

*“I have witnessed a river so strange . . .”*

Presentation of artists' books by

James Cook University PhD Candidate

VICTORIA COOPER



*“I have witnessed a river so strange ...”*

Resolving the microscopic view of freshwater within the context of topographical,  
historical and mythical narratives of sites in three Australian rivers.

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**Petherick Reading Room, National Library of Australia**

August 5, 6 & 7, 2010

## RATIONALE FOR AND AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This study seeks to construct visual narratives that express an alternative dialogue in the contemporary discussion on freshwater by drawing upon the relationships between freshwater and post-colonial Australian discourse. Also considered in the research are questions of the contribution of science, mythology and post-colonial historical knowledge to the development of this alternative perspective.

The collection and documentation of the aquatic fungi and their micro-environments provides the scientific 'data' and raw visual material for translation and transformation within the freshwater sites investigated for this project. This work will underpin the following aims for the research:

1. To refine a methodology for the artist's investigation of connections with the natural and human narrative within selected Australian freshwater and riverine sites: 1. Rio Vista, Mildura, 2. Arthur Boyd's Bundanon, Shoalhaven River and 3. Myall Park Botanic Garden and the confluence of the Balonne and Condamine Rivers.
2. To locate this site-specific work within the form of the artists' book as a metaphorical site. This will include references to the documentation and artists' books produced by artists including land and performance artists.
3. To re-position this work within the context of the original site and develop supplementary documentation to provide access for local audiences and the Library as a repository for future reference and review.

## THE LIBRARY; SITE OF CONFLUENCE

In this work I have been weaving together many threads, part autobiographical, part self-reflective and part magical realism, into the narrative of freshwater. In my wanderings and meanderings<sup>1</sup> I have collected and contrasted views across science, myth, history along with my own lived experience. I have then constructed narratives that are embedded in the place of each freshwater site to be returned and viewed/read in the context of each site. The photographic and textual visual narrative spaces perform as metaphorical interventions within the mind of the reader impacting on their everyday experience of water.

Books and other publications are a popular medium utilized by land and site-specific artists to extend the audience of the sometimes remote or ephemeral site work. Sometimes this work is only encountered as its visual or conceptual idiom through a publication<sup>2</sup>. In my work the contextual site of the thesis is essentially water, which is in a fluid state of perpetual translocation. The books transport the site-specific work of water and place into the site of reading and visualizing — the Library<sup>3</sup>.

The Library is a site for the confluence of ideas. The reader can be engaged in any amount of potential pathways from science to the humanities. It can be a space for myth and magical realism or just a social or lived place. Above all it is a space for *The Reader*. The book provides a site for the flow of ideas both abstract and concrete from the author to the reader. Once read these ideas become streams within an extended continuum thus flowing from reader to reader.

1. I refer to the methodology of walking employed by land artists such as Hamish Fulton in my research.

2. See the book works of English land artists Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy and the documentations and writings of Robert Smithson.

3. I have also installed the books in the context of the *Gallery*, transforming the space into a reader's space with tables and sometimes chairs (when able) or a bookstand on a plinth and gloves to enable the reader to turn the page. In some cases the flexibility of the concertina form of the book has enabled it to be read as a codex and other times as a

3 dimensional installation.



## COMMENTS ON AQUATIC FUNGI

Although not a currently fashionable research topic, aquatic fungi have an important role as the decomposers, recycling important elements and materials, which provide the basic nutrients to feed new life. Aquatic fungi's role in the ecological cycle of life on this planet has been, and continues to be, re-defined by the work of a few scientists. The vital role played by the fungi includes "conditioning dead leaves and making them palatable to detritus-eating invertebrates" (Kendrick, 1992:188). They are the decomposers, recycling important elements and materials, which provide the basic nutrients to feed new life. Aquatic fungi are known to have forms that are amphibious and these have then adapted to the vagaries of water availability in the riparian environments in forests. Felix Barlocher (1992) notes the ability of fungal organisms to survive periods of drought, "desiccated mycelium can survive for up to one year" (Barlocher and (ed) 1992:1). These and other functions fulfilled by fungi, parallel the all-encompassing cycles of the life and death in freshwater. They evolved and adapted to the changing conditions of nature from drought to flood with their amphibious characteristics forming a vital link between land and water.

Although internationally significant work is being carried out in Hong Kong and Asia, America and Europe, there appeared to be little research within Australia. This lack of local knowledge of aquatic fungi was identified in the Murray Darling Basin report, *Rivers as Ecological Systems, The Murray Darling Basin*,

"Although it is known that fungi are important in the decomposition in the rivers of the basin - especially of dead aquatic plants - very little is known about the specifics of their biology or ecology, or how they may be affected by physical changes in the riverine environment."

