

JOHN WOLSELEY
HEARTLANDS &
HEADWATERS

Artwork labels

History of the Whipstick Forest with ephemeral swamps and gold bearing reefs

2011

watercolour, charcoal and pencil on 2 sheets

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

One summer's day I walked from my studio into the forest and followed a dry creek to some swamps and pools bursting with life. This arid landscape, so torn up and churned over, was still miraculously reinventing itself. Such resilience!

In this drawing I bring together the histories of three kinds of time: the 'deep time' of geology, 'shallow time' since European arrival, and 'now time' in October 2011. The history of the hidden workings of the earth I stole from a geologist's map. Resting on this ancient framework in the painting's centre is the green swamp. Above this is another map, which tells the story of William Johnson, a visitor to this forest 160 years ago, whose discovery of gold was the birth of the Bendigo goldfields.

When I was working on this painting, this bush was burnt in line with the government's draconian legislation to burn all public bushland in Victoria every ten years. This often gives no time for vegetation to mature and seed, and biodiversity in certain fire-sensitive ecologies is being ravaged. My reverence for nature's resilience was moved to a sense of deep chagrin that yet again we are destroying the matrix which is our home.

Huon pine gateway with pillars

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2013–14

Huon pine, wood relief on 3 sheets of Japanese paper

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

The *Huon pine gateway with pillars* serves as a portal to *The Great Tree of Drawings*. One pillar is an ancient tree trunk felled in Tasmania, and the other is a vertical slice from another tree. Near each is an impression on paper made by printing or rubbing the surface of the wood, thereby enabling nature to imprint itself on the paper. This echoes the great existential question – do we listen to and move with the rhythms of the earth and the cosmos, or do we separate ourselves from it, exploit, consume and destroy it?

Natural history of a sphagnum bog, Lake Ina, Tasmania

2013

watercolour, pencil, pen and ink and sphagnum on 8 sheets

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

As a creek moves down to the shores of Lake Ina in the central highlands of Tasmania, it swells out into an ancient sphagnum moss swamp. I leant over and peered into a gap between the mats of sphagnum, and a small fish emerged in the crystal water. This brief phantom – a Clarence galaxias – was only miraculously there because its ancestors had been isolated by a glacial moraine (ridge) upstream, which six million years later had saved it from the European trout, which had supplanted most of the other galaxias in the rest of Tasmania. And then, marvellously, it had been saved again by the Tasmanian Land Conservancy, which had purchased these plains to protect them from further loss and degradation.

As the grey shadows moved down the hill and melted into the lake, I soaked and painted the spongy sphagnum mats with tinctures of watercolour – viridian and crimson and Indian yellow – and laid them on several sheets of paper. I did the same with water milfoils, spike reed, tassel sedges and bladderwort, and weighted them down overnight with slabs of bark. Their images were imprinted on the paper, emerging slowly like a photograph being developed.

Natural history of swamps III, heron in swamp – Loy Yang Power Station

2009–10

watercolour, pencil, ink, black chalk, scratching out and leaf

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

I was looking at a dam in the grounds of the Loy Yang Power Station, when in flew a black-backed heron. It looked for fish in the water and then peered at a billboard declaring 'Hazelwood Power Station – WETLAND DEVELOPMENT PROJECT'. I walked down to the vast open-cut coalmine, and looked for fish fossils and Cryptogamic flora among the seams of coal. Then I returned to the heron, which now seemed to be looking at the steam and CO₂ belching out of the cooling towers – those clouds of CO₂ that came from the coal which was once a carboniferous swamp.

Cycles of fire and water – Lake Tyrrell, Victoria

2011–12

watercolour, charcoal, pencil, sponging, scratching and masking out on 2 sheets

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

I was sitting on a low sandbank and drawing the pools of water that lay on this ancient salt lake. A rust-coloured cloud erupted into the air and darkened the sky over the water. The wind grew stronger, as if emanating from the core of the fire, and it carried embers and burning branches like dismembered limbs. I felt a kind of disquiet, almost dread. I knew such fires had always been part of the natural cycles of the bush, but this was one of several I had experienced that season where it felt as if fire itself was behaving in a different, more erratic way; as if the subtle equilibrium of the climate was changing.

