

I was recently invited to spend three months at the Heathcote Cultural Precinct as part of their Artist in Residence program. With access to a studio and facilities, it offered the space and freedom to experiment and the opportunity to develop my practice.

Point Heathcote juts like the prow of a ship into the junction of the Swan and Canning Rivers, and with its intriguing history and natural beauty it offers a rich source of potential material. So I arrived at the beginning of January with an open mind, blank sketchbooks and determined to engage with the site as much as possible.

Exploring the grounds, it was hard to ignore the influence of the mature eucalyptus trees. Collecting fallen pieces of bark, I began a series of linear studies, which led to watercolours and then oil paintings of the trunks. As this work developed it was possible to see how it would translate into the printmaking workshops I was planning to conduct during the residency. The variety of bark types proved endlessly fascinating: part botanical record, part metaphor, each study examining the surface details, the skins of their identities, becoming "portraits" of individual trees.



Both workshops focused on drypoint, a branch of intaglio printmaking. Introducing the technique initially, I was pleased to note the wide variety of backgrounds amongst the participants: from a Year 11 student to graphic design professionals. The results were excellent which was very encouraging for the second workshop with its more challenging objective of using multiple plates to print colour images. Again, the outcomes were good given the limited time available for these quite complex techniques.



I frequently tell students that the best way to learn is through making mistakes, and in trying to be more experimental this residency was not without its blind-alleys. I spent quite a lot of time trying to make large-scale, multiple-plate drypoints with disappointing consequences. I have certainly discovered the limitations of my press with that type of matrix, a valuable although frustrating lesson.

As my work progressed into overlaying scratched, worked images, I was interested in getting under the surface to suggest the texture of the

historical narratives implicit within the cultural memory of Heathcote. A kind of reverse archaeology which does not peel back layers but builds them up, analogous to the sedimentary nature of history: creating an awareness of the past but without necessarily looking directly at it.

Following that thought, my work culminated in "Ghost Gum", a three metre high installation of delicately suspended bark. The fragments hint at their own past; an ontological spectre of a tree. Its immateriality and fragile construction call to mind the contingent nature of existence: pathetic fallacy possibly? Alternatively in a world becoming increasingly sensitive to environmental concerns, perhaps it is not so metaphorical.



Viewing the same piece from a different perspective, I like the symbolism involved in putting the pieces of something back together,

in a place formerly dedicated to the recovery of its patients and their return to the community - an echo of Heathcote's previous existence as a mental health institution.

Three months seems like a long time, but it went by in the blink of an eye. Celebrating the end with an open studio exhibition gave me a chance to display the work I'd been making, nicely punctuating the residency. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the gallery staff and other studio artists who were so welcoming in sharing their space, and instrumental in making this such a positive experience. I'd particularly like to thank the curator, Jana Braddock, for her support and encouragement.