

Coming to Ground: from market garden to native garden



Bette Mifsud: *Coming to Ground* (2009) diorama (aerial view), mixed media, 85 x 160 cm.

Coming to Ground is the title of a land-based artwork proposed for Western Sydney. A diorama of this artwork is shown here with earlier works that led to it.

Coming to Ground is intended as a restorative ecological artwork symbolising a diverse and interconnected community integrated within the native ecology of Western Sydney. The work was developed during three years of creative arts doctoral research at the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

The layout of *Coming to Ground* (CTG) is a mandala measuring 26 metres in diameter. It will contain a native garden of endangered¹ Cumberland Plain Woodland vegetation incorporating four cardinal components: *North*, a circular Casuarina grove; *South*, a circular steel cage-like construction; *East*, a solid circular dry stone structure; and *West*, an octagonal domed building. *West*'s glass walls will be embedded with a transparent photographic panorama of the original woodland. *East* and *West* will mark the equinoxes when sunlight passes through their aligned 'portholes'.

The cardinal components are interrelated by design and symbolism discussed below. Each of the structures will be 480 cm high by 296 cm across. The work's proportions were determined by the harmonising geometry of the Golden Section, a geometric ratio common to all life forms and organic patterns, and related to the Fibonacci numbers.² A yantra of ceramic tiles is located at the artwork's centre. The yantra pattern represents the expansion and contraction of cosmic energies returning to the primordial centre.³

While its overall design is resolved, the artwork will inevitably adapt to the characteristics of its site and evolve with further input from traditional indigenous custodians and site owners.

Nature Climate Change Human Nature



B. Mifsud: *Human Nature* (Rooty Hill 2007) print on paper, 60 x 70 cm

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)⁴ and the Wentworth Group ("of leading Australian

environmental economists, scientists and business leaders with conservation interests") are in no doubt that human activity is dangerously warming the Earth by its carbon emissions.⁵

Traditional human cultures all over the world have for millennia maintained a balanced intimacy of conscious interconnection with and within Nature.⁶ This interconnection makes all things in Nature sacred. In Nature humans are not central to or more or less important than any other part of it. By Nature I mean the entire dynamic multi-dimensional web of life and all of its support systems on Earth as well as Earth's relationship with the cosmos. A balanced intimacy of conscious interconnection involves the whole human being: spirit, psyche, emotions and creativity.⁷

Contemporary human life has exceeded Nature and dulled our sensibilities to it. We take and use much more than we need to live. Excess has broken our balanced intimacy within Nature. So, we foul the air, water and soil that are absolutely fundamental to our survival and that of thousands of other species. We are also out of balance with one another. Human conflict and poverty compound our degradation of the Earth.

We are reflected in what we create. The state of the human psyche is mirrored in the state of the landscape. Contemporary unsustainable urban landscapes largely reflect our disconnectedness from one another, from other life forms and from the biosphere that supports us.⁸

After colonisation, around 1793, settlers began farming land in Western Sydney seized from the indigenous Dharug people. I worked family market gardens on the same land for 18 years during the first half of my life. Like most market gardeners of that time we regularly used a range of accepted chemical fertilisers and poisons including DDT and Dieldrin until they were banned in Australia. Much of this region now densely houses a highly diverse population. Each of us contributes to biosphere degradation and global warming through land use, life style and resource consumption, and so each person is to some extent a landscape architect.

Land Landscape Origins Life Work

Landscape is a construct of land as scenery.⁹ Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory* is an evocation of more multifaceted reflections on landscape as a dynamic and influential complexity of nature, place, memory and myth.

He [Schama] wants to take us beyond geology and vegetation into myth and memory, to unravel the ancient connections which bring mountain, forest and river into our soul.¹⁰

Perhaps everything is already always here. Perhaps all living things are the embodiment of past things continuing as dynamic evolution. Perhaps those things leave their trace in our unconscious. Perhaps the mountain, forest and river are already in our souls and beings. Perhaps if we recognize (identify and bring to mind again) our deep connections with the whole of Nature, we may profoundly know again that the soil beneath our feet that supports all life, the plants that turn sunlight into food, the trees that expire the oxygen we breathe, are as much a part of us as we of them. Perhaps these deep dynamic connections remain to be tapped and enhanced through creative collaboration.

My formative relationships with the landscape of Western Sydney and with photography laid the foundations for CTG. I was born in Western Sydney in 1958 to post World War II migrants from Malta.

While working the land I wondered what had happened to the Aboriginal people who lived there before colonization and before me. I found no trace of their lives, although I was aware of an ‘orphanage’ for Aborigines at Kellyville called the Marella Mission Farm because I knew two ‘orphans’ who attended my high school at Baulkham Hills during the 1970s. These were stolen generation Aborigines.

Identity and Belonging, Photography and Fragments

As a teenager I spent many hours alone tilling soil while my father and three brothers attended to sowing and ploughing. Our land had once also contained pastoral homesteads. I began collecting old china shards I found in the soil. (I have a large collection from every place I inhabited.) These are relics of lives past, found fragments of a lost world.

