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Place Making: some reflections on Western Australian art Practice

Abstract

The concept of 'sense of place' has been a dominant theme within the history of Western Australian art. Since the earliest colonial records, artists have responded to the local environment either in the form of historical documentation or as personal articulation, seeking to capture a moment in time and an understanding of the uniqueness of the location.

This paper examines the work of three Western Australian women artists within the context of a sense of place. Underpinning this investigation is an understanding that place is not just a geographical location but rather the loci of human activity and significance. As Tilly notes 'places (are) contexts for human experience, constructed in movement, memory, encounter and association.'¹ In the first instance, the paper considers the *Panorama of the Swan River Settlement* by Jane Currie as an example of a colonial women's view of her place in the world. It then explores the work of two contemporary artists, Holly Story and Elsje van Keppel (King) whose practices emerge from craft traditions. In discussing these artists and their work, the paper explores a number of themes intertwined in place making and the lived experiences of women. While for Holly Story, place making involves a consideration of the role of women, home and domestic arts in the project of colonisation, for Elsje van Keppel, it is an exploration of the very phenomena of being in the Western Australian bush.

Biography

Dr Ann Schilo is a senior lecturer in the Department of Art in the Faculty of Built Environment Art and Design. Currently she is Chair of the Faculty's Research and Creative Production Committee. Ann lectures in Visual Culture and is the supervisor of a number of postgraduate students. Her research interests include Western Australian visual culture, feminist art theory and criticism and folk material culture. More recently, she is working on a history of Western Australian craft practices in the second half of the twentieth century.

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Imagine, after spending most of your life amidst the stinking, grey detritus of the modern city, finding yourself literally at the other end of the world, where the horizon seems to go on forever, linking the impossible blue dome of heaven with the vast azure of sea, and around you, a sweep of land with vegetation the like of which you have never seen. Yet, there is something of this place that you wish to commend to the visual historical record. As Joan Kerr notes, Jane Currie's *Panorama of the Swan River Settlement* (1830 – 32) was 'done in perfect consciousness of creating a significant historical document, recording the beginnings of British settlement in this extremely distant part of the world.' (Kerr, 1995;188) My interest in this work is not just that it is one of the earliest colonial women's views of the area, but more so how she has pictured the place.

The format, 26 x 304.8 cm, allows Currie to create the sense of horizontality that pervades the feeling of being in this particular place in the world. The problem of representing the vastness of space is resolved through the panoramic vision. According to Casey, a popular form of representation in the nineteenth century, the panoramic painting 'was an effort to re-create this very situation of being continually encompassed and exceeded by a given landscape.'² On one hand, Currie's representation is a topographical rendition, depicting rudimentary buildings dotted amongst identifiable landforms (even today), indicative of the reach of the British Empire. On the other hand, and to my mind foremost in her visualisation, is the experience of being a woman in the landscape. Although she struggles to render the unruly vegetation, she identifies the space with domesticity. She hangs her washing on the line to dry; a simple statement that proclaims the freshness of the air, the welcome breeze of the Fremantle Doctor³, and the civilising influence of the colonial woman at home. It is an act of place making.

The concept of place making hinges upon the understanding that place is not solely a geographical location, rather:

Knowledge of place stems from human experiences, feeling and thought... (places) have primary ontological significance as centres of bodily activity, human significance and emotional attachment.... People are immersed in a world of places which the geographical imagination aims to understand and recover - places as contexts for human experience, constructed in movement, memory, encounter and association.⁴

As Currie grapples with the colours and forms of the Western Australian landscape, she also immerses herself in her experiences, her bodily engagement with the land. She is creating and recreating her being in the world. It is as much a representation of what she sees as an exploration of her own cultural position. Tilly continues, arguing that 'place is an irreducible part of human experience, a person is 'in place' just as much as she or he is 'in culture'. Place is about situatedness in relation to identity and action.'⁵ For Currie, such 'situatedness' is implicated in her social position as the wife of a colonial harbourmaster with all its trappings of proper behaviour. Her understanding of the place, Swan River Settlement is both the vision before her eyes and the envisaging of her colonial station in life, her identity as a woman in a remote location, attending to her daily living as best she can.

Since Currie's panorama, 'sense of place'⁶ has been a key consideration for artists working in Western Australia. Successive generations have fabricated their version of the Western Australian landscape. For the most part, it has been a history played out through the field of vision and the conventions of landscape painting. From early twentieth century artists like Herbert Gibbs and James W.R. Linton, through to the modernists like Harald Vike and Elise Blumann and to late twentieth century artists such as Robert Juniper and Howard Taylor, most have focused on colour and light in their quest for portraying the particularities of place. Rather than extrapolate on these changes in depiction, in this paper, I wish to consider the concept of place making, as it is formulated in the work of two contemporary women artists whose art emerges from craft traditions. What draws me to the work of Holly Story and Elsje van Keppel (King) is that through their artistic practices they attend to the 'situatedness' of their own conditions of place making. Like Currie, both artists are immigrants, white folk who have arrived in this place with their vision and sensibilities already coloured by European models. And also like Currie, within their work there is a perceptible affection for the land and a response that is grounded in their lived experience as women. While for Story, place making involves a consideration of the roles of women, home and domestic arts in the project of colonisation, for van Keppel, it is an exploration of the very phenomena of being in the Western Australian bush.

Stokowski contends that:

The concept of 'sense of place' typically is used to refer to an individual's ability to develop feelings of attachment to particular settings based on a combination of use, attentiveness, and emotion..... places are more than simply geographic sites –they are also fluid, changeable, dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory, and they 'contain' overt and covert social practices that embed in place making behaviours notions of ideology, power, control, conflict, dominance, and distribution of social and physical resources. ⁷

In her more recent exhibitions, *Fancywork* (2000) and *Land-marks* (2002), Story explores the complexities in place making that combine her own 'feelings of attachment to a particular setting' with an articulation of those 'overt and covert social practices that embed in place making behaviours notions of ideology, power, control'. The works grow from Story's own history as a migrant in Western Australia and the exploration of her 'relationship with this landscape. Because I was not born here in Australia it has become an obsession to understand how I come to feel at home where at first I felt so out of place.'⁸

The result of research undertaken in the South-West of Western Australia, under the auspices of an Australia Council Grant, *Fancywork* 'presents the familiar imagery of domestic embroidery in a new context, layering the known over the unknown, invoking feelings of longing, dislocation and strangeness experienced when negotiating arrival in a different place'.⁹ The exhibition featured seven large-scale embroideries worked over photographic imagery of specific sites in Western Australia which are of importance for Story, places of attachment and fond memories. The overlaid motifs are gleaned from heritage embroideries from women whose families settled in those specific locations. Within these works, Story highlights both individual and collective acts of place making. They are an investigation of her own socio-cultural position and her personal response to the landscape of Western Australia, as well as a consideration of how her story configures in a larger history of other women immigrants who have arrived on this shore to make a home for themselves.

An embroidered rose, the European ideal of floral beauty, boldly adorns a local banksia bush. Rows of neatly arranged carrots are ploughed over grass trees. Heraldic lions claw their way over mallee scrubland. A floral cottage garden shelters under a giant tuart tree and, without touching the ground, Dolly Varden eerily strolls over pastureland. The juxtaposition between the two forms of representation

creates a disjunctive space that points to cultural displacement. Such motifs are out of context, foreign objects competing for space with native species. In this way, Story questions the European habitation of this country, the repositioning of European mores and the often devastating impact of imported agricultural schemes and other practices onto local, indigenous knowledge.

The site of these conflicts is the domestic setting. At the heart of settlement is the need and desire to establish a home, to 'tame the wilds' and to make a place for oneself in the world. Imported from nineteenth century European ideals of women's social and cultural responsibility, domestic arts play a crucial role in this endeavour. While on the surface, seemingly simple things like an embroidered tablecloth, a crocheted doily, or a tapestry cushion cover are evocative tokens of a comfortable life, that all is right on the home front, at the same time they are important signs that the womenfolk are maintaining and fostering the principles of good housekeeping and home management. They are engaged in place making. Yet, these objects also belie the often harsh conditions faced by many of these women, eking out a living in a foreign land. Their embroidery work, through the inherited techniques and the repeated motifs of European flowers, cottages or crinoline-clad women, not only traces their memories of the land of their birth and the succour of an extended family left behind, but also enables them to make sense of their surroundings, to feel at home in an often alien landscape. They surround themselves with the familiar to lessen the feelings of estrangement. As an artist whose work emerges from textile traditions, Story displays both a professional interest in, and an affection for, women's needlecraft as well as an understanding of the circumstances of place making from her own experiences as an immigrant woman.

Land-marks continues the project of place making, but while *Fancywork* focuses upon displacement and unease, *Land-marks* indicates a move to reconciliation. Through the use of resins and dyes from Western Australian plants in combination with European embroidery motifs and quilt patterns, Story creates works in which local and imported knowledges sit compatibly alongside each other. Whereas in *Fancywork*, the motifs foreground dislocation and an unstable presence, in *Land-marks*, cloth, motif, resins and dyes bleed into each other to form a patchwork of image and colour harmonies. No longer at odds with her place in the world, Story recognises and celebrates her European cultural heritage within the context of an acquired love of the bush. Her work is a response and a responding to her emplacement in which place is an irreducible part of human experience. As Philip Sheldrake notes:

"place" refers not simply to geographical location but also to a dialectical relationship between environment and narrative. "Place" is any space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious. It evokes a distinctive sense of "thisness" or particularity ... (which) is most clearly expressed in the language of *haecceitas* in Duns Scotus. "We need to think about where we are and what is unique and special about our surrounding so that we can better understand ourselves and how we relate to others."¹⁰

For van Keppel, the 'thisness' of place underpins her work as seen in *Fragile Objects*, her major solo exhibition from 1997:

The objects she makes are the result of experience in the natural world. They reflect qualities within the landscape. Similarly, they reflect human qualities. She is sensitive to the feelings of separation from the world of nature, and to the modern alienation from nature, from body and our natural selves. In representing nature in her work, she represents her own precarious existence in the physical world. Existence itself is a process, a continuum, paralleled by the continual accumulation of experience.¹¹

For van Keppel, place making is the concentrated attention to a particular place, in a particular time. Her artistic process is very much about being in the moment. Working in situ in the bush, she attends to the detail of the world about her, taking rubbings of rocks, grasses, bark or spinifex. The resultant works are an accretion of the specificity of place and the narrative of her engagement with it. The marks on surfaces are the direct experience of her immediate surroundings. The fabrics are dyed in baths in the bush, using the local native plants to produce colours that are authentic hues, born of the setting. The overlaying stitches are traces of her memories of sites. The body of the artist responds to the immediacy of her place in the world, seeking a presentation of the uniqueness of its location and the lived experience of being there. Place, process, artist and artwork operate in a dialectical relationship.

I am reminded here of French philosopher, Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendent. Irigaray critiques Western philosophical traditions and the resultant separation of mind from body, a split

between rational behaviour, logic and reason and the emotional, unexpected, often disruptive realm of sensations. She alerts us to the patriarchal order of knowledge and power that privileges mind over body, order over chaos, culture over nature with the masculine codified in the objective rational realm of intellectualised reality and the feminine bound to the sphere of matter and materiality. For her such gendering of knowledge disavows other ways of being in the world and hampers the development of the whole human being. She contends that within Western metaphysics, the discourses concerning ‘who am I?’ and ‘what is my place in the cosmos?’ emphasis is placed on conceptual thought – an abstracted reasoning of one’s relationship to the world. It is always out there, beyond, at a remove from being. In such a framework, place making is an intellectualised endeavour.

Instead, Irigaray

prioritizes touch as a sense that can hint at ...the divine beyond. This emphasis brings us back to our own bodies in a very personal way. Touching upon the world brings into awareness not just the world’s proximity but the world’s proximity to us. It leaves us no room for situating ourselves at one step removed.¹²

Through the incorporation of a corporeal knowledge, a way of knowing that embraces bodily being in the world through the organ of touch, the separation of mind /body can be subverted. We can situate ourselves fully within our world as a sensing, thinking being; we can inhabit our sense of place.