From out of the billowing clouds of smoke some spoonbills, ibis and cormorants emerged, and flew far out over the lake. Several of them alighted on a patch of sunlit water and remained there, as if illustrating some cycle of eternal return – from action to stillness, from noise to quiet. But as I watched, the great black cloud drifted over their resting place, moving them on as if they were being chased away from the world they had known.

Murray-Sunset refugia with 14 ventifacts

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2008–10

pencil, watercolour and charcoal on 15 sheets

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

This work was made in the Murray-Sunset National Park, where I found an island of unburnt scrub remaining after a bushfire. This refugium, or sanctuary, provided shelter for plants and small creatures from which they could later gradually recolonise the surrounding sand dunes. The small, flying sheets are papers I released to blow on the desert winds for weeks and sometimes months. Each sheet records carbon traces made by the burnt fingers of trees and shrubs. Having been made soft from dews and showers, and dried and tossed by the desert winds, they have become fixed in a variety of sculptural forms.

Regeneration after fire – the seeders and the sprouters, Mallee

2009–11

watercolour, charcoal, pencil and pigment

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

I went for a long walk through recently burnt mallee scrub in the Big Desert Wilderness Park. Some of the mallee roots had vivid amber, scarlet and mauve new growth exploding from the surviving stumps. Nearby were scatterings of tiny, bright banksia seedlings that had germinated after the fire, causing seed pods to burst open and expel their seeds. Botanists call such trees ‘seeders’, while their companions, the mallee eucalypts, are known as ‘sprouters’. Sprouters have a large root, known as a lignotuber, which stores water and nutrients – this is part of a brilliant strategy for survival in arid landscapes.

Ephemeral water with new growth – Murray-Sunset National Park

2009–12

watercolour, charcoal and pencil

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

After rain in the Murray-Sunset country, I always marvel at how, in just hours, seedlings appear in the swales and dips of the sandhills. The emergence of new life after rain, on what was once a dry desert, is an experience of great power. This work joins together two strands of my painting practice: my more objective methods of drawing and an approach that involves tactile contact with trees, collaborating with them in making the drawing. The large sheet was ‘frottaged’ against burnt trees and the smaller ones had been blown about by the wind and drawn on by carbonised twigs.

After fire – spiny-cheeked honeyeaters at Lake Monibeong

2009–11

watercolour, charcoal, pencil, gouache and brown chalk

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

Walking through the recently burnt Cobboboonee Forest in Victoria one morning, I reached a lake where fresh water rested in sand dunes bordering the sea. I stood beside a burnt banksia tree with powdery black, corrugated bark. It had been a stormy night, but now the sea and lake were calm.

Several spiny-cheeked honeyeaters swooped down, perched in the tree and sung out jubilantly. It was as if they were filled with elation at all these elements coming to rest in equilibrium – the lake resting within the sand dune, the quietening of the wind and the passing of the fire.

Mallee gilgai – ephemeral pools, Wyperfeld National Park

2009–12

watercolour, charcoal and pencil

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

At Round Swamp in the Wyperfeld National Park, crab holes, or gilgai, appear in response to flows as the groundwater in hidden aquifers rises and falls. As I painted one of these mysterious waterholes, the processes of making a watercolour seemed strangely analogous to the action of water in the landscape. I laid out a large sheet of paper and flooded it with watercolour, which pooled and dried in the hot sun. As the liquid slowly evaporated it left spidery reticulations and tidemarks very similar to those on the banks of these strange, ephemeral pools.

