

a water or a light

But our native country is less an expanse of territory than a substance; it's a rock or a soil or an aridity or a water or a light. It's the place where our dreams materialise; it's through that place that our dreams take on their proper form... The stream doesn't have to be ours; the water doesn't have to be ours. The anonymous water knows all my secrets. And the same memory issues from every spring.

Gaston Bachelard *L'Eau et les rêves, 1942, Paris*

Water figures in Australian art and Australian history as a vital thread binding together many narratives and imagery. Aboriginal art is alive with water, rain, rainbows, dew, hail, freshwater, saltwater, borewater, waterholes and storms. Much Aboriginal art of the desert recounts journeys from waterhole to waterhole, and many stories are based on the creation of these soaks or rockholes. The paths to them are not necessarily spectacular but they are crucial to survival.

The idea of an inland sea was the Holy Grail of non-Aboriginal exploration of Australia. The dream of plenty, of fresh water, of a green heart in a dry red continent was persistent although death and privation accompanied the quest. Actually an inland sea can be found in the centre of Australia but not in a predictable way. Underground there is the Great Artesian Basin, and then there is Lake Eyre which has been full only twice in the 20th century. It is an endorheic or centrally draining system, the largest in the world. When the rains fill the river networks of Cooper's Creek and the Diamantina/Warburton in the north-east, and the Macumba in the north, and run across country to flood the Lake, there is an enormous sense of miracle involved, borne out in the blooming of the desert flowers and the quickening of the fauna. The miracle lies also in the fact that the water doesn't fall from the sky but comes flowing over the land to run in the veins of her dry river and creek beds like blood in a body.

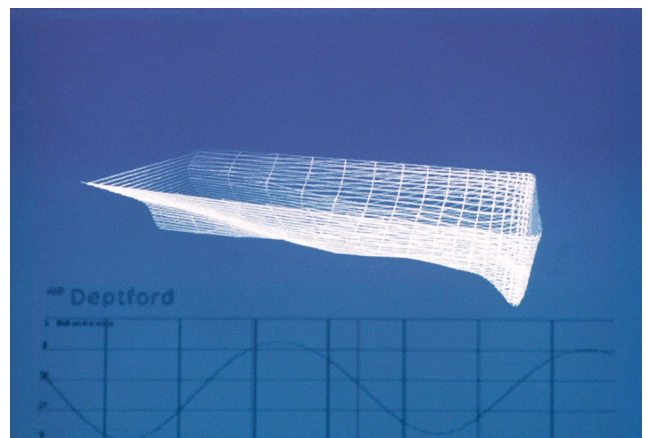
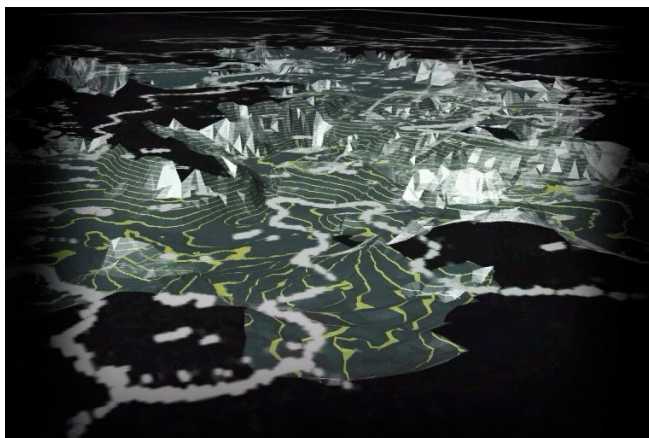
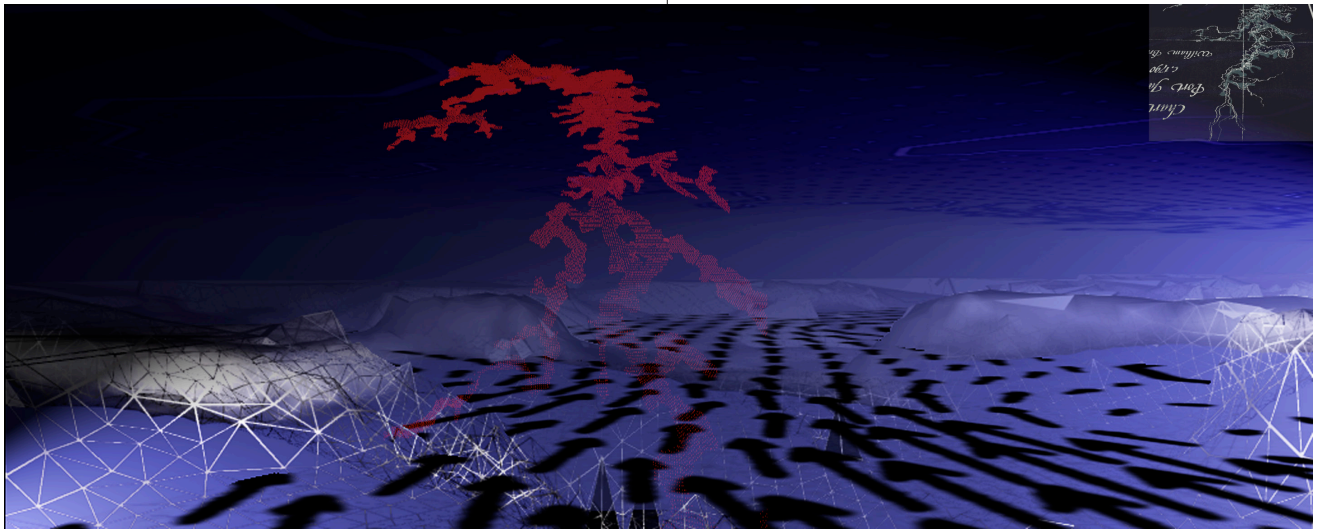
A sense of the earth as animate is strongly supported by Aboriginal accounts of Australia. This animation is partly metaphoric, seeing correspondences between the human body and the earth, and other organisms or substances; partly it is not metaphoric but based on the livingness of everything, stones even, their sense of presence and, indeed, destiny.

He woke to the sound of voices and footsteps but tried to go back, back to the dream that seemed to make sense, to be offering him some guidance and consolation. In the dream he walked on a cliff over the sea, a silver mirror with islands and swimmers; and someone said: "there's a way down" and he was uncertain but there was a path; and he ate a chocolate bar from his pocket and proceeded easily along the path, through the bushes, to the sand where his own people were sitting. That wasn't so hard and he opened his eyes trying to keep his heart in that place of light.

Stephanie Radok *Skimming, 1998, Adelaide*

Many Northern Hemisphere categories are inverted by Australian nature, but the Australian or Southern categories are only inversions if they are compared with something else regarded as the norm. Regard them as infinitely subtle rather than as inconsistent, regard them as intricate exercises for the imagination and they can be seen to be variations on what is already known, another way of seeing and being rather than 'the other', thus providing immense reflective potential for thought and experience.

Art that concerns itself with some manifestation of water demonstrates what can be considered a new phase in Australian art about the land. After Mabo, after the final shredding of the myth of *terra nullius*, after the Aboriginal art that makes known the daily patterns of almost every region of Australia, this land can never be seen in the same way again. Aboriginal land, occupied land, land covered with stories, births and deaths, it is yet ready to receive more living and to deepen our understanding of what was and may still be. Our understanding of this history makes both bitter and sweet our current occupation. Each of us arguably comes from river people, or plains people, book people or boat people, people of the night, of the fish, of the mountains or of the sea. Many of us do not know what kind of people are ours or where we belong but perhaps we can, by listening to our intuitions and feelings, understand where we fit in and take responsibility for the effects on the world produced by our actions and ways of thinking.



Tabulating underwater space forms a significant part of two recent installations by **Nicole Ellis** whose works analyse water as a great conduit for ideas and bodies, history and knowledge. She asks: “How does water carry the memories of those who lived on its shores and even on the water and below the waterline...?” While working at the Docklands studios in London in 1995 Ellis started to think about the ships that would have been moored in the fast-flowing Thames in 1777 to 1857, man of war ships converted to prisons, in which the convicts were kept before being sent out to Australia. Once in Australia ships were again used as prisons before deportation to Norfolk Island. In *below the waterline*, a site specific installation at the Customs House, Circular Quay, Ellis linked historical documents, names and myths, physical space and the complexion of thought. *Tidal Vectors*, a work made in collaboration with James McGrath,

was a 3D digital installation at the Museum of Sydney describing the dynamic shape and motion of Sydney Harbour. New technologies provide new ways of mapping and seeing invisible forces and features. By investigating the underwater where ships take up space and currents play around landforms the work transforms history and information into patterns and almost musical or architectural forms. The past and the present are re-viewed in this way as an interlocking series of objects and subjects, names and stories, thoughts and feelings.

TOP AND ABOVE LEFT: **Nicole Ellis and James McGrath** *Tidal Vectors*: 2000, digital installation, Museum of Sydney, Olympic Arts Festival, image courtesy of the artists and dLux media/arts ABOVE RIGHT: **Nicole Ellis** *Below the Waterline* 1998, video, 15m 49 secs VHS, Sea Change Festival. All images on this page permission by Viscopy, Ltd, 2001, Sydney.