(Young 2001:174)

Most of the recent work published in this area of research in Australia has been by Dr Kevin Hyde, in the Centre for Research in Fungal Diversity, University of Hong Kong and Drs. Joan and Alan Cribb with their contributions to *The Queensland Naturalist* journal. Much of the work that informs the science of aquatic fungi today was carried out by Ingold in the 1970s. His 1975 publication, *An Illustrated Guide to Aquatic and Water - Borne Hyphomycetes (Fungi Imperfecti) with notes on their biology*, is an important guide to my identification of this group of organisms. The seminal text in my foundation research is *Ingoldian Fungi: field and laboratory techniques* published by Enric Descals in 1977. Another important text is *The Ecology of Aquatic Hyphomycetes*, written by Felix Barlocher in 1992 provided an extended understanding of this organism's role in the ecology of the freshwater environment. It was in reading this last reference that an important contribution was made to the direction of my research. In his final discussion about the need for a holistic approach to understanding freshwater ecology Barlocher discusses a statement made to an international conference in 1975 by Dr Noel Hynes,

"... streams and their biota extend into the stream bed and beyond the stream banks. The following words, with which Hynes (1975) concluded the Edgardo Baldi lecture at the 19th International Limnology Congress in Winnipeg, Manitoba, remain relevant to anybody working with stream organisms:"

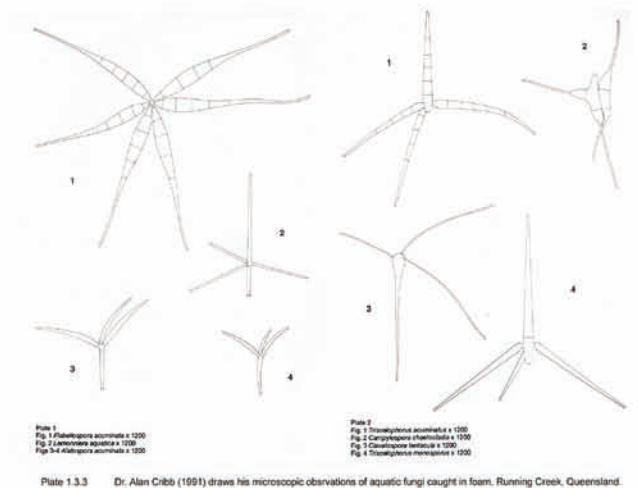
(Barlocher and (ed) 1992:32)

Felix Barlocher then continues with Hynes' statement:

"We must, in fact, not divorce the stream from its valley in our thoughts at any time. If we do we lose touch with reality. The real lake is not a basin with two vertical sides as in a textbook. One that is like that, Loch Ness, is so out of line that it harbours monsters. Somewhere, in Australia, there must be a stream with a channel like a gutter, fed by runoff from a landscape paved like a parking lot. There, I predict, will be found the legendary river creature of the aboriginals - the Bunyip."

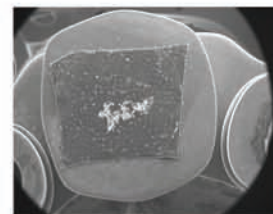
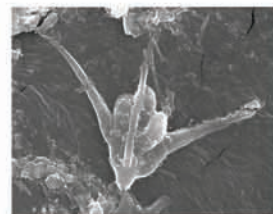
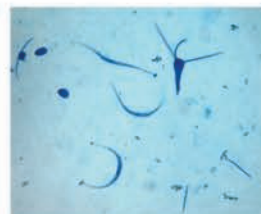
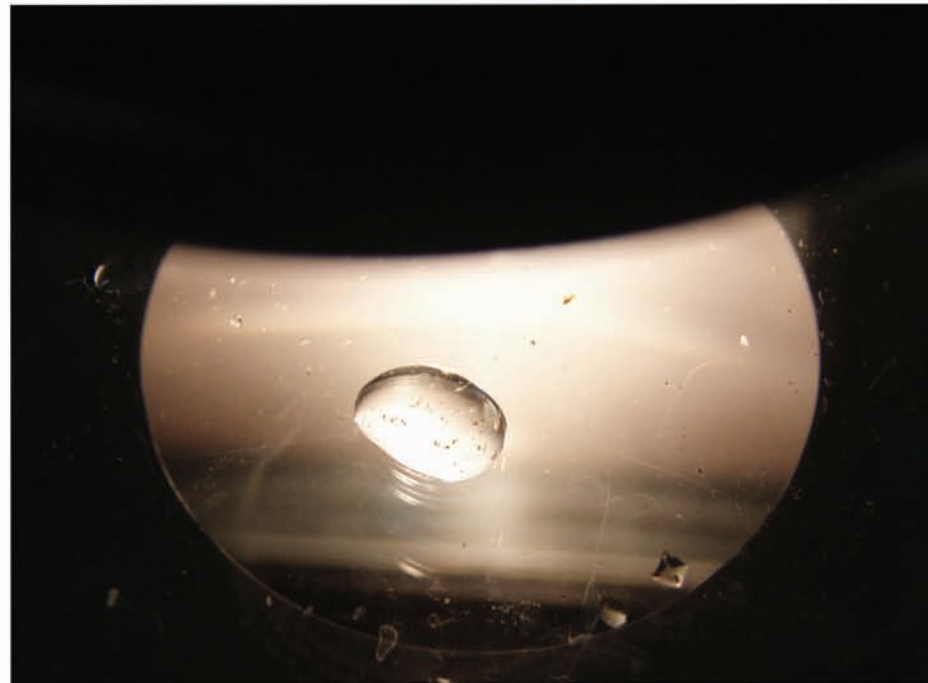
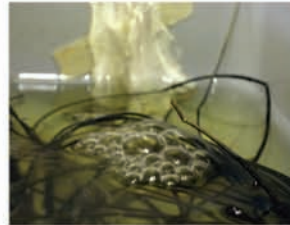
(Barlocher and (ed) 1992:32)

This reference to the Bunyip in his lecture to an international scientific conference presented an interesting thesis. I contacted Dr Hynes and in a personal email correspondence he spoke of his interest in mythical water creatures. This connection between myth and science became one path of inquiry in my research and artwork in this project.



