



Marshartability

NIC MICKLE
artist



I work a lot in public art works, particularly large scale works. I'm used to carting around 250 kilo bronzes and using cranes and heavy lifting gear. Everything's heavy. So to go up into an environment like Derby on the marsh where we were dealing with the delicacies and the intricacies of the environment, well, that was beautiful and intimate.

There were five guest artists who were invited to do a residency. Our brief was to come up with some ephemeral art works that the community would interact with on the last night of the Derby Boab Festival. The pressure was on to produce something beautiful.

The marsh was ginormous. As far as your eye could see was a circular sweep of flat, horizontal nothing, like a big blank canvas. But it's extremely healthy. It thrives off the tidal movements of the water. So the tides just sweep in and then hang around for a bit and then sweep back out. When we were there, there was no tidal movement. So we just had an expanse of dry mud to work with.

We felt like outsiders at first, like we were sort of tampering with something that wasn't ours. So we went with Wendy Robertson who's the art coordinator with DADAA [Disability

in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts, Australia] to speak with Lena who was one of the Elder Indigenous women in the community. We felt we needed permission, I suppose. Afterwards I went off and wandered the marsh. I was taking in the colours and the way the light works but I still felt awkward, so I thought, 'I'm going to go and get a shovel.'

So I went down to the local op shop and bought a shovel and went back out onto the dry clay and the first turn was actually in the shape of Australia. And as soon as I put the shovel in this Indigenous song, a chant, started behind me. There was a little hut, just a shade shelter really, on the outskirts of the marsh and there were a couple of guys just sitting in the shelter and they were singing this beautiful song and chanting and humming. And I don't know how to describe it but it was then that I actually felt like I had acceptance and could explore. From then on it was a matter of playing with the clay and finding that under the dry crust it was wet as anything. Beautiful, rich, sticky mud.

I started looking at circles straight away. Concentric circles. I find circles are a universal symbol of wholeness and they seem to resonate on the horizontal landscape up there. So I was getting huge big trailer loads of pindan and bringing that out onto the marsh and just watching the colours glow within the sun.

It was quite an insular project because we were individual artists going to the marsh to interpret in ephemeral art works. We spent big, long days working. We'd get out there around 6:00 in the morning and then we'd still be there

at night, watching the sun go down. The sunsets were unbelievable. It was gorgeous.

There's a quote I read years ago, 'Art is not what it looks like, it's what it does to you.' And I suppose for me, art is about capturing a feeling or an essence of a thing. In that landscape I was using found objects, just whatever happened to be around. We had only basic tools like secateurs and spades and some string. And to be able to draw on the natural environment without having to go to great lengths in a workshop, that was the big challenge for me – to still try and capture a feeling. It's something that I'd love to do more of.

It was a wonderful project. There was one work which was a huge barramundi that had been drawn on the mud with the lines run in by motorbikes. And it was huge. There were some shots taken up in the air because there are big floatplanes that go over the marsh every day. They took photos also of the big concentric circles and a lot of the other art works that we'd done and it was just beautiful to see that, to see art works from above. Since we've left, there's actually been another big competition for art on the marsh that will be photographed aerially. It's just amazing how one project can grow and lead to another so rapidly. To me it shows that the community were really blown away to respond that fast. Everyone seemed to be wrapt.

Each morning when I was still working on my piece, I would go for walks and try and chat with people who didn't understand what we were doing. And they were always just going, 'Why are you working out there? Gosh, it's just a marsh.' People become blind to what is theirs and don't really see the beauty in it because they see it every day. So I suppose that's what's nice about artists' residencies and exchanges – artists come into a town and interpret something that's completely foreign to them and there's a fresh approach.

At the end of this festival people were coming up to all the artists, saying, 'I just wanted to thank you so much. It's just beautiful the way you have interpreted our home.'

Oh god, I'm getting all tongue tied now. I hope you know what I mean...



ABOVE:
all and nothing by Maya Haviland

RIGHT:
common ground by Nicole Mickle
PHOTOS: NIC MICKLE

