

Michael Hall *Bushfire 2*, 2009, ink jet print,  
100 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Bonita Ely *Murray River Punch* 1980  
Performance, Rundle Street Mall, Adelaide  
Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

## The Challenged Landscape

20 April - 21 May 2010

Nici Cumpston  
Ruby Davies  
Bonita Ely  
Michael Hall  
Peter Solness  
Stephanie Valentin  
Curated by Sandy Edwards

### Accompanying free public program

**Opening night performance** by Bonita Ely *Murray River Punch - the 21st Century*  
Tuesday 20 April 7pm

**Yarning Circle** with Nici Cumpston  
Wednesday 21 April 12.30 -2pm

**Panel Discussion** with Professor Stuart White, Professor Heather Goodall,  
Ruby Davies and Asa Wahlquist, chaired by Tania Leimbach.  
Thursday 20 May 3-4.30pm

Supported by UTS:Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning,  
UTS:Transforming Cultures, UTS:Institute of Sustainable Futures

Printed 100% recycled paper



Head On Photo Festival  
29 April - 5 June 2010

In conjunction  
with ARTHERE



UTS Gallery supported by Oyster Bay Wines  
and Coopers Brewery. Media partner: 2ser

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# UTS GALLERY



## The Challenged Landscape

20 April - 21 May 2010

## THE CHALLENGED LANDSCAPE

The task assigned to artists by Samuel Beckett to “find a form that accommodates the mess” is realised in the discipline and process of the photographers presented in *The Challenged Landscape*. Their work reflects a kind of porous environmental dialogue needed in these current times. It’s something akin to growing the capacity to hold attention long enough to take a reading.

Michael Hall’s depictions of drought and fire-ravaged landscapes are underscored by the arresting beauty with which they are captured on film. Forming part of an ongoing documentation of the effects of climate change in various parts of the world, Hall’s work, in his words aims to “present the viewer with an immediate visual truth.”

Peter Solness and Stephanie Valentin’s work draw upon natural curiosity as they expose the complex and uncertain human relationship with the natural world through eerie, poetic and at times wondrous images.

Combined, Nici Cumpston, Bonita Ely and Ruby Davies offer portraits of an exhausted river system. Beyond the momentary media release, these photographs extend over many years and across vast country. Gradual reveals are made through a steady relationship with place and the construction of almost ritualised processes within their practice.

The work of these three artists in particular suggests that it takes humility to come to know a river, particularly one as vast and changeable as the Murray-Darling. A river

embraces many variables, with natural alterations over the course of months and years. Floods flow into bone-dry lakes; droughts persist and then are broken – particularly in Australia where climatic patterns have always been extreme.

In contemporary reality, there is a long list of anthropogenic factors stressing river health. The impact of which include significant decline in aquatic biodiversity, widespread salinity, erosion and sediment build up, excessive nutrients, blue-green algal blooms, and invasive exotic species. These impacts are magnified in the southern states, aligned with perhaps the most concerning emerging tension – climate change. The devastating effects of which will be compounded across the world by our misuse of water.

Under the forensic lens of Cumpston, Nookamka Lake, linked to the Murray in the Riverland country of South Australia, becomes a site of sunken histories. Her photographs reveal the effects of salination, pollution, the drowning of red river gums and unsustainable water usage on the majestic lake. In addition, the images present Indigenous threads both visible and invisible. Research traced by Cumpston uncovered historical accounts of the lake. “While building the northern approach to the bridge, the bones of hundreds of natives were unearthed and used in the structure.” (Donkin 2009). On further examination the burial grounds have in fact been confirmed as massacre sites. These past offences, compounded with the

existing ecological reality offer a bitter and terrible beauty, captured in Cumpston’s meticulous photographs.

Since the mid 1990s, Davies’ photographs have exposed the social, environmental and economic dimensions of access in the Darling Basin. Large-scale irrigation to grow predominantly ‘virtual’ commodities for export raises issues of right ownership, distribution and the broad impact of world-market economies. Intensive agricultural practices require massive amounts of water, a challenge in this drought-prone region.

