

Death of an Interior

Western Australian W H E A T B E L T – the road to Ballidu

The wheatbelt is that stretch of land, somewhere east of Perth that city people drive through on their journey east, north or south. It is seldom the destination for holidays, more often it is travellers that lob up in this part of the world. Consistently the utopian dream of our early settlers and their endeavours, together with the aid of various government settlement schemes, have shaped this part of the land into a sea of grain.

Today, the wheatbelt bears witness to this short-lived dream of past generations. The production of a seemingly never-ending grain bounty has had devastating consequences. Individual farms have been combined, town services have been ruthlessly cut or disappeared altogether. Farm houses are abandoned, individual families are often isolated, vehicles are faster, thereby make distances shorter. Farm machinery is increasingly sophisticated, expensive and computer driven.

The wheatbelt is an efficient producer of grain yet in spite of this efficiency, or because of it, salt is now a crop of nightmare proportions.

I have memories of this part of WA from childhood and early adolescence. Many of my holidays were spent on farms, driving tractors, old utes and trapping rabbits. To be able to revisit the place in another time and for another purpose has been of great interest to me. For some time I have been intrigued with the notion of the panorama or the vista and the wheatbelt has become the ideal site. I have chosen to work with large scale drawing in an attempt to deal with this endless space.

The works [drawings + paintings], are a iconic personal response [with use of local land marks used as metaphor], to issues of land use, crop rotation, salinity and the disappearance of families in the area. Additionally, issues of sustainability, salt and land erosion, the 'garden' landscape and quality of life V standard of living are all further consequences of settlement of this region.

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My recent art work maps a personal reaction to trips made into the NW wheat belt, during the period 2000 – 2002. I present this talk with an introduction of memories from early adolescence, through to the present day realities and connections with the port of Fremantle, and the trading commodities of grain livestock and machinery.

Slide 1 – typical view of w/belt from a car

Some of my earliest memories of this part of WA - the wheatbelt - are of family trips to visit some of my fathers war comrades, who had now settled in the wheatbelt as part of the federal governments war settlement schemes. These farms were allocated on 'marginal' low rainfall areas of the wheatbelt [Wyalkatchem, Dalwallinu districts], and in retrospect, were often new land, that required clearing of the trees and scrub, and the addition of massive amounts of fertiliser – superphosphate and so on.

My father had previous experience of these areas – as a £10 pom in 1930 from the industrial Lancashire city of St. Helen's he had worked for a French count in the Wyalkatchem area. Here he had ploughed the land with a team of horses.

We travelled in a succession of cars, all of which were British technology [remember this was the 1950's] – a Vauxhall, Jowett Javelin, Morris Minor utility...they all resented the long, hot trips, even in the May school holidays, and registered their protests by overheating, burst tires and other minor break downs. I remember that my father determinedly eschewed the Australian vehicle technology of the Holden, and likewise the American Ford, felt they were overpowered and inferior to his choice of 4 cylinder British motor vehicles.

Slide 2 - Pic of Jowett Javelin

Quote from the Jowett Javelin web site:

“...Its aerodynamics were not exceeded until 1983. It had a top speed of 78mph with good roadholding and its performance was at least 10 mph faster than other comparable cars of the day.”

Slide 3 - Morris Minor Utility

I learnt to drive in the Morris Minor utility during 1964. My father allowed me to chauffer him on these trips to the wheatbelt, teaching me to drive with caution, and to drop the car out of gear down the long low hills, in order to up the petrol consumption. You only put the car back into top gear when the speed dropped to below 20MPH.

Slide 4 - Volkswagen

My father purchased a Volkswagen in the mid sixties, with of course an air cooled engine, and overheating problems were finally a thing of the past. This I also drove on those expeditions, and again we always kept a log of the petrol consumption, which could subsequently be gloated over. I seem to remember that we had some enviable petrol consumption figures, even though the trips were by necessity, slow.

