

Scarring the Land Dr Greer Honeywill

Ground (graund), v. ME. [f. *Ground sb.*]

† 1. *trans.* To lay the foundations of (a house); to found; to fix or establish firmly ¹

Ground Cover brings together two artists who explore from their differing perspectives evidence of our interface with the resilient and forgiving land and the influence of the landscape, natural and man made, upon the human psyche.

The land is a silent witness to our existence providing a grand and powerful stage upon which we live out our lives. This stage serves as the ground, the canvas against which we are read as object, it supports and records our insatiable desire to cultivate, create shelter, mark territory and display success, even excess, and it has, since colonisation, been an object of desire in its own right. In developed societies across the world once desire for land is translated into ownership the land is inevitably tamed, covered with crops, houses and markers of civilization along with a plethora of discarded traces that reveal the consumerist nature of contemporary life. It is these patterns of life, these fragments of personal histories, that interest the artists.

Megan Campbell grew up in Central Victoria as did generations of her forebears. In the rural landscape thoughts inevitably centre on scale and heroism, determination and control because the taming of the natural environment and the establishment of property is tangible, real, valuable. When the earth is breeched it can be read like a book revealing the lineage of attempts to manage and subdue, evidence of settlement, movement, drift, success and failure. Layers of stories that Campbell pieces together from recovered fragments. When change occurs and families or communities drift away from their holdings the marks left on the ground by past declarations of ownership inevitably soften but they still remain. These marks are invariably the marks of men.

The presence of the woman in the landscape is in sharp contrast to the masculine presence. The small-scale heroism of the woman, her interminable tasks, her isolation, her often-futile attempts to domesticate the land and her need to express her femininity, are part of her continual song that goes unrecorded. Her contribution to life on the land is as real as that of any man but is far less tangible.

From the natural environment, women have historically gathered fragments of the landscape in an attempt to soften the interior landscape. These fragments are also applied to the landscape of her body as ornament. Leaves and flowers move from the external landscape to embroidery and fabrics, become motifs on a teacup, are gathered into sweet scented nosegays. In time these ephemeral expressions of women's existence are obliterated. Occasionally a faded photograph, a ghostly remembrance, is all that remains. And then a remnant resurfaces, perhaps after generations of division and dispersal and the intangible becomes tangible and the memories rebuild.

While the woman on the land yearned to be recognised, different kinds of memories were built closer to the cities and the shoreline in that euphoric period when the war ended in 1945 and the soldiers returned to take up a normal life. And not long after boatloads of migrants reached our shores to begin a new life in a new country. At this time the demand for shelter, for housing, was so acute that the natural environment beyond our cities became a target for growth and development. In the 1950s vast tracts of land were consumed and continue to be consumed, as a ground for the object most desired (after the very land itself), the family

¹ Little, W. Fowler H.W. and Coulson J. revised and edited by Onions C.T. 1973. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary Volume 1*, Oxford at The Clarendon Press, London, p. 895

home set on a quarter of an acre, surrounded by a perimeter fence. Greer Honeywill views the landscape from an urban perspective shaped by her experience of the picture-perfect, post-war, suburbs and in particular the seaside suburb of Glenelg in South Australia where she grew up.

In the new suburbs the land was not simply scarred or tamed it was obliterated, covered by a dense and suffocating blanket of man-made objects that denied the true nature of the ground. The long shadows cast by the old gums were replaced by the jagged shadows of the built environment. This was the face of the 'new nature' and Australians embraced it with passionate enthusiasm. The beauty of the natural environment and the poetry of the changing seasons were barely noticed in the suburbs but eventually as optimism turned to familiarity something else became obvious. The urban woman began to feel defined by and trapped within this suburban utopia. Life in the family home in the suburbs became something the woman and her children wanted to escape from.

The house, its shape, and its capacity to adequately shelter, are factors that have a profound psychological effect on the family sequestered within. The house as a motif has invaded the work of many artists but none more powerfully than Louise Bourgeois who saw the structure of 'house' as a sealed enclosure with a double meaning. It was at once 'the site of dreams and daydreams, shelter and comfort...' and also 'the site of infidelity, treachery, and abuse...'² Thoughts of Louise Bourgeois bring me again to the woman at the heart of the object. It is clear that the house as an object and the concept of *home*, with its connotations of warmth and succour, are loaded ideas and that the natural needs of women have been exploited, especially when it comes to the notion of home ownership and equality. In post-war Australia it could be argued that the dream of home ownership was shared as much by men as women, however, once home ownership was attained women became lost within the dream paradigm of *home*, family and duty. There was (and still is) a great need as Virginia Woolf put it, to *kill the angel in the house*. The American historian and critic, Arlene Raven, commenting on the project *Womanhouse*, developed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in the early 1970s, said the artists had effectively turned 'the house inside out...' exposing the 'isolation and anger many women felt in the single-nuclear-family dwelling...' and 'the sadness which had been covered by the roofs...'³

The utopian ideal of the *Garden City* in the form of beautiful, leafy, generous, suburbs is not new. Surprisingly, the great American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, had a lot of time for the notion of the suburb as an alternative to city living. He saw the suburbs as nurturing. In 1898 Wright even went so far as to built his architectural office onto his family home at Oak Park, Illinois, and shaped his practice to support the theory that nurture should be at the heart of architectural practice. To Wright the new suburbs represented nurture and the family home was the nucleus. But within a decade Wright would have a change of heart, deserting his theory, his practice, his wife and the home.⁴ Years later he described the concept of 'house' from a quite different viewpoint. 'Any house is a far too complicated, clumsy, fussy, mechanical counterfeit of the human body...The whole interior is a kind of stomach that

² Bourgeois, L. and Rinder, L. 1999. Louise Bourgeois – Drawings and Observations, University Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkley, and Bullfinch Press, Berkeley, p. 58

³ Sharon Haar and Christopher Reed. 'Coming Home: a Postscript on Postmodernism.' Reed, C et al. 1996. *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. Thames and Hudson, London, p.51

⁴ David Van Zanten. 'Frank Lloyd Wright's Kindergarten: Professional Practice and sexual Roles.' Reed, C. et al. 1996. *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. Thames and Hudson, London, pp. 92-97

attempts to digest objects...The whole life of the average house, it seems, is a sort of indigestion.⁵

Wright's reaction, or over-reaction, was extreme but ever since the dawn of the suburbs and the imposition of legions of look-alike houses on the Australian landscape the potential to evoke an equally passionate response remains. As does the potential for the woman in a house on a quarter acre block in any suburb or the woman in an hermetically sealed apartment in a high rise tower to become isolated by her environment. But despite this evidence new suburbs and housing estates have continued to develop unabated erasing the natural landscape with the determination of a slow moving lava flow. And while the footprint of the house may be much larger today the competitive and combative atmosphere of life in the suburbs continues to create personal and cultural anxieties, myths and metaphors. And at the epicentre the woman in the rural homestead and the urban woman on a quarter of an acre have one thing in common, they leave no lingering mark upon the ground and yet in both cases the woman is the archivist, the keeper of the vitrine.

Since the earliest settlement of this vast continent we have been as if at war with the elements, the land and ourselves. As a consequence any investigation of the land inevitably leads to an examination of human existence, human interaction with the land and signs of life, for we scar the land in order to exist. In *Ground Cover* the artists bring into focus what we do to the land and what the land does for us.

⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright. 'The Cardboard House' (1931). Wigley, M. 1997. *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, frontis page