containers were named coolamon.

Colonial artist H. J. Johnstone painted *River Red Gum* in 1880; Jimmy Kite, who accompanied ethnographers Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen on an expedition through Central Australia in 1901-02, drew it. His Aranda name was Erliakiliakirra, "the subdued". Fred Williams painted the Murray and its trees in the early 70s; the large panels are on permanent display in the foyer of the Adelaide Festival Theatre. The Murray has also been the subject of Ian Abdulla's quirky silkscreens of the 80s. An etching by Chris De Rosa overlays an excerpt from a pioneer letter — Mary Thomas in Adelaide in 1839 to her brother in England — on a detail of a coolamon scar in the trunk of a river red gum. Work by all of them is reproduced in the catalogue. So are Gilbert R. M. Dashorst's precise and exquisite botanical paintings. But for me the great surprise of this exhibition is Kathleen Petyarre's luscious *Dusk in Thorny Devil Lizard Country (watercourses and rockholes)*, painted last year on Belgian linen. It is large and mysterious and powerful, a centrepiece among the detail, a focus for meditation, an invitation to a different-way of mapping, and seeing, and feeling, the country.

Eric Rolls writes of the karra as if it were a living character, a grand and noble being. He invites us to consider the living it has given us — those bridges and wharves and fence posts — and he details the life it has given to the creatures of the bush, the ducks and parrots and owls and possums and goannas that live in its hollow branches. Some of the river reds lived so long and were so huge that their hollowed centres could accommodate entire Aboriginal groups. There's one left as evidence in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens. When hollow branches



HEALING: river red gum: *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* Dehnh. var, 1999.  
Gouache and pencil on archival paper  
ARTSPACE, ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE

were hauled out of the river, Murray cod that once ruled two kilometres of water from their fortress logs, lost their habitat and began to die. The river red gum is host to mammals, birds, fish, bees, fungus, grubs and parasites. It can feed and it can heal. On top of that, it helps regulate the water table. And we burn it for firewood. When Douglas Stewart says, "It's the gum trees' country. They had it before we came. They'll have it when we're gone", I hope he's right. "The most terrible invention of our industrial civilisation," Gary Catalano said back in 1985, "has not been the bomb but the idea that the self exists as something apart for earth." He is quoted in the catalogue.

"WE ARE RUINED BY THE THING WE kill," Judith Wright says. Veronica Brady quotes her in a recent essay on Wright and the poetics of ecology. The point Brady and Wright both make is that we need to find a way of being in the world that allows truths and perspectives other than our civilised industrial ones, a mutuality with the environment.

It's hard to find language for this, for our forms of writing are themselves touched by the kinds of separation — between self and other, self and earth — that Wright wishes to dissolve. Perhaps poetry, with its reliance on compression and image, can best do it.

*We with our quick dividing eyes  
measure, distinguish and are gone.  
The forest burns, the tree-frog dies,  
yet one is all and all are one.*

That's Wright again. "Often our imagination cannot fully absorb the truth of a city or of a land," Simon Leys writes in his celebrated essay on Lawrence of Australia, "unless a poet first invents it for us."

When Stan Parker's grandson walks among the trees at the end of *The Tree of Man* down in the gully where there are still a few standing — a "sculpture of trees" — it is poetry he feels growing in him. Even as a scraggy boy he understands that poetry is as much a part of

"the already scribbled trees" as it is of himself. And as the suburbs come lumbering down the road, stripping the bush before them, he knows that his inheritance is not this headlong rush into easy comforts but the story of the great gums and his grandfather's modest hut. "So that in the end there were the trees," is how the novel ends. "The boy walking through them with his head drooping as he increased in stature. Putting out shoots of green thought. So that, in the end, there was no end."

Forty-five years later, the frail hope that "in the end there is no end" slips into a different register. One could almost plot the course of our history by the twists and turns of what our writers do with the eucalypt.

In *Eucalyptus*, Murray Bail, the least political of writers, avoids the pitfalls of ecology and politics by letting the genus eucalyptus become the subject — in both senses — of its own legends. We don't have to worry about anything as difficult as protesters sitting in the branches or salt rising through the paddocks. Perhaps, paradoxically, the success of his work, particularly overseas, has to do with the distancing effect of legend, while here in Australia it reminds us of how deep into our psyche and imagination the roots of the eucalypt have dug.