Slides 5 + 6 + 7: Pics of typical wheatbelt

I spent my time on these trips gazing from the car windows at all that space, and when arriving at the farm, would then engage in the blood lust pursuits of the young adolescent by trapping rabbits, roo shooting and on one occasion the execution of a litter of kittens. I also was able to drive old farm utes, ancient tractors, and anything else that I could get my inexperienced hands on.

I quote from David Bromfield's essay " Paul Moncrieff and the Road to paradise"

The land itself is shaped by all that has happened in it. This country has been farmed for more than 80 years, every feature marks a struggle, joy or disaster. To diagram, draw or paint what one sees requires a passionate eye, a willingness to follow the folds of memory, as carefully as the contours of the hills.

Consequently, I find myself drawn to the wheatbelt in later life. There is something about all that space, the farm 'garden' organisation, the signs of endeavour, and the changing seasons that appeals. I no longer indulge in blood letting, in fact, those early experiences of maiming and eventually killing animals cured me of any urge to develop and enhance the hunter gatherer instincts....except with fishing, but that is another story.

Slides 8 + 9 + 10 + 11: Pics of Ballidu

I was able to indulge this interest for and with the wheatbelt via a residency project that I undertook between 2000 – 2002. I was invited to work on a project in the district of Ballidu. A small town of around 50 – 100 inhabitants, it boasts 3 churches, 1 pub, 2 stores, an airstrip, post office, gallery and variety of agricultural support businesses. In other words, a minor centre for the agricultural industry.

Pics of landscape:

- 12 Wongon Hills**
- 13 Nature reserve**
- 14 Tree**
- 15 Rocks**
- 16 Salt Lake**
- 17 Dams**
- 18 Hay bales at harvest time**
- 19 Harvest machinery - header**
- 20 Dams + salt lake**
- 21 Burnt fields ready for next planting**
- 22 O'Briens lookout at the Wongon Hills**

I spent my time there driving [a modern Ford Courier 4WD, and more recently, a Falcon utility!] and walking around the district, documenting the various local landmarks,

throughout the cycle of seasons. This selection of landmarks included the Wongon Hills, trees, rock outcrops, salt lakes, dams and ploughed, cropped and harvested fields.

Pics of drawings

- 23 Pencil drawing, view from Wongon Hills**
- 24 Agricultural vista, Wongon Hills Agricultural research station**
- 25 Agriculture, Day + Night.**

I became intrigued with the notion of the panorama, and concentrated my work in recording / drawing and photographing select slabs of the region, and developing large scale drawings that for me, was a personal distillation of the area wheatbelt, rather than an exact recording of the specific locale.

Slides 26 + 27 + 28: Pics of Panorama / vista photographs

Pic of panorama drawing:

- 29 Panorama Plan drawing**
- 30 Panorama Plan - paint + pencil**
- 31 Large Panorama**

Quote from David Bromfield:

The ten panel panoramic view of Ballidu country is built from a seemingly endless range of small marks, lines blunt and sharp that have settled over the scene like a net of recollection, tiny points where memory touches and shapes the scene. Each panel contains an incident, an encounter with the life lived here At one end beams

prop a shaded sagging structure, a stack woven from cobwebs of dark line. Next to it are panels showing the harvest, spiral stooks and bales, laid out across striped and textured fields. At the other are rock piles, a crossroads wedged into a quilt of paddocks. Framed by life and death, the panorama 'reviews' day and night, the passing seasons in the country.

Slides 32 + 33 + 34: Pics of salt lakes

Pics of salt drawings:

- 35 Salt drawing**
- 36 Scrub drawing**
- 37 Rock + Salt lake drawing**
- 38 Tree Rock Dam and Wongon Hills drawing.**

Ballidu is a farming area that concentrates on grain and sheep, a typical agricultural production region that has been settled for less than 100 years. The signs of salt degradation are everywhere, and I would expect that all land holdings have significant amounts of salt degraded land. In fact, often the best and earliest cleared land, most arable and valleys are now salt pans and lakes...this is in evidence everywhere.

