

BELOW

The physicality of the land and the sensations unique to the Territory influence Dr Rannersberger's work.



PAINTING NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

TEXT

Leanne Coleman

IMAGES

Kate Freestone
NT Tourism

A longing to understand her place within the Australian landscape and her own philosophy behind her artistic medium drove **CAROLINE RANNERSBERGER** to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory for answers. What she found was re-invigoration and inspiration.

As a four-year-old living in South Australia, Caroline Rannersberger began her informal art education on a chalkboard, encouraged by a friend's artist mother. It was the seed that grew into her becoming the celebrated painter and printmaker that she is today.

But it was not until 2001 that Dr Rannersberger finally realised her dream of becoming a full-time artist, choosing Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory as the place to begin her new career.

The palpable power of the Kakadu environment soon ignited a need in Dr Rannersberger to know more about her relationship to the northern landscape and her role as a painter of it.

"I knew when I arrived there was something deeper to understand within the

Territory landscape," Dr Rannersberger said. "There was a real sense of space and a feeling that the landscape of the north could open up new possibilities.

"I wanted to find out where I fit and how I experienced the country as an artist. How did I find a sense of place without encroaching on the people already here?"

That quest led her to study with Charles Darwin University, where she discovered her own philosophy behind painting the northern landscape, documenting her experiences through art and producing an outstanding body of work, now held in major collections throughout Australia.

As Dr Rannersberger began looking into the history of the northern landscape from a European explorer's point of view, her studies soon

became enmeshed with the perceptions of Indigenous people and their belief systems in relation to country and mythology.

"I drew on the historical features of the land and studied the early explorers of the NT, particularly German scientist and explorer Ludwig Leichhardt's interpretation of the landscape," Dr Rannersberger said. "I was also interested in how people throughout history had perceived far off lands and played with images from historical contexts such as old maps and with grotesque 16th Century creatures."

Dr Rannersberger looked at the perceptions of western myth as a concept parallel to traditional Indigenous painting practices. She observed how myth might contribute to the experience and representation of country

and felt that the sensation of the invisible, the realm of the unknown, might actually be rendered visible through the process of painting.

"I think that taking images from historical ideologies and unique phenomena partly reflected my way of saying 'I wonder what the land holds' and 'is there more here than I can perceive'?" she said. "Many aspects of Indigenous culture operate on a different plane to my reality and Indigenous artists live in parallel worlds, where their ancestors are tangible entities."

On completing her Master of Visual Arts Dr Rannersberger still wanted to deepen her understanding. A Doctor of Philosophy in visual arts presented the opportunity to immerse herself in an interdisciplinary fusion of painting and philosophy and

REMOTE NORTH PERSPECTIVE

The body of work Dr Rannersberger produced during her Master of Visual Arts, entitled *Sublime Territory*, examined the concepts of exploration and colonisation from her personal perspective and experiences as a painter in remote Northern Australia.

One of the pieces, *Sublime simplicissima 2006*, was recently acquired by the National Gallery of Australia to feature in the gallery's collection of artworks exploring the Australian landscape.

Dr Rannersberger's new body of work, entitled *Unsettling Country*, formed part of the visual arts research undertaken during her PhD.



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to further explore the impact of sensation on the aesthetics of painting.

"I wanted to challenge traditional ideas of landscape painting as a label and search for my own way of experiencing and expressing country," she said. "It was not only the landscape but the aesthetics of the environment and the sensations I felt while painting directly on site that formed the basis of my work."

It was the work of contemporary French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in particular that helped her to read her work and form her philosophy that painting from direct experience in the remote north of Australia could lead to the development of a unique aesthetic.

"The philosophy of Deleuze describes our state of being in the world," she said. "It

shifts the idea that the artist is the master in the centre of everything. Rather, there is a kind of tripartite dissolution between the painter, the painted and the painting itself, where everything, including the environment, is connected and exerts its own powerful force. This philosophy resonated very intimately with me. It is the physicality of the land and the sensations that are unique to the Territory that shaped my work.

"Here, the difference between the painter and the elements of the land merge and transform, somewhat like individual droplets of humidity forming sheets of monsoonal rain," she said. "Works of art created themselves independently of the painter."



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Artist Dr Caroline Rannersberger with some of her earlier works.

