

The art of walking country | Michael Giacometti

When I saw the cover image of Philip Jones's *Images of the interior: seven Central Australian photographers* (Wakefield Press 2011), I knew that I needed it for the hybrid art–recreation exhibition I was curating: **walking country: 30 years in the arid rangelands, a photographic journey.**



The photograph by Cecil Hackett, *At the summit of Mt Woodroffe, the highest point in South Australia, June 1933* (1933), is a classic summit photo, but more importantly, it is a study of cultural contrasts. Three fully-dressed and

bearded white men stand in front of a large rock cairn on the summit of South Australia's highest peak in the Pitjantjatjara lands. One of them, anthropologist Norman Tindale, stands on the cairn but appears as if he stands upon the shoulders of the man in front of him. Beside them are three mostly naked young Pitjantjatjara men, lean and muscly, hair swept back by headbands. Except for one blackfella, all gaze directly at the self-timed exposure; this man is caught in profile gazing up at Tindale. The image is tightly framed, bringing attention to the contrasting attitudes of the three whitefellas and the three blackfellas. The overexposed sky and harsh lighting, the indeterminate nature of the landscape – the cairn indicates that they are on a high peak but there is no view in the washed-out background – strongly evoke intercultural misunderstanding. What for them whitefella walking country?

The landscape of inland Australia was a vast blank on mid-19th century maps. Rumour and desire gave it an inland sea and a great range extending from coast to coast; and yet it remained impenetrable, a ‘region of magic ... of enchantment’¹ or one ‘of dread ... the entrance to Hell’², defended by a litany of repulsive landmarks: Mt Hopeless, Starvation Creek, Mt Destruction.

The inland sea was a fallacy; but a central range did exist, the MacDonnell Ranges, now roughly centred by Alice Springs, from where plumes of red dust trail from the outback tourist caravan ticking off a homogenous bucket list of natural splendours. But there is much in the vast outback that remains little known. Beyond the roads and walking trails of Central Australia, this is where I want to take you. Into a mythic landscape of peaks and gorges and chasms untainted by development. To places rarely visited, perhaps by as many as six or eight people a year; places unmarked on any map, that are accessible only on foot, and often several days across untracked terrain from any vehicle access point. This is where **walking country** ventures. To a landscape of possibility proved credible. There are spectacular summit views, but first you have to defy spiky spinifex, swim through freezing chasms (a rite of passage) and deep permanent rockholes, ascend and descend rugged ranges and rocky spines, all to attain the places of magic.

walking country featured thirty images from four adventurer-photographers: Glenn Tempest, Meg McKone, Peter Nowak and Michael Giacometti, as well as archival images from the 1920s and 30s. The images were complemented by an extended digital slide show interdependently coupled with an audio soundscape created by historian Megg Kelham; artworks by Deborah Clarke, Jenny Taylor and Julie JAT Taylor; literature, and other adventurous artefacts.

¹ Edward John Eyre, *Journals of expeditions of discovery into Central Australia 1840–1*

² Captain Charles Sturt, *Journal of the Central Australian Exploring Expedition 1844–6*

I had two main aims: to promote and to provoke. One: to reach a broader audience than regular art patrons: outdoor recreationists, people that are generally estranged from art exhibits, people that would come because of the places represented in image. And two: to provoke bushwalkers to step off the marked trail, to pore over topographic maps and explore their intricate contours.

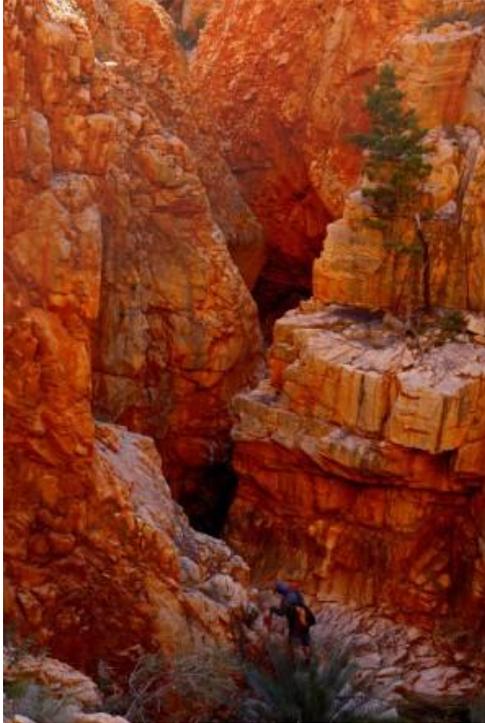
I originally intended to explicitly locate the site of each photograph with GPS coordinates; reason and mystique, however, won out, and visitors to **walking country** were left wondering where these places were, why hadn't they heard of them before, and how could they get there.