In *Water as life: The town of Wilcannia and the Darling / Baaka*, a wide cross-section of the community willingly gathered for Davies. Positioned across the dry, sandy riverbed, people of this inland community had seen no water for a record twelve months. A waterless river goes to the heart of deeply seated community beliefs and attitudes. Even with the long recognised degradation of Australia’s rivers, it remains shocking to see dried out rivers and wetlands. Along with the Murray-Darling, there is a list of major rivers across the world, such as the Colorado (USA), the Nile (Egypt), the Yellow River (China) which, for the most part no longer meet the sea.

In handling the extremity of neglect, Australia is “apparently undergoing a paradigm shift in river health management ... most obvious in Southern Australia, where ‘river health for all’ has transformed to ‘life support systems’, ‘triage’ and ‘saving icons with expensive technological fixes’.”

(Schofield 2010). This is a bleak situation, where hope for return to broad-scale health is unattainable, despite increased co-ordinated efforts.

A river is an amalgam of history, culture, agriculture and community. This was brought home to an unsuspecting audience in *Murray River Punch*. First performed in 1980 in Adelaide’s Rundle Mall, the artist, Ely, served up the forgotten waste of the Murray. An environment not often cast for delicate irony, Ely’s domestic role-play delivered a wicked brew of toxic chemicals. A concoction of fertilisers, animal waste, sewage discharge, phosphorous and nitrogen, all of which streams down the Murray-Darling to the coast, not a far distance from the Mall.

Perhaps these actions and images will help to galvanise action, an ambitious contingency plan, or at least elicit a further recognition of the balancing act we are in. The response will likely sit somewhere between overwhelm and complacency. The artist is not responsible either way: their role rests in taking a reading and finding the form, bringing it forth with integrity. The rest is in our hands.

## Tania Leimbach, 2010

### References:

Barlow, M. and T. Clarke (2002). *Blue gold : the fight to stop the corporate theft of the world’s water*. New York, New Press.

Donkin, T. and Sumner, V. (2009). *Riverland Weekly*

Lippard, L. R. (1997). *The lure of the local : senses of place in a multicentered society*. New York, New Press.

Schofield, N. (2010). ‘Australia wide assessment of river health.’ *Journal of the Australian Water Association*.

## ARTIST BIOS

**NICI CUMPSTON** (born 1963) Cumpston is of Afghan, English, Irish and Barkindji Aboriginal heritage, and is a descendant of the Darling River people of northern NSW. She holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) degree from the University of South Australia, and is currently the Assistant curator of Australian Paintings, Sculpture and Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of SA. Recent exhibitions include Attesting at Gallerysmith Melbourne (2009), Making Tracks: A glimpse at two decades of Aboriginal art in South Australia at Tandanya, National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Adelaide (2009) and Power and Beauty at Heide Museum of Modern Art (2007). Cumpston has been a seven times finalist for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, and was awarded the People's Choice Award for the River Murray Art Prize in 2007.

**RUBY DAVIES** (born 1953) Davies has photographed the Darling River since the mid 1990's. She completed a Masters of Visual Art at the University of Sydney in 2005. Davies was a finalist in the National Photographic Portrait Prize (Water as Life (2007), The Moran Prize (2007), Fishers Ghost Art Award (2006), the Head On Portrait Prize (2007) and winner of the Energy Australia National Trust Heritage Award (2001). Exhibitions include, Origin at Podspace Gallery Newcastle (2008); Inland Sea, Vantage and Expanse at Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery (2007); Darling / Baaka at RMIT (2001), Stills Gallery (2000), The Mildura Arts Centre (2003), the Broken Hill Regional Gallery (2000) and Goolwa Regional Art Gallery in (2006). She is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the State Library of NSW and St Vincent's Hospital.

**BONITA ELY** (born 1946) A leader in environmental art since the early 1970s, Ely's work encompasses a broad diversity of mediums and disciplines. Exhibitions include The Murray's Edge at the Art Gallery of NSW (2009), Urban Screens Melbourne 08), Federation Square (2008), National Sculpture Prize, NGA (2005) and Fieldwork at the Ian Potter Centre for Australian Art, Melbourne (2002). Her work is represented in numerous museum collections both in Australia and internationally. Ely is the Head of the Department, Sculpture, Installation, Performance [SPI] and a founding member of the Environmental Research Institute for Art at College of Fine Arts, UNSW. In 2009 she completed a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Western Sydney.

