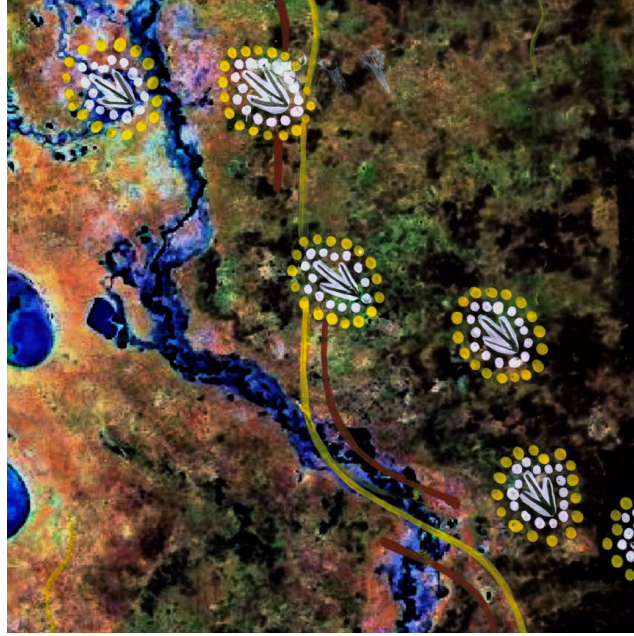


Ancestor tracks though art

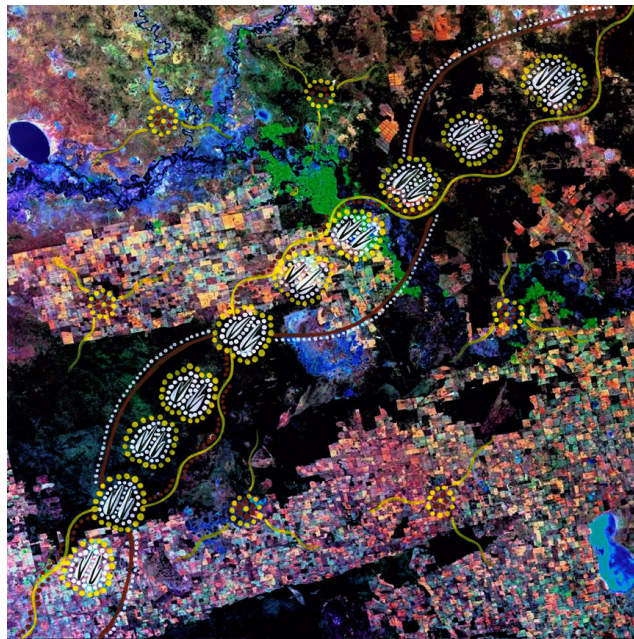
© Lyn Moore and Tracey Andrews

Our particular kind of collaborative art practice seems to be a journeying along metaphorical cross-cultural routes. We travel together, a Koorie and a non-Koorie Australian artist exploring our histories, our present, and our possible futures. Somehow our art practice finds its own cultural route and surprises us on its journeying. We have tried to develop a dialogue and a critical engagement with the many aspects of the Willandra Lakes/ Lake Mungo region and its inherent social, cultural, geological and historical contexts. Tracey as a Barkindji woman has an especially potent interest in her Ancestor's country, whilst my own interest has developed around the immense significance of this site to us all.

The Willandra Lakes World Heritage Region in far south-western New South Wales covers 240,000 hectares of semi-arid landscape. Lake Mungo is one of a system of Pleistocene lakes formed over the last two million years. The lakes, now completely dry and saline, were abundant in relatively fresh water some 50,000 to 19,000 years ago and supported our Ancestral communities with an abundance of food and a rich and bio-diverse living environment. Lake Mungo is the site of the earliest known human presence on the Australian continent, recently dated back in time to approximately 68,000 years. There in the Mungo landscape, layers of earth cover symbolic ochred burial sites, indicating the complex ritual practices of our Ancestors. According to Dr Alan Thorne, the latest dating raises discussion re-earliest use of ochre for burial ritual and indicates earliest evidence of art and philosophy in modern human society (Thorne 1999). On the stark wind eroded Mungo lunette natural processes have exposed the rich layers of earth substance containing precious fragments of human habitation, layers of time and history in the pink and cream-yellow landscape and the eroded dry lake beds. The parched Mungo lunette can be traced to the full and thriving water source some 40,000 years ago, when Ancestors of the Latje Latje Murray River people and the Barkindji people travelled the region extensively.



Tracey and I began working together over three years ago when we made a work for the first *Mildura Palimpsest* exhibition in 1998. The concept of a palimpsest was a great inspiration for us. We could imagine almost instantly the writing over of the metaphorical manuscript, one text erased or simply hidden to make way for another, the parchment's re-writing forming new narratives and narratives anew. Earth text became our perfect vehicle for exploring meta-narratives, cultural routes, and diverse cross-cultural histories.



This is the text that accompanied our current work recently exhibited at *Mildura Palimpsest #4*.

