

Q&A - Tarn McLean & Jude Taggart Roberts

What took you both out to Western Queensland?

Tarn. It was in 1990 and I was in my second year out from finishing school and took a gap year or two to travel the country and possibly overseas before applying for a Fine Arts degree at Sydney University. I travelled around for a few months then landed in Mitchell where my brother and friend were working. That stop was where I met new friends and my future husband, Jondy. It was also the place that felt right; the colour, the climate, the long hours working but most of all the pure simplicity of living. My family has moved on from there now but as they say, while you can't take the city out of the girl it's impossible to shift the country from her also.

Jude. When I was young my family would visit Mitchell on several occasions to see Mum's old school friend who eventually became my mother-in-law! My husband Harry lived on a property 100km south of Mitchell (next door to Tarn's husband's family) and so in 1984 I moved from Sydney and we lived there for the next 21 years. I'd always loved the 'bush' well before I moved to Mitchell as we lived beside Lane Cove National Park, Sydney and my parents instilled the appreciation of Australia's natural environments to us. Through the early colonial landscape artist prints on our suburban lounge room wall I developed a romantic idea of the 'bush' too but this soon was replaced with the reality of living 'inland'.

Where did you both meet?

J. I think I met Tarn when my father died and with the help of neighbors Harry and I drove to Mitchell over some very wet roads and flowing creeks. It was the weekend when Charleville experienced what was one of its highest floods in 1990. Obviously it wasn't the time to have a conversation but it was soon after that we met again. My first impressions of Tarn were of an exceptionally beautiful, capable and independent young woman. By that stage Harry and I had 2 young children and it was a couple of years later that I began to get to know Tarn when neighbouring property owners and their families would meet on various creek beds for social outings.

T. Yes it was around the time of Jude's father passing and there seemed to be a lot of people involved in helping her get home to Sydney. Perhaps we met at the Mitchell air strip because I can vaguely remember an airplane but I also don't remember speaking at that time. Her presence stuck with me, she had a calming warmth and some kind of earthy openness that was unique and I was glad to know I'd be meeting her again properly one day. Jude (and Harry, who had a big loud funny laugh) had two 'larger than life' children that

seemed to have been born from the wild landscape. Jude's calmness in comparison to them was intriguing. I didn't know anything about having children at that stage but I remember mostly she had a quiet strength and beautiful kindness.

How often did you see each other?

T. I didn't see Jude as much as I would have liked. While we were neighbours we still lived a way from each other (40 kilometers) but it was more that we were at different stages in our lives. Jude was busy with two children and I was very hands on helping with stock work on the property. As time went by her family of four became five and she was teaching school of the air while I was spending time building my garden pot business and later opening a beauty salon in town. Perhaps we saw each other a few times a year. I didn't know a lot of people in Queensland or out there, so I always loved it when I knew something social was coming up and I'd see Jude. She felt like home.

J. As Tarn says, we didn't see a lot of each other unfortunately but we always had a strong rapport. Some of the most memorable moments would be meeting with other women with their children on the Mungallala or Wallam Creeks. It was imperative for both of us to surround ourselves with creative people and also Tarn was a lot of fun to be around!

What was it like living in such an isolated part of the State?

J. There certainly were challenges but I enjoyed the times of solitude. Watching our children playing on creek and riverbeds or out on the flat was memorable. Living away from extended family was the hardest and when I was first married we only had a party telephone line shared with 7 other houses. When we left the property in 2005 I knew there would be two things I would miss; the fact that you were sometimes the only person within a vast distance and the mesmerising night skies.

T. Like Jude said it was isolating but I too enjoyed it more than not. The hardest thing was not having any family, let alone friends to call in on. I had great neighbours and friends closer to town, but at the end of the day my family and childhood friends lived interstate and I had no one to drive to and touch base with, and over time this sense of separation became magnified. Travelling home was a rarity because we were constantly in drought and I was needed to help with the workload. On top of that, making phone calls was tricky because we were a business and every call was long distance and expensive. By the end of being out there after 13 years we had two children who kept me busy, so keeping in touch with old friends and travelling anywhere soon became more of an idea than a reality. It's amazing though what good things exist in solitude. We made our own fun, meeting up with all our children in tow on riverbeds and having sleep overs and drinking champagne. They all became mandatory and fun was the name of the game. I guess the best part about it was, that's where I started to paint and having a friend out there like Jude who was an established artist brought new possibilities and perspectives into my world.

Did you ever make art together out there?

T. Jude and I were involved in a few Arts council activities in town. Jude use to organize projects and I would volunteer to help and get involved that way. I remember I needed to do some life drawing once for a course I was doing and she drove over and did some modelling for me and shared her knowledge and technical skills. As far as making art together we once drove out to a really baron place on our property called Chalk Hill. We packed up our vehicle with drawing boards and materials and set up camp (for the day). The ground was covered in white chalk rock and raised out of the flat landscape into a small white hill that protruded with skeletal like trees. It's one thing to drive past this area of our property, but to spend time there making marks and responding to it visually was another. Jude's experience of drawing in the landscape showed me a new way to approach art making and the day is etched into my mind like a series of photographic snap shots. I still have the painting I made and would love to go back and do that again. I wonder if that country would look the same.

