Queensland College of Art
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Doctor of Visual Arts

FERTILE DREAMS
BIRTHING A DISCURSIVE, ABJECT, POSTPRODUCTION STORY SPACE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this project is to create a ‘story space’ that cultivates and challenges enduring dominant myths about the Australian landscape by using perverse and abject audio-visual strategies and ‘postproduction art’ practices. This project draws on Australian writer Ross Gibson’s theories on dominant cinematic Australian landscape myths and an aspect of French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection from her book *The Powers of Horror* (1982) to challenge these myths. The cinematic myths that underpin this project relate to non-indigenous Australians’ largely unconsummated desire to understand and unite with an intolerant and sometimes vengeful landscape.

Metaphorically, abjection describes anything that is cast-off or excluded from the dominant social norms, and can include people, objects, spaces, motion and stories. Cast-offs represent the binary opposite of what is accepted by the dominant social norms, such as right and wrong, life and death, or “human and non-human” (Creed 1993, 8). This project sought to challenge and update dominant social norms by creating a physical lived story space based on Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa’s (2006) concept of the lived cinematic image as ‘lived space’. Located in a gallery, the story space I have created consists of audio-visual artworks that present an abject interpretation of trees that inhabit under-represented swamp and native forest landscapes located in Moreton Bay and Byron Bay.
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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Merri Randell
21 January 2014
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This exegesis is designed to be read as an accompaniment to the physical experience of the gallery installation of *The Fen* ‘lived story space’, staged at the PoP Gallery in Brisbane, in March 2014. As I will detail, this visual art project aimed to cultivate and challenge enduring dominant myths about the Australian landscape. To do this, I used perverse and ‘abject’ audio-visual strategies and ‘postproduction art’ practices to create a specific ‘story space’, the terms of which I will define and describe in this introduction. Following this, I will describe this project’s methodology, and provide a brief summary of the chapters. To begin, I will briefly introduce the aims of the project and my motivations for pursuing it.

I grew up in a rural Victorian town that had a population of 700 people. The main sources of income were through wheat and sheep farming; however, these industries were in continual jeopardy due to the natural catastrophes of flood, storm, drought, plague and bushfire. The land was flat, dry and hard with an endless horizon that sometimes drove beleaguered farmers to self-harm and suicide. In these instances, the children I went to school with were either forced off the land or struggled on. As children, my classmates and I were not allowed to discuss these tragedies.

That was my childhood; as an adult, I live in south-east Queensland where the landscape, climate and horizons are different, but the same natural catastrophes threaten the order and safety of this sub-tropical corner of Australia. I live on a small hobby farm near Moreton Bay, where land is often classified as marginal because it is found on the edge of cultivated areas and is difficult to grow crops on. I find the vegetation growing on this marginal land, in this sub-tropical climate, beguiling: spindly paperbarks emerge from swampy, slimy mud with questionable root systems, carrying heavy loads of voracious exotic vines, only to be blown over during storm season. But sometimes these trees recover and adapt, and continue
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their life cycle. The story of these trees is explored in this project through the concept of the ‘fetid fen’.

The fen in this project’s story space is not a conventional one. It is a shadowy forest wetland replete with rank water, slimy ensnaring mud, and invasive clouds of tiny, buzzing, blood-sucking, disease-ridden insects. This fen has been disturbed and now only certain things can grow because of scarce plant nutrients in the water and soil. The plants that have evolved to thrive in this project’s fen include native swamp trees, mosses, grasses and neoteric carnivorous species. The aim of creating this project’s story space is to challenge the dominant cinematic myths of Australian landscape and their relationship to non-indigenous Australians’ largely unconsummated desire to understand and unite with an intolerant and sometimes vengeful landscape. In the next section, I will define the terms ‘abject’, ‘story space’ and ‘postproduction art’, since they contribute to the theoretical framework and execution of this research project.

1.1: KEY DEFINITIONS

ABJECT

The ‘symbolic laws’ or ‘social norms’ discussed in this project provide the framework of acceptable human behaviour in Western society. They are based on the notion of opposing binaries, with examples including “human and non-human” (Creed 1993, 8), right and wrong, self and other, insider and outsider, white and black, male and female, “familiar” and “strange” (Gibson, 1992: xii), and life and death. I draw on theories of abjection posed by French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1982) and Australian film theorist Barbara Creed (1993) to explain the concept of opposing binaries that underpins my research as it seeks to challenge social norms through the creation of a lived story space.

According to Kristeva’s (1982) abject theory of opposing binaries, there are dominant binaries and cast-off, or abject, binaries. Cast-offs represent the binary opposite of what is accepted by the dominant symbolic laws. In her book *The Powers*
of Horror (1982), Kristeva posits that when opposing binaries or “one and the other” (Kristeva 1982, 161) co-exist, “the place where meaning collapses” occurs (Kristeva 1982, 2). According to Kristeva, this place represents the boundary zone between what is acceptable and not acceptable according to social norms. This boundary zone is a contested space, where opposing binaries overlap, and thus test and redefine social norms.

Kristeva (1982) suggests that the corpse is the ultimate abject object because it reminds us of the unacceptable but unavoidable non-human state—the body without a soul—or, if represented as opposing binaries, the corpse is an object where human and non-human binaries co-exist. Metaphorically, abjection describes anything that is cast-off or excluded from the dominant symbolic law and can include objects, animals, people, spaces, motion and stories. Kristeva (1982) asserts that society’s reaction to signs of abjection generally takes the emotional forms of fascination and attraction, or horror and repulsion.

In her book The Monstrous Feminine (1993), Creed draws on Kristeva’s (1982) abject theories to analyse cinematic narratives from the horror genre. Creed (1993) notes that in many of the cinematic narratives where opposing binaries exist, balance must be restored, or the dominant symbolic laws upheld, which usually means that the abject binary is destroyed. For example, Creed discusses Terminator (Cameron 1984), where the human and non-human opposing binaries are embodied by the android antagonist character who becomes increasingly repulsive as the narrative progresses. During the narrative, the android conducts repairs on his robot chassis and displays flagrant disregard of social norms, by casting-off the human skin and eye that act as his disguise. In these scenes, abject, non-human signifiers of death—such as blood, discarded body parts and open fleshy wounds—are employed to heighten the repulsive emotion towards this character. At the end of the narrative, balance is restored when the abject android is destroyed.

Terminator (Cameron 1984) questions the power of technology in our culture—the non-human versus the human state. This cinematic narrative creates an opportunity where both sides of a concern that affects social norms can be presented to the
public as part of a dramatic discussion. Such productions are biased and therefore their popularity is measured by the quality and cultural appropriateness of the discussion presented. This cinematic narrative is similar to the boundary zone, the contested space, where opposing binaries overlap to test and redefine social norms. These notions are important to my research since I sought to challenge social norms by adopting audio-visual strategies, including manipulating opposing binary signs and signifiers, which resonate with the strategies used in the described scene from *Terminator* (Cameron 1984).

Creed (1993) suggests that challenging the boundary zone between opposing binaries is a typical human evolutionary pattern. The process of upholding the dominant symbolic laws was traditionally conducted by the Catholic Church, which used religious rituals, such as confession and the rite of penance, to do so. In these rituals, priests helped purify the penitents by reassuring them of right and wrong behaviour and reinforcing these laws, as Creed notes: "Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process" (Creed 1993, 8).

Creed (1993) asserts that society still requires symbolic laws to be reinforced. Since organised religion's influence has waned as the ordained enforcer, some sections of society today receive realignment and purification from watching horror cinematic narratives. According to Creed,

> Viewing a horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure... but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject... (Creed 1993, 10)

In Creed's view, this process can be observed in many horror cinematic narratives where the abject entity is either the antagonist or the abject victim, and typically both are destroyed in an appropriately abject, purifying manner. The above-described concept of the corpse is explored in the horror cinematic narrative genre through popular antagonists, such as vampires (e.g., *Nosferatu*, 1922), zombies (e.g., *The Night of the Living Dead*, 1972), ghouls or corpse eaters (e.g., *Alien*, 1979) and androids (e.g., *Terminator*, 1984). Creed (1993) suggests that through ejecting abject characters in these cinematic narratives, the ordained cultural producer vicariously
defiles and purifies their audience to reinforce dominant symbolic laws or social norms. However, my project does not seek to reinforce dominant social norms through ejecting the abject. Instead, it seeks to create a contested, perverse and abject lived story space, a boundary zone where opposing binaries overlap to challenge and promote opportunities to redefine social norms.

THE LIVED STORY SPACE

A range of disciplines offer different definitions for story spaces. However, as this project concentrates its discussion on dominant cinematic myths of Australian landscape, the definition of story space used is based on semiotic, cinematic and architectural discourse.

First, it is necessary to clarify the key terms ‘story’ and ‘myth’. Story is a broadly used term that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “is an account of imaginary or real people and events” (Oxford 2013a). Therefore, stories in and of themselves do not create meaning; rather, people create meaning from stories. Story is a benign term that is often interchangeably used with myth—which can be misleading. Myth, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, includes two definitions that relate to assigning meaning to stories. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states,

Myth: 1: a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events, 2: a widely held but false belief or idea.