Cribb, A.B. (1991) Some fungal spores from foam in Running Creek, Queensland. *The Queensland Naturalist*: Vol 31, Nos 1-2, December 1991, pp 21-25. Brisbane: The Queensland Naturalists' Club.





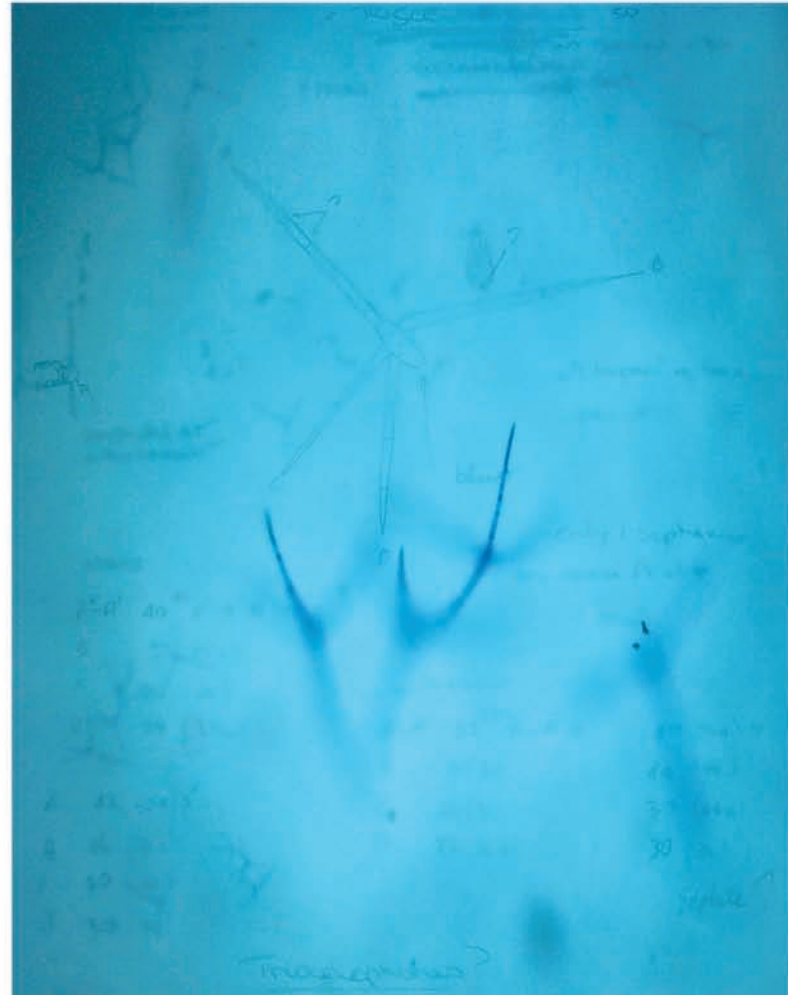
## OBSERVATIONS IN MICROSPACE

Initially I connected with an existing scientific study on the Condamine River into freshwater aquatic fungi and then began to collect small amounts of water, foam (when available) and decomposing organic material from other sites including the Condamine and Shoalhaven Rivers. After each collection the next stage of the analysis was to bring this material back to the laboratory and, after 2 to 3 weeks incubation, samples were taken for microscopic observation and imaging.

A significant quantity of work for this project was collected and developed during many hours of observation within the site of the microscope. I continued this work utilizing the high power magnification of the electron microscope at the Australian National University's Electron Microscope Unit.

When engaged with the microscope, I begin to recognize how this machine collapses immense barriers of scale and perception. The viewer's mind becomes separate from the familiar and immediate surroundings and is relocated in an unimaginable space and time of an alternate reality. The microscope provided a contemplative space to consider the site and substance from deep within fresh water. The books I created were a material response to this interaction in which the microscopic work reveals itself as an unexplained disturbance, an apparition or a myth, appearing at the edge of the everyday. They present a paradox of scale within in the familiar narrative of site ~ a documentation of a metaphorical and mythological site intervention.





*Tricelophorus* sp.?  
2004, Digital montage and microphotography by Victoria Cooper,  
Drawing by Dr Malcolm Ryley, Scientist and Plant Pathologist

## THE BUNYIP IN THE MICROSCOPE

In this work I also investigated the way in which the scientist draws out a constructed concept of the microscopic vision of the organism. They are able to transcribe the view, as seen through the tunnel of the microscope, to a hand made drawing from memory taking into account the proportion and spatial attributes of the organism.

