It is no secret that Australia’s rivers have been misused and ill-treated over the past two centuries. Our recent history and current politics abound with controversial and complex river stories, from damming to parching, from Tasmania to north Queensland. Beholden to rivers, we have a strange way of showing it, however for Adelaide-based artist and curator Nici Cumpston, the Murray-Darling Rivers and their attendant tributaries sketch out a protean triangle of country that holds more than a lifetime’s work.

While East Kimberley artists have relied on oral histories and living memory of the ancestral sites beneath Lake Argyle and Lake Kununurra on the Ord River (artificially flooded in 1972), Cumpston has approached the waterways of her Barkindji ancestry with an archivist’s eye and a documentary partisanship. Tracing the course of her practice to date, Cumpston’s Riverland works, in particular her 2009 Attesting series from Nookamka (Lake Bonney) on the Murray are the most well-known, have been shown in a number of recent exhibitions exploring landscape and place.¹

The genesis of the Riverland works was a large scale commission for the Commonwealth Law Courts in Adelaide in 2005 for which Cumpston took inspiration from the Art Gallery of South Australia’s most copied painting, H J Johnstone’s Evening Shadows, Backwater of the Murray, South Australia, painted in London in 1880 from a photograph.² Searching for her own imagery, Cumpston discovered first-hand the sad ecology of the river. In 2007 the Murray suffered yet another blow when the Federal Government cut off the water-flow to Nookamka, compelling Cumpston to record the dramatic environmental impact. The resulting images, arresting for their melancholic, ‘horizontal sublime’, feature physically tormented wetlands. Once-sentinel River Red Gums, now ghostly and static, are split by a sharp horizon line, one truth reflecting another.

While Cumpston’s photographs illustrate the decline of this fragile ecosystem, paradoxically they reveal evidence of Indigenous occupation, sites previously concealed by the partial flooding of Nookamka by irrigators in the early 1900s. Few could have predicted the heavy rains of 2011 and the

Nici Cumpston Settlement view 2011, archival inkjet print on canvas, hand coloured with synthetic polymer paint, 65 x 175 cm, edition of 5. Image courtesy the artist and Gallysmith, Melbourne.

PRESENSES in the LAND
Nici Cumpston

Una Rey
resulting floods, but for a time, recorded through Cumpston’s lens, the drying lake revealed its ancient markers: campsites, scar-trees where bark and timber was removed for coolamons, shields and canoes, ring trees and other clan-derived markings. Burial grounds and massacre sites co-exist in a most unsettling, but no longer surprising discovery, lending a painful poignancy to the process of reconciling narratives through the medium of photography.³

Cumpston’s Nookamka research also resonated on a personal level: “I found out that ancestrally Barkindji people are connected to the River Murray system as well as the Darling River as we used to travel to the inland lakes depending on weather patterns and availability of food sources during different seasons.”⁴

Born in Hindmarsh in Adelaide in 1963, Cumpston’s English father and Barkindji/Afghan/Irish mother moved to Darwin and then Canada before returning to the South Australian Riverland when Cumpston was thirteen. While her father’s work as a radiographer may have inadvertently suggested the penetrating possibilities of photography, it was the regular visits to Broken Hill and Menindee Lakes to spend time with her mother’s relatives that shaped Cumpston’s teenage years. It was later in her thirties that Cumpston’s research into the family tree led to precious reconnections with her mother’s Afghan and Barkindji relatives, and she learned that her great-grandfather Khan Zada was one of the earliest Ghan cameleers. Zada had arrived in Australia from Karachi in the 1860s, later traversing the same country between Port...
Augusta and Central New South Wales that Cumpston’s great-grandmother’s ancestors had trodden and known for millennia.5

And what of the lineage of her work? As a genre, landscape photography has undergone ironic reinterpretations through postmodernism and has been laboured over by postcolonial theorists. Meanwhile, from the mid-80s, a generation of loosely urban-based Aboriginal artists such as Leah King-Smith, Fiona Foley and Brook Andrew began mining the archive and pointing the camera to present alternative identities. In a historical context it is possible to read Cumpston’s work as a continuum of the environmentalist photographic genre of Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis, as Museum of Contemporary Art curators Rachel Kent, Keith Munro, Glenn Barkley and Anna Davis proposed in the exhibition In the Balance – Art for a changing world in 2010. Cumpston readily admits to the inspiration she gained from Michael Riley’s practice, although parallels with Ricky Maynard’s emotionally resonant, classical photographs of the Tasmanian landscape and its people are also notable. So too are accents of Namatjira’s distant horizons and unaffected naturalism.

