

Karra

Karrawirraparri-River Red Gum-*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*

Vivonne Thwaites

Karra was a visual arts project devised for the 2000 Adelaide Festival in Australia. Its focus was the River Red Gum, quite justifiably an Australian icon, and once the most widespread tree in south eastern Australia. The project comprised an installation by three artists and a 40 page publication with essays and visual material from many contributors.

The intention of the project was twofold. Firstly, I hoped that an examination of the River Red Gum from a number of points of view might help people connect with the tree itself, and more broadly with this place non-Aboriginal Australians so uneasily inhabit. Secondly, given the tree's central place in Australia's inland waterways, I wanted the art to help people consider the urgent problems facing this ecosystem, such as increased salinity, diminished water flow and environmental degradation. This subject had particular relevance for South Australians, as our state is so dependent on the Murray-Darling River system. For example on 15 February 1999 Dr Tom Hatton of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation published a media release titled **Salt: Australia's greatest battle**. "...we're losing an area equal to one football oval an hour-or about 85 typical suburban blocks...in Western Australia, eighty per cent of the remnant native vegetation on farms and 50 per cent on public lands is at risk. In other words we stand to lose a large fraction of our native biodiversity." "Trees...or an agriculture which uses water more effectively will remain the front line answer to salinity and large scale adoption is urgent .." "Below this landscape lies stores of salt as high as 10,000 tonnes per hectare."

The theme of the Festival was *The new out of the old*. At the rear of the Festival Centre lie the River Torrens and the Adelaide Plains. Along the river are several gnarled old trees, River Red Gums, some of them predating white settlement and bearing the scars of Aboriginal timber collecting activities. The media was full of stories of the way these trees are still being cut down along the Murray further out, regardless of their proven value in filtering water and reducing salinity. We found the subject for the Festival project right in our own backyard.

Once committed to the subject, research could begin. This took almost twelve months. First up was the tree's Aboriginal history. The Kurna people, original inhabitants of the Adelaide Plains, called it Karra or more fully, Karrawirraparri (literally 'redgum forest river' from karra 'redgum', wirra 'forest', parri 'river'). The tree was central to their lives as source of food and shelter, and supplier of timber for shields and other implements. There are incised shields of Red Gum in the South Australian Museum, and delicate drawings of the tree by Jimmy Kite made c1920.

The tree's place in Australia's white history can be traced back to explorer's journals where, variously named, it was described as a welcome sign of the presence of a watercourse. More recently it appears in the natural history writing of Eric Rolls and others. (Rolls 2002). Ironically the tree's botanical name, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, originated in 1832, when a botanist admired and named a single specimen grown by monks of the Camalduli order in the Apennines outside Naples, Italy. We can see that the eucalyptus was already spreading in 1832!

Preparing the art exhibition also required a wide reading of literature. Les Murray's poem *The gum forest*, one of the greatest 20th century Australian poems, was an early discovery. "After the last gapped wire on a post, / homecoming for me, to enter the gum forest." (Murray 1998, 33) So too was Murray Bail's book *Eucalyptus*: "By sheer numbers there's always a bulky Red Gum here or somewhere else in the wide world, muscling into the eye, as it were; and by following the course of rivers in our particular continent they don't merely imprint their fuzzy shape but actually worm their way greenly into the mind, giving some hope against the collective, crow-croaking dryness." (Bail 1998, 109)

We also explored the visual history that had grown up around the tree. The unruly growth of its limbs and canopy defied the imported vision of colonial artists, though the ability of Heidelberg school artists such as Roberts and Streeton to truthfully depict gumtrees is often considered to mark the beginnings of a 'true' Australian art. Stephanie Radok reviewed representations of the gum tree from 1815 to the 1990's from colonial artist John Glover to Aboriginal watercolourist Albert Namatjira, from John Davis' wrapped tree trunks to Gloria Petyarre's paintings of infinite space.

Early in the research it became clear that the tree, and the complex set of natural and cultural interactions it engendered, could be seen as a kind of symbol of the human settlement of Australia. It was much discussed and much loved, but also much abused. I felt that to bring together different systems of understanding and representation of the tree could help

contemporary urban Australians begin to understand and connect to the tree, and through it to the land. This was the broader cultural agenda of the project.