(Oxford 2013b)

These definitions highlight the distinction between story and myth; myth creates an idea or meaning that can be popular because it is appealing, but that is ultimately a fictitious story. Therefore, story and myth rely on a person’s interpretation to create meaning. This project seeks to cultivate and challenge existing myths or myth signifiers to promote subjective meaning-making or ambiguous signification. In his book *Mythologies* (1972), French semiotician Roland Barthes discusses the notion of ambiguous signification based on the reading of a myth signifier, which is a sign representing a myth familiar to an audience—not a sign that constructs a myth.
Barthes (1972) notes that one way of reading a myth signifier can result in a more ambiguous signification or subjective experience because it builds on a familiar concept. According to Barthes, "if I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification" (Barthes 1972, 128). This way of reading Barthes' (1972) theory supports this project's aim to cultivate and challenge existing myths to promote ambiguous signification or subjective meaning-making.

American cinema theorist Seymour Chatman's (1978) definitions of key cinematic narratology terms are widely used as primary structuralist sources in the discipline. However, his definition of story space in relation to cinematic narrative theory differs from the definition I use in this project as he is not interested in creating opportunities for audience's to experience ambiguous signification. Chatman defines a story space as being what can be seen or heard in a single “imagined visual frame” of a larger “story world” (Chatman 1978, 104). Chatman's definition of story space (1978) relates to linear, plot-driven stories told as narratives. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a ‘narrative’ is “a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values” (Oxford 2013c).

Typically, cinematic narratives are highly influenced by the structured linear order in which ideas are introduced; as Gibson notes:

> given the linear progression of film, every image in a narrative is elaborately coded through its location in culture generally and through its insertion in a specific diegetic flow which must give rise to some meaning (Gibson 1993, 215)

Thus according to Chatman and Gibson, narratives create meaning from manipulated stories to serve an author's agenda. As the author of the artworks, I acknowledge my agenda, which is my interpretation of Australian landscape myth signifiers that have become narratives. However, since the audience physically experiences the exhibition in the gallery, or story space, in a non-linear way which resists a ‘specific diegetic flow’ (Gibson 1993, 215) - ambiguous signification (Barthes 1972) is encouraged. Barthes expands on this notion of attaining
“ambiguous signification” by describing the audience or reader's experience as a lived experience: "the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal" (Barthes 1972, 128). Thus, I adopt Barthes' (1972) notion of the lived experience of mythical signifiers to justify my divergence from Chatman's (1978) definition of story space. Indeed, this project's story space experience is lived in a non-linear, physical space inhabited by different narrative artworks as a collection of self-contained moments that can be appreciated in any order. In this way, they create opportunities for subjective meaning-making.

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa extends this notion of a physical lived space, discussing the existential, phenomenological notion of the lived cinematic image as a lived space in his chapter "The Lived Image" (2006). Pallasmaa's notion extrapolates visual arts and cinematic discourse, incorporating concepts of phenomenology, especially those underpinning conceptual art and the belief that the artwork is completed by the audience, with the artwork occurring in the audience—not the object.

Pallasmaa is concerned with physical space, but acknowledges that the audience or subject approaching this space brings with them beliefs that ultimately influence their experience of the space. According to Pallasmaa,

> Lived space resembles the ephemeral structures of dream and the unconscious, organized independently of the boundaries of physical space and time. Lived space is always a dialectical combination of external space and inner mental space, past and present, actuality and mental projection. When experiencing lived space, memory and dream, fear and desire, value and meaning, fuse with the actual percepts. Lived space is space that is inseparably integrated with the subject's concurrent life situation. (Pallasmaa 2006, 11)

Pallasmaa's definition of a 'lived space' (2006) also proposes that meanings or myths made from the experience of the physical story space in the gallery are further influenced by the moment the subject visits this space, which suggests these meanings may change over time due to the variables he mentions. This notion of evolving subjective meaning-making resonates with my project's myth propagation aspirations, which is further supported by my postproduction art practice described next. Pallasmaa's dynamic and philosophical notion of the lived space is the main
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experiential aim and justification for the definition of this project's story space; however, measuring the audience's response to the story space is outside its scope.

Thus, based on the discussion above, the definition of this project's story space is a physical gallery space exhibiting artworks that are narratives about familiar myths of under-represented Australian landscapes. This project's experiential aim is for the physical gallery space to be a lived space (Pallasmaa, 2006) for the audience, and for its non-linear nature to promote opportunities for them to create ambiguous (Barthes, 1972) and subjective meanings from the lived (Barthes, 1972) stories created from the story space.

POSTPRODUCTION ART

This project's artworks have been created using a postproduction art practice. ‘Postproduction’ is a cinematic narrative term that French curator and writer Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) appropriated to describe work by a group of postmodern artists who create new meanings for existing subjects through re-appropriation and re-editing, as defined in his book Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World (Bourriaud 2002). As Bourriaud states, postproduction artists invent new uses for works, including audio or visual forms of the past, within their own constructions. But they also reedit historical or ideological narratives, inserting the elements that compose them into alternative scenarios. (Bourriaud 2002, 39)

Although the artworks created for this project are based on my photographs of under-represented swamp and forest landscapes, I have cultivated and challenged enduring supernatural Australian landscape myths through digital manipulation and incorporating abject audio-visual elements. This creates new narratives, which fulfill the aims of the project. Additional visual elements include motion design, based on animalistic movement, which is applied to the trees in the landscapes. Audio elements include audio files downloaded from Freesound (freesound.org), a collaborative online database of Creative Commons Licensed sounds. The audio files from this website were uploaded for specific diegetic uses, which reinforced literal
meanings. However, I subverted their intended meanings by reediting them “into alternative scenarios” (Bourriaud 2002, 39) within my artworks. All of the sound artists whose audio files were used for exhibited artworks were notified of their use and are acknowledged on my Vimeo page (vimeo.com/merrirandell) where my artworks are shared.

Postproduction art draws on Bourriaud’s concept of ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud, 2002), which suggests, among other things, that the conversation about the meaning of the artwork can be as important as—and in some cases, more important than—the artwork itself when it is exhibited. Bourriaud notes that, “The artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions” (Bourriaud 2002, 13). To achieve this project’s aims, my postproduction art practice is combined with an inductive, practice-led, action research cycle model, as discussed below.

1.2: PRACTICE-LED AND ACTION RESEARCH CYCLES

To identify appropriate creative outcomes that addressed this project’s aim, I conducted experiments through an inductive, practice-led approach. These experiments were structured using the action research cycle model. My methodology draws on theories of the practice-led approach from Scottish writer and practitioner Carole Gray and Finnish academics Maarit Mäkelä and Sara Routarinne, which I will describe below. I will also explain the action research cycle model that American educator Jim McKernan offers, which draws on the work of American psychologist Kurt Lewin, who, in 1946, was the first practitioner to document this approach. As noted by these experts, the practice-led approach and action research cycle model is highly appropriate for practitioners, such as myself, who already have an established art practice based on discovery through experimentation and iteration.
Gray (1996) observes that the practice-led approach is particularly useful for practitioners, as it allows unforeseen research questions to arise through inductive practice. Gray comments that,

firstly research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray in Haseman 2006, 104)

Since I have twenty years’ experience as a visual communication practitioner, this approach is ideal for this project. Gray (2004) asserts that creative-practice-as-research often leads to discovery through an artwork that explores research problems or questions. She notes that,

When research involves practice, it is likely that some new work... has been developed to explore the research questions. These may be resolved pieces embodying some of the research concepts or they may be experimental ‘sketches’ or prototypes. (Gray 2004, 168)

Mäkelä and Routarinne’s (2006) chapter on research practices in art and design also supports using a practice-led approach to discover directions for further inquiry. They comment that, "In the field of practice-led research... making is conceived to be the driving force behind the research and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas" (Mäkelä and Routarinne 2006, 22).

Thus, a key research design feature of this project is discovery made through creating, exhibiting and reflecting on artworks. Subsequently, I structured this project by using the action research cycle model in conjunction with the practice-led approach. According to Lewin (1946), the action research cycle model typically employs discrete cycles of four ordered, task-driven phases: planning (reflection), action and observation, and reflection (planning). Each cycle informs the next, following an evolutionary spiral form, as shown in Fig. 1.1.

![Action research cycle model diagram](image)

*Fig. 1.1: Action research cycle model diagram*
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This type of structure was necessary due to the practice-led approach and because I conducted this project on a part-time basis over a number of years. In this project, action research cycles, based on concentrated work sessions performed within specified timeframes, provided an ideal structure for experimentation, discovery and reflection. Each action research cycle was based around a residency, exhibition or conference, and over the course of my candidature, I participated in six residencies, five group exhibitions, two solo exhibitions, and presented two conference papers. Each action research cycle includes a number of smaller action research cycles, as all activities on this project—including creative collection (photography, audio selection, motion design research), production (digital manipulation, motion design) and exhibition—used a plan-act-observe-and-reflect process for iteration to ensure the research aims were addressed effectively.

This reflective action research cycle model was also appropriate for this project because I am a practitioner using a practice-led approach to promote change within a social context. McKernan (1991), who has written extensively on the action research cycle model, notes that Lewin argued that to “understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry” (McKernan 1991, 10).

In this project, I am the practitioner from the “real social world” who was involved in all phases of the research, including the reporting of appropriate discoveries to promote opportunities for change to current social norms.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the practice-led, action research cycle experiments that were implemented to address the project’s aim and the consummation of the lived story space in greater detail. In the following section, I will provide a brief summary of chapters as they relate to the project *Fertile Dreams: Birthing a Discursive, Abject, Postproduction Story Space*. 

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1.3: CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 2 outlines the project's theoretical framework. It introduces the myth of the non-indigenous Australian landscape through a contextual discussion based on theories from Australian writers Ross Gibson, Robin Wright and Kirsty Duncanson about the landscapes presented in Picnic at Hanging Rock (Weir 1975), The Man from Snowy River (Miller 1982) and Lantana (Lawrence 2001). Concepts of identity from Australian anthropologist Nicholas Smith, and personal reflections from Australian settler writer Marcus Clarke are also presented as part of this contextual discussion. Following this, I elaborate on theories offered by Australian writers Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs that draw on Kristeva's theories on abjection to unpack non-indigenous Australians’ largely unconsummated desire to understand and unite with an intolerant and sometimes vengeful landscape. I then extend on Bourriaud’s and Gibson’s concepts to explain this project’s strategies to challenge and promote opportunities to update social norms.

The contextual review in Chapter 3 extends this discussion through critically analysing artworks by artists significant to this project. In the field of Australian landscape art, I consider artworks by Australian artists William Robinson and Tracey Moffatt that have significantly influenced my strategic aesthetic aims in relation to distorted forests and swamps. I then analyse seminal artworks created by British artist Sarah Lucas, French artist Louise Bourgeois and English cinema director Chris Cunningham, drawing on theories of abjection from Kristeva and Creed. I examine how these practitioners’ work impacted the abject forms and motion strategies used in this project. Following this discussion, I analyse an existing story space (available online) made by non-indigenous Australian documentary-maker Debra Beattie, and two existing story spaces by Japanese artist Hiraki Sawa to establish an understanding of the existing contexts of story space that this project straddles. This discussion highlights the appropriate motion, visual and presentation strategies that were applied in this project's artworks and story space.

Chapter 4 draws on the theories, artists' work and concepts developed in previous chapters to describe the consummation of The Fen lived story space exhibition (held
in March 2014). I use the action research cycle model process of plan-act-observe-reflect to outline the development of the lived story space and a selection of the artworks that inhabit it. The final reflective phase of the action research cycle model discusses whether the aspirations of the lived story space were able to be achieved. Chapter 5 provides the concluding summary of this project’s outcomes and reflection on my personal transformative journey of discovery as an artist through practice.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework outlined in this chapter introduces the dominant cinematic myth of the non-indigenous Australian landscape through a contextual discussion and unpacks non-indigenous Australians' largely unconsummated desire to understand and unite with an intolerant and sometimes vengeful landscape.

2.1: AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE CINEMATIC MYTHS

The Australian landscape has been presented in a long list of feature-length cinematic narratives, among them *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Tait 1906), *Walkabout* (Roeg 1971), *Mad Max* (Miller 1979), *Crocodile Dundee* (Faiman 1986), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott 1994), *Ten Canoes* (Djigirr and de Heer 2006), as well as recent landscape pastiches in *Wolf Creek* (McLean 2005) and *Australia* (Luhrmann 2008). In many of these cinematic narratives, the natural Australian landscape has been presented as a character in its own right. In his paper entitled "Blood and Soil: Nature, Native and Nation in the Australian Imaginary", Nicholas Smith confirms this, stating, “the landscape is represented as integral to the narrative, as if it were a character with its own role” (Smith 2011, 13).

Significantly, in the 1970s and 1980s, cinematic funding bodies actively encouraged narratives that developed notions of non-indigenous Australian identity through differentiation based on Australia’s unique non-European landscape (Gibson, 1992). Thus, many feature-length Australian cinematic narratives created during this time present the landscape as integral to the narrative. However, since the 1992 High Court of Australia’s landmark decision that recognised Eddie Koiki Mabo’s indigenous sovereign rights, postcolonial, non-indigenous Australian cinematic narratives have largely concentrated on either urban landscape settings, or perpetuated the vengeful Australian landscape myth established in the cinematic narratives from the 1970s and 1980s.

The following discussion analyses the Australian landscapes presented in cinematic narratives *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir 1975), *The Man from Snowy River* (Miller
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1982) and _Lantana_ (Lawrence 2001) so as to establish the context of the Australian landscape cinematic myth. I selected these films because the landscape drives the plot of their narratives. Writing on the first two films, Australian writer Robin Wright observes “The landscape is the prime determining feature which identifies the films as Australian and overtly influences both the nature and the actions of the characters” (Wright 1993, 88).

The Australian landscape is a contested space. Aboriginal people were the first Australians to populate this land and lived symbiotically within the ecosystem for over 40,000 years. Since Anglo-settlement less than 250 years ago, the relationship between Australians and the landscape has undergone a series of iterations, ranging from the colonial-style ransacking of resources to more sustainable custodian understandings of the land. During this time, many myths have been created about the land, which are often portrayed in visual cultural representations, such as art, theatre, marketing, television, games and cinema.

However, as Gibson (1992) notes, when the land is represented in visual culture, it becomes landscape: a myth of land. Gibson states that,

> as soon as such geography is represented and dramatised within images, sounds, and stories, it is no longer land. Rather, it is landscape; it has been translated and utilised as an element of myth. (Gibson 1992, 75)

Therefore, ‘land’ is the noun that describes a place, and ‘landscape’ is a dramatised mythical or narrative place that communicates meaning. In fact, the natural landscape can be another cultural construct, as Gibson observes: "The landscape image might signify nature, but that is not to say it is nature. The very notion of nature is a cultural construct" (1992, 75).

Nature as a cultural construct is at the heart of the uneasy relationship that non-indigenous Australians have with their landscape. Marcus Clarke is credited as one of the first social commentators to document myths about the Australian landscape and he coined the much interpreted descriptor “weird melancholy” (Clarke 1896, 33). In his book _Australian Tales_ (1896), Clarke describes his relationship with his
new land; despite being clearly fond of it, Clarke describes it as a land of monstrosities, as seen in this extract:

the poetry which lives in the trees and flowers of Australia, differs from those of other countries... Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume... But the dweller in the wilderness acknowledges the subtle charm of this fantastic land of monstrosities (Clarke 1896, 34)

However, Clarke is not the only cultural commentator to present the Australian landscape in this way, as evidenced by the discussion that follows.

Nicholas Smith (2011) acknowledges four general categorisations of Australian identities, including indigenous, colonial, settler and migrant, which approximate to a chronological settlement pattern. Creators of Australian cinematic narratives often co-opt the mythic landscape characters to assist them in communicating the deeper turmoil of their counterpart Australian identities, which Wright notes in her work on Australian cinema. According to Wright, creators “pick and choose the characteristics they wish to identify with the Australian character, and then graft them onto their own representations of the landscape” (Wright 1995, 6). Picnic at Hanging Rock, which exemplifies this practice, is a mystery about a group of schoolgirls and teachers holding a picnic at Hanging Rock in Victoria on Valentine's Day 1900. The drama centres on the disappearance of several schoolgirls and their teacher. The meta-narrative represents the tension between the Australian colonial and settler identities. The landscape character is used as a sign to express a range of meanings, as Wright notes:

The rock becomes a metaphor for the whole Australian bush; powerful, dangerous, desirable, beautiful, mystical, pure and most importantly incomprehensible to those living by the repressive rules of British colonial society. (Wright 1995, 5)

The supernatural landscape character presented in Picnic at Hanging Rock is the predator that bewitches and abducts the girls and their mistress by tempting them into a dark, vaginal-like tunnel in the rock. During the resulting search for the girls, a young man tries to follow them into the tunnel. It is unclear if he was successful in entering the tunnel but emerges from his struggles, unable to speak about his experience. This encounter perpetuates the supernatural landscape myth of a powerful natural force that opposes repressive controls, as Wright comments: "The secret of the rock is portrayed as inaccessible to those who chose to remain within
the Symbolic world of language and rational explanation” (Wright 1993, 90). Despite Wright's comment on remaining within this symbolic world, many of the local settler male characters who conduct the search for the missing females are portrayed as being accepting of this merciless landscape. In fact, the missing females are ultimately represented as sacrificial victims of the “negative elements of British social control” (Wright 1995, 6), which is consistent with the grafting of Australian identity onto the landscape. This cinematic narrative had a death toll and an ambiguous ending, resulting in decades of speculation and subjective meaning-making for its audience.

_The Man from Snowy River_ is another period piece. Set in the Snowy Mountains in New South Wales (NSW), it centres on a young man’s struggle to earn his right to live on the mountain. On his journey, he falls in love with the daughter of the settler antagonist character, but ultimately the protagonist becomes the hero and achieves his quest because of his deep understanding of the “untameable high country” (Australian Government 2007). Wright (1995) comments that in this cinematic narrative, the landscape again represents the turmoil of the binary tension that exists between the represented Australian identities. In this instance, it is between the “hard” (Miller 1982) mountain men embedded in the wet fertile wilderness and the colonising rules of the ruined flat plains. According to Wright:

[The] high country is used to represent nature, freedom, passion... while the civilised plains represent culture, constraint... The film valorises the wild high country... and consequently devalues the civilised life on the plains. (Wright 1995, 5)

The tempestuous landscape character presented in _The Man from Snowy River_ is both the object of desire and the destroyer. In fact, the headstrong young female character describes the landscape as such, "One minute it's like paradise, the next it's trying to kill you" (Miller 1982). This mountainous landscape consists of steep inaccessible valleys and extreme unpredictable weather, but is fertile and full of treasure for worthy supporters. For example, one of the characters is a miner who has dedicated his life to creating a tunnel in the mountain—a symbolic groaning womb that he playfully derides with name calling, such as “trollop”, “harlot” and “jezebel” (Miller 1982). This gender binary theme is further explored by the two
strong female characters’ struggle for equality with men during the narrative. The conclusion of this cinematic narrative is unambiguous. The protagonist who understands and tames the mountain is the hero and subsequently earns the right to take his place in this Australian landscape myth. Unlike *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, no one dies *The Man from Snowy River*, and there is no opportunity for subjective meaning-making. As mentioned previously, my visual art project seeks to promote opportunities for the audience to create ambiguous and subjective meanings from the lived story space (Barthes 1972; Pallasmaa 2006) to challenge social norms. This aim is therefore more aligned with strategies employed in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* than those used in *The Man from Snowy River*.

*Lantana* is a more contemporary, postcolonial cinematic narrative that builds on the previously identified mythical signifiers of the Australian landscape. The story centres on the mysterious disappearance of a woman (married to a settler Australian character who is the Dean of Law at a prestigious university) in the Blue Mountains, NSW, whose daughter was killed in the urban landscape eighteen months earlier. The narrative represents both settler and migrant Australian identities through the mountain and urban landscape characters. An indifferent Australian landscape is presented in *Lantana*, with the mysteries surrounding the two deaths of the narrative remaining unsolved and therefore assigning no blame to the landscape. A death occurs in each of the presented Australian landscapes. Duncanson (2009) suggests this storyline initially perpetuates the enduring myth of the intolerant and vengeful Australian landscape. As she comments,

> the justice system... fail[s] him [the husband/father character] by neither fully restoring order.... Instead, the deaths of this woman and girl, caused by 'no-one', repeat the Anglo-Australian narrative of the deadly threat of 'nothing' in the Australian landscape. (Duncanson 2009, 36–37)

Duncanson (2009) develops this argument further and offers an insight into a post-Mabo Australian landscape myth, where the noxious, exotic settler Australians have become illegal due to their false claims of sovereignty. Duncanson remarks that at the end of the settler Australian storyline, the “white figures of law appear
overwhelmed, inadequate and impotent, their sovereign potential unsatisfied” (Duncanson 2009, 45).

The illegal, exotic settler Australian concept is consistent with the narrative’s title, which is named after an invasive, noxious, exotic weed. This weed is presented in the urban landscape and it represents a duality in the narrative as it is a safe place for the urban migrant children to play, but it is also the source of anxiety for the urban migrant couple as it hides the only clue to the mystery of the missing woman in the form of her shoe. Although this narrative initially perpetuates the enduring myth of the vengeful Australian landscape, it ultimately assigns accountability for the deaths to the illegal, exotic weed—the settler Australian identity—now grafted onto the urban landscape character; as Duncanson explains,

the narrative transposition of the crime scene from local bushland to exotic lantana relocates responsibility from the ‘native’ to the ‘introduced’... In this way, Lantana rewrites the traditional narrative of subverted sovereignty to reassign criminal liability for the violence of law’s foundation from the colonised to the coloniser. (Duncanson 2009, 46)

Due to the failure of white law to enforce its sovereignty and restore order, the Australian landscape is presented as indifferent to the characters in Lantana. Duncanson asserts that Lantana is a rare contemporary cinematic narrative because it wrestles with Australian postcolonial identities and does more than merely perpetuate the vengeful Australian landscape character myth. Lantana’s approach of initially cultivating the vengeful Australian landscape myth and then innovating on it to acknowledge a more contemporary postcolonial perspective is similar to the approach taken in my own project.

This analysis has established the Australian cinematic landscape myth context for further discussion. Historically, the landscape myths that are presented as characters in these cinematic narratives have performed an important role in the binary struggles that established and maintain Australian social norms. These norms are still highly influential and highly contested today, which I expand on in the next section.
2.2 CULTIVATING LANDSCAPE MYTHS

The Australian landscape myths discussed in the previous section deal exclusively with the non-indigenous Australian relationship with the land and its binary struggles to establish and uphold social norms. The three cinematic narratives discussed each manifest a desire for union between non-indigenous Australians and the land. This section presents Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs’ theories in Uncanny Australia (1998) that draw on Kristeva’s work on abjection to further examine non-indigenous Australians’ binary struggles that established contested Australian social norms. Further, it explores concepts from Bourriaud and Gibson that assisted my strategies in challenging and promoting opportunities to update these social norms.

According to a number of scholars (Gibson 1993; Wright 1995; Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Duncanson 2009), the source of non-indigenous Australians estrangement with the landscape in these cinematic narratives is based on guilt caused by past transgressions and illegal claims of sovereignty. Historically, the taming of the Australian land included eradicating indigenous people and their claim to the land. With evolving cultural attitudes and changes to the law, this pursuit has lost currency with non-indigenous Australians. Gelder and Jacobs (1998) argue that the narratives discussed in this exegesis represent society’s need for abject purging of this estrangement with the land to reestablish balance and social norms. Gelder and Jacobs (1998) draw on Kristeva’s (1982) theories of abjection to argue that this uneasy disunity is caused by the co-existence of the opposing binaries in postcolonial Australia; as Gelder and Jacobs (1998) describe:

> In postcolonial Australia, however, it may well be that both of these positions are inhabited at the same time: one is innocent (out of place) and guilty (in place) simultaneously. (Gelder and Jacobs 1998, 24)

Using Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection, Gelder and Jacobs’ (1998) description of these co-existing binaries, such as “possession and dispossession” (1998, 32) and innocent and guilty (1998, 24), has led to “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 2).

The postcolonial Australian landscape is truly a contested place, and through myths presented in popular culture, boundaries continue to be challenged, compulsively
seeking balance to maintain social norms. Evidence of this binary struggle in Australian society can be seen in political parties, such as the One Nation Party, that lobby for the cessation of multicultural and anti-discrimination policies so as to enforce Australian settler identity assimilation (One Nation Political Party, 2013).

This project seeks to challenge and promote opportunities to update dominant social norms. To do so, I consciously make postproduction art because its ideology includes re-appropriating and reediting existing elements to create new meanings for "ideological narratives" (Bourriaud 2002, 39). As Bourriaud observes, "the artwork functions as... a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives. Each exhibition encloses within it the script of another..." (Bourriaud 2002, 13).

I use a postproduction art approach because this project seeks to reinterpret "preceding narratives" (Bourriaud 2002, 13) of the supernatural, tempestuous and indifferent Australian cinematic landscape myths. Bourriaud's notion of artworks occupying a "moment in an infinite chain of contributions" (Bourriaud 2002, 13) seeks to challenge social norms and assist in achieving balance without the need to "eject the abject" (Creed 1993, 10). I photograph trees and landscapes and digitally manipulate them to construct new abject Australian landscape myths. Australian writer Ross Gibson discusses this notion of cultural meaning-making in relation to the photographic image, observing that,

The photographic (or cinematic) image is not the unmediated re-presentation of a portion of reality; it is a presentation, a newly created or arranged portion of the reality of the cultural world. (Gibson 1992, 76)

This concept of a “newly created... reality” (Gibson 1992, 76) through mediated photography is aligned with aspirations for this project's lived story space (Pallasmaa 2006), as described in Chapter 1. As already noted, the artworks created for this project cultivate enduring myths to create new narratives to fulfill the project aims.
Non-indigenous Australians’ ongoing estrangement with the land is unfortunately typical of postcolonialism, as Gelder and Jacobs (1998) note,

> It is not simply that Australians will either be reconciled with each other or they will not; rather, these two possibilities (reconciliation; the impossibility of reconciliation) coexist and flow through each other in what is often... a productively unstable dynamic... This is entirely consistent with postcoloniality as a contemporary moment where one remains within the structures of colonialism even as one is somehow located beyond them or after them. (Gelder and Jacobs 1998, 24)

Thus, accepting an “unstable dynamic” and co-existing opposing binaries may be necessary if non-indigenous Australians are to rebuild their relationship with the land.

In conclusion, this chapter has established the context of estranged Australian landscape cinematic myths through an analysis of three feature-length cinematic narratives that explore presentations of this landscape of monstrosities as supernatural, tempestuous and indifferent. The source of this estrangement was then examined to arrive at strategies for cultivating these myths to assist this project’s aims, which are to create new myths that promote subjective meaning-making and challenge Australian social norms.

As such, this project seeks to promote opportunities for wider appreciation of abject notions of co-existing opposing binaries. For, in doing so, postcolonial Australian society may be able to confront non-indigenous Australian guilt, and move towards wider acceptance of difference, rather than purification and assimilation as a strategy for balance and reconciliation with the land.
CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The contextual review in this chapter extends the discussion from Chapter 2 through critically analysing artworks by artists significant to this project, two of whom are Australians (one indigenous and the other not), and the others international. I will then discuss three examples of story spaces made by a documentary filmmaker and an artist respectively.

3.1 DISTORTED FORESTS AND SWAMPS

In this section, I discuss distorted forest and swamp landscapes from Queensland that have significantly influenced the strategic aesthetic aims of this project. First, I discuss non-indigenous Australian artist William Robinson's painting Nerang River Pool (2004) in relation to his use of distorted space. Second, I consider indigenous Australian artist Tracey Moffatt's vignette Mister Chuck from her feature-length cinematic narrative beDevil (1993), which I discuss in relation to the depiction of swamps and the stylised visual treatment of this landscape.

The visual strategies Robinson uses and how Australian writers Hannah Fink and David Malouf discursively contextualise these strategies were useful in shaping this project’s outcomes. The focus in this contextual exemplar, Nerang River Pool (Fig. 3.1), is on Robinson's distortion of space through a multi-perspective approach, and his depiction of detail, which are his main strategies for capturing the experience of a vast but constricting Queensland rainforest.
In this painting, Robinson’s trees are at odd angles to each other and wrap around the two pools of water, which could easily be interpreted as the sky. There is a sense of delicacy, majesty and wild unpredictability in this painting, which is caused by the dramatically warped sense of space. This is a compositionally intriguing and disturbing narrative space, with only a hint of normalcy residing in a patch of non-distortion in the top right corner of the painting.

In her analysis of Robinson’s artworks, Fink (2011) observes that the physical nature of the bush makes it hard to see: “The bush is something that is literally difficult to see, a multi-perspectival thicket of grandeur and detail in which foreground and background seem simultaneous” (Fink 2011, 109). Fink’s comments hint at the key strategies Robinson uses to overcome these difficulties in capturing the experience of the forest. Further to this, Malouf (2011) comments that Robinson’s multi-perspective approach creates a truer experience of immersion and in this painting.
we are invited to become, like Robinson himself, a multiple viewer, to see things from several points at the same time, and to find this truer to actual experience—to the experience of being in the landscape and part of its endless process of becoming. (Malouf 2011, 74)

Elements that my project shares with Robinson's work include the depiction of under-represented swamp and native rainforest landscapes, the attention to detail and the multi-perspective distortion of space and reality, which, in this painting, Robinson used to achieve his goal of capturing "an inner vision of the day" (Robinson in Fink 2011, 109).

Similarly, this project's artworks were informed by Moffatt's depiction of the swamp landscape in her vignette *Mister Chuck* (Fig. 3.2), and how this was discursively contextualised by American writer Glen Mimura and Australian writer Julie Roberts. In particular, I was interested in Moffatt's bold creation of a cinematic narrative about an under-represented abject landscape, and her stylised photographic treatment of it.

![Image of *Mister Chuck*](image_url)

*Fig. 3.2:* Still from Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil* 1993, film, duration: 90minutes.
© The artist. Image courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

*Mister Chuck* recounts the story of a community living with a myth of an exotic ghost who haunts the nearby swamp, and the absurdity of the construction of a cinema on top of the swamp. *Mister Chuck* represents a rare presentation of a Queensland swamp landscape. However, rather than presenting it with documentary-style
photography, Moffatt has applied her distinctive artificial visual style to highlight the surreal myth signified in this landscape; as Mimura notes: “Moffatt's signature aesthetic ... defamiliarises the prevailing mythical images of the Bush and the Outback” (Mimura 2010, 115).

The stylised photographic treatment of the swamp hinges on the contrast between the reality of the abject, black, bubbling, slimy mangrove mud of the swamp that “stank worse than shit” (Moffatt 1993), and the artificial studio atmosphere—with the repetition of young, uniform paperbark trees forming a transition between the real and the artificial. Indeed, Mimura (2010) muses that this contrast between real and artificial also invites a historical comparison; he comments that this visual treatment represents “the artificialism of the past and the realism of the present” (Mimura 2010, 121).

This historical reading can also be applied to the scenes depicting the swamp landscape where the indigenous children observe the construction of the cinema. The children appear to be enclosed within the landscape, which is typical of colonial landscape paintings whose artists were unable to separate the trees from the natives. In these instances, Roberts observes, the forest was depicted as a dark, unknown “space occupied by Aborigines [from which] they watch the white men struggle” (Roberts 1999, 125). In Moffatt’s work, the long grass denies the audience a horizon line, while the identical trees visually suggest never-ending symbolic bars, which combine to threaten to detain. I would also argue that the contrast between real and imaginary could represent the veiled transgressions against abject indigenous Australians— one of non-indigenous Australians’ historical strategies to “eject the abject” (Creed 1993, 10).

Moffatt described her desire to depict this landscape as “a hyper-real, hyper-imaginary, surreal construction of landscape” (Moffatt in Mimura, 2010: 115). Thus, Moffatt’s aspiration to construct new Australian landscape myths is aligned with my project’s aims, as is her use of hyper-real audio-visual strategies to depict abject
signs, such as smelly, slimy, black mangrove mud, and the under-represented abject swamp landscape itself.

Indeed, both Robinson’s and Moffatt’s strategies, used to create new myths about under-represented Australian landscapes, have had an important impact on this project’s outcomes. Their influence is manifested in my use of distorted imagery and audio-visual components that are intended to promote experiences of claustrophobia and disorientation, and to challenge the audience’s conceptions of reality and social norms.

3.2: ABJECT FORM AND MOTION

In this section, I draw on Kristeva’s and Creed’s theories of abjection to analyse seminal works created by Sarah Lucas, Louise Bourgeois and Chris Cunningham to highlight abject form and motion strategies that were implemented in this project’s outcomes.

Kristeva (1982) asserts that artists have always trawled the terrain of abjection, particularly when they were sponsored by religion during its reign as the dominant paradigm in Western society. Kristeva (1982) notes that, “catharsis par excellence called art... the artist experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies” (Kristeva 1982, 17). As previously mentioned, historically, religious rituals were the principal process for upholding dominant symbolic laws or social norms (Creed 1993). Creed (1993) suggests that because of the natural desire for perverse pleasure, challenging the boundary between opposite binaries is a typical human evolutionary pattern, and it is the role of the ordained cultural producer to vicariously defile and purify their audience to reinforce dominant social norms. Through this process, Creed suggests, “the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew” (Creed 1993, 8). The abject visual strategies used by the artists discussed in this section are pertinent because they implement anthropomorphic sinuous forms, disturbing motion, and the co-existence of opposing binaries, resulting in the simultaneous abject emotional reaction of
attraction and repulsion (Kristeva 1982). By creating opportunities to elicit this abject response through my artworks, I aspire to the role of ordained cultural producer who challenges social norms by creating a boundary zone story space that allows opposing binaries to overlap.

Sarah Lucas is an artist who uses perverse and abject visual strategies, as evidenced in *Pauline Bunny* (2002), which is made up of approximately six stuffed Caucasian-skin-tone tights, arranged to create an anthropomorphic sinuous form slumped in a chair. The addition of the black stockings suggests the form is not only female, because of the connotations suggested by the black stockings themselves, but provocatively sexual because of the way the form is slumped in the chair. Co-existing opposing binaries in this sculpture include human and non-human, phallic and female, and subject and object. The artwork’s perversity results from these binaries but also from the sensual but repulsive anthropomorphic sinuous forms.

Louise Bourgeois is another artist who used perverse and abject visual strategies, and her artwork, *Cumul I* (1969) (Fig. 3.3), is discussed in relation to my research.

![Image of Louise Bourgeois Cumul I 1969](image)

*Fig. 3.3: Louise Bourgeois Cumul I 1969, Marble, 56.8 x 127 x 121.9 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: Philippe Migeat, dist. RMN. © The Easton Foundation/ Licensed by Copyright Agency/VISCOPY, Sydney.*

While this marble sculpture is inspired by cloud formations, its spherical, anthropomorphic, sinuous, erupting forms have been likened to a cluster of breasts,
nipples or penises. Designed to be viewed from above, the combination of forms are reminiscent of the Greek classical and visually confounding statues of Artemis. The co-existing opposing binaries in *Cumul 1* are the same as *Pauline Bunny* with an emphasis on being simultaneously concealed and brandished.

In these two artworks, the juxtaposition of materials, their sensual anthropomorphic, sinuous visual forms, and co-existing opposing binaries create a sense of perversity that creates opportunities to elicit the simultaneous abject emotional reaction of attraction and repulsion (Kristeva 1982). I have also adopted these visual strategies in this project’s artworks, which are discussed further in Chapter 4.