In effect the scientist is a kind of portrait artist, taking note of the structural components that characterize the subject and its form. I decided to explore the relationship between the microscope view and the drawing through a collaborative experiment with the scientific drawings by Dr Malcolm Ryley. I chose a particular fungal spore, *Tricelophorus* sp. and digitally montaged them into my photomicrography images of similar specimens.

This work brought up many new questions of the connection between art and science and the philosophical space between scientific fact, reality and the human understanding. As with the artist there appears to be moments when the scientist is required to make an interpretation based on intuition to form a conclusion. This work and research was very compelling, creating a new opportunity for future cross discipline study utilizing the

spatial/optical intervention of microscope. The study should also take into account the way technology has now overtaken (even removing) the hand of the scientist in the form of computer algorithms. These programs both digitally image and piece together 3 dimensional, sharply detailed views of the subject under microscopic scrutiny.

As the research proceeded in the laboratory, it was becoming apparent that both the microscopic aquatic environment and I were moving further away from the river ...

Was this distraction the work of a Bunyip placing doubt and confusion in this scientifically controlled environment?

Did this explain the strange event when a temperature controlled incubator set at optimum settings for growing my fungi suddenly and without warning turned into a freezer overnight ruining most of my cultures?

Another event involved a perfectly good freezer stopped working, thawing its entire contents, in a room where I was incubating fungi in water baths. This was a science laboratory and not a murky swamp where a mythical creature lies in waiting to play havoc!

# Aquabatics

## BOOK DESCRIPTION:

2004, Edition of ten copies

Concertina Book

Eight pages plus cover and colophon

21 x 18 x 1.5 cm extending to 112 cm

Pigment inks on watercolour paper

Handmade watercolour paper enclosure

## COLLECTIONS:

#1 **Library of Australian Fine Art**  
State Library of Queensland

## EXHIBITIONS AND INSTALLATIONS:

2004 **Science meets Art**  
Queensland Parliament House

2005 **Books 05**  
Noosa Regional Gallery



## THE THEATRE WITHIN THE LABORATORY

The performance of observing through the microscope provides a time space not just for the visual but also for poetic, interpretive and analytical thinking. The first action for the scientist is to analyse, interpret and relate what is discovered in the microscope. For this purpose taxonomy provides a language to describe and impose order on the process of investigation in these microscopic environments. This language has a kind of poetry and metaphor in its construction, which I found important to investigate in the development of my early work, *Aquabatics*.

In the process of microscope 'walking' I noted that the 'field of view' as a circle that had an association with that of a theatre or circus. The spotlight followed the performers of the show as they move across the stage. It is interesting to note that the moving part of a microscope, where the specimen slides are positioned, is called the 'stage'. The performance holds the viewer by their control in revealing of the microscopic forms. As the magnification is increased to view the fungi more closely the viewer can never see the entire organism in sharp focus. So the eye, mediated by the machine, follows along the structure in a kind of visual dance across the stage. Each slice of focus reveals a little more of the story, but you do not see where you are being taken and where you have been. Only through a composite drawing direct from the memory of the visual experience or a through series of documentary photographs can a concept of the entire organism (and its performance) be formed.



## Koolunga Bunyip

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

2007, Edition of three copies

Concertina book

14 pages plus cover and colophon

21.5 x 26.0 x 2.5 cm extending to 680 cm

Pigment inks on watercolour paper

Handmade acrylic case by Doug Spowart

### COLLECTIONS:

#1 **Library of Australian Fine Art**  
State Library of Queensland

#2 **Artspace Mackay**

### EXHIBITIONS AND INSTALLATIONS:

2007 **Lessons in History Vol 1**  
Grahame Galleries and Editions

2008 **2nd Libris Artists' Book Awards**  
Artspace Mackay



## BEYOND THE LABORATORY

So it was in the dark muddy depths of this interstitial zone between science and art and myth that I had to contend with this presence of the Bunyip. Dr. Noel Hynes' statement was ever present every turn I was to take in the study. In 2005 my partner had planned a field trip to central Australia, on this journey I took a side trip to investigate more closely a colonial story of a Bunyip. In the small South Australian town of Koolunga in the late 1900's, there were sightings and reports of uncanny and unexplained events from the nearby water hole. The story then unfolded into the familiar response to the unknown that human fear drives. The town's people, believing that the Bunyip would attack and kill them all, dynamited the pool to kill the beast. My book, *Koolunga Bunyip*, proposes that the Bunyip is the fear that can be found within us all.

This book evolved from an exploration of place without the scientific microscopic investigation. I worked onsite to photographically document aspects of the Bunyip Park, the track and the water hole. While I walked the track I found myself suddenly alone in the landscape — there was nobody around, not even a bird-call. I felt the uncanny feeling of a presence, was it real or was it my imagination? When I recall my time there, I still remember those unsettling moments alone and how relieved I was to be leaving that town. The book was created in the studio when I returned home.

As I was working, walking through my memory of this place, I overheard on the radio an update of the United States' invasion of Iraq. How uncanny it was that, although on a grander scale than Koolunga, history repeats itself in the war against the unknown and unfamiliar.

