

WaterMarks

Paul Harmon

16 February – 24 March 2019

Where beauty from the air meets ugly truths on the ground.

WaterMarks is a series of innovative drone photographs by Southern Highlands artist Paul Harmon. Shot in Western NSW along the Murray-Darling Basin the series examines the tension that exists when a stark beauty from the air meets ugly truths on the ground of stolen lands, stolen water, inappropriate land use and environmental degradation.

Made with the support of the First Nations over whose country he shot, *WaterMarks* documents this visually stunning but drought-prone land that has supported human occupation for over 65,000 years. Harmon encourages audiences to consider these works alongside current debates and discussion around the preciousness of and expanding demand for water, the cultural significance of country and the declining health of Australia's river systems and land.

WaterMarks is exhibited with the support of Barkandji, Ngemba, Euahlayi and Wayilwan Indigenous elders over whose country these images were shot.

Left to right

1. Wiradjuri Country 1, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper. 1.6 x 2.4m.

2. Wayilwan Country 2, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper. 1.6 x 1.6m. Supported by Danielle Flakelar, Native Title Rep Ngiyampaa Wayilwan people.

3. Barkandji Country 2, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper. 1.6 x 2.4m. Supported by Badger Bates, Director Barkandji PBC.

4. Barkandji Country 3, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper. 1.6 x 2.4m. Supported by Badger Bates, Director Barkandji PBC.

5. Ngemba Country 1, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper 1.6 x 2.4m. Supported by Grace Gordon, Chairperson Ngemba Community Working Party.

6. Barkandji Country 1, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper. 1.6 x 1.6m. Supported by Badger Bates, Director Barkandji PBC.

7. Euahlayi Country 1, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper 1.6 x 2.4m. Supported by Ghillar, Michael Anderson, Leader Euahlayi Nation.

8. Barkandji Country 4, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper 1.6 x 1.6m. Supported by Badger Bates, Director Barkandji PBC.

9. Wayilwan Country 1, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper 1.6 x 2.4m. Supported by Danielle Flakelar, Native Title Rep Ngiyampaa Wayilwan people.

10. Barkandji Country 5, 2018

Archival Solvent Pigment Print on Wet Strength Paper 1.6 x 1.6m. Supported by Badger Bates, Director Barkandji PBC.

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The Genesis and Intent of *WaterMarks*

Exhibited with the support of elders of the Barkandji, Ngemba, Euahlayi and Wayilwan Nations over whose country these images were taken, it is my hope that the images represented in *WaterMarks* are aesthetically pleasing while, at the same time, they add something to ongoing and timely discussions about the importance of water and country in the seriously threatened environment of the Murray-Darling Basin and its river systems.

Projects often develop organically and unexpectedly. Sometimes they start with an idea, sometimes with a technical innovation that excites or a casual comment that starts a line of thought. This project began when I acquired a professional drone with the intent of shooting abstracted landscapes. Unhappy with the level of abstraction I was able to achieve at the legal height limit of 120 metres, I adapted computer controlled drone mapping technology that allowed me to capture up to 150 overlapping high resolution exposures for each image. I would then stitch these overlapping images together in Photoshop giving me one image with an apparent height of two to three kilometres and the abstracted quality I was after.

Once I had the technicalities of this approach mastered I started searching Google Earth for landscapes that aesthetically excited me. What I saw in Nth Western NSW caught my attention, particularly where the drama of water in the landscape was palpable and where the story of post European dependence on it are rendered in such strong hues. After much planning I and a painter friend Tristan Parry went on a series of camping trips along the ancient floodplains of Australia's Murray-Darling basin to shoot and paint.

As I continued to work on this project I met Ngemba Nation man Feli Mchugh. He, other First Nations people and small water-deprived struggling pastoralists helped me understand the broader story of the basin and the growing cultural and environmental stresses to the river systems within it. As my knowledge grew, the stark beauty I was capturing from the air stood out more and more in contrast to the reality I saw on the ground – ugly truths of stolen land, stolen water, inappropriate and illegal land use, environmental degradation, the declining health of Australia's river systems and a dispossessed people fighting for the country in which their spirituality and identity are so enshrined.

So the project was born of new technical options and aesthetic attraction but the eventual themes came from the journey itself - into country, into culture ... into a deeper knowledge of what the country once was, what it once meant and what it has become in the service of western civilization and corporate profit.

I don't believe that by itself art can change anything but it can be part of the context in which issues are seen and discussed. At the moment it is easy to be depressed about humankind's ability to face the many environmental challenges in front of us. Nothing positive of significance seems to be occurring in any of the major areas of environmental concern. Sure we have been able to address pollution here and there but that is hardly surprising as pollution abatement can yield relatively swift results easily justifying the economic resources spent on them.

When it comes to the more difficult issues of climate change, bio-diversity and landscape degradation, I worry that humankind is genetically incapable of making the kinds of "here and now" sacrifices necessary to protect the future. As a species we evolved to look forward one or two seasons at best. Looking forward one or two hundred years – which is what will be necessary to deal with climate change - might be beyond us. Having said that we must try. Throughout history humankind has been very resourceful and there is evidence that with social evolution rather than biological evolution we have the possibility to slough off some of the destructive limitations of our genomic drives.

It is my hope then that through our growing awareness we can find a way to muscle up to the challenges and innovate out of a fast approaching dead end. In the end this project's statement only has value if we have hope and do our bit. *WaterMarks* is my little attempt to stick my oar in.

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Interested in Purchasing a Limited Edition Print from the *WaterMarks* Exhibition?

While the prints on display are not for sale, giclee prints on 330GSM archival cotton rag are available to purchase as strictly limited editions in a range of sizes.

These and other series of works of Paul Harmon can be viewed at:

www.thinkingpictures.com.au

Please forward any enquiries to:

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