

Travelling the Many Lines of Place: an essay on the work of 2018 Biennale of Sydney artist, Yasmin Smith

by
Jan Guy

Cockatoo Island is an enormous, industrial graveyard situated not far from the iconic tourists' views most Australians imagine when they think of Sydney Harbour. It has served many purposes since its colonial occupation in the late 1830's, from penal settlement to industrial shipbuilding. Today it is hard to imagine its former life as a favoured fishing spot of the local Eora people, its description as 'heavily timbered sandstone knolls' nor the likes of Frederick Ward who, aided by his Indigenous wife Mary Bugg, was one of the few convicts to swim to the mainland and who lived to become the bushranger, Thunderbolt.¹ Each Biennale of Sydney (BoS) since 2008, sees its artworks, exhibited here amongst the silent, giant cranes of a technological past, unable to escape a reading of them that does not retain some of the history of this place, whether intentional or not. This year's 21st Biennale of Sydney SUPERPOSITION: equilibrium & engagement is no different. But 2018 BoS artist, Yasmin Smith, not only welcomes the influence of place, but the work, *Drowned River Valley* is both literally and metaphorically, the place.

Place

What is place? Is it somewhere else outside us? Place is to space as home is to house. Space is an abstract measurement of terrain; it is transferable, without specificity. It is the framework for the experience of place between bodies – land, human or otherwise, but space is not place. Place has specificity, it is as Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas suggests, 'a certain sort of opened space but it is a space opened within a boundary and so the space that appears in place is a space that takes on an almost "felt" quality...'²

Place is made of weighty substances tangible and virtual. It is the lay of the land, the waters, the skies, the pungency of aromas, the acuity of sounds, the graces of touch, the depths of light. It is the gestures, the labours, the accumulations and entwinements of constellations, of bodies, of elements, of thought, of time. It is held within us long after we have tread its visceral geography.

Place is neither the navigated space or our memory of it, but the merging of these elements and more. It is both actual and mnemonic presence – the lived moment, our memory of specific place and a place's memory of itself, intermingled. Smith sets out to explore her own sense of being in place and to offer those who encounter her work insight into the particularities of a space and to further imagine and enter the machinations of their own sense of place.

Maps of an artist

¹ <http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au/visit/history>

² Jeff Malpas 'Thinking Topographically: place, space and geography

<http://jeffmalpas.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Thinking-Topographically-Place-Space-and-Geography.pdf>

While biography can never be a certainty of entry into understanding an artist or their work, it can illuminate trajectories of inclination and motivation. The present emphasis in Smith's practice on the specificity of place and her desire to excavate its hidden material and geographical flows is not lost on her younger self. She studied classical music and violin throughout her childhood and developed an interest in the visual arts, specifically painting, in the final years of high school. Science, because of its power to reveal the internal workings of things, enamoured Smith. Many hours at play were also spent in the backyard Jacaranda tree composing, building and locating herself in relation to the distant cityscape; creating imaginary topographies. This sense of enquiry and play is embedded in her, now mature, approach to art practice.

In 2003, when Smith began her studies at Sydney College of the Arts, she intended to major in painting, but through a twist of fate ended up in the ceramics studio and stayed. Ceramics is presently a very popular medium in the Art World. Beyond the superficial Art World politics of cannibalising that which is marginalised in order to renew itself, the practice of ceramics provides a sense of agency that many people now yearn for in a world dominated by virtual and often, depersonalised social experiences. But for Smith, clay and ceramics has always been central to her practice. Clay's discursive associations and approaches have been a vehicle for her drive to understand and imagine the world.

Clay and ceramics as a material offer the artist inexhaustible avenues of exploration that are at once physical, representational and poetic. Representationally, it can take us directly from the formless to form, from mud to the refined object surface of a delicate teacup, a ritualised human figure, the replication of a myriad of worldly shapes. Mimicry is one of its virtues. Yet, the non-objective energies of the unknown and invisible also can be born of the assembled gestures of artist and material. This might appear to be the magic of the medium yet, quite literally, it is also the carrier of history, place and identity. It contains the chemical, biological and cultural compositions of the world – its changing molecular structure, the corpses of our ancestors, the social narratives of archaeological excavations. Smith recognises this enormity of ceramics' potential to reveal the complexities of place and the open challenges it, as a base material, provides for our innate need to discover and control. She views the seemingly abstract science of clay and glaze formulation as 'real world' alchemy and never loses fascination with its creative rendering of place and our personal and collective attunement with it.

