

EVIDENCE OF SCALE III

Rod Moss 2023



All Weathers Abide Within Me, the Torrid, Transparent and Untamed, 2022, 110 x 165 cm

Newcomers to *Mparntwe/* Alice Springs are stunned by its visuals. Amateur and professional artists feast on its topographic variety so at variance with most settings. Though the social scene just cited took precedence in my work I was mindful of the environmental impact colonisation visited upon our country. Coincident with 1960s readings about First Peoples were warnings about Climate Change and our overpopulated world.

It has wrought cataclysmic disasters across the planet, species loss, warming oceans, fires and floods of great magnitude and increasing frequency. The Covid pandemic forced many denialists to temper or revise opinions. Indeed the above events have given new-found credence to long-held indigenous practices that nurture the ground on which we stand. As the scale and timelessness of climate collapse disrupts food security and causes mass migrations the bell tolls for us all.

With these factors in mind I started describing the country which I share with Arrernte families, and walked, camped and hunted over during the decades. This was the country that held the stories and law crucial to Arrernte well-being.

While some drawings and paintings acknowledge places of Arrernte significance their deeper meaning in law and supporting networks remain the property of the initiated. Yet they help me identify with vibrant energies once shared with the many friends no longer here.

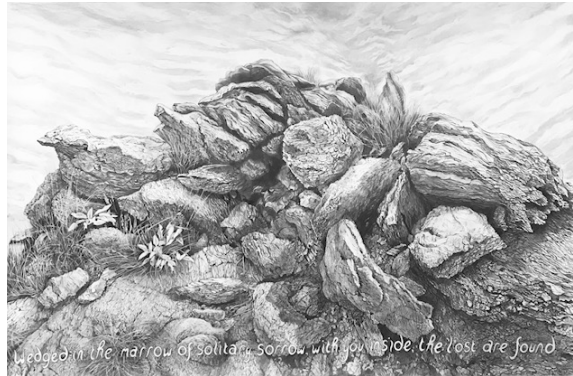
For coastal dwelling Australians the arid zone is a foreign country. Great space is the game changer with pollutant free air and unparalleled lucidity. Such exposure can be intimidating. Though bearing huge botanical variety, trees, shrubs and grasses prosper at discrete distance from each other. The place is like a magnificent, thoughtfully planted garden.

The unpredictability of rain is an abiding fact of desert dwelling. Few places experience the dramatic transformation following a downfall. Insects, frogs, birds, mammals, flourish. Flowers burst forth. Shrubs blossom. Grasses resurrect the greening world. This drama of weather, the powerful luminescence, the antiquity of rocks, these heighten my insignificance. Drawing is my means of entering their magnitude.

When beginning to chart locations to draw like a parched finch I gravitated to water places where my family swam and camped after good rains. *Lyalthel/* Wigleys Waterhole was a prime spot, as were *Atherreyurre(euro dreaming)/* the Telegraph Station and *Anthwerrke/*Emily Gap. These prime *kwatye alaye/* water locations are foundational in Arrernte stories tying together numerous associations with other water dependant lives.

Slowly, generationally, we discover means to express and explain ourselves to the circumstances of our arising. I reside in country that has been fully accounted for by the Arrernte. They read its complexity with understanding that

could only arise from a relationship of symbiosis millennia in the making. Stories and namings embed life-sustaining meaning to the country; stories that humanise and thus, befriend the country. Stories are celebrated and memorised, embodied through song and dance on both a grand and specific scale. Do not to forget from where you came.



Wedged in the Marrow of Solitary Sorrow, with You Inside the Lost are Found, 2023, 122 x 187 cm

The drawings of country, like the popular 'dot dot' paintings are acts of befriending and belonging, which I, dependant on sustenance delivered from afar and 'only yesterday' in Arrernte parlance, aspire to through drawing; intimate earth portraits, though plucked from nature's chaotic abundance that seek to show the organic rhythms undergirding all life.