During six years working for the SA Police Department – Photographics, Cumpston developed her camera skills and refined her ‘forensic eye.’6 Originally colouring her own hand-processed prints with transparent oil paint, Cumpston’s approach has evolved into hand-coloured digital prints on canvas produced from analogue negatives, a pragmatic solution to her desire to make larger scale works. With an increasing painterliness, Cumpston’s watercolour or synthetic polymer finishes create a translucent clarity in the work. To this end, Cumpston cites South Australian born artist Kate Breakey as an important mentor, encouraging her ambitions during hand-colouring workshops leading up to her first solo exhibition at Tandanya in 2002.

With an honours degree in visual art from the University of South Australia, Cumpston values art history as a generating force in her work as an artist, curator and educator. A socially engaged member of the South Australian arts community, Cumpston has held a number of lecturing posts, including a decade at Tauondi Aboriginal Community College from 1996 to 2006 and membership of the Tandanya board since 2009. Now Associate Curator of Australian Paintings, Sculpture and Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Cumpston curated the national touring exhibition Desert Country which included the privilege of travelling to several desert communities for the first time.

In winter 2011, Cumpston undertook an artist’s residency at Fowlers Gap Arid Zone Research Station in Western NSW. This allowed her to explore the boundaries of Barkindji heartland and meet with the generous and knowledgeable traditional custodian Badger Bates and his wife Sarah. Working in an arid environment brought different sensations to bear on Cumpston’s process and subject matter, with granite outcrops and spotted gums forging the living grounds of the past. The resulting series, having-been-there, owes its title to the profound sensation of ancestral presence, of being attendant in country rather than walled within cities, in vehicles or behind screens. It also relates to the remnants of stone tools scattered over a 30 kilometre radius of the station. “Everywhere that we [with sister Zena] went, we found shards of quartz and it made us feel as though our ancestors had only just departed and had left us calling cards so we knew how important this place was to them.”7

Immediate and direct, Cumpston’s large scale panoramas perform as cinematic trompe l’oeil, their sparing beauty designed not to trick the eye, but to transport the body. The ease of the picturesque, recapitulated to serve a broader vision, makes these works highly accessible, cautionary tales. Landscape, in spite of the countless straws upon its back, never really collapses. The onus is on us to stand before its image when we cannot stand upon it, and draw breath on its behalf. Cumpston’s pictures offer us succour.

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Nici Cumpston Flooded Gum, Katarapko Creek, Murray River National Park 2005 – 2010, archival inkjet print on canvas hand coloured with watercolours and pencils, 75 x 205 cm, edition of 10. Image courtesy the artist and Gallerysmith, Melbourne.
First exhibited at Gallerysmith in Melbourne in 2009, Cumpston’s Attesting series were included in The Challenged Landscape, University of Technology, Sydney, In the Balance – Art for a changing world, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and Stormy Weather – Contemporary Landscape Photography, The National Gallery of Victoria as well as Lake at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, and UnDisclosed: The National Indigenous Art Triennial, National Gallery of Australia, 2012.

2 Artist Tom Nicholson installed multiple painted copies of Johnstone’s work alongside the original in the Elder Wing, Art Gallery of South Australia, for the 2012 Adelaide Biennale.


4 Una Rey interview with Nici Cumpston, November 10th 2012.


6 Dr. Christine Nicholls, Nici Cumpston, Photographer, Craftsouth Bulletin, Issue 6, April-June 2009.

7 Email correspondence between the author and Nici Cumpston, February 2012.