Getting there

Smith's track to exhibiting in this year's BoS has taken a variety of turns and seen her gain a wealth of experience. Networking, community and the soul of an explorer have helped shape her artistic career. One of the most formative experiences for her was as a member of Locksmith Project Space (2007-2010), an artist run initiative (ARI). This gallery space was unique on the Sydney scene, providing a not-for-profit venue for emerging artists to show and mingle. Part of Locksmith's directive was to treat art as employment and they worked hard through fundraising events and acquiring grants to cover artists' fees and documentation. They also produced a beautifully crafted 'whenever we can-nual' journal that focussed on research in emerging contemporary art practice. She credits this time with strengthening her ethics towards making art - the value of working hard and respecting

oneself as an artist. It was also here that a chance meeting with gallerist Amanda Rowell blossomed into an enduring, supportive, professional relationship and she has been represented by The Commercial Gallery since Rowell opened its doors in Redfern in 2012. Smith also has spent time in an artist's squat in Berlin, volunteered on an archaeological dig in Clunia, Spain gathering research for her master's degree, and while working as a roustabout, briefly set up an artist's residency called The Dark Teatime of the Soul in Cumnock, New South Wales with fellow artist, Alex Pye.

The work on Cockatoo Island is not the first of Smith's works to deal with Place. Indeed, in examining past works one can see the unfolding trajectory of an incremental deepening communion with place.

One of Smith's earlier works titled *Red Belly Black* (2013) is a striking example of her ability to observe and connect the nuances of place with a poetic precision that ignites the imaginations of her audience. It is a simple work that uses clay's chameleonic nature to marry the disparate forms of a remnant of a blown tyre and the roadkill corpse of a Red Belly Black Snake. This ceramic object immediately transports us to the dusty roadside of an endless Australian highway and highlights the way distance and heat in such places can induce creative misperceptions.

The 2015 work, *Nitara Fence*, is the first to directly address the link between place, landscape element and material and it was the first of Smith's works encountered by the 2018 BoS curator, Mami Kataoka who is the Chief Curator of Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan. The surfaces of the ceramic branches are coated with a glaze designed by Smith with Hermannsburg wood ash – River Red Gum, Mulga and Palm. The specificity of place is marked as boundary, as fence, but what constitutes the boundary is questioned. Is place made by the erection of a man-made fence or the particular chemical composition of species? Is this place tied to its human conception like the branches to the cyclone wire? Or is material specificity the marker of a place's boundary?

Contours of Our Heart, commissioned for the 2016 *Sculpture at Barangaroo* was the artist's first directly relational work. It had many commonalities with the 2018 BoS work – the interaction with others, the firing on site, and the gathering of material elements, but it was of a lesser scale and complexity. Smith, herself, made the connection between the two works when the clay used for elements of her Biennale work contained ground sandstone from the 2016 Bangaroo site. Quite literally, she has made concept and materiality take a watery journey, alluding to both the artist's own processes and the previous boundaries of place. The 2017 work created for the Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award, and later acquired by the Shepparton Art Museum, *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker* similarly involved the gathering and evolution of local materials and histories, but in contrast to Barangaroo its presentation did not break the formal qualities of the gallery space. The activities undertaken for the production of the wood ash glazes from local pear and apple orchards in Shepparton and fallen branches of River Red Gums collected from the banks of the Goulburn River, where she camped out during research trips, were mostly hidden from its audience. However, the 2018 work, *Drowned River Valley* revealed not only the location's history, but positioned an artist's labour as an integral and visible part of the work's aesthetics and final installation.

Arriving here

Drowned River Valley occupied two sites on Cockatoo Island. The makeshift studio site consisted of a small established building containing the remnants of an old brick oven and two purpose built ports, one covering a salt distilling pyre and the other, the kiln where numerous elements of the installation were fired. The other site housed the final installation. During the first few weeks of the exhibition, Yasmin Smith was on site making, firing and building the installation, however, the intensive labour undertaken for the production and research behind this work began almost a year before.