J. Yes the Chalk Hill drawing was memorable! Probably more conversations about art making than creating together but I think it is something Tarn and I should do more of together in this next decade!

How long have you been making work on a full time basis?

J. I include the organizing of arts projects as part of my full time work as an artist. When I left school I studied Graphic design and worked in that field before my move to Mitchell. Bringing up children and living on a property certainly took up most of my time during the 80's -90's but I managed to continue drawing, tutoring workshops and being employed by Booringa Council in the streetscape program. It wasn't until I began a Fine Arts degree in 2006 that I worked full time at my practice so perhaps the answer to this question is 16 years.

T. Like Jude, I've been experimenting with creating most of my life. The first thing I remember making was a fishing rod when I was a small girl. When I wasn't at school in Sydney I was with my grandparents who lived at Mollymook on the South Coast of NSW, overlooking the beach. I was always constructing things, but it must have seemed appropriate to finally make something that could be used, so a fishing rod it was. Made from a found stick and some string from the kitchen drawer, it was a bit wonky. Needless to say, I didn't have success at fishing but pretty much the process of making something has always fascinated me. As far as making on a full time basis, it would be since I started my degree in 2006.

You both talk about different parts of the country and where you found your pigments. Do they vary much from one location to the other?

T. I mainly used paint pigment while I was living out west in the 90's and early 2000's, but when we made the move to Toowoomba and I would revisit our

property, that's when I would bring soil back and use it to paint with. It was probably a way of staying connected to the spirit of the place, plus the colours are so vibrant I can never resist. Since then I have always been collecting ochre from visits to different properties of family and friends. My brother has also gifted me ochre over the years from his travels into the Kimberley and around most of Australia and yes, they can vary from the purest white to the darkest red.

J. The work I do is often site-specific so that the location, time, material are all important as they imply a multi-layered experience of that place. The paper substrate responds immediately to the terrain, weather and circumstances, and the use of found sediments, ochres, charcoal and other mark making media are indexical to the particular sites.

Most material has been found from the Maranoa region. While making the recent drawings, I ventured out to Mitchell and discovered (with great joy) a small spherical iron rock filled with dark purple ochre which I have used on some of the circular works. Mostly the sediments in the Maranoa have been a sandy consistency but occasionally I find small quantities of softer powdered ochre coloured material or the red/pinks from crumbled grounded rocks near Mt Abundance. The turquoise azurite pigment I bought on a trip to India, which is traditionally used in miniature painting.

What main ideas are you exploring in your drawing/painting practices?

J. Through my work I experiment with strategies of drawing and print media to reveal the hidden interrelationships of water and land systems in the Murray Darling and the artesian basins that lie beneath.

Over many years I have undertaken several journeys following pathways such as stock routes and ephemeral watersheds in the semi-arid regions of Queensland. Water, in all its forms, has shaped, mapped, and determined locations of the colonised and Indigenous land histories. Early European explorers and settlers capitalised on the knowledge of Indigenous people in terms of tracks, water locations and water signs while they charted and formed their own understanding of the pronounced differences of water and land use on the Australian continent. Through this understanding, my work implies a multi-layered experience of place.

T. It always comes back to colour, in it's most basic and purest form. It's about paint as colour that, kind of like light, or architecture, fills space. So when I put one colour down, I'm interested in what happens (in a monochromatic essences), and also what happens in the spatial shift when you put another colour next to it, and so on. This then opens up endless opportunities to explore, such as painting that moves not only within the picture plane, but also onto the three dimensions. Architecture, textiles, objects, accessories, all act as kinds of painting in an extended way for me, reflecting my

engagement in time space and place. By this I mean it's a way of documenting taking part in the story of being alive at this time. What's happening in culture: fashion, architecture, all kinds and aspects of contemporary living in the 20th and 21st Centuries. But I always have this need to keep returning to the monochrome. Its like a ground zero where the fundamental act of putting down pigment allows me to problem solve, or rather solution solve my time being here. I understand there are problems in the world that are bigger than me, but being an Australian, well there's an awareness of land we are yet to discover and maybe its' pigment is just a starting point.

Where can you see your practices evolving to from here?

T. That I've just started a degree in architecture might suggest (to me) that this interest in what happens off the two-dimensional picture plain might be something worth looking into. Who knows where it could evolve to but its interesting to think that it all starts from a very basic technology, being pigment. I'd also like to think it could involve another drive out to Chalk Hill with Jude. Lets see what happens, I'm up for the ride.

J. The way I work embodies an extended practice of print culture and land/site responsive arts so to work in situ is essential to begin the process. Despite the worldwide COVID pandemic my husband Harry and I have been travelling in a caravan across parts of Australia. I carry a large box of art supplies and numerous paper varieties working small scale because of the space limitations. As artist in residence at the studio space at ALG galleries it has afforded myself time to consolidate the ideas, journal drawings and prepared papers.

I continue to connect with the regional communities of the Maranoa with ongoing creative projects and am involved with the Country Arts S. A. Land Arts of the Limestone Coast.

Together with these types of events and taking road trips out to places with other artists (including Chalk Hill with Tarn!) is where my practice is continuously evolving.

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and waters that we've journeyed into to create the work and we pay respect to the Elders past present and future.