The two books, *Aquabatics* and *Koolunga Bunyip*, created more questions and problems for my study to resolve. I needed to connect the scientific work and the cultural site documentation work together in a single narrative of water. At this time Julian Bowron, the Director of the Mildura Arts Centre, offered me an opportunity to connect my research in a site specific work referencing the adjacent historic house, *Rio Vista* for *Palimpsest 2006*. This offer was a pivotal moment in the development of my project and the work done at *Rio Vista* brought the microscopic view into the context of the colonial history of water.



"At what point is man going to recognize that this power of innovation may have to be restrained and that just as economically it may not be desirable to grow indefinitely, so that technologically it may not be necessary or desirable to innovate indefinitely? We're the first culture in the history of the world that ever regarded innovation as a friendly act."

(Benedetti & DeHart 1997:193)

## RIO VISTA; The colonial solution

*Rio Vista*, a 19th century colonial mansion is located in Mildura nearby the Murray River. This grand home was built by W.B. Chaffey in the height of the successes of the development of irrigation and the Murray River. W.B. Chaffey and his brother George were American engineers that came to Australia to establish a privately owned irrigation programme in this region.

This grand home provided a cultural perspective for the microscopic work and presented a great opportunity to initiate a discourse between the scientific, historical and place. At this time, *Rio Vista* was undergoing major restoration work. Richly textured and patterned wallpaper was exhumed from under overcoats of paint, wallpapers and the bland neutral surface of plaster. This restored relic symbolizes the lavishness of the decorative arts from this era. It is also the foundation layer in the sedimentary stratum of lived experience within this grand home. *Rio Vista* provided, for the Chaffey's, a sanctuary for 19th century ideals; keeping them safe from the threatening influences outside and the reality of living within the Australian landscape. It connects with a history that profoundly changed the way water and the landscape was to be utilized in Australia.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alongside the *Rio Vista* story of irrigation, there was a continued and accelerated development in other technologies, which expanded the possibilities for exploration into many new territories. With the aid of advancements in optics and the discovery of photographic imaging and reproduction, these new frontiers could then be observed and recorded more accurately than previously able. From these new visions of nature, novelty became necessity, and change was manufactured in all aspects of society for art and architecture to health and agriculture.

I planned my site work based on my previous experience with digital montage and the construction of the visual narrative. The early work in the microscope was woven into the story, *Aquabatics*, revealed insights into the form and function of the organisms adapted to a mobile aquatic environment. Now they were to be set loose to invade a new space. In the space of the house they adapted quickly from the aqueous to the aerial. Scale was unimportant to these life forms as their purpose was clear. The restoration of history was their new agenda.



## The Apparition

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

2006, Single Sheet

18 pages

32 x 32 x 1.5 cm

Pigment inks on archival paper

Acrylic presentation clamshell 33 x 33 x 2cm constructed by Doug Spowart.



## Part A: The Excavation Part B: The Restoration

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

#### Part A:

2006, Flip book

49 pages

21 x 90 x 1.0 cm

#### Part B:

2006, Codex, concertina binding

16 pages

#### Part A and Part B:

Pigment inks on archival paper

Acrylic presentation clamshell 33 x 33 x 2cm constructed by Doug Spowart.



## The Exploration

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

2006, Concertina Book

16 pages

20 x 25 x 2 cm, can extend to 320 cm

Pigment inks on watercolour paper

Acrylic presentation clamshell 33 x 33 x 2cm constructed by Doug Spowart.



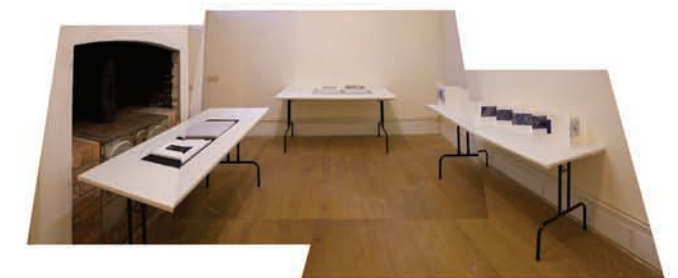
## RIO VISTA - AQUA VISTA

Book I, *The Apparition*, was made utilising projections of scanning electron microscope and light microscope images on furniture, rooms and dark spaces of the house. The manifestation of these microscopic forms in *Rio Vista* evokes a sense of mystery and an other worldliness connecting two disparate realities and dimensions.

The continuation of this confluence: the two histories of water — the natural and the social, takes place in the second book. In *Part A: The Excavation*, the viewer flips through a sequence of images that open a crack in the wallpaper to a microscopic scene. The animated sequence zooms the view into a wallpaper crack and then dissolves away the wallpaper to reveal another dimension beneath — that of water metaphorically flowing through the walls of the house. *Part B: The Restoration*, proposes that the room interiors throughout the house are undergoing a different kind of restoration, regeneration and repossession by the microscopic.

The third book, *The Exploration*, takes the viewer on an exploration of another dimension. It is a microscopic landscape where an untold story of these life forms both begins and ends. For most people *Neo-Micronesia* is an unexplored world but it is never far from our own experience.

This project was important in the development of this research. From this work I discovered visual tools and language for the microscopic to be reinvented and have a context in future dialogue. In this work I continue to pursue the mythology, historical and scientific interface within the context of water in the sites of Bundanon, on the Shoalhaven River and Myall Park Botanic Garden, near the confluence of the Condamine and the Balonne Rivers.



### COLLECTIONS:

Mildura Art Gallery

National Library of Australia

### EXHIBITIONS AND INSTALLATIONS (see image above):

2006 **Rio Vista Aqua Vista, Palimpsest 06**  
Kitchen, Rio Vista, Mildura Arts Centre





Arthur Boyd in a discussion with Sandra McGrath said:

“... If you are concerned with putting down the landscape in the same way as a novelist is concerned with putting down aspects of life, you are limited unless you become completely surreal. And then you get completely into the realm of the imagination, which becomes so hard to deal with that it has to be an intellectual rather than a visual exercise.”

(McGrath 1982:120)

1. My methodology for working in this project included walking through the many spaces of place, both metaphorically and bodily. This process of connection with site and collection of the conceptual and visual work has been inspired by Land Artists such as Hamish Fulton and Richard Long.
2. One of the Chaffey children was drowned in the fountain outside the *Rio Vista* home. His ghost now reputedly haunts the house.
3. In the book, *Arthur Boyd, Art and Life*, Janet McKenzie has inserted texts that come directly from interviews with Boyd in the early 1990's.

## BUNDANON, WALKING<sup>1</sup> THROUGH ART, SCIENCE, MYTH AND METAPHOR

The Shoalhaven River has its source in the highlands near Braidwood. It then meanders through gorges of the national parks on the southern highlands of New South Wales till it reaches the valleys of the hinterland west of Nowra, where it finally flows into the sea. Its upper reaches have been dammed to provide for Sydney's water supply and in hydroelectric power generation.

The river has a history of flooding from which the experiences have formed part of Bundanon's story and development. Another notable event in the story of Bundanon and the Shoalhaven River had a tragic end as in,

“1922 Kenneth McKenzie and his daughter Helen were drowned in the Shoalhaven River at the boundary with Lumsden's land to the west. Helen had been to the Nowra Show with her cousin Jean, and was washing her pony in the river when she was swept away. Kenneth went to her help, but both were drowned. The jacaranda tree in front of the house was planted in their memory”

(Freeman 2007:16)

This event had some resonance with my project in *Rio Vista*<sup>2</sup>, as each story has been recounted to me after I have shown my work to people associated with the administration of each of the sites.

Bundanon and the local region have a long history and connection with artists visiting and drawing inspiration for their own art production. Arthur Boyd had a great connection with this landscape and the Shoalhaven River, which is referenced much of his artwork from the 1970's after he bought the properties of Riversdale and Bundanon.

Boyd was also concerned with the local environmental issues. In an interview with Janet McKenzie<sup>3</sup> in 1993 he spoke of his fear

“I think Australians have been apt to believe that because this was such a vast land, they couldn't make a mark on it. But a mark has been made and if it continues at this rate, it will soon be too late ...”

(McKenzie 2000:170)

Boyd's experiences living at Riversdale and then Bundanon, on the Shoalhaven River became a metaphor and background for this work. Some of these issues were referenced in his artwork. Both he and the poet Peter Porter collaboratively developed interpretations on theme of *Narcissus* over the next nine years. In these works, Boyd and Porter, tackle the issue of self-absorption and its connections with beauty, love and desire.

“It is the self-absorption of Narcissus that interests me. He was more interesting to me than Ajax or Hector or Mars. Conceit is essentially non-productive in all aspects. You only perpetuate your own being.”(Mc Grath 1982:69)

What I had concluded from Boyd's connection of intellectual ideas within a lived experience of the landscape created more questions to explore. In the technological advances of science to reveal more facts and information of the intricate workings of nature, how are we really improving our place in the world? In the uncomfortable space where science and myth overlap, can new territories for discourse on the overworked issues of freshwater ecology be discovered?



## Images of Metaphor

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

2007, Codex  
14 pages  
21 x 15 x 1 cm  
Pigment inks on archival paper  
Hand stitched pamphlet book



## The House

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

Codex  
20 pages  
33.2 x 46.0 x 1.0 cm  
Pigment inks on 100% cotton paper  
Hand stitched by the artist



## The River

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

Codex  
18 pages  
33.2 x 46.0 x 1.0 cm  
Pigment inks on 100% cotton paper  
Hand stitched by the artist



### THE TRILOGY

#### COLLECTIONS:

National Library of Australia

#### EXHIBITIONS AND INSTALLATIONS:

2007 *Interior through an open door, Bundanon*  
Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery

2009 *Installation SITE: Bundanon*  
Bundanon, Nowra, New South Wales

## BUNDANON, WALKING (Continued)

In 2007 I began an artist-in-residency of four weeks duration at Bundanon, where I worked individually on my PhD research project and collaboratively with Doug Spowart on a larger site-specific venture. To pursue the project a stage further from *Rio Vista*, I went six weeks earlier to collect material directly from the river at the Bundanon property for microscope imaging. A month later I returned to Bundanon to bring these microscopic images into the context of the site. To begin the work I needed to embed myself in this place — so I started by walking through the buildings, across the fields down to and along the river, along the tracks of the bush land in the hills over looking the river. I experienced the floods and the storms along with the moments of wintery sunshine. I researched the place, its history and the art of Arthur Boyd.

