



JILL ORR:  
WORKS FROM THE  
WIMMERA  
HORSHAM REGIONAL ART GALLERY  
12 FEBRUARY—11 APRIL 2010



## JILL ORR

Since the late 1970s Jill Orr has been a formidable presence in contemporary Australian art. One of the early proponents of a burgeoning environmental art movement, Orr utilises a combination of performance, photography, video and installation in her representations of the Australian environment. Orr throws up troubling images of the space we inhabit that prompt her audience to question their place within that environment. While intricately connected to the landscape, Orr's work deals equally with the human element, and ultimately, the intertwined existence of the two.

Announcing Orr's remarkable endeavour, *Bleeding Trees* (1979) fused newly emerging ideas surrounding environmental degradation and feminism. With Orr's body playing out the life cycle of trees in response to their environment, *Bleeding Trees* invites our empathy through animism. Feminine nurture, rhythms and cycles - sometimes identified as more in keeping with the natural environment than patriarchal modes of dominance - acted as a conduit between feminism and environmentalism.

Key devices in Orr's performances include considered use of costume, often invoking figures from history. The ghostly nature of these historical figures is sometimes apparent in their material manifestation but is often more a result of their nonspecific identities, making them familiar yet distant all at once. Often described as mythical, Orr's work deals in archetypes rather than specifics, enhancing a shared experience of History in which personal detail can be omitted or included by the audience as the work permits.

On first encountering the Wimmera landscape, the sheer vastness is striking. It gives a sense of being on the edge of an enormous hinterland. The view from Mitre Rock is one of limitless expanses of land and sky in which human presence is negligible. The bleaching sun of the Wimmera blurs the distinction between horizon and sky, further enhancing feelings of limitlessness. This immense scale of space ensures that the land, rather than the people, becomes the dominating theme in artistic representations of the Wimmera.

These photographs, produced as part of Orr's performance on Mitre Lake in the Wimmera, speak loudly to local histories of missions and early Christian settlers across the region. The name Mitre references the shape of Mitre Rock, which resembles a Bishop's mitre and overlooks Mitre Lake. The naturally occurring salt lake takes on a symbolic resonance with the proliferation of salty encrustations scarring the Australian landscape through drought and distress. The sublimation of the lake's surface into the atmosphere blurs traditional representations of landscape, whilst a sometimes ghostly, fragile and wavering figure traverses these alien environments.

Through the process of performance the landscape becomes an active agent influencing artist and audience alike. In *Faith in a Faithless Land* and *Southern Cross to Bear and Behold* Orr's choice of costumes strikes us as particularly out of place in the harsh environs she inhabits, highlighting the strange nature of early settlers in this land. The excessive layers of fabric or the stark formality of the missionary's robes seem to weigh down the characters in these images as they struggle through the silty lakebed.

Jill Orr's works deal with the nature of human interaction with the environment, bringing the relationship to the fore in provoking fashion. An early harbinger to *Southern Cross To Bear and Behold - Burning*, *Walking on planet earth* (1989), is "environmental in its concern [but] also the beginning of post-colonial rereading which is seen by numerous artists in the late 80s and 90s. The dress is alluding to the early white settlers who found themselves in an alien land. The following words guided the images: Imagine that you are in a world in which your very protection ignites in flames; such are the images of global warming."<sup>1</sup> The motif of the burning umbrella has

reasserted itself here reminding us that the environmental concerns of the 1980s remain unaddressed and that the impacts of extreme environmental phenomena are being experienced across the globe.

In *Southern Cross to Bear and Behold* Orr invokes the element of fire for the transformative qualities it harbours, particularly in relation to the Australian environment. The Mitre Lake works can be read as a prayer for redemption, although whether redemption exists for the environment, its inhabitants, or for neither is unclear. Referencing the contrary relationship between early settlers and their environment, the solid figure traversing the salt encrusted lake is an inversion, the 'true' upright figure a ghostly presence in the land, yet the imprints of human presence are concrete. Temporal suggestions within this construction play on questions of presence and belonging.

The psychological concept of Transgenerational Haunting has been explored in relation to several of Orr's performances. This concept entails a phenomenon in which generations are impacted by trauma experienced by their forebears, and this trauma is then "acted out or compulsively repeated"<sup>2</sup>. When read in this light, Orr's performances can be seen as a type of compulsive repetition of past events that have traumatised both the landscape and the people who inhabit it. "There can also be a haunting across different groups of one generation, in different places" resulting in what Jacqueline Rose has termed "a monstrous family of reluctant belonging"<sup>3</sup>.

