





*Shelter I, quartzite ridge*, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm

*Shelter II, quartzite ridge*, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of one, 98 x 98 cm



*Settlement view*, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 65 x 175 cm



*Leopard tree III*, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm

# nici cumpston

## having-been-there

Look.  
Who's this coming  
out of the desert  
like a pillar of smoke  
with more incense, myrrh  
frankincense than a merchant?<sup>1</sup>

Barry Hill  
*Song*, from 'The Inland Sea'

It is customary to travel inward bearing gifts, but it is conditional to come away with them. *having-been-there* is evidence of a fruitful exchange between Nici Cumpston and the desert of central western New South Wales, recognition of Cumpston's ability to give and take. The cinematic images tender a documentary reckoning and an archivist's eye for detail, but on the double-take, a poignant, emotional spectrum inhabits the frame.

Adelaide-based Cumpston returns to her Barkindji heartlands around Broken Hill and Menindee regularly, but the opportunity to undertake a residency at Fowler's Gap Arid Zone Research Station was a welcome immersion in her own practice after curating *Desert Country* for the Art Gallery of South Australia. Camping in the Green House studio and walking the rocky slopes with her large-format Hasselblad cameras, Cumpston found a post-industrial landscape of the earliest vintage, dotted with shards from ancient tool-making. Such concrete remnants are the stuff of Cumpston's search for material, but beyond the critical judgements of the photographer, Cumpston is equally empathic to the temporal. *having-been-there* acknowledges the expansive living-sites of the past and the contemporary sensation of earlier histories. Warm ashes in the fire-pit, sand swept clear of rubble, laughter on the wind – all envisaged and welcomed rather than denied.

Since the 1980s, a generation of urban-based Indigenous photographers have used the camera as a means of redressing presumptions of identity. Fewer have engaged with the landscape as a primary subject, with the notable exceptions of Michael Riley and Ricky Maynard. For Cumpston, of Aboriginal, Irish, Afghan and English heritage, the picturesque convention provides ample means to record the country in a range of attitudes, often composite in a single image.

Water, or the absence of it, is a central theme in Cumpston's work; previous series have documented the culturally redolent but environmentally savaged Murray and Darling river systems via the stark motif of dead trees, arrested in mid-life. *Scar tree, Fowlers Creek, New South Wales* (2011) shares similar lineage but heralds a more optimistic epithet. A tattoo of historic usefulness – maybe a coolamon, perhaps a shield, sits high above a flood-mark skirt of tangled wood, proof of the elemental extremes that nourish the interior. In a twist of taxonomy, *Leopard Tree* poses as sentry and witness, both animist and chic, a riposte to Namatjira's supple, waxy ghost gums and a homage to the skin of trees and distant lands.

Cumpston, a pre-digital babe, has known the alchemy of darkrooms and the depths of field; by choice she has adapted the anachronistic tradition of hand colouring her black-and-white prints. By painting up the minutiae of country, blade by blade and grain by grain, Cumpston performs a singular ceremony, stroking and coaxing the land into a dream-still. The effect is manifold, the ambiguous radiance leaving the last stone unturned. Dawn or twilight, it is gold.

*Una Rey*, October 2011



*Scar tree, Fowlers Creek, New South Wales, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with watercolour and pencil, edition of three, 98 x 177 cm*



*Fossil waterhole, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with watercolour, pencil and synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 65 x 175 cm*

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having-been-there

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nicipumpston.com



*Leopard tree II*, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm