

Australian Galleries Melbourne
Tracing the Ephemeral Rivers of the Wimmera Plains
Recent Paintings and etchings by John Wolseley

In the last few years, I seem to have spent much of my time wandering along rivers and creeks. There was a lot of this while I was engaged on the Earth Canvas project when six artists were paired with six brilliant regenerative farmers. We celebrated and documented the farms, and our work became the touring exhibition, *Earth Canvas* which had its grand finale at the National Museum in Canberra this past Autumn. Walking over the land and following the creeks and chains of ponds, we found how so much of the regeneration of these farms has been about the slowing down of water, and the rehydrating of the land. Since white settlement so much of the Riverina had been cleared of trees and the water rushes down the rivers and creeks to the sea along veritable drains. Fast water causing gulches and drastic erosion.

As we documented these farms, we found that the husbanding of water enjoys a splendid vocabulary. Living water has always invoked fabulous names like: fen, bog and swamp, ditches dikes, and berms. We discovered that most of the features with these lovely names had been drained or erased over the last hundred years or so. But not on the farms we were exploring. On Bibbaringa, Gill Sanbrook has evolved her land from a bare dumb-downed landscape to a rich fecund farm with complex vegetation and a dark healthy soil, hydrated and swimming with microbial life.

After working on the *Earth Canvas* project, I continued wandering along rivers and creeks to the west of my home in the Whipstick Forest. I was bent on researching the remnant bits of country where the river systems behaved and worked in the way they used to before white settlement. In particular, I became obsessed with how many of Australia's inland rivers formed chains of ponds in between and around wetlands. Charles Massy wrote in his revolutionary book – *Call of the Reed Warbler* – “*Like many before me, I dearly wish I could be transported back in time to go for a long walk through the pastoral ecosystems of Australia prior to white settlement. Just once to walk across grasslands un-grazed by the cloven-hooved animals of white settlers; ... to feel the soft ground underneath and access the depths of layered mulch; to witness fully hydrated landscapes and see how the original chains of ponds looked and functioned; to hear the cry of bustard and reed warblers...to glimpse bettongs and bilbies busy about burrows beside inland streams, and to listen to insect and birdsong under river redgums and she-oaks.*”

I have been very lucky down the years to have met passionate experts and lovers of the wild landscapes which I paint. In this – my own particular *Pilgrim's Progress*, in the Riverina and the Wimmera, I have sometimes felt as if I had fallen into one of those ancient stories where a mythic guide has appeared out of the mists. Some kind of ferryman like a Charon who guided souls across the river Styx. Or perhaps Hermes the god of flocks and herds. I'm not sure whether they would approve but I reckon that it is appropriate that I should be hanging these kinds of mantles onto writers such

as Charles Massy and to Peter Andrews because like Hermes they are both farmers – *and* visionaries. Visionaries of the earth in the tradition of Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson and James Lovelock.

Rob Youll, the naturalist and Land Care expert took me to some fascinating bits of geography where the water courses flowing within marvellous remnant woodland spoke to me about living, vital, healthy country. Looking at the google earth maps of Kara Kara National Park one sees landscapes which seem to have the generative energy found in Chinese paintings of dragons. These dragons being embodiments of ‘chi’ in which the flow of water is so often identified with the nature of the Tao. As Lao Tzu says – ‘*It is best to be like water, nurturing the ten thousand things without competing, flowing into places people scorn, very like the Tao.*’

In April 2019, I camped and began documenting the source of Middle Creek in the forest, and followed it as it bubbled up in the fields of Sam Medlyn and Meagan Barham and then as ‘chains of ponds’ it moved through groups of River Red Gums, some of them of gargantuan size (Catalogue nos 4, 5, 6).

In July 2020, I crossed over to Anne Hughes’ farm where she has restored the creek by encouraging fallen trees to slow the water down, and in some cases do the same kind of work which I had seen beavers do in rewilded Shropshire rivers.

Later in 2020, I moved my base camp to somewhere near Gray’s Bridge and did several forays following the Avon River (properly called the Korokubeal in the Djaara language). This was where I really felt I was entering, almost burrowing into the land. This river moves across the endless industrial cropping lands with their heavy reliance on fertilizers. When the land was cleared of the trees which had hitherto held in place the banks of the river, the water carved out deep channels. Over the years, these became a sunken river and the red gums which had been left on the banks slowly slid down and grew horizontally and now strangely resembled human torsos and limbs.

Some of these have the feeling of stranded whales as they create bridges over the river bed, their giant limbs reaching out and resting on the further bank. Below Gray’s Bridge, I descended into the dried riverbed and wandered along till I came to the first of the pools which had formed as the water backed up against the tangles of debris and branches washed down by the floods. Each afternoon, I would draw a pool and then erect a tarpaulin over the great tangled structures of woven branches and flotsam – like shambolic Gothic cathedrals – in which I would spend the night. After several nights like this, I began to imagine myself in one of those ancient works of literature – particularly those which incorporate myths of descent into the nether world. This fantasy of tumbling into a mythic dimension was encouraged when the river tunnelled along below the cemetery of the lost village of Korokubeal, and those past signs of diggings of veins of metalliferous earth, left by gold miners. It was here

that Hermes popped up again and brought to mind one of my favourite poems, *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes* by Rilke.

*But here were rock
and ghostly forest, Bridges of voidness
and that immense, grey unreflecting pool
that hung above its so far distant bed
like a grey rainy sky above the landscape.
And between meadows, soft and full of patience,
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.*

Somewhere on York Plains, I laid out my own long line of Fabriano rag paper and found myself trying to describe this journey between the layers of the earth and sky. I cut the roll of paper up into separate sheets and on each one I painted models of each layer. On some I mapped the webs of Mycorrhizal fungus which wove themselves under the ground and connected to the trees. I had recently read *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben and been excited by such expressions as – ‘*The joyous entanglement of the ancient webs of mycorrhizal fungae...*’ He wrote – ‘*these fungae operate like fiber-optic internet cables, their thin filaments penetrate the ground, weaving through it in almost unbelievable density. Over centuries a single fungus can cover many square miles and network an entire forest.*’

On each rectangular window I drew the meeting of two or three lamina or layers of a particular place. I felt as if I was moving under the blankets of some extraordinary bed, or I was burrowing along like a grub in the ground. A mode of travel which my ‘wawa’ (sister) Mulkun Wirrpanda had encouraged when she gave me the name *llangurrk* – a moth or beetle larvae – all those years ago. Here I did the first of my multi-panel paintings or polyptychs. I called it *Entangled layers of the spectral rivers of the Wimmera plains — canopy, soil crust, fungal web, invertebrate fauna and rock*. (Catalogue no 1)

Each section or panel was devoted to one or two layers or lamina of the river bed. In each panel I used a different perspective, sometimes traditional, sometimes $\frac{3}{4}$ bird’s eye view, or even worm’s eye view.

I described these different layer-scapes with a number of headings:

- The foliage layer, made up of thousands of leaves and petals.
- Another foliage layer – duckweed misting over the still pools, (In French so much more poetic – *lentille d’eau – un plant aquatique flottant*).
- The great skeins and nets of fungus hyphae as they link the trees.

- The rhizosphere layer of microbial and other biological worlds in the soil – cyanobacteria, worms, heliozoanes, and animalcules etc.
- Biological soil crusts of living organisms on the soil surface; algae, lichens, bryophytes and archea etc.

I am ridiculously excited by this ‘Landscape Polyptych’ way of doing things. I’ve pinched it from the Japanese Ukiyo-e printmakers. It enables me to include in one work a number of modes or graphic systems. I do seem to have a number of quite different systems or modalities in my work. There’s the charcoal frottage on paper and the more cartographic birds-eye drawings. A favourite one is the more traditional perspective view. Usually, I tend to have these modalities in separate paintings. In these multi-panelled works they are on different panels, juxtaposed with each other to make a diffracted and yet unified single work which brings together the different systems found in a complex bit of country.

Last year I followed the Avon River until it joined the Richardson River (properly known by its Djaara name, Banyena) There I set up camp in a curl of the river on a farm which the McAllister family are bringing back to a state of regenerated fecundity. In place of the use of powerful insecticides and volumes of fertiliser they are using organic fertilisers, and sowing nitrogen fixing clover. I drew more ephemeral pools. (Catalogue nos 8, 9, 10) and continued drawing mayflies and other aquatic insects on the etching plate which I had carried in my ruck sack since I started my wanderings along regenerated rivers and creeks back in 2018. (Catalogue nos 15, 18) I loved documenting these insects which like reed warblers are such emblematic signifiers of healthy living streams and habitats.

Each time I drew the duckweed covered pool below Richardson Bridge a lone Australasian Grebe would swim past. A few weeks ago, she came towards me followed by seven exquisitely mottled baby dabchicks (Catalogue nos 14, 17). On the 18th of October the flooding waters came hurling down the river bed and soon rose up to my camp site. Just in time the brave and stalwart Dougal McAllister came charging down the hill and took me back to the Bonnie Brae homestead. My swag and several drawings were swished away and are now probably floating somewhere near Lake Bolac.

John Wolseley
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