*Eucalyptus* is the novel that has introduced us to the poetry of the botanical names; suddenly they seem to be everywhere. Eric Rolls used them in *A Million Wild Acres* back in 1981, but not on the same scale and not as a kind of poetics. That book — dedicated to Douglas Stewart — was tethered in the present and in history, not myth (and was of course not fiction but passionately "real") but somehow that tethering gave it, like *The Tree of Man*, its own mythic qualities. Because Rolls takes the question of ecology to the heart of his work, there is a profound concern — as there is in his catalogue essay for *Karra* — with the interconnectedness of everything, and in that respect it remains unsurpassed.

In *The Idea of Perfection*, Kate Grenville takes a different fictional tack, writing in the tradition of the Australian novel of politics and relationship that was once commonly set in the bush. By taking the fate of a rough-hewn timber bridge on the edge of a NSW country town, it is the awkwardness of connection — bridge rather than trees — that becomes the subject for contemplation. Viewed from below, the timbers of the bridge, "wedged against each other into crude simple joints", were "like two people holding hands".

The engineer has been sent to replace it with concrete; the quilt maker has been sent to help the townsfolk make use

of their heritage. Outsiders both, their faltering progress towards connectedness is a kind of metaphor, or blueprint, for the urgent but imperfect possibilities between heritage and economics, bush and town, city and country.

One of the best pieces in Peter Craven's *The Best Australian Essays* (Bookman, 1999) was, I thought, Gillian Mears's "Mono No Aware: The Slender Sadness". Mears has lived for many years outside Grafton beside the Clarence River. At its headwaters is the Timbarra wetland plateau. A Brisbane-based company is mining for gold there, despite dodgy environmental reports, native title claims and a long campaign of protest that includes local landowners. To extract gold from ore, the diggings have to be irrigated with a solution of sodium cyanide. About 2 tonnes are used each day. Plastic sheeting is meant to prevent run-off as the gold is washed through the heap of ore. Cyanide eventually degrades when exposed to sunlight, but a spill into the creeks that feed the Clarence can have lasting toxic effects on everything that depends on the river. Which is why the plateau and its forest is also inhabited by the eco-camps.

Mears writes of journeying there to confront the complex interactions of the combatants, the moral cross-currents, the hypocrisies in every camp (and not only those we love to hate). And, of course, her own romanticism, squeamishness, prejudices, irritations and doubts. It's not hard to maintain the rage against mining company officials when you know what cyanide does, or against the QCs who respond to the plain complaint that this is our drinking water by saying: "You'd better get negotiating because it's going ahead anyway." Much harder to face are the ambivalences of the Aboriginal community and stupid things the vulnerable ferals and protesters do.

"Nature lovers", says a sign put up by one exasperated landowner, "please do not shit in or near the (fuckin') creek!" He lets them stay, he tells Mears, because despite it all they are doing an "amazing job". But still the trees come down and the water is poisoned, and nobody much knows or cares, and would it be easier to stay on one's meditation mat? What can a writer do?

Well, she can write, and this compassionate, pliable essay is as good as it gets. In writing such as this, or in an exhibition such as *Karra*, the distinction between art and politics is hard to maintain. They come out of a thinking that resists the urge to pit one thing against another, ordering and classifying, as so much in our culture does. Reading them, my frail hope is that we are seeing a new poetics, "shoots of green thought", emerging even out of the most contentious aspects of our relationship with our trees.

"A slender sadness," Mears calls her essay. It's a long way from Marcus Clarke's early encounter with the "weird melancholy" of the bush, but for each of them — separated by more than a century — something of the mysteriousness of the bush remains. While that's the case, perhaps Australia can still, just, be said to be "the gum tree's country".

*New trees step out of old: lemon and ochre  
splitting out of grey everywhere, in  
the gum forest*

These lines from Les Murray's *The gum forest*, which reminds us how much we need our poets, are to be found both in the *Veil of Trees* and in *Karra*. As are these:

*Sky sifting, and always a hint of  
smoke in the light;  
you can never reach the heart of the  
gum forest.*