Mungo in the Backblocks 2001

tracks
marks etched into earth
Ancestors
geological etchings
a Mungo footprint
the footprint Mungo
words
another mark - human intervention
language
Barkindji/Paakantyi

yapa-footprint
Ihawu-flour
yalta-grinding stone
kira-seed
seed ground from grass to flour-**paapa**
from eucalypts to flour-**kantu-ngara**

thina-foot
thina-yapa-track
milinya-yapa-footprint, track, scratch mark to show ownership

Koorie connection to land/Mungo, **wimpatya**-man, person, Aboriginal person,
kiira-place, country, ground, **Ihuuraka**-ancient, from long ago, very old,
thunka-burial ground, **pukala**-cake made from grass-seed flour.

Mungo environment, **yaparla-marnti**-clay ground, **thiltakara**-lake permanent,
wuna-mitina-dried out, **thapa-thaparu**-rough, scrubby, earthy, **wirupi**-saltbush,
paapa-seed from grasses for flour.

Representing white man, **wanta**, **puuri**-ghost, white person, **maninga**-money,
ngayilka-fence, **yalthi-yuri**-rabbit, **murru-manu**- Johnny cakes made from flour.

land/country
grid
division
country/land
backblocks

This text indicates the kind of thinking that went into the production of our art work.

Mungo's cultural heritage is indeed a rich palimpsest. The Latin word *palimpsestus* from the Greek word *palimpsestos* translates as 'scraped again'. In this sense we tried to

engage with the potent layering, the ancient, colonial and contemporary histories, the multiplicity of meanings and the immense cultural significance of the site.

Mungo in the Backblocks grew out of our last work together, *Mapping Possibilities* which was exhibited at *Mildura Palimpsest #3*, 2000 and explored mapping through different time frames within the Mildura and Lake Mungo/Willandra Lakes regions. The land now called Victoria including Mildura, Robinvale and Merbein is that of the Latje Latje Murray River people and the NSW side of Sunraysia is the land of the Barkindji whose country stretches from the Darling/Murray junction at Wentworth to as far as Wilcannia NSW. As part of our journeying, we researched the many ways the area has been mapped, from early colonial maps, geological survey maps, tourist maps, salinity maps, anthropological maps, and agricultural maps to the very latest satellite imaging. We conceptually linked contemporary satellite tracking of the region with the earliest known human presence on this continent through our usage of Landsat 7 ETM satellite data acquired January 2000. To celebrate this extraordinary presence Tracey drew Ancestor tracks across the satellite images. The Ancestor tracks range over the satellite data celebrating ancient tribal lands and a profound Aboriginal presence on this continent. In the art installation we juxtaposed these images with an early colonial map of 1835, showing the progress of 'discovery', the explorer's tracks. For us, this alluded to the irony of the colonial 'discovery' of this land.

Sturt and Mitchell were amongst the first colonists to venture into the region in the 1830s and there are dire tales of mayhem and murder of Aboriginal populations. The Ancestor tracks became the inspiration for renewed cross-cultural exchange and our current work has surprised us in its capacity to connect us to some of those cultural routes and enable a necessary examination of our diverse histories. Thus the title of the work *Mungo in the Backblocks*, for, quick to follow, in 1838 the graziers Joseph Hawdon and Charles Bonney drove cattle along the Murray from Adelaide, commencing a movement of stock that was to be the beginning of the establishment of stations in the Lake Mungo region. At first the blocks spread out along the river frontages, then later in the 1860s, backblocks without river frontages were taken up including the 203,000 hectares known as Gol Gol station, which included Lake Mungo. Traditional owners suffered acute dispossession when pastoralists, supported by police, occupied their lands. By the 1890s, the fragile land already overgrazed by sheep and over-run with rabbits, suffered a decade of droughts. It is thought that the immense droughts and wind storms of the 1890s exposed the stark crescent wall, the lunette of eroded clay and sand that holds such ancient histories in its pink, cream and grey layers (Fox 1993). In the 1920s, Gol Gol was again divided and given over to soldiers returning from the First World War. They were known as 'soldier settlement' blocks.

How do these cultural routes manifest themselves through contemporary art practice? The *Mildura Palimpsest* exhibition has provided an annual venue for participating artists to examine environmental and social change and more recently has encouraged artists and scientists to explore links between their two practices. For example, our interest in satellite tracking and imaging led us to Professor Tony Milne and Dr. Toni O'Neill's 1990 remote sensing studies which looked at the effects of grazing in the Lake Mungo and Willandra Lakes region through environmental monitoring which used satellite imagery. We became inspired when we recognised that the geological etching of Lake Mungo on

the earth's surface was, for us, a Mungo footprint. Mungo's intriguing narratives become the subject matter for our art, the vehicle to share and explore our cross-cultural journeying. We make new tracks across cultural routes recognising the journeys that have already been taken. We appreciate and critically engage with the multi-layered histories and perspectives. We travel together to explore the meta-narratives and the cultural layering of this land.

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