In July of 2017, two thousand litres of salt water were drawn from the harbour waters lapping at the island's coast. No doubt this water contains traces of iron, copper, manganese, chrome and others elements accumulated from the island's long history of industrial activity, as well as the chemical fluctuations of the daily tides (these traces would later provide some of the delicate coloured tones of the salt fired vessels). Smith solar evaporated this water to a condensed salty solution over the following preparatory months. Once on the island, a constant steamy mist rose above the small clay containers of salty water that were lined up in grid formation over a fire and the fluffy white salt crystals harvested through a final evaporation. The wood that fuelled this distilling process is also the same wood contained in the artist's glazes; collected Grey Mangrove branches from the farther reaches of the Parramatta River and old Turpentine wharf wood from Cockatoo Island.

On the heady days of April in Sydney, it was quite unbearable to linger near the fireplace too long, but its boundaries were stacked with an array of raw pinch pots drying in the radiating heat. These were formed in the makeshift studio in the shadow of the island's chimney stack, where Smith, her assistants and the visiting public conversed while shaping the pinched vessels that would become part of the final installation. It is a strange phenomenon that I have seen before, but people with clay in their hands relax and conversation comes easily. This participatory aspect of the work seems important to Smith and her research into early colonial salt harvesting collectives not only because it creates evidence of creative labour, but because dialogue can give some understanding of the al/chemical processes of the artist while generating connective narratives for both artist and audience. The pots made from the Barangaroo Sandstone Clay (created by Smith 18 months earlier) were fired in a kiln built on site with the harvested salt introduced to form the glaze. A complete bond of Sydney salt and sandstone melding across time, across a drowned river valley.

On making the climb up the hilly sandstone to the second site, the hive of activity of the first site dissipated. The historical timber drying shed of the industrial age is quiet and still – a space of contemplation. This is so often the manner in which we view an artist's objects – a state of remainder, residue, that which is left behind after intensive labour. The installation echoes and remembers the spent labour of the island's penal and industrial era. The drying shed, built with even, open panels to let the air pass through on all sides, casts intersecting lines of sunlight across the floor that mingle with the line and grid formation of tiny vessels. This multitude of lines suggests the mapping and collision of eras, geographies, gestures and materials that have brought the artist, audience and objects to this moment in time, to this

place. But the passing of time also shifts the lines of light, making them run beyond this place to infinity, which creates a sense of connected futures.

The fired pinch pots in their variety of soft, fleshy forms and tones are testament to the individual moments of their creation and firing. The steel grids on which they sit are a reminder of the steaming salt harvest at the ‘studio’ sister site at the island’s base. Somehow, the stillness is gently broken by this memory of rising steam, the artist’s process and objects are now entwined in the viewer’s experience.

The placement of the ceramic cast Mangrove branches (glazed with Grey Mangrove wood ash, the original branches collected from a council regeneration project of salt marsh at nearby Canada Bay) and the similarly, cast wood from the island’s former shipyard wharves (glazed with the ash from the wood itself that is contaminated with oxides from antifoul and boat paints), also resonate with the architectural lines of the drying shed that contains them. The branches’ natural, irregular shapes and their arrangement seem to mimic travelling aquatic currents, while the placement of the replicas of the island’s wharf timber suggests the presence of slow, deep time. Finally, Smith intensifies the stillness of this work by placing the finished installed elements behind the archiving partitions already present in the drying shed. The sense of touch and activity from the first site is now only a memory, we are forced to conjure the lived experience of it and, in turn, the echoes of other places we have known.

Yasmin Smith’s *Drowned River Valley* offers us a complex experience of the poetics and categorisation of the physical world. The title doubles as a poetic device pointing to the sense of immersion in place that the work evokes and is also a geographic descriptor to explain the formation of a ria – a coastal outlet, where the ocean partially drowns a river valley; in this case, the Parramatta River Valley.³ This work opens us to the scientific, lyrical, cognitive and gestural compositions of place. Through her ceramic focussed investigations into the materialities of place, the emphasis on the visibility of labour and the inclusion of relational exchange, the artist has shifted our perceptions of the world and its deep, evolutionary time. We are startled to realise we are not bystanders to it, but travelling with it. Things among things. We should take care.

Jan Guy is an artist, writer and academic at Sydney College of the Arts, the art school of the University of Sydney.

³ Amber Ariona Coastal Features: What is a ria? What is a ria coast?
<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/coastal-features-what-is-a-ria-what-is-a-ria-coast.html>