



Water is the new gold

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS
creative producer



We've often done projects focusing on the issues confronting young people. The shift here was rather than using the young peoples' issues to create the art, why not let the young people be the facilitators of that art. In *Gold* we connected kids with farming families and they collected stories about living on the land and the drought. The idea was to see if the farmers and these young people from town could strike common ground.

We took over a shop front in the main street of Griffith. It was next to a takeaway where we knew the kids hung out. It was an empty shop and we set it up to run workshops and have a post-production facility. As we gathered photographs, they'd go up on the wall and it became like a production space, really.

The kids would hang around outside or we'd go next door and say, 'How're you going?' and they'd wander in. Our aim was to get them hands on with digital technology. So we had stills cameras that we weren't precious about. And we had a couple of video cameras and again we'd allow them to be completely hands on in a disciplined sort of way.

Then we contracted a farmer who found us people in farming communities who were prepared to be involved. He wouldn't have said too much first up about the young people, probably more about us being an arts organisation. (The bit about the young people we would ease in later!) But funnily, once the two groups met, it was the young people who were the selling point because what the farmers liked was the idea that they weren't really talking about themselves, but were doing something for the kids.

Each young person established a unique relationship but there was one 16 year old girl who really connected with a farmer. I was surprised she had come with us at all. I thought she was going to drop out because there was another temptation in town, a 21st party. But she stuck to her guns and she came and she was the only girl with that particular group on that particular visit. And I thought, 'What's this going to be like because it's going to be a fairly male world.' But she met this 80 year old farmer and she was just completely blown away by him.

She ended up directing a short film which we shot that afternoon about this old man who was on his own, running the farm without family, the end of a line. It was a sort of really lovely surprise what happened because it's like, what does a 16 year old girl who doesn't come from a rural family have in common with an 80 year old farmer? She was just struck by the human story, I think.

We had a filmmaker on board as part of the team and she put together a crew. There'd be someone operating camera,

someone operating sound, someone logging and someone interviewing. So it'd be three or four young people as part of the crew and she'd be there to make sure things were going okay.

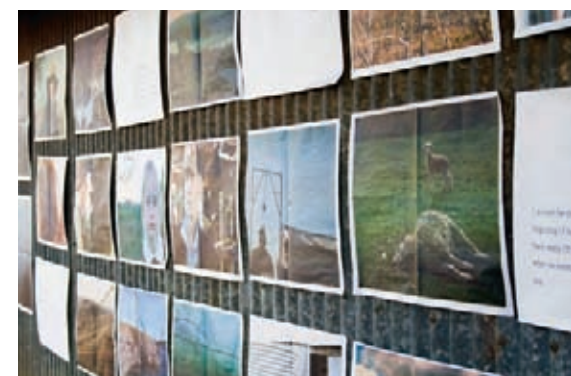
We were building towards an exhibition in the Griffith Regional Gallery. I didn't know what form it would take or how good the photographic images would be, particularly as a lot of these kids had just been handed a camera. But there were some really evocative shots and film interviews and we decided to move away from a static exhibition in the gallery and do something more dynamic.

It occurred to me that the shop was functioning in a really beautiful way with, you know, the walls covered like a scrapbook of ideas and quotes and images and I said, 'Well, what we should do is transfer the shop to the gallery.' And that's what we did. We put the post-production facility in there and the works that had been more refined up on the walls and the whole thing had this lab quality to it.

It was a place where the work was still evolving, still being generated and it was the young people who were doing it. The kids showed the visitors around and talked about the work and the area and the farmers. And they got online and showed people the website under construction. It was fantastic. It was amazing.

There was a broadcast going through a transistor radio of sound interviews and because we printed all our photographs on newsprint, tabloid size with headlines like, 'IT'S NOT THE SURVIVAL OF THE FARM, IT'S THE SURVIVAL OF THE FAMILY', what people saw were the sort of stories you don't ever hear or see in the real media. The real human stories. People who came to the show could take home copies of the whole exhibition if they wanted.

A while later we went with the kids to visit some of the farmers who couldn't get to the show. The idea was that we'd take the show to them. We took those huge newsprint photographs and pasted up their stories on farmhouse walls and local pubs. We've got one more to do. A farmer who hasn't been well and we're going to put the exhibition up on his shearing shed. That's the plan. It will be absolutely magic.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Frank, Fabian and Rohan – Hume Weir

PHOTO: HOLLY RANKIN SMITH

Ray – Hume Weir

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS

Alchemy

PHOTO: FABIAN HERNANDEZ

Gold Exhibition – Boree Creek

PHOTO: FABIAN HERNANDEZ