

JUDY HOLDING

The Unshaped World

For the past thirty-five years Judy Holding has been a regular visitor to the Northern Territory escarpment near Cannon Hill. In this visually spare landscape, so rich and crowded with sensations and accumulated knowledge, Holding imagines a world of reciprocity and interconnectedness. She has developed a sensual language of symbols to convey the energy of place that exists within the Australian landscape. Working across various media, Holding's watercolour drawing and collage, lino-cut printed artist books and cut-out sculptures describe the imaginative life of the landscape itself.

A non-indigenous artist, Holding alludes to a world in which things are experienced differently. Her way of knowing is responsive and her work comes from her own powerful experiences in country. She has learned about the significance of place in a culture that believes in a reciprocal connection between people, animal species and land. Camp notebooks, filled with drawings and notations, inform her studio practice along with her long-standing interest in Outsider art and Australian landscape painting from Aboriginal Rock art to the work of John Glover and Merrick Boyd; lyrical, independent landscape artists who had a strong, natural feeling for the Australian environment. Her recent work has been inspired by ornithological diagrams depicting the black bush birds of Australia.

Seeking ways of thinking about landscape beyond the Western tradition, Holding has developed a vocabulary of poetic forms as symbols for phenomena and place. This idiom creates a level of abstraction, and has evolved intuitively as a way to organize relationships and convey aspects of land that are significant. A composite of forces, sensations, emotions, ideas, memories, and histories; her dynamic lexicon blends the old and the new. Motifs such as Spinifex, Bim, Food Tree, Balander, Smoke, Mother Crow, Anthill, Kookaburra, Diver Duck and Basket form a kind of orthography that alludes to local flora and fauna, seasonal weather patterns and landscape features, ceremony, kinship systems and traditional ways of making. In these archives of creativity there are no direct equivalences - only the mutable temporality of poetry in a landscape sensed, rather than viewed.

*I think with the landscape one is always trying to find ones own voice ...to say something fresh and original.*¹

Landscape is a cultural narrative we develop to connect with place. Responding to elements of light, space, water, land, atmosphere and sound; sensing balance and imbalance; through our very involvement, the elusive ungraspable thing that is landscape continues to shift beyond our comprehension. Indigenous images of land synthesise different realms of experience through ancestral time to the present. Creation stories or Dreamings map country to link Aboriginal groups to place and lay down custodial laws for equilibrium in the natural and spiritual environment. Seeking knowledge and dominion, traditional Western representational systems embed identity in the landscape differently; framing the view from a singular and

¹ Conversation with the artist, 2010.

distinct vantage and imposing schema to map and classify all that is surveyed. Holding brings together elements that allude to both systems. Mindful of distance and stillness; caught in the movement of the landscape, she allows new patterns to emerge. Her visual language is a thinking through and structuring of her experience and thought.

Holding's is an expressive gesturing landscape; vital, elegiac and screeching. Soft watercolour washes and threaded forms create an ambiguous, planar depth. Densely packed images are drawn, collaged, stencilled and painted to create a many-layered surface. Interlocking rings and ellipses gather and shift to mark ceremonial ground. Silhouetted forms appear as X-ray like inversions. Space pools and eddies. Sounds enter the skin like colour. In the complex interplay of figure and ground, material and immaterial merge.

I am not interested in pictorial space, but in the energy that occurs across the picture plane, over time, through the push and pull of positive and negative shapes.²

Shimmering figure-ground relationships suggest a plenitude or fullness that is indeed also a vast emptiness. Striations and stippled markings flow through and around a distinctive web of flora and fauna like contour lines on topographical maps, songlines or seed pods cast to the wind. Intimations of an unseen realm, such markings recall the Raark that feature in ceremonial Arnhem Land painting. Making visible that which is invisible, these energetic tracings appear to create the features of the landscape

Trees and birds are totemic figures of transformation. They connect the shifting realms of past, present and future; earth and sky. In Holding's work, they turn around the waterhole. Birds have long been thought to mediate between the living and the dead or unborn, as carriers of the sacred aspect of the soul. Holding's birds seem to converse in languages unknown. They commune, pressed together on the page, the space between them dripping and energized, circle blackly in high ambits and stand as large monoliths in the foreground. Holding's trees essay many architectural forms. Freed from their immobility, Eucalypts, Banksia, Boab and Mallee people this unshaped world. Birds feed, maraud and stand sentinel in their branches.

Emergent and cycling, shapes map together as vast and open present in a world that speaks in gesture, sound and rhythm. We become attuned to each tree and its particular shadow. In these boundless abodes, we can almost escape the pull of our earthbound condition and fly.

Art is the world flowing into existence, it doesn't represent nature. Its activity gives a momentum to the world of spirit from which it comes. *Homage* is about creative enquiry and the discovery of forgotten knowledge. In this new body of work, Holding has chosen to communicate her strong respect for the landscape and its people and her sense of kinship with the work of those artists finding their individual understandings of land.

Martina Copley

² Conversation with the artist, Melbourne 2008.

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