In the following section, I discuss two cinematic artworks—*Afrika Shox* (1999) and *Rubber Johnny* (2003)—made by English director Chris Cunningham, which are significant to this study because they assist in creating abject understandings relating to narrative, visual and motion strategies. Both of these works incorporate abject qualities, and I have implemented some of their strategies in my project.

Cunningham is famous for his work for artists such as Aphex Twins, Bjork and Madonna. In his cinematic artwork *Afrika Shox* (Cunningham, 1999), based on a song by Leftfield and Afrika Bambaataa, Cunningham depicts the journey of a long-limbed man of Afro-Caribbean descent with advanced cataracts, dressed in a shabby army flak jacket and dog tags. The character emerges from a filthy, dark alley and stumbles through a bustling, concrete-lined, white-American metropolitan business district. During his journey, his limbs snap off and shatter like glass. In most instances, the limbs are broken by a variety of disinterested white men, such as a business man, a hip hop dancer and a taxi driver. There are a number of opposing symbols at play here, which combine to unsettle and challenge the audience because of the abject appearance of the protagonist and his lurching, abject motion. His black skin, white eyes, implied emaciation, filthiness, out-of-control motion that suggests inebriation, and his escalating lack of body parts is contrasted with signs of secure Western white wealth.
Narratively, this work is consistent with typical approaches to abjection because balance is ultimately attained at the end when the abject element is destroyed. Of significance to my project are the abject, otherworldly appearance of the character comprised entirely of opposing binaries and the abject motion of his uncontrolled lurching. However, the ultimate narrative ejection of the character is not aligned with the aspirations of this project.

*Rubber Johnny* is a more explicitly abject narrative whose protagonist is a naked, grossly deformed boy in a wheelchair, who is locked in a dark room with his loneliness, drug-induced, action-packed deliriums and pet Chihuahua. After an initial hateful visit from a male carer, the protagonist dreams of suicide.

This suicide fantasy is brought to an end by a second hateful visit from the male carer. The audience is then left with the abject misery of this character’s ongoing existence, where he is waiting to die. Again, the protagonist is entirely composed of co-existing opposing binaries, such as human and non-human, subject and object, reality and fantasy, calm and explosive, culture and animal, and life and death. In contrast to *Afrika Shox*, *Rubber Johnny* does not purify or “eject the abject” (Creed 1993, 10) at the end of the narrative.

In these two cinematic artworks, the anthropomorphic, sinuous visual forms, the motion design, the open-ended conclusion which does not eject the abject, and co-existing opposing binaries create a sense of perversity that succeed in creating opportunities to elicit the simultaneous abject emotional reaction of attraction and repulsion (Kristeva, 1982). I have adopted appropriate visual strategies from these cinematic artworks and those of Lucas and Bourgeois for the artworks in this project, which are discussed further in Chapter 4.
3.3: STORY SPACES

As already outlined, this project's story space is a physical gallery space that exhibits artworks featuring re-edited narratives of under-represented Australian landscapes. This project's experiential aim is that the gallery becomes a lived space (Pallasmaa 2006) for the audience, and that its non-linear nature promotes opportunities for the audience to create ambiguous (Barthes 1972) and subjective meanings from the lived (Barthes 1972) stories created from the story space. The next section begins by analysing an existing story space, accessible online, created by non-indigenous Australian documentary-maker Debra Beattie, and then considers two existing story spaces by Japanese artist Hiraki Sawa. I present these examples to create an understanding of the existing contexts of story space that my project straddles. In particular, the following discussion will highlight the narrative, presentation and visual strategies that I felt were appropriate to use in my own project.

Beattie's story space The Wrong Crowd (2004) (Fig. 3.4) is an online, autobiographical, interactive documentary that offers a series of mediated photographic images that the audience can view in any order.

Fig. 3.4: Debra Beattie "FJ Holden" from the story space The Wrong Crowd 2004, Flash intro, html and Quicktime. © The artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

These photographic images were all created to be used on the ABC's website, which hosts this story space, and combines audio with highly detailed images depicting distorted spaces. Despite some interactive strategies, The Wrong Crowd largely conforms to that of a traditional linear narrative, which may be because it was commissioned by a broadcaster (or “ordained cultural producer”) that would have
demanded particular outcomes for the project. The work is structured more like a DVD than one that encourages intuitive exploration, such as emergent architecture, which immerses the audience. Thus, while the appealingly distorted composition and high detail used in Beattie’s photographs is consistent with the visual strategies I employ in my project, the linear style of interaction is contradictory to the lived (Barthes 1972; Pallasmaa 2006) experiential aims of my story space.

Sawa’s story space extends the concept of the construction of reality in his distinctive, grainy, low-resolution, black-and-white, silent cinematic artwork, *Migration* (2003) (Fig. 3.5) and his multi-channel, cinematic installation with audio, *O* (2009).

*Fig. 3.5:* Hiraki Sawa, still from *Migration* 2003, video duration: 7 minutes 10 seconds. © The artist. Image courtesy of James Cohan Gallery.

For *Migration*, Sawa’s digitally captured domestic, interior environments became his landscapes that he populated with tiny people and animals. This cinematic artwork is interesting on many levels; it is an intimate, surreal, meditative, looping snapshot into an alternative and slightly disturbing reality, context and story space. Although *Migration’s* story space re-appropriates non-abject visuals, which do not create opportunities to elicit simultaneous attraction and repulsion, Sawa juxtaposes his surreal landscapes with rules from the real world, such as gravity and light, to create new narratives from existing elements to fascinate his audience. *Migration’s* story space is largely benign due to the looping motion design of the characters in the landscape, which is reminiscent of English photographer Eadweard Muybridge’s
nineteenth-century studies of motion. Migration, like my surreal landscapes, uses juxtaposition and looping strategies to attract the audience and provide opportunities for ambiguous and subjective meaning-making. However, Migration’s looping snapshots are exhibited one after another on a single screen, which essentially becomes a linear cinematic artwork with its own diegetic sequence.

As previously discussed, my project resists this “specific diegetic flow” (Gibson 1993, 215), since the looping artworks are displayed separately, allowing the audience to contemplate the narrative artworks as a collection of self-contained moments that can be appreciated in any order to create opportunities for subjective meaning-making. Sawa also took this direction in his later multi-channel, cinematic installation with audio, O (2009). This installation again deals with surreal elements shown as a collection of self-contained moments through ten short films of spinning everyday functional objects and a triptych projection depicting the lunar landscape, the central Australian desert landscape, and interiors from an abandoned house. Sawa’s use of the abject derelict interiors, the subversion of spinning the everyday functional objects—thereby rendering them un-functional—together with the barren landscapes creates opportunities to elicit simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Further, Australian curator Melissa Kavanagh noted that Sawa’s addition of audio to this installation reinforced “the non-linearity of his approach” (Kavanagh 2009, 169). Sawa’s strategies are aligned with the aspirations of this project.

Thus, by analysing these three story spaces, I have identified beneficial audio and non-linear, looping narrative presentation approaches, along with visual strategies of distorted compositions and highly detailed photography. This chapter has extended the discussion from the previous two chapters through critically analysing artworks by artists significant to this project. First, I discussed how William Robinson distorts space through his multi-perspective approach and depiction of detail in a rainforest setting, which promotes experiences of disorientation and claustrophobia or interiority. Second, I examined Moffatt’s aspiration to construct new Australian landscape myths through her use of hyper-real audio-visual strategies that present abject cast-offs, and her depiction of under-represented
abject swamp landscapes that challenges the audience’s conceptions of reality and
social norms. These are key strategies that I employed in this project. Third, I
discussed how Lucas, Bourgeois and Cunningham all implement perverse and abject
strategies in their works through the use of anthropomorphic, sinuous forms,
disturbing motion, and co-existing opposing binaries, resulting in the simultaneous
abject emotional reaction of attraction and repulsion (Kristeva, 1982), which are all
strategies enacted in my project. Finally, through discussing Beattie’s and Sawa’s
story spaces, I established an understanding of the existing contexts of story space
that this project straddles and identified further beneficial approaches.

The central theme of the discussion in this and the previous chapter relates to the
discovery of strategies that challenge social norms through creating a boundary
zone that allows opposing binaries to coexist and resist assimilation. The most
compelling example discussed in this chapter is Moffatt’s allegorical tale *Mister
Chuck* (1993). The absurd meaning from this narrative can be compared to the
equally absurd practice of manufacturing an Australian identity myth through the
fictitious propaganda of government-funded 1970s’ and 1980s’ cinematic
narratives, which, instead of being built on a solid foundation, are built on an
unstable, swamp-like estrangement with the landscape, as it was in *Mister Chuck*. It
has been suggested in these two chapters that—like *Mister Chuck*—this
estrangement with the landscape is caused by the haunting of the black ghost that
inhabits the guilt of non-indigenous Australians and clings to these constructed
myths that strive for assimilation.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH PRACTICE

“THE FEN”

The creative outcomes to be presented at The Fen exhibition in March 2014 constitute the major research outcomes for this project. They embody the aim, which is to re-appropriate and cultivate supernatural Australian landscape myths in order to create new myths that challenge social norms. To achieve this, I conducted creative experiments using an inductive, practice-led, action research cycle model. The experiments used perverse and abject strategies combined with a postproduction art practice to create artworks for a lived story space to promote opportunities for subjective meaning-making. These perverse and abject-audio-visual strategies draw on theorists, artists and concepts gleaned from the discussion from previous chapters.

