

Damian Smith essay on the Layered Landscape

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Artist Judy Holding's recent body of sculptures and works on paper continues to articulate her interests in the liminal zones that emerge when two contrasting cultures come into close contact, with specific focus on the meeting of Australian Aboriginal people and European colonists. Since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and up to and including the present, the relationships between these two cultures has been generally conflicted, sometimes harmonious, and in all instances the cause of new cultural productions on both sides of the equation. While it is easy to identify those strong partisan positions that arise in the conflicted zones of colonialism, the more nuanced stance that embraces those new and unfamiliar forms that hybrid cultures produce is not always to the fore. In Holding's case, there is a clear recognition of the adverse impact that European enterprise has wrought on Aboriginal culture and their ancestral lands. Equally, Holding is alert to those wonderful cross-overs and sharing of knowledge and experience. These two factors intermingle in the complex and at times, beautifully tangled and labyrinthine compositions that she conjures in her works on paper.

In conversation with the artist, and as a way of accounting for the inspiration behind these works, I was struck by Holding's allusion to the fecund and energized conditions of the escarpments and ecology of Arnhem Land, where she has been a regular visitor over many decades. As Holding explains, this profusion of life is matched also by an abundance of creative energy. For instance, the rock art, bark painting, ceremony, dancing, song cycles, weaving and artefact making that continue as daily activities in the local communities. Even after dark, as one sees in Holdings 'Night Wrens at Nourlangie' 2017, that sense of the profuse persists. The bright stars that appear in her work feature prominently in Indigenous myth and cosmology, linked moreover to the creatures and topography of the earth. Camping in these environs and keeping detailed visual diaries over thirty years, as the artist has so often done, it is hard not to feel subsumed within a larger cultural narrative fashioned over millennia of continual occupation.

Within Holding's work there is a persistent deployment of key motifs that speak of the colonial past, of modern industrial attitudes to the land, and of a 'third space' where European and Aboriginal cultures intermingle. There is hope in Holding's position, for it evokes not merely the possibility of détente but those many instances where the two perspectives find common ground and the creation of new cultural forms derived from shared experiences emerge. Holding's key symbols, which may at first appear as too obvious as to be loaded with complex symbolism, are the Australian Eucalypt and the country's cornucopia of native birds. Holding's third symbolic element is an enigmatic cultural artefact known generally as 'Toas'. Hailing from the Diyari people of South Australia and collected by the Lutheran missionary J G Reuther (1861 – 1914) at the Killalpaninna Mission on the Cooper Creek, the Toas have attracted a good deal of speculative analysis. Whether they are 'traditional' artefacts or objects made specifically for the enquiring mind of the collector remains a point of contention. And what if they are something new? Does this undermine their 'authenticity' or rather, point to the emergence of a new cultural form resulting from frontier encounters?

In contemplating this question Holding has created her own 'Toas', being floor and wall mounted sculptures that incorporate ensembles of modern and natural artefacts. As objects that 'point the way' as some have suggested of the Diyari Toas, Holding's sculptures are markers, both of places and seasons, on the way to an indeterminate

ecological future. At times her powder coated surfaces, which gleam with unnatural luminescence, contrast with an oxidized base; the result of an unmistakably natural process of decay. Like the Old Testament bronze statue with crumbling feet of clay, these objects are both attractive yet shot through with uncertainty. Small birds gather in their branches but they are knitted or made from Lego blocks – a sad reminder of the changes being wrought on the natural environment and those species that have become extinct in the wake of colonialism. In an allusion to the environmental impact of mining in the Northern Territory, Holding in her sculptures and paintings, has used an unnatural shade of blue in the trunks and branches of her trees, while an iridescent green Perspex, which sits at the base of some of her Toas are evocative of the holding ponds at Uranium mines dotted throughout the Territory.

In her works on paper Holding again explores the creatures of Australian ornithology, both as a ubiquitous raucous presence and as a symbol of European expansion. As a form of colonial science, ornithology facilitated the ‘naturalization’ of territorial exploitation, especially where the presence of local populations made for an unpalatable truth – we are taking this land. In her 2017 composition ‘Cockies’, a rendering of a sulphur-crested cockatoo by colonial illustrator George Raper (1769 – 1796) appears as a central motif. These references to the works of the early bird artists are an important layer in Holdings paintings for they point to the way that these seemingly impartial observations worked to advance the agendas of European nations. For instance, images were sent back to England as a reminder of the ‘little piece of Britain’ struggling to survive in a colony at the far end of the world, and in so doing asserting the colonial occupation of the land. Yet contrasted with Holding’s depiction of a ‘mob of cockies’ in flight, the image seems overly tame. Cockies like the one depicted by Raper never behave quite like this! Moreover, they are creatures of perpetual, ear-splitting sound. We, they remind us, are in their territory and not the other way around. ‘Chicken Hawk Dreaming’ 2017 contrasts the eponymous creature with a swirling collection of symbols both natural and manmade. A riot of colours bursts from the page, reminding the viewer of the marvelous palette of northern Australia that contrasts so vividly with the red earth of the central desert and the ochre tones that are routinely ascribed to Aboriginal art. Some may even suggest that those muted tones are signs of a bygone era, when in fact, Aboriginal culture is nothing if not contemporary.

Judy Holding’s work is celebratory of Aboriginal culture and the landscapes to which it is inextricably linked. She defines herself as a visitor but one who recognizes the immensity of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and the challenges that colonization has engendered in those communities. Yet as one who is ineluctably drawn to the riches that these contexts impart, Holding recognizes the value of serious engagement and the possibility of a third cultural space. Both her sculptures and her works on paper are markers on roads and trails heading in that direction.

DR DAMIAN SMITH, 2017

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