While not abandoning abstraction I opt to keep close to the ground, prioritising the concrete and particular. It's the concrete that is truly complex. The sense of the tangible and sensuous lies at the heart of my aesthetics, a realism consistent with paintings derived from Whitegate experiences. As with the paintings for the most part, I eschewed endistancing panoramas. Close up and personal was my creed.

Our love for country hopefully arises from active commitment and openness to its many manifestations. That it engages in visceral exchange empathising with the loss of plant and animal species with the same profundity we experience with the loss of family, friends or pets. It may not be obvious to the untrained eye how our culture has impacted this arid zone other than the well publicised corruption of water sources, buffel and Love grass numbering amongst instances causing Aboriginal grief. So much for schoolboy memories of McKellar's romantic love for her sunburt country. The sun still burns though increasing urbanisation has rendered such sentiments impotent or in need of re-evaluation in the face of our warming planet. For urbanites images of country are 'out there', delivered by television and social media.

Whatever impact rabbits, cats, sheep, goats, horses, donkeys, camels and cattle have had on the environment I leave to those better informed. Pastoral leases granted to settlers in the late C19 were the most dramatic cause of frontier conflict. Herds and flocks were given priority over the Arrernte and other desert groups most precious resource. There was little choice but to assemble at missions or engage in the stockwork on Stations that had so abruptly compromised their lives. Additionally, as tarred roads replace dirt tracks the spread of introduced weeds accelerates.

It was soon after Ronja's 1988 birth when McKellar's poem flashed before me while chatting with one of the Neal brothers. He was shoeless. That wasn't so remarkable in the context of his family at Whitegate town camp. What drew my attention were the scores of *yerre*/small black ants, undeterred by his presence, continuing their hurried journey en route across his bare feet.

"Don't the ants bother you?' I asked

'No. I not frighten of my country, Rod.' Christopher was momentarily confused by my question and after a brief pause added, 'I love my country.'

That openness, that embrace said something distinct from sentimental attachment or some idealistic notion of love of country, the kind I associate with the jingoistic love of country often attending recitations of our national anthem, for instance. His utterance carried total conviction, his body literally placed on the line in a way difficult for me to fathom.

Which brings me to rocks. Certain scenes pull my attention for their summaries of shape, texture, scale and so on. They might present as drawings but they are not drawings. Only work makes drawings. And through the care of construction, cumulative caresses, touchings, tender or vigorous, art might also triumph and love emerge.

Rocks have always had their way with me. They manifest the history of the planet, capturing eternal antiquity, simultaneously distant and urgent, surrounding yet fleeing. As a child they weren't in my eucalypt and fern environment. However the giant granite boulders at Shiprock Falls north of Gembrook and majestic massifs forming Mounts Bishop and Oberon at Wilsons Promontory were regular destinations and subjects of adolescent doodlings. They prompted geological imagination, pondering the 4.5 billion years since our planet's fiery origins. Was I attributing sentience to rocks by calling them bold and muscular while forming an aesthetic of sensuous embodiment?

While these were settled, frozen things, the rock riddled ranges near home and up Todd River's headwaters suggested a dynamic still unfolding. Here I identified with an elementary convulsion. If those old southern granites were timeless, here I perceived urgency. Rush and vortex constellated in the raw conglomerate of sandstone, gneiss and jagged quartz. Scant vegetation gives ready access to these qualities. Rocks thrive.

Arne artetye/mulga proliferates in central Australia with *apere*/red gum eucalyptus clinging to creeks and rivers to tap subterranean water. Together with spinifex and the ever-expanding buffel grass they provide fuel for summer's lightning strikes. Each fire event causes species loss. Soils are left exposed and vulnerable to erosion. Chemical restructuring occurs below surface. The scrubby trees on higher ground and those with protective bark like *untyeeye*/corkwood mostly survive. Others adapted to fire regime soon regenerate. Within a week buffel shoots poke through the charred soil.