This chapter describes the evolution of The Fen lived story space exhibition, including accounts of two prototype experiments that preceded it. These accounts are described chronologically, using the action research cycle model process of plan-act-observe-reflect to outline the evolution of the lived story space and a selection of artworks that inhabit it. The final reflective phase of the action research cycle model discusses the outcomes of the research project and whether the aspirations of the lived story space were achieved.

The two prototype experiments were two group exhibitions in which my photographic artworks were displayed. The first exhibition was entitled Stepping Up, curated by Craig Douglas, and held at the PoP Gallery, Brisbane, in May 2011, and the second was the Teerk Roo Ra Residency Program 2011 exhibition, curated by Pat Hoffie, also presented at the PoP Gallery, Brisbane in November 2011.

My artworks displayed in these two exhibitions were explicitly based on a feature-length cinematic narrative screenplay I wrote before I began the doctorate. The story is based on an ancient mystical relationship between two supernatural recovering cannibal addicts. The story centred on the pied piper character from The
Pied Piper of Hamelin fairytale (Grimm 1816) and the witch from the Hansel and Gretel fairytale (Grimm 1812), and their efforts to survive undetected in a modern but financially depressed village landscape. This village is located on the edge of the dark wild forest—the inspiration for their addiction and the scene of their past compulsive transgressions. In this narrative, I reinterpreted European fairytale myths to present this supernatural forest in a similar manner as the cinematic myth of the supernatural Australian landscape; the historical scene of colonial Australian cannibalism. This forest was not only a character in its own right that drove the plot, but it was also a vengeful and tempestuous agent of amoral, chaotic nature that was in constant conflict with the supposedly moral, controlled civilisation of the Catholic village.

The initial plan for the photographic artworks that portrayed this story was to create the Australian landscape character myth for this screenplay through photography and digital manipulation. I began creating the forest’s fetid fen with the intention of incorporating the two human protagonists later. The forest’s fetid fen is the dark heart of the forest; it is the abject, disgusting, insatiable, cannibalistic muse that motivates the depraved compulsions of the witch and pied piper characters. The forest’s fetid fen is the setting for the climactic scene of the screenplay where all three characters are united in a final macabre ritual.

The first artwork trialled at the Stepping Up exhibition was a photographic print entitled Pan 21 (2011) (Fig. 4.1).

Fig. 4.1: Merri Randell, Pan 21 2011, photomedia, 88 x 45 cm.
The action phase of this narrative artwork included photographing the scene, collecting visual assets, and digitally manipulating the composition in a way that created the interiority similarly contained in Robinson’s and Moffatt’s landscapes. The elements in this digitally manipulated photographic print were arranged to present the wild forest myth, which revealed glimpses of its dark ensnaring nature, with escape and hope offered at the end of a treacherous shadowy passage.

However, after observing, discussing and reflecting on this artwork—during and after the exhibition—I realised that, because of the burden of the literal and explicit narrative elements, this kind of visual storytelling was not appropriate for the aims of this project.

The second set of artworks, trialled at the *Teerk Roo Ra Residency Program 2011* group exhibition, were two photographic prints entitled *Outsiders 5 (2011)* (Fig. 4.2) and *Outsiders 25 (2011)* (Fig. 4.3).

![Image](image_url)

*Fig. 4.2:* Merri Randell *Outsiders 5* 2011, photomedia, 100 x 67 cm.
The plan for these digitally manipulated photographic artworks was to display the visual perspective of the insidious, predator forest character surveilling human civilisation. The visual narrative strategies adopted for these images were appropriated from cinematic genre conventions used in thriller and horror cinematic narratives to create drama.

Again, observation, discussion and reflection on these artworks during and after this exhibition deemed that while they were closer to uncovering the nature of the forest character myth, I was yet to present the forest effectively. I needed to confront the nature of the forest and present this in the artworks by appropriating more characteristics from cinema in the form of audio and motion.

As this project’s experimentation progressed, revealing the forest’s character became more important than visually portraying the narrative screenplay. Cultivating Australian forest landscape myths became the main focus since iteration and reflection revealed that the project’s aims would be expressed more succinctly without literal signifiers or human protagonists.

Because of the aims of the project to create a non-linear lived story space to resist “specific diegetic flow” (Gibson 1993, 215), I decided to present self-contained,
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character-based, looping, narrative artworks, displayed separately, in a physical
gallery space.

Further, to address this project’s aims, I used perverse and abject thematic and
audio-visual strategies in the artworks. Thematically, this meant depicting under-
represented Australian landscapes and co-existing opposing binaries in every
artwork, while the abject audio-visual strategies included implementing sensual,
anthropomorphic sinuous forms, distorted space (multi-perspective, compositional
interiority, high detail in both the foreground and background and the exclusion of a
horizon line), and the use of disturbing abject signifiers in the form of animalistic
audio and motion design.

Therefore, the initial plan for creating The Fen artworks involved the following:
photographing the landscapes, digitally manipulating the photographs to create
appropriate compositions, selecting suitable animalistic audio, collecting relevant
animalistic motion design reference material, and creating abject, audio-visual
artworks.

In the action phase of photographing the landscapes, I drew inspiration from Marcus
Clarke’s description of his relationship with the Australian landscape of
monstrosities. Clarke writes,

Whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness... [one] can read the
hieroglyphs of haggard gum-trees, blown into odd shapes distorted with fierce
hot winds, or cramped with cold nights... (Clarke 1896, 34)

When photographing the landscape characters in Moreton Bay and Byron Bay, I
searched for “distorted” trees with “odd shapes” (Clarke, 1896) to capture sensual,
anthropomorphic sinuous forms in the swamp and native forest landscapes for my
artworks. I also targeted landscape scenarios that suggested themselves as
harbouring co-existing opposing binaries. When photographing the landscape
subjects, I also adopted a multi-perspective approach, similar to that of William
Robinson, in an attempt to capture “a truer...experience of being in the landscape
and part of its endless process of becoming” (Malouf 2011, 74). I also experimented
extensively with different kinds of lenses and techniques, which allowed me to capture extreme detail and further distort the space.

Digitally manipulating the images involved layering and masking photographs in Adobe Photoshop. Creating acceptable compositions with co-existing opposing binaries is a laborious, iterative, and, in most cases, rewarding process. This process is necessary because it seeks to address the distorted visual space aspirations of multi-perspective compositions that imply interiority with meticulous detail in both the foreground and background, the exclusion of a horizon line, and therefore involves the combination of many highly detailed images.

I have found that during the process of creating the digitally manipulated composition, the landscape character comes to life, and a type of abject animalistic rhythmical audio and motion design, appropriate for a looping narrative and consistent with the aim of co-existing opposing binaries, suggests itself. The common co-existing opposing binaries in The Fen’s artworks include anthropomorphic sinuous visual plant forms that represent animal limbs, nubbins and genitalia, animal audio juxtaposed with the plant visuals, and animal motion design applied to typically still plants. All of the audio-visual artworks have a base audio track of a fen soundscape, which includes multiple types of buzzing insects, birds and rustling leaves. The audio-visual artworks are then developed in Adobe After Effects. This is also a laborious, iterative, and, in most cases, rewarding process.

I applied this action process to the artwork The Fen: Furnace (2013) (Fig. 4.4). While a number of audio-visual artworks have been created for this project, only two will be discussed in this chapter.
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Fig. 4.4: Merri Randell The Fen: Furnace 2013, full HD video, 10 sec (looped),

*The Fen: Furnace* is an audio-visual artwork about a Moreton Bay strangler fig tree reclaiming a disused furnace situated in a forest landscape in Teerk Roo Ra National Park, Queensland. As they ingratiate themselves upon the crumbling brick structure, the anthropomorphic sinuous forms are suggestive of human limbs, pythons or muscles. This artwork is not a factual representation of this landscape - all of the visual elements have been manipulated to satisfy the aspirations of the project. The distorted visual space aspirations of multi-perspective, compositional interiority with high detail in both the foreground and background, and the exclusion of a horizon line are all fulfilled in this image. The disturbing audio-visual signifiers are of calm, human breathing audio synchronised with motion design of flexing muscles, which cause the rusted iron strips to sway backwards and forwards. The co-existing opposing binaries presented in *The Fen: Furnace* include human and non-human, subject and object, plant and animal, culture and nature, possession and dispossession, life and death, strange and familiar, real and surreal, union and separation, and soothing and threatening (caused by the calm breathing in the foreground juxtaposed with the repetition of the warped trees in the background). This artwork’s perversity results from the co-existence of these binaries but also from the combination of the anthropomorphic sinuous tree form calmly constricting the furnace, surrounded by the looming forest which threatens to detain. When this
artwork was exhibited as part of a trial story space in 2013, it was popular with audiences. How the artworks were arranged in the story space of the physical gallery forms the basis of discussion in the next phase of the action research cycle: observation.