Travelling north – five rivers

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

watercolour, pencil, charcoal, frottage, coloured chalk, coloured pencil, fibre-tipped pen, coloured inks and ink wash, synthetic polymer paint and oil paint, nature print, relief print, colour etching and lithograph, linocut on Japanese paper, monoprint on handmade moss paper, collage, earth, plants, adhesive tape, turtle shell, clay, wood

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

Flight of ventifacts, Mallee

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2006–12

charcoal, watercolour and synthetic polymer paint on 57 sheets

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

Through this flight of paper ventifacts I have drawn one of the most significant scientific diagrams of our time, the Keeling Curve, which plots the rise in CO₂ in the atmosphere from 1958 to the present. The progression of this graph in a zigzag motion up the wall charts the yearly rise and fall of CO₂ in response to the leaf cover of the Northern Hemisphere's deciduous forests. There is a steady movement upwards as CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere moves up to the highest it has been for the last 400,000 years. We are reaching a point of no return.

Flight of the eumenine wasps – mud domes and paper nests

2012–14

charcoal, watercolour, earth pigment, pencil, black pencil, chalk, masking out and fired clay nest

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

In the heat of summer I pin up sheets of drawing paper by a large open window overlooking a dam. Two kinds of eumenine wasp often career into the studio, searching for places to build their nests. A potter's wasp chose the surface of this drawing for its nest built from clay, and I added a drawing of a paper wasp's honeycomb nest to the left side of the sheet. It felt eerie, yet oddly reassuring, as if beautiful maps of the lived world of these little insects had been transposed onto a map of my own 'life world'.

Simpson Desert sand dunes moving across the Finke River, SA

2014–15

watercolour, charcoal, coloured pencil, touches of gouache, masking out, pen and black and brown ink, collage of nature prints in oil paint on Japanese papers

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

In 2013, I chartered a helicopter and flew across the Simpson Desert. We circled where I had camped in 1990, where the sand dunes meet the Finke River. I used drawings I did on that first visit and photographs taken from the air to make this painting of the longitudinal dunes leaping the riverbed and then flowing into the distance as far the eye can see. Changes in wind direction can make them merge or fork out to form compound dunes. I love the way they seem to be giant abstract demonstrations of the primary or originary shapes in nature. As they move, each one seems about to morph into some other shape. The dunes in this painting are mostly seriously committed to heading north, but always with the possibility of branching off to the east under the influence of prevailing winds. Thus they form one of the most primal forms in nature: the branch that forks, with one line of growth turning into two, then three and more, as can also be seen in the plants growing on the foreground of this painting. They are acting out in microcosm the same branching shapes as the giant versions blowing across the desert.

Decomposition ventifacts 1–4

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2011–12

charcoal, earth, watercolour

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

A Daly River creek, NT

2012

watercolour, pastel, pencil, charcoal, ink, yellow pencil, masking out and collage of woodcut and linocut on Japanese paper on 3 sheets

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

Here is a flowing tropical creek near Nauiyu, about two hours' drive south of Darwin. It shows the fecund, flowing mass of life and aquatic plants and fish, and how they are all an integral part of one particular ecosystem. The plants were all drawn on the spot or collected and drawn later in Darwin. It was May 2012 and I went on several trips with the ethnobiologist Glenn Wightman, the Ngan'gi elder Patricia Marrfurra McTaggart AM and other artists from the arts centre at Nauiyu. They showed me the plants in their living habitat so that I could draw them in action, rather than as dried museum specimens – the *Nymphaea* waterlily, with its long, convulsive stems, several species of bladderwort, water chestnuts and duckweed.

In this tropical aquatic painting I have tried to show how landscape for me is made up of energy fields that I draw as passages of particular plant forms, in which the individual plants move or dance with different rhythms. My intention is to show how these rafts of different species weave in and out of one another, and across the surface of my painting, rather as a passage of a symphony changes key and mood.