Belonging and dispossession are writ large across the Australian landscape. The 1836 Major Mitchell expedition marks the beginning of Western incursions into this region. Ebenezer Mission, active from 1858 – 1904, stands as a constant reminder of the traditionally fraught relationships between, and differing values placed on land by, indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Orr's exploration of post-colonial concerns evident since *Walking on Planet Earth* (1989), in combination with ideas of Transgenerational Haunting, guides our reading of the figures she evokes on the bed of Mitre Lake. In combination with the spectre of regenerative fire these ghosts of our shared history are summoned for a ritual cleansing. The performance meditates on painful discords in our past and seeks to offer the chance of renewal to both the land and its inhabitants.

Orr professes her interest in "creating distilled photographic images"<sup>4</sup>. Working in close collaboration with the photographer, she is simultaneously actor, director and producer in the narratives she constructs. "The photographic and video documentation is the artwork. This is where I believe I differ from most other performance artists who have not necessarily worked with images in mind as the final art work. Their concentration is often in the conceptual nature of the action. My work covers both."

The post-production in several of these images takes them beyond the physical performance, communicating an intended conceptual experience rather than merely recording a performance in space. The mirrored figures shimmering in the lake bed appear organically in space, belying the visual trickery of technology at work. The concept of distilled images is apt, Orr's careful construction of imagery includes the symbolism of the Christian cross, which here doubles as a reference to the Antipodean setting and its signifier, the Southern Cross. The inversion of the figures in space, perhaps again in response to our geographic location but also enhancing their ghostly quality, is another considered device. These ghostly figures hint at a regression through time to the source of our current haunting. Each element in these images is clearly considered having passed through the artist's process of distillation and emerged as an active agent in the finished piece.

Danielle Smelter , Curator,  
Horsham Regional Art Gallery

## JILL ORR

Jill Orr is represented in a number of public collections including the National Gallery of Victoria, National Gallery of Australia, Geelong Art Gallery, Mildura Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, and Redgate Gallery Beijing, as well as in numerous local and international private collections.

Her work has featured in notable exhibitions including the National Gallery of Victoria's survey exhibition of contemporary Australian Art *Fieldwork* 2002-3, the video festival *LOOP 2008 Barcelona*, and the 2005 *Howl Festival* in New York.

Selected works from the Mitre Lake series have previously been exhibited at Maroondah Art Gallery and Jenny Port Gallery in Melbourne. Other projects by Jill Orr conducted throughout regional Victoria include *The Crossing* in Mildura 2008, *Ash* at Shepparton and Sale Art Galleries 2004, *From the Sea* Warrnambool 2003-2004, and *Exhume the Grave* at Geelong Art Gallery 1999.

Jill Orr completed a Higher Diploma of Secondary Art and Craft Teaching at the Melbourne College of Advanced Education in 1975, a Masters of Arts in Fine Art at the Royal Melbourne University of Technology in 1994 and commenced a PHD in Art and Design at Monash University in 2006.

Selected projects by Orr include *Bleeding Trees* 1979, *Lunch with the Birds* 1979, *Walking on Planet Earth* 1989, *Love Songs* 1991, *Raising the Spirits* 1994, *The Hunger* 1998, *Exhume the Grave* 1999, *The Sleep of Reason* 2002, *Ash* 2002, *From the Sea* 2003-4, *The Crossing* 2007, *A Prayer* 2007.

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### Image details

1. *Sothorn Cross to Bear and Behold—Burning* (detail), 94 x 160cm (framed)
  2. *Faith in a Faithless Land 1*, 166 x 115cm (framed)
  3. *Faith in a Faithless Land 2*, 20 x 14.5cm (framed)
  4. *Southern Cross to Bear and Behold—Missionary 3* (detail), 94 x 160cm (framed)
- all photographs by Naomi Herzog for Jill Orr, ink jet print on crane silver rag archival paper

### Endnotes

1. Jill Orr, *Walking on Planet Earth*, <http://www.jillorr.com.au/walking.html> 4 February 2010
2. Patricia Ticineto Clough, Jean Halley, Hosu Kim, and Jamie Bianco, *The affective turn: theorizing the social*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007, pg. 7
3. Patricia Ticineto Clough, Jean Halley, Hosu Kim, and Jamie Bianco, *The affective turn: theorizing the social*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007, pg. 7
4. Jill Orr, in notes provided by artist

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