When we look to the work of van Keppel this ‘sensible transcendence’ is evident. Through touch, the inexpressible of nature becomes manifest. The qualities of the material, the fabric that she uses immediately call to mind tactile sensibilities. Through her working methodology, van Keppel integrates the elements of touch. She touches the landscape with materials. She touches the cloths with stitch. The dyes seep and swallow the fabric areas. She cuts, assembles, reconstructs, fabric on fabric. With each act, the materiality, the matter, the substance of her work is ever present. And thus, for her place making is an intimate bodily interaction with the world. It is, as Sheldrake comments in relation to Dun Scotus, about ‘*haecceitas* (“thisness”) in the belief that an individual thing is immediately knowable by the intellect in union with the senses.’¹³ In attending to the minutiae of place, to its particularity, van Keppel employs both the senses and the intellect to articulate ‘the local and universal dimensions of place’.¹⁴ Her work is a picturing of her being in the Western Australian bush as well as the representation of her mortality, her place in existence.

The works of Story and van Keppel (King) offer ways of considering the concept of sense of place within Western Australian art history. Both artists’ practices emerge from craft traditions and hence are informed by its histories and techniques. They respond to the local environment through the elements of textile arts – embroidery, stitch, dyes, fabrics, patterns, cloth and so forth. Thus their work is not solely a visual depiction of what is before them, but rather a layering of textures and textile constructions of their experience of being within the specific location of Western Australia. They work with local materials such as dyes and resins wrought from regional plants to create works which resonate the uniqueness of their environs.

Implicated in these craft traditions are the roles of women as producers of objects and knowledges. Both artists are fully aware of the gendered specificity of their practices and use their awareness to valorise and amplify women’s contribution to culture. For Story, this is achieved through an analysis of the role of women and their domestic arts in the act of settlement, as well as a consideration of her own position as a woman artist practicing in Western Australia. For van Keppel, it is through the extension of traditional techniques such as quilt making, spinning and weaving to evoke women’s participation in culture through their manufacture of cloth. By situating themselves within the histories of craft/art production and calling to attention the particularities of the local environment, these two artists envisage in their work their own sense of place, a place that is the loci of human experience and situatedness.

¹ Tilly, C., *A Phenomenology of Landscape Places, Paths and Monuments*, Berg, Oxford, 1994, p 15.

² Casey, E.S., *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, Minneapolis, p 8.

³ The fresh westerly wind that blows off the ocean is known locally as the Fremantle Doctor. It provides welcome relief to the heat of the day during the summer months.

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- ⁴ Tilly, C., *A Phenomenology of Landscape Places, Paths and Monuments*, Berg, Oxford, 1994, p 18.
- ⁵ Tilly, C., *A Phenomenology of Landscape Places, Paths and Monuments*, Berg, Oxford, 1994, p 15.
- ⁶ In Western Australia, the term 'sense of place' was coined in 1976 with the publication of George Sneddon's seminal text *Sense of Place* in which he presented a detailed geographical analysis of the landforms, flora and fauna of the Perth region. It is still highly regarded today for its environmental concerns in understanding of the uniqueness of the locale.
- ⁷ Stokowski, P., 'Languages of place and discourses of power: constructing new senses of place' in *Journal of Leisure Research, Fall Vol. 34; 14, 2002*, p 368.
- ⁸ Story, H. (2002) *Land-marks* Catalogue of exhibition Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra, Nov. 1-16, np.
- ⁹ Schilo, A., *Fancywork: Embroidery and the Texture of Place. New Work By Holly Story* Visual Culture Research Unit, Curtin University of Technology, Perth., 2000, p 1.
- ¹⁰ Sheldrake, P., 'Human Identity and the Particularity of Place' in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1.1, 2001 p 43.
- ¹¹ O'Brien, P. (1997) *Elsje King: Fragile Objects* Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft, Perth, 1997, p 15.
- ¹² Lorraine, T. (1999) *Irigaray and Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1999, p 87.
- ¹³ Sheldrake, P., 'Human Identity and the Particularity of Place' in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1.1, 2001 p 58.
- ¹⁴ Sheldrake, P., 'Human Identity and the Particularity of Place' in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1.1, 2001 p 61.

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