Farmer's battle with this problem, and with the aid of agricultural crop research, are still able to produce efficiently increased quantities of grain, when, of course, the season is kind. Programmes of salt reclamation are constantly being undertaken, and ironically, many farmers now, as a matter of course, plant out thousands of trees around salt affected land. These programmes are costly, and I anticipate [and indeed, has been signalled by the agricultural industry and [some] politicians alike] that it is the major human made challenge facing Australia in the near future.

Slide 39: Pic death of an Interior

Quote from David Bromfield:

Death of an Interior echoes the knife sharp, dark shadows that fall across the centre section of the panorama, country split and ruptured by salt. Shadows appear only through violent pressure that congeals shiny impenetrable graphite, light filled paddocks require only careful tender caresses. Silhouettes of words slowly soak to the surface of the skein of marks like salt, a metaphor for the inevitable inscriptions of human presence. Dotted red lines suggest hidden shapes, diagrammed longing, unrealised plans or the ghostly residue of times past, desires fulfilled or denied.

Whilst meandering my way around the Ballidu district over a period of 2 years, I had the opportunity to consider some of these problems, and, if you like, come up with some of my own 'dream' like solutions.

Slide 40: landlocked

I now live in East Fremantle, and therefore have daily access to the Port of Fremantle. I started to consider the link between our vast inland areas, the 'sea of grain', and the export of commodities and import of value added goods, machinery and the like. Grain is stored at silos in the wheat belt and then [by train], shunted to convenient ports around the coast.

Slide 41: Harboured

Quote from David Bromfield:

Occasionally as in Harboured or Landlocked great ships loom across the wheat fields mysteriously borne from their moorings at Fremantle. This is a common enough metaphor, land as ocean inspired by wind blown stalks waving in the wind. In his letters from Arles, van Gogh refers to a panorama of wheat fields as a sea. Like Van Gogh Moncrieff also understands the image as an icon of universal desire. Moncrieff's boats however are stranded, lost in a land corroded by salt, a dream destroyed by greed. Such scenes abound for real around the Aral Sea. Moncrieff may have dreamed our future. More likely though the essential life giving link between paddock and container ship has emerged as a single coherent memory one of the necessary fantasy images of real life.

Slide 42: Pink ship + sheep protest sign

I have an ongoing interest in the comings and goings of container ships in the Port of Fremantle. If we consider the wheat bins as the container ships of the land, then we may also consider that container ships are the wheat bins of the sea.

Slide 43: Pink ship stretched

These massive container ships trundle in and out of the port, on and off loading commodity, largesse for our ever increasing obsession with consumption goods.

Pics of harbour series:

Slide 44: Drawing – death of an Interior

Slide 45: Drawing – Mined Denim

Death of an Interior makes the link between the port and incoming container vessels, and the sea of grain in the wheatbelt. The pressure exists in our grain

producing farming community, to provide ever increasing, efficiently produced product for export to neat Asian and European communities.

This series of drawings of ships and the port ponder the link between the wheatbelt and the export culture:

Slide 46: Coal mines in the sky

- holds contain embedded fields of grain,

Slide 47: Crises Cruises

- sea creatures, which appear malformed or mutated float under container vessels,
- the night fish floats under the indistinct outlines of a container vessel, is it a menace, affected by the ship floating above, or is it oblivious to these events.

Why not halve this transportation, and build a series of canals into the wheat belt, allowing grain and sheep ships to onload in country centres.

Consider the benefits:

- Salt infested areas could be pumped out into the canals, thereby regenerating the current unusable land.
- New ports could conceivably spring up in centres like Ballidu.
- Inland country centres would develop large cities, with increased service facilities, and encourage new housing developments away from the over utilised coastal strip, and our capital city...a viable decentralisation of population.
- Imagine the boon to tourism with the possibilities of inland cruises, canal house barges, not forgetting the arresting sight of large ocean going ships docked at Ballidu.

Maybe the new settlers dream of a vast, inland sea can prove to be more than just a dream.

Paul Moncrieff February 2004