While engaged in this activity, the forays into the microscopic waterscapes were a constant companion in my thoughts. While in the dimmed surroundings of the electron microscope, I had drifted into conscious dreaming<sup>1</sup> about the *Narcissus* myth and the Shoalhaven River. The microscopic environment became a background for a kind of anthropomorphic theatre. I found shapes and forms that brought into my mind things that were familiar from a human seen context. These forms along with the aquatic fungi I identified were then imaged and collected as the basic components for my narrative as I had previously done at *Rio Vista*.

But there was a fundamental truth that I found difficult to escape — these forms were not part of a human seen reality and they were also not mythical manifestations. These microscopic organisms are facts of the everyday and yet also alien, beyond the conception of the real in human daily life.

For me, this hybrid space tested both the voracity of the science and the integrity if the art, it was a new and uncomfortable place. How can I resolve the slippery space between fact and myth? Should I try? What connections with history and myth embedded in this place would I find to inform this work on the Shoalhaven River at Bundanon? Intuition, history and the narratives inherent in the site were to guide much of the direction of this interaction.

Amongst the site specific works produced, I created three books for my research project, *Images of Metaphor*, *The House* and *The River*. Each book refers to a different aspect and connection with the site. From the microscope work, I referenced the human predisposition to initially search for patterns in understanding the complexity in nature just to then modify or mimic them to produce a saleable commodity or create an aesthetic form<sup>2</sup>. *Images of Metaphor*, was constructed from this reverie and as a preface to the site work ahead. *The House* and *The River* presents the river as a metaphor for the arcane, unreachable and yet ever present in everyday life this space and place of art.

I wonder at the new perspectives and alternative possibilities that could exist at a subaltern layer below the reflective surface of the everyday; the other side of the mirror where life and death continues its cycle of renewal at a level deeply connected with, yet other to, our own experience.

1. Attributed to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1969) and *Water and Dreams* (1983)

2. It is important to note the influence of the microscope had on design in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I refer to Karl Blossfeldt and others as exemplars in this discussion on the microscope in the introduction.





Renown ecologist, Professor Henry Nix states in his opening speech for the new gallery (pictured above)

"In the garden is a wonderful preserved collection of plants which is important to botanical science, and behind me is a gallery which preserves and displays an artistic impression of that same collection and of other plants in the region."

(McKenzie 1999:85 & 86)

## MYALL PARK BOTANIC GARDEN

Myall Park Botanic Garden (MPBG), created by David Gordon in the mid 20th century is situated around 300 kilometers west of Toowoomba in southern central Queensland. Located in flat river country nearby the confluence of the Condamine and Balonne Rivers with Dogwood Creek. This landscape is controlled by the drought / flood cycle that naturally occurs across the central and western regions of eastern Australia. It is also situated near the top section of the Murray Darling Basin and the Surat Basin that forms part of the Great Artesian Basin. The water flows deep within and through the ancient underground watercourses and over this landscape through its creeks and rivers. Dry riverbeds can become raging rivers in a matter of hours, then back again to just a series of stagnant water holes. But the underground water continues to flow as it has for millennium.

The work to establish a major garden of indigenous plants within a natural context was to sustain Gordon for fifty years until his death in 2001. In the 1950's he married Dorothy Gemmell, a botanical artist. This marriage brought together art and science in the garden with a new vitality.

This garden is now a continual artwork in progress within the changing landscape of land and water use in that region. It remains a place where artists, naturalists and scientists can collaborate in many different ways. The garden is constantly transformed, sometimes in only a very small way or sometimes in ways that are not visually apparent — but it is an evolving and involving place. Like Arthur and Yvonne Boyd and their family, the Gordon family have been generous to share the heritage of, and vision for, the landscape they had acquired, nurtured and protected for the benefit of future generations

## My gardening work

The site research for this book began by travelling a few kilometres from Myall Park Botanic Garden to the farm where the junction of the Condamine and the Balonne Rivers is situated. From the road there were many gates to pass through. The journey along the river included a narration of the owner's life spent along the river. Stories that told of a healthy river quite different to the now muddied waters. Once through the last gate, the rest of the way was on foot. Reaching the site of the major river junction was a private event. It is a hidden place known only to a few locals.

I collected small samples of water and decomposing leaf litter for microscopic examination. After my objectives were achieved we headed back. The journey was broken by the gate ritual, ensuring the gate was secure each time, and, a not uncommon event in the country, the replacement of a flat tyre.

This material was then taken to Australian National University's Electron Microscope Unit for processing. Deep into the microscopic site I examined the samples and made images, which then became the basis for the three books, *Day Garden*, *Night Garden* and *Seven Gates*, and their references to the site and water.



