

Mungo healing

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Walls of China area,
Mungo National Park,
Willandra Lakes, NSW.
Photo: @Krystal Seigerman



Donata Carrazza discovers the beauty and history of Lake Mungo as a group of senior artists traverse its ancient contours.

With a slowness befitting the solemnity of the occasion, a hearse will travel away from Australia's seat of power towards Mungo National Park in the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area in late 2017. The bones of Mungo Man and the remains of over 100 of his ancestors, who lived over 40,000 years ago, will finally be laid to rest in their home ground. There will be communal relief among Indigenous descendants who have carried grief and distress since the remains were removed more than 40 years ago. It will be a time of healing and recognition.

This location, in southwest New South Wales, came to international attention in the late 1960s when geomorphologist Jim Bowler uncovered bone fragments of an 18-year-old woman protruding from the soil. Named Mungo Lady, her remains revealed the oldest demonstrated ritual cremation anywhere in the world. Several years later, Bowler found Mungo Man, his skeletal remains intact, ceremonially buried and scattered with ochre. Research has been constant and fruitful: millennia

of wind, sun, wildfire and rain have contributed to preserve evidence of human settlement and environmental change from the deep past.

A month before Mungo Man's return, nine Australian artists, hosted by Julie Chambers and Vikki Moore of Mildura's Art Vault, gathered at Mungo over five days for an immersive experience in one of the world's most telling ice age landscapes. The significance of the imminent repatriation floated in and out of conversation and imbued the residency with a heightened awareness of the group's great privilege and responsibility. How do you artistically capture the vastness of this place, the flora and fauna, the palimpsest in the sediment of ancient social networks adapting to altering conditions, the spiritual consciousness of one of the oldest living cultures on Earth? Some long-time collaborators are part of the group: Rosalind Atkins and eX de Medici; Raymond Arnold and Ian Westacott. Others are GW Bot, Ellis Hutch, Michael Kempson, Martin King

and Brian Robinson. Most are old friends or at least acquaintances, while others meet for the first time, but all have been chosen by Julie Chambers for their talent as printmakers. The objective is to gather ideas and commence work for an exhibition at the Australian Print Triennial in Mildura next October. Maureen Reyland, a Balranald artist, is also a guest, but equally a host, as a direct descendent of Mungo Lady and a spokesperson for one of the three tribal groups that negotiate on all matters concerning the site.

Our headquarters is Mungo Lodge. Outside the entrance we are welcomed to country by the Indigenous crew who will be looking after us. Following the mournful sounds of two didgeridoos, we gather around a platter of smoking eucalyptus leaves, passing our bodies through the cleansing clouds of smoke then stopping to form a respectful circle. The ceremony takes less than ten minutes, but it formalises the relationship with our hosts and tempers some good-hearted enthusiasm.



We traverse Mungo's saltbush-dotted lakebed by car to reach the 33 kilometre-long lunette (so-named for its resemblance to the crescent moon) and sand dunes that have been formed by endless westerly winds on the former shoreline. Shaun, our guide, unlocks the metal farm gate. As the group pours into the heart of the site, we cross a threshold into another dimension of time and space. Before us are jagged ridges of brownish-gray sediment jutting out of the earth like sentinels. Reyland folds into a squat, scoops a handful of fine, pale sand, encouraging us to do the same for the pleasure of its softness. Shaun is a tall man, quiet and contemplative for a communicator, offering us the bare essentials of what we need to know. Yet, all that he shares packs a punch: here on an organic palette, a scattering of manufactured stone tools that were once traded for ochre; there embedded in the clay that has not been a lake for over 15,000 years, a fresh-water mussel shell; and further along, sitting delicately between the ripples of sand on a dune, the jaw bone of a bettong, a now extinct long-tailed rat kangaroo.

'Every day I find something new out here', Shaun tells us of this open-air museum. Many have their cameras at the ready taking in close-ups of calcified tree stumps or panoramic views that include the strange mounds garnished with scraggly needlewood or eroded gullies. Mungo's mysterious and haunting quality needs to be felt. Here the heart beats more slowly, but the senses are woken.

Some of us return later that same day with Shaun when the gentler light throws shadows from the lunette's craggy outcrops on to the clay, red soil and corrugated sand. The softer light of the late afternoon has softened us. We enter the space more present, emulating Shaun's calm, rhythmic pace towards the sand dunes where we drift around in clusters or alone. The sinking sun tinges everything golden pink.



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The artists explore the extraordinary landscape around Lake Mungo. Photo: Martin King

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Maureen Reyland (Mor Mor) on location at Mungo National Park as part of the Mungo Prints collaboration, Willandra Lakes, NSW. Photo: ©Krystal Seigerman

The illusory conjurings of the creative process are in full swing the next day. Essential time for ideas and images to coalesce. Some artists remain close by, among mallee eucalypts and the piping refrain of spiny-cheeked honey-eaters, others set off by car on the self-drive tour spotting emus, exploring microclimates on the lake's perimeter, and the ghostly ruins of a pastoral station, while some set to work immediately on prepared plates and other media.

