

2008 Catalogue Essay

Judy Holding's camp notebooks are brimming with sketches, photographs and notations of colour, stories and sound. Albums of happenings and musings. There are trees, noisy crows, dry leaves and outback sky. There are people - her family and friends including local elders whom Holding has come to know well, and there are images of Indigenous rock art, swathes of red ochre from the creek crossing, fine line drawings of camp site and swag, skin-group diagrams, Aboriginal names and indexical details from topographical maps... Things that are mobile and multiple. A kind of temporal and spatial map of her experience over thirty years, these diaries are a record of Holding's time in the landscape of Kakadu in Northern Australia.

Moving between her Melbourne studio and solo camps near Cannon Hill, the camp diaries themselves are a way of bridging culture and place. They record Holding's growing understanding of the Traditional owners and their relation to land. They also relate the evolution of an artistic sensibility and a way of knowing. Working with her notebooks in the studio, Holding creates a vocabulary of poetic forms as symbols for phenomena and place - a personal language for the telling and retelling of stories.

A link to the inherited rules that channel the growth of culture, these motifs blend the old and new. Holding's kind of abstraction is not a paring down, but a pictorial capturing of the energy of place. Like things that remain in the landscape, her formal language creates a sense of mystery and continuity. A shifting loop through time and space, each motif has stories associated with it and is linked to a particular season or place. The loop represents the waterhole and the ancient stone circles; colours track the seasonal changes in the time of 'one rain'; striations recall the lightning men of the rock paintings and the rain; the spiral evokes women's weaving and the criss-cross grids are 'bim' or string pictures; the shadowy coiled ellipse represents burning or 'cleaning up country' and Diver Duck is a bird painted on local rock.

Cut, drawn, painted and carved these motifs are transcribed in various mediums, colour and scale. This mutability temporalises form. Some motifs are easily read and others are apprehended only obliquely. Like characters in a story that take on a life of their own, they echo each other as rhymes do in a poem - they evolve and recur to create a sense of sameness and difference. An archive of creativity, these pictorial glyphs, like the notebooks themselves, are signs that refer to something unseen, felt - a composite of forces, sensations, emotions, ideas, memories, and histories.

As the tree mediates between realms, these works are vessels for communication and thoughtful introspection. The red *Mallee Tree* of the dry flat landscape of north western Victoria is the artist's tree. It is from where she grew up. The tall Blue Northern Gum, *Kadjimulk's Tree*, stands as a ghost in dry heat of summer in the monsoonal escarpment of the Kakadu region. *Kapirigi's Tree* is ceremonially painted with a ring of ochre pigment to mark his passing. There are Kookaburras like souls resident in the canopy void. Both archetypal and particular, Holding's trees are as much about form as shadow. Moments of incommensurability, when it becomes difficult to distinguish between substance and shadow, whiteness and reflection.

What interests Holding is the eidetic relation between things. Negative spaces are charged. There is deliberateness and play, involvement and detachment, labour and design. Each medium demands different ways of thinking. Lines may be incised or moulded. There is a slowness in the carefully drawn watercolours that recalls the Aboriginal rock peckings that have survived for many thousands of years. The map-like oceanic overlapping of form in the collages suggests the interconnectedness of elements that appear to float over an uncertain ground. There is vibrant red and yellow, grey, pink, green, white, silver and indigo blue, all in various transparencies. There are material instances of colour in the landscape and tales of colour that signal a person's origins and connections with the land. Shimmering figure-ground relationships are reminiscent of the crosshatching effects and luminous earth pigments used in Aboriginal painting. Shapes sometimes appear as absence; as a trace-like halo or echo, like the silhouette of hands left on rock walls after paint is blown or thrown from grass dipped in ochre. Some look as if upside down or sideways, dying. There is intimacy and vastness. And concordance, as though an unseen mysterious force opens up the surface to a new sensation of space.

Between the seen and unseen, Holding's works appear as a kind of guide - a coded way of representing something that is hidden by something that is shown. Representation as process, the emphasis is on the journey in the making. Holding presents an oneric landscape, a unity of memory and dwelling. Landscape as a motion of the mind, memory and imagination.

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