But the aim of the project would not be possible without giving audiences a chance to read and see at least some of the historical material. Hence the decision to make the catalogue an integral part of the project. Essays on various aspects of the tree were commissioned from several authorities – natural history writer Eric Rolls, plant specialist Martin O’Leary, linguist Dr Rob Amery and art historian Stephanie Radok. In addition there were botanical illustrations by Gilbert Dashorst and historical images associated with the tree. Finally there were works of art ranging from HJ Johnstone’s *Evening shadows, backwater of the Murray, South Australia* 1880 – the Art Gallery of South Australia’s first acquisition in 1881 and for years its most popular painting – to more contemporary works by Fred Williams, Ian Abdulla, Kathleen Petyarre and Ian Burn. A piece of music titled *Karra* by Aboriginal musician Nelson (Snooky) Varcoe was commissioned and this was printed in English and Kurna in the catalogue and movingly performed at the opening.

Rather than use historical works, I felt that it was important to give contemporary artists the opportunity to respond to the history of the tree, its presence as a physical object and its place in our future.

The artists’ selected were Jo Crawford ceramic and mixed media artist, Agnes Love (Kurna) photographer and Chris De Rosa printmaker. They

were given basic information on the tree and then began an extensive research period of their own, looking at how the tree functioned, its ecosystem, Aboriginal associations and the records of early settlers.

Although originally they planned to work individually, after extended research the three artists decided to collaboratively produce an installation to take up the entire gallery space. It was built around a series of sheer fabric circles, falling trunk-like from the ceiling to the floor and onto which multiple overlaid images were printed and stitched. The floor was covered with a thin carpet of bark from the tree, harvested from a sustainable plantation.

The artists also grew several hundred Karra trees. They were brought into the gallery at seedling stage and grew in the gallery throughout the project. Some seedlings were also attached to the walls to suggest the shape of Aboriginal shields. The seedlings were planted at various sites at the conclusion of the project. A third component was a work on the rear wall of the gallery. Snaking along its 24 metre length, this fabric work represented the Murray River. Hundreds of Karra leaves inscribed with historical references to the tree including hand-written diary entries by early settlers were attached to this 'river', appearing to be swept along by its 'waters.'

How can we measure the effectiveness of an art project, especially when its intended audience is the 'general public'? As school groups and the public came through the gallery, the reaction was overwhelming. Students from as far afield as Tasmania and Sydney as well as hundreds of students from across South Australia came through the gallery and the response was

overwhelmingly positive. The Tasmanian students had been involved in massive tree plantings and it became clear that these young people have a great concern for our environment and are searching for ways to participate in assisting wherever possible. There was an emotional reaction to the installation that did not require prior reading. I had felt that the installation may have been asking too much of the audience but something of the character of the tree was conveyed to the general audience where there were no established ideas regarding what an art project ought to be or what an art project should look like. In this regard I felt that the artists had achieved the almost impossible – in a physical environment unassisted by light control (three of the Artspace's walls are glass) they had found a way of reminding the public of the place that this tree holds in the landscape, and in the Australian imagination.

As Drusilla Modjeska wrote in *The Australian Review of Books*, "Our art and literature might be full of gum trees, but day by day we hardly notice them. Is it that they are so much a part of us that we need something more dramatic to jog our attention?...in *Karra* the distinction between art and politics is hard to maintain. (It) come(s) out of a thinking that resists the urge to pit one thing against another, ordering and classifying as so much in our culture does." (Modjeska 2000, 4) and "Often our imagination cannot fully absorb the truth of a city or land unless a poet first invents it."

The destruction of the landscape began on European settlement and continues now as most Australians refuse to adequately comprehend and adapt to the conditions in which they are living. Trees are still removed when they become 'too large', housing design has not altered significantly, gardens

that require precious water are still being planted. Water collection, solar power, land use etc must be integrated into town planning. It is my hope that this project , and art in general, can help influence the attitudes that need to change, for our common future to be viable.

Bail, Murray. 1998. *Eucalyptus*, Text Publishing Company, Melbourne.

Modjeska, Drusilla. 2000. Dots on the landscape, The Australian's Review of Books 3-4, Sydney.

Murray, Les. 1998. *New Selected Poems*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney.

Rolls, Eric. 2002. *Australia : A Biography*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.