



NOT THE WAY HOME

13 artists paint the desert

The Journey Out There

Story James Compton

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To think that I almost pulled out before we sallied forth. So daunted was I by the prospect of travelling into the fringes of the Strzelecki Desert with a posse of artists 13 strong, I didn't sleep more than a couple of hours the night before. Wracked by self-doubt about how to document the experience, I sat while the clock ticked onwards towards dawn, watching that already packed bag full of recording devices, windproof clothes and an array of headgear.

First light broke into a grey-washed Sydney sky, full and breezy with the threat of rain. Gritting my teeth I hitched a ride in to Observatory Hill where I watched the assembly come together for this foray into the western lands. Even before 8am they started to arrive outside the SH Ervin Gallery. Not drifting in but with alacrity, a procession of field-trippers enthusiastic to get on the road. Scarcely a glance into the ominous clouds above, they seemed to relish the pressure drop ruffling the feathers, as they readied for the flight from city-bound civilisation.

At the helm of the 12-seat coaster, Peter Sharp on his 19th foray into the far west of NSW – the first time 20 years back in the company of Idris Murphy and Guy Warren, both of whom are on this trip. Idris, playing Svengali and spiritual guide, takes the rest of the mob in his smooth 4WD ride, while master printer Tom Goulder pilots his troop carrier, loaded to the gunwales with equipment, as the third vessel in convoy. Bush hits the horizon at Emu Plains and a clean run to Blackheath brings a blast of cool mountain air and morning coffee.

The Great Divide proves just as significant in its psychological geography; as we coast downhill the layers of daily responsibility begin to slough away. The bus is full of exploratory talk. A gaggle of opinions and personal tales flies between the seats – gallery politics, family updates, and artistic output. And who is this journalist guy anyway? What's he going to be doing? Strange to think that for some this is the first time west of the Blue Mountains;

for others the journey out through the western plains of NSW is like returning to a second home. But there is a common vein of curiosity pervading the group. It also has an air of social experiment: place 13 individuals together in a hothouse creative environment, feed and water them, and see what they produce outside their comfort zones.

Why we took the Molong road to Dubbo is soon revealed as the probing angle of the setting sun hits the land. Tree trunks catch metallic beams, and a soft velvety green ripples across lines of eucalypts, contrasting the pastoral estates marked by scarified red paddocks ready for the winter crop. Nyngan RSL after dark is the dinner venue, and despite nearly 12 hours on the road, good humour prevails and the first of many tall tales starts to weave its way up and down the long table. Everyone is clearly expectant to get to Broken Hill and savour its quirky artiness, a springboard to more isolated observation points at Fowlers Gap.

There is a waft of artistic uncertainty from some of the crew as the vistas expand. Whether the individual artists will be good enough to do the landscape justice makes my challenge of documentation pale into submission. What mastery of tools, of canvas and brush, of colour and composition, does a wordsmith grapple with by comparison? Euan Macleod talks about his marking and rubbing out, scraping back and re-application, layering thick on thin towards a point when the work gets as close as it is going to be to the finished article.

Idris asks me, with a twinkle in his eye, what I hope to get out of the trip as a writer. I can feel an affinity with the process, a commonality of construction. But I feel I need to position myself firstly somewhere between unobtrusive listening and learning, but paying attention to active observation, recording and annotation.

From that routine, a sympathetic interpretation of exploring the 'out there' has got to come forth.



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After Cobar, thick mulga and cypress dominate the undulating scrub for endless miles of near straight road, stretching out to the expanding horizon. Sketchbooks are slowly coming out as impressions are put to paper in squiggling lines, bumps in the land providing contour and resolution to penmanship on the fly. There are sidelong glances at what fellow travelling companions are doing, and a sense that each one needs to whet the grindstone and sharpen the tools in preparation for the real deal in the *plein air* ahead.

Abundant grass cover fringes the road shoulder. Patches of new growth in the scrub glow green, testament to the big rains from the past few seasons. The air is unusually free from dust. Passing Talyawalka Creek, the land even shows signs of long-term inundation, the closest thing this outback gets to swampland. Afternoon light catches the ridgeline of the Barrier Ranges, and the clouds throw shapes in painterly gestures to the north-west. Broken Hill's slag heap looms closer and Argent Street's historical boulevard welcomes the weary travellers. Reaching the Silver City is a major signpost, 1254km into the journey, and the weeks of expectation have begun transmuting into a new reality, hopefully opening up a collective seam of creative composition.

We stock up next morning with fuel and food and we're gone. As the last bar of mobile phone coverage fades, Broken Hill's yabber recedes and the wide open outback awaits. On the dirt road to Fowlers Gap, bursts of light wash between thick cloud clusters, moving over stark hills, their folds and bunions punctuating the flat. In the scrub, the diversity of colours starts to reveal itself. Myriad variations of green and yellow atop the red dirt; succulents red-on-green stemmed and spiky colonise the earth.

Rusted remnants of human habitation cluster randomly around the ruins of the Euriowie Pub – an old boiler, a crushed suitcase, twists of fencing wire, all testaments to a tin-mining town long

gone. There is a new depth to the landscape – looking up from the sands through the groundcover it is like thick bush on a different scale.

Stumbling through the creek bed behind the Fowlers Gap homestead for an evening constitutional, the 'getting there' now complete, a striking resonance starts to percolate upwards from terra firma. Parallel lines of shale, beads of white quartz scattered like random teardrops, the sound of the spirit wind through the casuarina trees. Each artist in this troupe is already questing to interpret these subtle nuances of place and unlock the stories that rest within this slab of country. A shaft of silvery winter light catches Elisabeth Cummings and Guy Warren in the same frame, both as curious as colleagues half their ages, stumbling through the gibbered ground as they take snapshots of the landscape.

An air of creative tension permeates the dinner banter, but first-night nerves are assuaged somewhat by a sumptuous spread prepared by Steve Lopes. After the feasting, the tinkering with equipment and materials lingers on for a while as some ready for an early morning start. The artists tread lightly, for the walls suddenly have ears. Each has been paired off – hopefully well matched – into the dormitory of the old shearers' quarters. Two cots in each compartment, separated only by a single layer of weatherboard, a new enforced intimacy in what will be home for the next two weeks or so. ■

- 01 Guy Warren, *Dry creek bed*, 2011, water colour on paper, 57.5 x 76.5cm
 02 Guy Warren, *Fowler's land*, 2011, water colour on paper, 57.5 x 76.5cm
 03 Amanda Penrose Hart, *Two Tanks View*, 2011, oil on board, 17 x 30cm