As curator, one of the great challenges (and joys) was reducing over 200 images to a select 30. All had merit. In the end I sought a balance of period, place and style. McKone focussed on specific places that she has revisited dozens of times over 30 years; Tempest featured glossy images from one classic remote walk; Nowak, a local bushwalker with over 25 years experience, offered a far broader scope in period and place; and Giacometti both complemented and expanded the viewer's experience.

The exhibit challenged the expectations of visitors, who were surprised to find not a series of composed landscapes depicting virgin wilderness as if just created by a Dreamtime being or God, but of an interactive landscape, actively peopled. A landscape that 'becomes' or exists only through this interaction and the stories associated with it. It is the conjunction of man and landscape that give each element context in time and space.

Most of the images are documentary in style, and consciously so. The photographers are bushwalkers foremost, and the images capture them on the move or contemplating their next move, requiring rapid framing and composition by the photographer. As such they are opportunistic and prone to some technical flaw, but that only adds to the realism captured. As an active participant in the process, the photographer cannot wait for the light

to be just so; instead they need to be ready to rush ahead (with heavy pack on their back) or fall behind or scramble to the side to momentarily frame the oncoming walker in the landscape, walking into it, or walking out of it, but in it, defined by it, and also defining it.



Modern bushwalking in Central Australia owes a debt to two prominent bushwalker–conservationists: Arthur Groom and Frank Rigby. In 1946, Groom documented in image and text several multi-day forays on foot in *I saw a strange land: journeys in Central Australia* (Angus & Roberston 1950). And in the early 1970s, Rigby and photographer Henry Gold lovingly represented their walks in and affinity with the arid rangelands in *The MacDonnell Ranges* (Rigby 1973). In

homage, copies of these books were prominently displayed.

McKone first walked in Central Australia in 1980, on a trip led by the aforementioned Rigby. She has since returned many times, often revisiting the same areas for a week or more, further exploring the intricate chasms and near-impenetrable gorges of the range. Her accumulated knowledge is evident in *Inaccessible gorge at the top of Portals Canyon* (2010), where the bright orange walls



dwarf the bushwalker, and also in the contemplative mood of *Map reading on the way to Mt Zeil* (2009), capturing a bushwalker in enquiring rest with the brooding summit of Mt Razorback at his back.



Nowak has a passion for exploring and his intimate knowledge of the region is unmatched among local walkers. It is his images, digitised from slides, that I am most drawn to. They are slightly grainy, as if faded by time. *The years do not weary the land* (1993) is a frozen moment from the ever-present past; as is *Falling in behind Coosje* (date unknown). These images want to draw you in and whisper stories to you, stories that ripple like gentle waves on a shallow sandy shore that are then compacted and tilted and thrust kilometres into the sky.

And it is from one of

those lofty heights, Mt Giles, that the bushwalkers in Tempest's *After a night in the heavens* (2009) descend, almost oblivious to the most outstanding view in the MacDonnell Ranges as they watch their footfall amid spinifex and unstable rock. Beyond Ormiston Pound and the bluffs of Ormiston Gorge, the central horizon is filled with peaks: the unmistakable Mt Sonder, and further off, Mt Zeil. It is an image that for me has many associated memories.

Without a forested canopy, the overwhelming blue sky is a dominant character of the Central Australian landscape, as is evident in Giacometti's *Lone bushwalker in Ormiston Pound* (2007) where it dominates the cliffs and ridgeline and the almost unnoticed bushwalker walking out of frame.