On day three heavy rain has set in with its distinct earthy scent. We gather after dinner to its pattering sound of rain on the tin roof to discuss progress so far. Each artist generously gives an insight into their practice and what's been their focus. De Medici and Atkins speak first. Despite their advanced middle age they still carry the energy of rebels at the back of the bus. Their ten-year production of etchings and engravings combines Atkins's life-long depiction of trees with de Medici's juxtaposition of the ugly and the beautiful. The results are nothing short of exquisite. There's a hint that the next work will incorporate mezzotint. De Medici, husky-voiced, lean and lithe, warns a group of students who have joined the residency, about the pressures imposed by funding bodies 'that expect you to predict and present spontaneously. I'm old enough and mean enough not to do that anymore.' Another comment captures an important truth: 'I think it takes some time for a place to work its way up through the feet. It's very important to be careful that we don't repeat the mistake of our ancestors and stomp all over the ground here. It's not ours to stomp on, or take forms of ownership on.'

Reyland, in her signature multi-coloured beanie, welcomes us again, 'proud as' to be sharing her spiritual home with the group. She presents her first-ever etching on copper plate, supplied by Atkins with helpful tips, of the sacred sands of Mungo surrounding the potent symbols of a snake and eggs. Alice Kelly, Reyland's mother, was responsible for delaying scientific research so that her ancestor's remains would be managed with appropriate cultural sensitivity. Reyland tells me earlier that day: They say that Mungo found Jim Bowler. My opinion is they found each other. Without Jim and Mum we would not be here today. I honour them both.'

Canberra-based Bot is still absorbing 'ideas (that) are bouncing off the page and rumbling around the head' in this unique landscape that has its own inherent language. Wood may replace her usual linoleum: 'Why would you bother with lino when wood has a grain to work with? It's already got some kind of memory of life.'

As a Torres Strait Islander, used to the reef at his doorstep, Robinson finds himself in 'an alien landscape... (with) arid, sparse



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Raymond Arnold works on an etching plate on location as part of the Mungo Prints collaboration, Mungo National Park, Willandra Lakes, NSW.
Photo: ©Krystal Seigerman

vegetation, different colouration'. His work combines Western iconography and pop culture with patterns from his islander heritage. He's been moved by the historical heft of all we've taken in, especially the repatriation story. His own story-telling technique will likely morph into three-dimensional forms on printed paper and etchings with elements of embossed lino.

Hutch, like Robinson, is one or two generations younger than many of the artists in the group. She's interested in the limits of her knowledge, the visible and invisible elements in the environment and how they make their presence known—how they contribute to the preservation of the landscape and revealing it as well, 'the vulnerable treasures there on the surface.' She shares a journal with descriptions in brush and ink 'slow writing' of what she's noticed during the day.

Kempson's usual role is educator and facilitator for others in the production of prints. He can only stay for three days, but is committed to 'do with intent' and chooses to draw with pen and ink, daub with crayon. He presents a white cypress pine on paper, precisely outlined and cross-hatched. It has a timeless quality we all admire. He's been in overdrive, cognisant of the shortened stay, but committed to productivity.

This is an overall impression of the group—a serious commitment to apply themselves by paying attention and taking the time needed to cement their ideas and images. Complacency is not an option, but no one loses their sense of fun and wonder. It makes itself visible in Atkins coal drawings of tree shadows, Hutch's ink-stained blotches on mulberry bark paper, and King's panorama in earthy watercolours of the eerie lunette.

Arnold and Westacott's joint technique has them agreeing on a subject and its scale. They then etch on separate plates, but combine their work on the same print run. Arnold asserts that it's the incidental and the accidental that makes the creative process playful and surprising. Both men, urbane and benign, came with some concern. Westacott had been told he was coming to 'an empty vacuum, a minimalist area', but assures us he 'felt completely the opposite'.

King, recognisable for his straw hat and dark-framed glasses, speaks to all of us, but Maureen Reynard in particular, when he makes a poignant point: 'I've worked on Indigenous land before, but the act of invitation allays a lot of fears and problems. I feel like I can relax and make work.' With an abiding interest in birds for their emblematic appeal he has spent many hours with his camera 'listening, walking, stalking, you look around the landscape and not rush through it'.

It's heartening to be among artists; they fill you with hope. They think deeply about the world, their work often a commentary about what's at stake. And this is what people do when they come together—the innately human activity of sharing information and experience, building community and understanding. The group embodies a profound respect for each other as colleagues, but equally for the land on which they find themselves. Next year's exhibition promises to capture this immense goodwill. It promises to deliver timely work informed by the spirit of the ancient past.

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**The Australian Print Triennial is on
31 October–4 November, 2018,
www.aptmildura.com.au**