As previously mentioned, each action research cycle in this project was based around a residency, exhibition or conference, and this included two solo exhibitions. In September 2013, a lived story space was trialled that consisted of seven audio-visual artworks. From an arrangement perspective, there were a number of unforeseen observations. First, it was noted that all of the works contribute to the discussion, both visually and aurally. The visual contribution occurred due to all of the artworks being visible from every vantage point in the gallery space. Aurally, the artworks behaved like noisy neighbours in conversation due to their placement in the same space without isolating the audio. In the gallery, the audio of each artwork is always at its loudest when standing directly in front of it, with audio spill from other artworks sharing the space constantly in the periphery. In many ways, this arrangement simulates a real forest soundscape, which is an orchestra of unique, character-driven noises. This holistic visual and aural experience of the story space created a community of individual, character-based stories. This was an unforeseen but welcome outcome of this trialled story space as it was aligned with the aims for the lived story space (Pallasmaa 2006; Barthes 1972). The other observation was the need for each audio-visual artwork to be shown at the size appropriate to the artwork. This was also unforeseen and required trial and error, as the elements—visual, motion and audio—of each artwork needed to be considered individually.
Fig. 4.5: Merri Randell *The Fen: Friggy* 2013, full HD video, 10 sec (looped),

*The Fen: Friggy* (2013) (Fig. 4.5) was an audio-visual artwork whose exhibition scale was unforeseen due to the framing of the image and the type of audio used. This artwork is about a paperbark tree covered in roots and vines, masturbating in a swamp landscape in Byron Bay, NSW. The anthropomorphic sinuous forms are suggestive of human body parts, genitalia, nubbins or muscles. As intended, this artwork is not a factual representation, but instead presents a new myth of this landscape—in this case, one that is based on an individual character. As with *The Fen: Furnace*, all visual elements are manipulated to satisfy the aspirations of the project. The distorted visual space aspirations of multi-perspective, compositional interiority with high detail in both the foreground and background, and the exclusion of a horizon line are similarly all fulfilled in this image. The disturbing audio-visual signifiers in this incidence are of frantic human breathing, synchronised with motion design of rubbing, pulsing, gulping and sucking. The co-existing opposing binaries presented in *The Fen: Friggy* are the same as *The Fen: Furnace*, with an emphasis on being simultaneously sensual and repulsive. Its perversity results from these binaries but also from the combination of the magnified anthropomorphic sinuous root and vine forms that relentlessly pursue a climax that never occurs, surrounded by disturbing gulping maws embedded in the crevices of the bark.
The Fen: Friggy was presented as a two-metre-high wall projection, while The Fen: Furnace (Fig. 4.4) was presented on a much smaller, 40-inch television. It was observed that the audio of The Fen: Friggy (Randell, 2013) dominated the story space, despite being the same volume level as the other artworks.

Reflecting on this arrangement, it seems that further experimentation with volume, similar to what was conducted with the visual scale of the artworks, is required for the next lived story space. The following reflection includes implications of the arrangement dilemmas, observed as part of a discussion on whether the aspirations of the project were achieved.

The visual and aural scale of each artwork in the story space poses a dilemma for the non-linear nature of the story space. As established, the lived story space aspired to present a group of self-contained, character-based, looping, narrative artworks to be displayed separately in a physical gallery space.

As defined in Chapter 1, this project resists the “specific diegetic flow” (Gibson 1993, 215) that Ross Gibson refers to in his analysis on the effect of cinematic narrative sequencing. Employing a non-linear approach allows the audience to contemplate the narrative artworks as a collection of self-contained moments that can be appreciated in any order, which allows ambiguous and subjective meaning-making.

If some artworks are larger than others, a hierarchy is created that prescribes a pathway for their viewing, and results in the audience’s experience being sequenced. Based on this implication, the obvious solution was to make all of the artworks the same visual scale, and potentially more uniform in other ways, such as colour palette. While this would de-emphasise artworks, create greater equality and potentially eliminate hierarchy, its use would have promoted other views that would undermine the project’s aspirations.

This notion of de-emphasis detracts from another important aim, which is to promote broader acceptance of difference or co-existing opposing binaries rather than assimilation. I have already acknowledged that, as the ordained cultural
producer (being the author of the narrative artworks), I have an agenda. My goal was that the audience experience the entire lived story space, located in the physical gallery, without being limited by a set sequence. Thus, they'd be encouraged to create their own meaning from the work.

However, it is impossible to have complete control over an audience’s experience, as noted in Pallasmaa’s definition of a lived space (2006), which acknowledges that the audience or subject approaching a space brings with them beliefs and preferences that ultimately influence their experience of the space, regardless of how it is presented. To repeat, Pallasmaa writes:

Lived space resembles the ephemeral structures of dream and the unconscious, organized independently of the boundaries of physical space and time. Lived space is always a dialectical combination of external space and inner mental space, past and present, actuality and mental projection. When experiencing lived space, memory and dream, fear and desire, value and meaning, fuse with the actual percepts. Lived space is space that is inseparably integrated with the subject’s concurrent life situation. (Pallasmaa 2006, 11)

Based on this definition, the artworks in The Fen exhibition are displayed at the visual scale that is appropriate to the visual elements in the artwork, and the volume of each artwork is randomised during the temporal course of the exhibition to create a simulation of a typical soundscape, with unexpected eruptions of sound from individual landscape characters. This approach is designed to reduce aural hierarchy through difference rather than assimilation. Therefore, through reflecting on the observations of the action cycle, I believe the aims of the research were effectively met.

This chapter has outlined how The Fen lived story space developed using the action research cycle model process of plan-act-observe-reflect. Because of concerns about the artworks’ sequence in the lived story space (due to individual works’ visual and aural scale), I re-visited Gibson’s (1993) and Pallasmaa’s (2006) theories, which offered a solution. In the final reflective phase of the action research cycle model, the aspirations for the lived story space were able to be achieved through implementing perverse and abject strategies. As previously mentioned, many more artworks were created to satisfy the aspirations of this project. This chapter merely offers an insight into the process of discovery and reflection used to complete the project.
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5: CONCLUSION

This project sought to cultivate and challenge enduring dominant cinematic myths of Australian landscape relating to non-indigenous Australians’ largely unconsummated desire to understand and unite with an intolerant and sometimes vengeful landscape through the creation and exhibition of *The Fen*, a lived story space. This exegesis is true to its definition as it is a literal self-examination of my research journey as an artist experiencing a process of discovery through practice.

This journey has transported me through a discussion on the estranged cinematic Australian landscape myths based on theories from Australian writers Robin Wright, Ross Gibson, Kirsty Duncanson, Ken Gelder, Jane Jacobs, Barbara Creed, and French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. The source of this estrangement was examined to create tactics for cultivating these myths to assist this project in achieving its aims and specifically to challenge Australian social norms.

Through a contextual review of visual strategies employed in artworks created by non-indigenous Australian artist William Robinson, indigenous Australian artist Tracey Moffatt, British artist Sarah Lucas, French artist Louise Bourgeois, English director Chris Cunningham, non-indigenous Australian documentary-maker Debra Beattie and Japanese artist Hiraki Sawa, a list of perverse and abject strategies were developed to create the research practice outcomes and address the project aims.

The final discussion of the project’s research outcomes outlined the development of *The Fen* lived story space, through accounts of the action research cycles implemented in this project.

The journey I have undertaken, which has explored the cinematic myths of Australian landscape and how they relate to notions of contemporary postcolonial non-indigenous Australians’ continued estrangement with their homeland (Australia), was initially unexpected but has been truly transformative. Through producing my final artworks, I gained a far deeper insight into my identity as a non-indigenous Australian, which has allowed me to reconcile with the myths I have
constructed about the Australian landscape—both past and present. This experience has contemporised my practice and permits me to contribute to the ongoing Australian cultural debate focussed on Australians’ relationship with the land.

As Wright notes, creators “pick and choose the characteristics they wish to identify with the Australian character, and then graft them onto their own representations of the landscape” (Wright 1995, 6). In the absurd boundary zone story space created for this project, co-existing binary identities are playfully grafted onto abject and perverse landscapes for the audience's contemplation. Further, through the ritual of the gallery experience, “the demarcation lines between the human and non-human” (Creed 1993, 8), or tolerance and acceptance of difference, can be potentially be “drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process” (Creed 1993, 8). Through this acceptance, more far-reaching notions of reconciliation may occur, which can impact on the land. If non-indigenous Australians did not feel like “foreigners at home” (Gelder and Jacobs 1998, 26), and replaced the old myths of supernatural or tempestuous landscape, which are built on guilt and fear or even indifference, there is a higher probability the current colonial-style ravaging of their own land would cease. To act as a custodian of the land, a person takes responsibility for the care of their land and all who live there. In most cultures, this is considered an act of citizenship.
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