## Day Garden

### BOOK DESCRIPTION

Codex  
48 pages  
23.0 x 33.0 x 31.5 cm  
Pigment inks on 100% Cotton paper  
hand stitched by Doug Spowart



## Night Garden

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

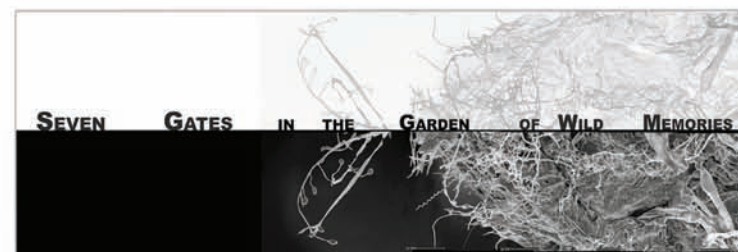
Codex  
40 pages  
23.0 x 33.0 x 1.5 cm  
Pigment inks on 100% cotton  
Hand stitched by Doug Spowart



## Seven Gates

### BOOK DESCRIPTION:

Concertina Book  
20 pages  
26.0 x 13.0 x 2.0 cm extending to 260cm  
Pigment inks on watercolour paper  
Binding by Doug Spowart



Seven Gates Detail



### EXHIBITIONS AND INSTALLATIONS:

2009 **Borderlines**  
Palimpsest 09, Mildura Arts Centre

**BOOK: Site**  
Ballarat International Foto Biennale, Post Office Art Gallery

**Borderlines**  
Myall Park Botanic Garden Gallery

### IN THE GARDEN

Over the last 12 years, I have connected with the MPBG in varying ways, sometimes to just experience the place. In this current project — exploring water, I was drawn to the garden again as a place to investigate the connections of art and science with the mythical and the everyday lived experience.

The garden is a space where the imagination plays a role along with the practical considerations in the activities of the gardener and visitor. Water's presence, as with all the cycles of the garden, becomes evident to the visitor over an extended time and space. Time spent in this garden brings the visitor closer to the fundamentals of existence. There is no shopping mall or evening entertainment for the masses. Technology is for the basic requirements. It is at the end of a road, there is no passing traffic. There is time to reflect, observe and discover new things about the immediate surroundings and the broader issues that have been embedded in this particular place.

There is a sense of drama within a garden as these human constructed spaces form a kind of "scenery" for an unrehearsed script. A theatre for nature, as cultivated by the gardener, unfolds to a receptive audience as they roam through the garden. By day the sun lights these spaces and reflects a vision of the outside world. One can feel the ground, see the daily and seasonal cycles, and hear the sounds of a diverse living environment resounding within the space. Here also are constant unseen rhythms that underlie the visible cycles of the garden.

By night in the dim light, the mind fills the dark spaces, creating an alternate vision of the garden. The invisible and unknowable grow in the imagination as at night the garden loses its scale and perspective. It is formless, no longer grounded — but dimly lit islands floating in the black sea of the universe. In the darkness of the night, the borders at the edge of the real and the imagined become less defined. Like driving down a dark and lonely road at night all that can be seen is in the light's beam until, at the edge of the light, a shadow moves and a different drama unfolds.

While working in the disembodied space of the electron and light microscopes I have been brought closer to the edge of science and myth, knowledge and truth. This visual research into Water and Place has only revealed more questions and answered none — as here ...

There is a contradiction of existence and the idea of the everyday.

There are questions to the placeness of Place, to what we know, how and where we live our lives.

Here, water is beyond culture — indifferent to the human — yet, paradoxically, integral to our every living and dying moments.

*“I have witnessed a river so strange ...”*

Presentation of artists' books by

VICTORIA COOPER



## Acknowledgements

**Doug Spowart** — artist, PhD candidate and teacher  
for his collaboration, creativity, innovation and considerable construction skills

**Julian Bowron** — Director Mildura Arts Centre  
For providing an important opportunity to create a substantial body of work towards my James Cook University PhD studies

**Dr Sally Stowe and the Electron Microscope Unit** — Australian National University  
For their assistance in this project with advice and support in the microscope work

**Drs Malcolm Ryley & Garry Kong** — Scientists and Plant Pathologists, DPI Queensland  
As mentors and collaborators in scientific work. and for their generosity of time to discuss other aspects of my project

**Andrew Sergeant** — Reference Librarian, Petherick Reading Room, National Library of Australia  
For his assistance and support in the presentation of this work

**Dr Stephen Naylor** — Associate Dean, Teaching and Learning Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts, James Cook University  
An exemplar supervisor, providing both a sense of the concrete nature of the academic framework alongwith the flexibility to enable this concept to develop in its unique way

**Bundanon Trust** and **Jennifer Thompson** — Collections and Exhibitions Manager, Bundanon Trust  
For the important opportunity the residency provided and their support and assistance

**Myall Park Botanic Garden including Carol McCormack** and **the Directors**  
For their support and interest of this work and all of my work over the years

**Ron McBurnie** — Artist in Residence, School of Creative Arts, James Cook University  
Has been both supervisor and mentor in the early stages of this project

**John Reid** — Senior Lecturer, The Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University  
Has been generous with his time and support. His work both as an artist in and a national leader of programmes involving this area of my research has been an inspiration.

**Gael Newton** — Senior Curator of Photography, National Gallery of Australia and **Dr Felicity Rea** — knowledgeable in many things on art and science. For the many occasions I borrowed from their extensive private libraries and the breadth of their knowledge on the issues in my project

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## Documentation

All documentation images in this document have been made by either the author or Doug Spowart.

## This Document

This document has been written, compiled and designed by the author with typographic assistance by Doug Spowart  
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