nici cumpston
having-been-there
17 January – 18 May 2014
Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection
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Tuesday – Saturday 10am – 4pm
Sunday 1pm – 5pm
Free guided tour every Saturday at 10:30am
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Thank also to Jem Cumpston, Jon Gray, Dr Sarah Martin and Edgell Rees, Barkindji Elder and artist
nici cumpston.com
Cover image:
Leopard tree I, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm
Leopard tree III, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm
Leopard tree II, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm
It is customary to travel inward bearing gifts, but it is conditional to come away with them. Having been there in 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. This liminal time renders a documentary recording and an architect’s eye for detail but on the double-take, a poignant, emotional spectrum that haunts the frame. Adelaide-based Cumpston returns to her Barkindji heartlands around Broken Hill and Menindee regularly, but the opportunity to re dictate a residency at Fowler’s Gap, Zero Point Research Station was welcomed especially in her own practice after curating Desert Country for the Art Gallery of South Australia. Cumpston is a photo-artist who has channelled the desert’s vigour, heart and soul into her work. Focussing on the double-take, such concrete remnants are the stuff of Cumpston’s search for material, from bones to natural pigments to the photographic Cumpston is magnificently attuned to the temporal. Having been there acknowledges the auspicious living sites of the past and the contemporary evolution of structure, vegetation in the dry, salt-tinged clear of twilight, laughter as the wind – all foregrounded and rejected 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, other components 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 damaged 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-marked 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. Murray and Darling river systems via the stark motif of dead trees, arrested in mid-life. 

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, the painting with the intention of creating shades by blude and grain by grain, Cumpston performs a regular 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
having-been-there
17 January – 18 May 2014

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Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection
Pro-Lab Imaging and Art Moods Picture Framers, Adelaide, South Australia
Una Rey, freelance arts writer, academic and artist
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Tripp Northey and Zena Cumpston

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

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

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

Cover image: Leopard tree I, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 98 x 98 cm
nici cumpton
having-been-there

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 gaze and take. The cinematic images render a documentary reckoning and an architect'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 invitation in her ever practice after curating Desert Country for the Art Gallery of South Australia. Cumpston found a place where the landscape is a witness to the region's story, swelling as it swells and swelling as it swells and swelling as it swells and swelling as it swells and swelling as it swells and swelling as it swells. Such concrete remnants are the stuff of Cumpston's search for material, the landscape's visual evidence of past practices, the photographic Cumpston is equally sensitive to the temporal. Having been there acknowledges the auspicious living sites of the past and the contemporaneous marks of modern humans. Illustrative in the natural, sweet-scented smell of mahogany, laughter as we bend – all enveloped and seasoned rather than denied.

Since the 1980s, a generation of urban-based Indigenous photographers have used the camera as a means of rendering perceptions 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 damaged Murray-Darling river systems via the stark motif of dead trees, arrested in mid-life. Settlement View 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-swept slice 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
Fossil waterhole, 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with watercolour, pencil and synthetic polymer paint, edition of three, 65 x 175 cm

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

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


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It is customary to travel inward bearing gifts, but it is conditional to come away with them. Having been there in evidence of fruitful exchanges between Nici Cumpston and the desert of central western New South Wales, recognising of Cumpston’s ability to gaze and take. The cinematic images render a documentary recollection 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 Fowlers Gap soon materialized; a chance to re-imagine, to see, to see again, and to see the new with the perspective of the ancient. Cumpston found the barrier to be a monument to the desert’s history, marked with a line of salt lakes, a social and cultural residue of the past. Such concrete remnants are the stuff of Cumpston’s search for material, for a present that recognises the collective depth of the photographic; Cumpston's work, paradoxically, is both historical and contemporary, the evocative, the concrete, the conceptual, the material. An examination of the visual, the retinal sweep of mobile, laughter as the backdrop – all entangled and transcended rather than denied.

Since the 1980s, a generation of urban-based Indigenous photographers have used the camera as a means of exploring perceptions 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. 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.

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