From the edge of the great flood plains of Garrangari and Garrangali, NT

2012–14, dated 2014

pencil, charcoal, black and brown chalk, watercolour, coloured pencil, coloured pastel, frottage and collages of linocut, wood relief printed in black and brown ink, watercolour, charcoal and coloured pencil over pencil and pen and ink on Japanese and wove paper

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

In June 2011 I was standing on the edge of the monsoon rainforest bordering a vast flood plain in East Arnhem Land with Djambawa Marawili, the great Yolngu leader and artist. Djambawa recounted how in the dawn of creation ancestral figures had moved up from the coast, digging for edible roots as they went, creating springs of fresh water that still bubble out along the plains. He described how when the first sun came up these ancestor women turned into broлга cranes. As he sang the song several broлgas emerged from the mists and flew slowly towards the coast.

This was the originary moment of this painting. For the next three years, guided by the Dhudi-Djapu clan leader and artist Mulkun Wirrpanda, I collected and drew specimens of plants and trees of the flood plain, and their edible roots and tubers. In the painting I have drawn many of them, along with the various trees festooned with vines.

For me the great miracle of that morning rested in that moment of time – *being there*, seeing the living land and sensing the ‘deep time’ so intimately linked with the life and art of the people who have lived in it for so long.

Dhalkurrñaniṅ (Dhuwa). Sarcostemma viminale – caustic vine

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2013–14

watercolour, pencil and pen and ink

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

Riny'tjaṅa (Dhuwa). Erioseme chinosemense

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2013–14

watercolour and pencil

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

**Räkay (Dhuwa). #1 Eleachoris dulcis –
water chestnut**

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2013–14

watercolour and pencil

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

**Räkay (Dhuwa). #2 Eliachoris dulcis –
water chestnut**

from *The Great Tree of Drawings*

1959–2015

2013–14

watercolour, pencil and brush and ink

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

From Siberia to Roebuck Bay – the godwits reach the mangrove swamps, WA

2012

watercolour over pencil, charcoal, coloured chalk and
masking out

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

Each year in June the bar-tailed godwits fly 12,000 kilometres from their breeding grounds in Siberia to the north coast of Australia. I was standing by the sea on the north Kimberley coast when out of a clear sky the godwits arrived in vast, pulsing flocks that swooped down to rest on the mudflats.

The land, with its mudflats and sandbanks, had been formed by the great king tides, dragged for eons by the cycles of the moon. And now I could see these great tides of godwit, pulled by another powerful force, flow down and merge with the waters.

Dystopia – the last wetland, Gwydir

2184

2012–15

watercolour, charcoal, pencil, coloured pencil, copper oil crayon, earth pigment, gouache mixed with graphite, black chalk, masking and scratching out, feathers

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

I found a dead pelican lying on the edge of a vast cotton farm near Moree in regional New South Wales, where once fertile land had been lasered, and flat fields of cotton now stretched as far as the eye could see. Once there were wetlands there, but they had been replaced by an industrial monoculture that would result in the kind of degradation of land and water resources, and loss of species, which is happening in so much of our continent.

I made this painting by flinging inked-up, dead carcasses of pelicans, owls and bustards onto the paper. Their imprints lie under an image of the Gwydir Wetlands – one of a shrinking number of wetlands in New South Wales, and home to thousands of waterbirds and rare plants. Around this last wetland I then drew the *tabula rasa* of the invading cotton farms.

In this painting I have imagined how things might go for the land – and how this wetland in the future, say 2184, might be the last one left. The terrible spectre of **DESERTIFICATION** now stalks us unless we change our ways.

Saline grounds, SA

2013–14

watercolour, black pencil, charcoal, pencil, masking out, frottage, stippling and collage of nature print and oil paint on Japanese paper

Collection of Sir Roderick Carnegie AC and Family

I made this work about a patch of ground in a part of the country where once fertile ground had been cleared of trees, the water table had risen and the salt had killed the remnant vegetation. In *Saline grounds, SA* I have beguiled the flows and pools of watercolour to make them mimic the subtle way salt works, with its fluid movements and encrusted reticulations. To contrast with the mercurial fluidity of the salt I have drawn a calligraphy of fencing, a linear progression that was once a firm boundary between paddocks but is now turning feral and springing free.