**MICHAEL HALL** Hall has been a practicing professional photographer for over 20 years. His fine art work focuses specifically on exploring human impacts upon the landscape. In 2009, he was announced as a finalist in the Hasselblad Masters, in 2006 he was honoured as Photographer of the Year by the Federation of European Photographers, and in 2004 he won the Canon New Zealand Architectural Photographer of the Year.

**PETER SOLNESS** (born 1958) Solness has worked as a photographer for over 25 years. He has worked on numerous freelance assignments for major magazines, newspapers and on several books including 'Tree Stories' published by Australian Geographic in 1999. He has lived and worked in both urban and outback Australia, including a three-year stint in Darwin between 2004 and 2007. His images are held in the collections of the National Library Canberra, the State Library of NSW, The Museum of Sydney as well as regional galleries and private collections.

**STEPHANIE VALENTIN** (born 1962) Valentin completed a Master of Visual Art at College of Fine Arts, UNSW in 2001. Recent exhibitions include Earthbound, Stills Gallery (2009), Flora, Hazelhurst Regional Art Gallery, NSW (2008) and The Year In Art, S.H. Ervin Gallery, National Trust of Australia, Sydney (2007). In 2003, Valentin was awarded the National Photographic Purchase Award, Albury Regional Gallery and in 1988 she undertook an Australia Council studio residency in Paretaio, Italy. Valentin is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, and numerous private collections.



## LIST OF WORKS

(clockwise from left)

### RUBY DAVIES

*Water as life: The town of Wilcannia and the Darling / Baaka* 2007

*Water Divining, rotation 1* 2010

*Water Divining, last light* 2010

*Water Divining, submerge* 2010

*Water Divining, entangled* 2010

*Water Divining, rorschardt* 2010

all pigment print on paper, 74 x 100 cm

### BONITA ELY

Left column from top - all ink jet print on paper, 80 x 120 cm

*Murray Headwaters: Spring* 2009

*Near Corryong: River Bank* 2007

*Near Barmah: Pash* 2007

Centre column from top - all ink jet print on paper, 29 x 40 cm

*Murray Headwaters: State Boundary* 2008

*Near Toolybuck: Agri Business* 2007

*Golfing at Lake Boga* 2008

*Near Robinvale: Latje Latje Country* 2007

*Near Robinvale: Euston Weir, Overflow* 2007

*Bottle Bend: Water Turned to Acid Sulphate* 2008

*Dried Lake Dust Storm: Hindmarsh Island Bridge* 2009

Right column from top - all ink jet print on paper, 80 x 120 cm

*Bottle Bend: Technicolour Snag* 2008

*Near Swan Reach: Trickle* 2009

*Barrage #4: The Coorong Meets Lake Alexandrina* 2009

*Murray River Punch* 1980, performance, Rundle Street Mall, Adelaide. Experimental Art Foundation residency, DVD (original recording 26:13m)

### STEPHANIE VALENTIN

*Gathering Field 1* 2009, 70 x 90 cm

*earthbound* 2009, 70 x 90 cm

*Vapour* 2009, 70 x 86 cm

*Rainbook* 2009, 70 x 86 cm

*terrarium* 2009, 70 x 86 cm

all pigment print on paper

### MICHAEL HALL

*Drought* 2009, 80 x 100 cm

*Trouble on Lake Hume 2* 2009, 80 x 100 cm

*Trouble on Lake Hume 1* 2009, 80 x 100 cm

*Bushfire 2* 2009, 80 x 100 cm

*Aftermath Black Saturday 3* 2009, 80 x 100 cm

*Aftermath Black Saturday 1* 2009, 100 x 80 cm

all ink jet print on paper

### NICI CUMPSTON

*Nookamka rushes, Lake Bonney* 2010

*Nookamka - Lake Bonney* 2010

*Scar tree, Nookamka Lake* 2008

*Campsite Nookamka Lake 1* 2008

all inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with watercolours and pencils, 75 x 205 cm

### PETER SOLNESS

*Extraordinary Tree* 2009, 90 x 60 cm

*Mangrove Forest #1* 2010, 60 x 90 cm

*Mangrove Forest #2* 2010, 60 x 90 cm

*Figtree on Sydney Harbour* 2009, 60 x 90 cm

*Splendid Rock* 2010, 60 x 90 cm

all inkjet print on watercolour paper

Bonita Ely is represented by Milani Gallery, Brisbane  
Nici Cumpston is represented by Gallerysmith, Melbourne  
Stephanie Valentin is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney