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Jane Carruthers

Mandy Martin's Artistic Explorations

Environmental art engages with landscape and its biota (flora and fauna) to capture human attention through aesthetics. Adding a different perspective on the environment and providing another vital way of engaging with it, art is a powerful ally of environmental history and marks an important edge to the discipline. Environmental history aims to bring understanding to nature and culture and to probe the interstices between them. The artist can partner the historian in this enterprise.

As its name implies, environmental history focuses on geography and topography, climate, water resources, and biota, and links these to particular human histories (social, economic, cultural, or political) in terms of how they have changed over time. Environmental art can do this too. Mandy Martin, a renowned and talented Australian artist, is a leader of environmental projects that explore the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration between the written and visual. Another artist and observer of environments who has recently been brought to scholarly attention is the nineteenth century artist-explorer Thomas Baines, who travelled extensively in Africa, and also in North Australia (1855–1857)¹. Martin's artistic philosophy echoes that of Thomas Baines:

I often adapt the model of a 19th century artist explorer working as part of a scientific exploration team, to suit modern environmental interdisciplinary projects. The artist-explorer mode informs both the subject and style of my paintings.²

Mandy Martin's art is an alliance between the aesthetic, the human, the scientific, the historical, the universal, and the specific. She probes the boundaries in environmental matters that may divide human groups such as Aboriginal and settler Australians, local and global concerns, place and space, and science and the humanities. Travelling extensively in areas of Australia that are not the usual habitat of artists, she translates abstract ideas into visually real works. In addition, she empowers others to think visually, and to appreciate and understand many different environments, and even to produce art.

1 Jane Carruthers' publications on Thomas Baines include Jane Carruthers and Lindy Stiebel, eds., *Thomas Baines: Exploring Tropical Australia, 1855 to 1857* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2012); *The Life and Work of Thomas Baines*, with Marion Arnold (Cape Town: Fernwood Press, 1995).

2 Mandy Martin, "Interlude I: Landscape Studies 2007," in *Desert Channels: The Impulse to Conserve*, eds. Libby Robin, Chris Dickman, and Mandy Martin (Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, 2010), 81.

Bringing an aesthetic element to environmental thinking, as Martin does, builds on strong intellectual foundations. History infuses the work, encourages the viewer to become more viscerally aware of environmental damage while encouraging an appreciation of what is special, or worth recording, about places. This concern is not with the dramatic (although it may sometimes be so, in the flooding Channel Country for instance), but with the typical and the recognizable, and the places treasured by local people. The talent in this environmental art is to transform the “ordinary” into the universal through a strong symbolic element. Such art contributes to discussions around the care and maintenance of land, incorporates imaginative metaphors, and opens avenues to understanding in a way that other disciplines cannot. The paintings convey an understanding but also a passion for ecological processes and the production of knowledge about them. It has been said that for Martin the real environment and the depicted environment are in a constant state of dialogue.³ Through her art she is able to explain the power of nature and to translate it into an accessible pictorial language that is, at once, both universal and specific.⁴

The specificity of Martin’s work includes the use of pigments and sand from the places she paints, brief journal-like descriptions written on the work relating to the time of day, the weather and the season, the name of the place or the river, and perhaps the name of a tree. Although a thoroughly modern artist who speaks to the concerns of the twenty-first century, Martin’s genealogy as a visual commentator on environments harks back to artist-explorers of the imperial era who interpreted colonial landscapes for a European audience. Often using the symbolism of the Romantic sublime that characterises Australian second-settler views, she regards herself as an artist-explorer. She has said consistently that she has painted the Australian natural, industrial, and agricultural landscapes through that lens and that it informs both the subject and the style of her paintings. However, she adapts this model of a nineteenth-century artist-explorer working as part of a scientific exploration team to suit modern environmental interdisciplinary projects.⁵ In doing so, she references Ludwig Becker, the artist who accompanied the Australian explorers Burke and Wills in their 1860 effort to reach the Gulf of Carpentaria overland from Melbourne and who died with Becker in the attempt.

3 Peter Haynes in Mandy Martin and Tom Griffiths, *Watersheds: The Paroo to the Warrego* (Mandurama, 1999), 36.

4 Peter Haynes in Mandy Martin, Jane Carruthers, Guy Fitzhardinge, Tom Griffiths, and Peter Haynes, *Inflows: The Channel Country Warrego* (Canberra, 2001), 47.

5 Mandy Martin in Robin, Dickman, and Martin, *Desert Channels*, 81.

Many artists display their work in august urban galleries. Martin's work certainly hangs in such surroundings—including even Parliament House in Canberra⁶—but she has an overt activist and social objective. One characteristic of her work is to be socially and locally inclusive. She exhibits in small local and regional galleries, frequently with her collaborating artists—often Aboriginal Australians—and she produces books that record the projects she leads and directs. Her techniques for inclusion range from art workshops that draw out the resonances between art, science, and story, to collaborations with sculpture, mapping, film, photography, and sound. While empowering her partners, she herself remains open to the meaning of all these dimensions, including the written word of the humanities and the data-collecting and conclusions of the natural sciences. As she explains, “Artistic observation may be haphazard, or just intuitive, but maybe it is not so far removed from the concerns of science itself. That slippage in human perception, the tension between *what* we see and *how* we see it, is at the heart of both art and science.”⁷ For environmental historians the challenges are very similar—how we interpret and explain our understanding of what we see or what has been recorded lies at the heart of the discipline.

6 At the time it was commissioned for the New Parliament House Committee Room in 1988, this was the largest commissioned painting in Australia.

7 Mandy Martin in Steve Morton, Mandy Martin, Kim Mahood, and John Carty, eds., *Desert Lake: Art, Science and Stories from Paruku* (Canberra: CSIRO Publishing, 2013), 183.