The landscape of Central Australia provides inspiration for many artists working in various disciplines; I approached several that employ bushwalking as a



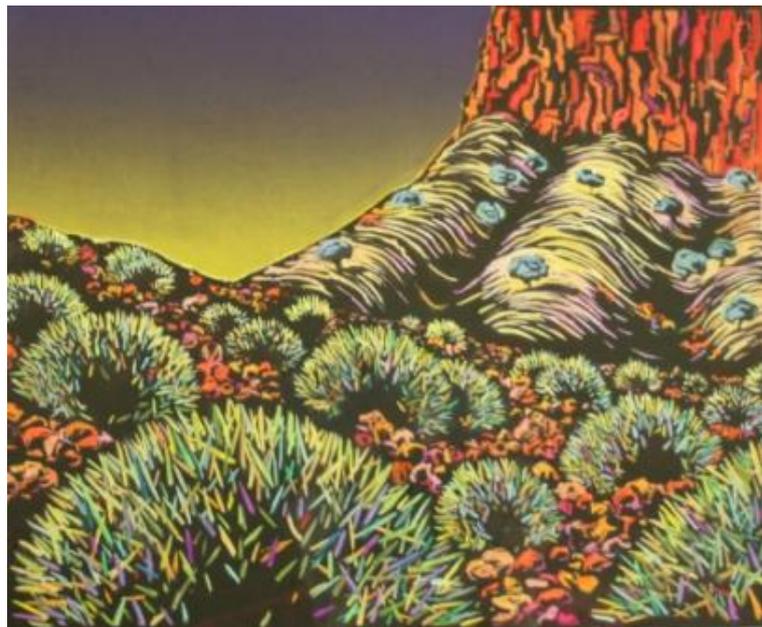
creative tool to contribute to **walking country**. Although absent of sentient beings, their works hint at human influence in landscape.



Jenny Taylor produced a series of small oils on board, acknowledging the double-layer of cultural identity and meaning in the landscape. *Rungutjirpa* (pronounced roong-GOO-chir-buh) / *Simpsons Gap* (2012) depict an important Arrernte rock-wallaby site. Her work could be considered ‘skyscapes’, focussing on the point of tension—the junction of land and sky. She emphasises the clouded sky above the cut-off tortured ridges and hills below. The work speaks of a simultaneous

connection and disconnection with the spiritual, physical and cultural landscape.

Julie JAT Taylor also provides a window-view landscape — an intently focussed aspect that infers the otherwise overwhelming panorama. For years I have admired her detailed works with charcoal, and her use of coloured linocuts perfectly evoke her fascination with landscape and its changing light and moods in *Valley of many walks* (2012).



Deborah Clarke draws inspiration from many years of leading creative walking adventures in the MacDonnell Ranges in her work *On Sonder* (2010). The digital print intricately combines multiple layers of drawing, photograph, map and route topography. It



is this enchanting work, almost alone, that effectively captures the passion of all the contributing artists for the rugged landscape; it eloquently maps this walking country, this region of magic.

Michael Giacometti is a bushwalker and award-winning writer based in Alice Springs. His poem, *Landscapes in miniature*, inspired a group exhibition at the DVAA Gallery, Darwin in May 2012. In 2008 he made the first (and only) solo and unassisted foot crossing of the Simpson Desert from east to west, from Bedourie to Old Andado, covering 450km in 24 days. He is writing a novel, *This landscape of failure*.

walking country: 30 years in the arid rangelands, a photographic journey was exhibited at Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Alice Springs, 21 September to 8 October 2012. Proudly supported by the Northern Territory Government. Curated by Michael Giacometti for the Central Australian Bushwalkers.

Images in order of appearance: Cecil J Hackett, *At the summit of Mt Woodroffe, the highest point in South Australia (June 1933)*, 1933. © Wakefield Press, Adelaide, from *Images of the interior: seven Central Australian photographers*, Philip Jones. Meg McKone, *Inaccessible gorge at the top of Portals Canyon*, 2010, digital image. Meg McKone, *Map reading on the way to Mt Zeil*, 2009, digital image. Peter Nowak, *The years do not weary the land*, 1993, digital image. Peter Nowak, *Falling in behind Coosje*, date unknown, digital image. Glenn Tempest, *After a night in the heavens*, 2009, digital image, © Open Spaces Photography. Michael Giacometti, *Lone bushwalker in Ormiston Pound*, 2007, digital image. Jenny Taylor, *Rungutjirpa / Simpsons Gap 1*, 2012, 27x29 cm, oil on board. Jenny Taylor, *Rungutjirpa / Simpsons Gap 4*, 2012, 21x30 cm, oil on board. Julie JAT Taylor, *Valley of many walks (AP#6, 2008 series)*, 2012, 25x30, hand-coloured lino print. Deborah Clarke, *On Sonder*, 2010, 40x32, limited edition archival quality digital print. *Photographs of artworks by Michael Giacometti*