Family photographs were the material and spiritual link to ‘home’. My mother regularly exchanged family portraits with relatives in Malta. I had a childhood fascination with her shoebox collection of black and white portraits. The portraits of my young parents in Malta taken in Sunday dress outdoors were most intriguing. Who *were* these foreign people? What was Malta like? What were they like there? Such photographs would later prompt questions about my own identity and belonging. Ethnic discrimination against migrants was common and confusing. My uncertain identity was not land-based. I carried it with me.

When I was ten years old my mother gave me a small camera and I began to record the rural landscape and people around me. I rarely photographed people in landscapes. Land and people were separate. I shot Super 8 footage of ‘empty’ landscapes and was scolded for ‘wasting’ film. (It was a curious thing to shoot movie film of an inanimate landscape.) Since that time I have taken hundreds of landscape photographs for no particular reason. The familiar un-peopled generic rural landscapes of Eastern Australia were what I photographed most.

Photographs are like fragments of the past, and the remnants of a larger ungraspable and ever-changing living world. The medium of photography is a prism through which I observe, interpret and reflect. As well as the illusion of realism, photography possesses inherent oppositional features that have influenced my life’s work in overt and subliminal ways: its negative and positive images, its latent and visible images; the interdependency of light and shadow; as well as its more philosophical relationships to life and death, identity and recognition; time and continuity. Photography continues to lay the aesthetic and conceptual foundations for symbolic and metaphoric photo-media works and installations.

During the early 1990s my parents reluctantly moved house and market garden for a second time as their land in Baulkham Hills had once again been rezoned for housing. My parents seemed to be perpetual migrants. At that time I dreamed of a giant Maltese dome rising over the eastern horizon of that market garden and nearby housing construction. The image was so compelling that I recreated it as a digital photographic montage (with additional images). The disjunction between the Maltese dome and Australian suburb seemed an apt symbol for the culture conflicts confronting the migrant. Some migrants seem to live within a transplanted memory bubble of ‘home’ unable to plant their feet in this soil. The weight of children and grandchildren may eventually pull them closer to land.

The dream montage was the catalyst for a multimedia installation entitled *Landmarks Watermarks* (1996) about the complexities of migration. It was dedicated to my parents.



Bette Mifsud:
*Landmarks
Watermarks
I* (1996)
photograph
109 x 127 cm

Symbolon is also from *Landmarks*

Watermarks. It is a double portrait of my mother. On the right she is in Malta, and on the left in Western Sydney. She is halved and doubled. *Symbolon* refers to the Greek tradition of rejoining two halves of a broken earthenware pot or tablet. At their parting each of the two friends or relatives keeps one half as a token and reminder of their previous relationship.¹¹ At their reunion the two halves are reunited. Their relationship can now continue as before. The word “symbolon” means “to join together”.



Bette Mifsud: *Symbolon* from *Landmarks Watermarks* (1996) framed photograph, 109 x 127 cm, and clay vessel.

In 1999 I began looking at my collection of rural landscape photographs for the first time with the intention of making something of it. I examined hundreds of these prints under magnification. When I found a particular compositional fragment that ‘worked’ I rephotographed it and began to

compose a panorama. As usual I worked intuitively, not really knowing what I was trying to achieve nor why. It was a painstaking and frustrating process, a little like making an unscripted film. Eventually I found a visual alignment of connective geographic forms in 19 image segments and digitally joined them. The final work is entitled *Fugitive Ground* (2002). The title refers to a sense of not belonging to any land, while at the same time the landscape changes underfoot. I was a product of a similar constructed generic rural landscape in Western Sydney, and to an extent belonged to it. This formative landscape of my childhood hovers like a mirage, detached from the land. Did I really belong to a mirage? Or is belonging a process of sensitive and patient cultivation towards the native landscape?

The title, *Coming to Ground* was drawn from Martin Thomas’s essay for the exhibition of *Fugitive Ground*:

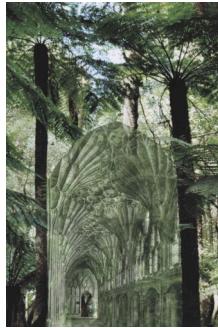
*In crafting a tableau from frozen photographic moments, from scenes that we can behold but never possess, the artist refers to an unresolved history of territorial seizure, expressing the disconnectedness of a migrant culture which has yet to come to ground.*¹²

How does one begin the process of belonging to seized land?

The ‘migrant’ hovering would re-appear in another montage entitled, *Homage to Caspar David Friedrich* (2005).



Homage to Caspar David Friedrich (2005) archival pigment on canvas, 120 x 76 cm



Cathedral (2004) archival print on clear acrylic 150 x 100 cm

The background of *Homage to Caspar David Friedrich* is a photograph of my native garden in Katoomba on a misty day, digitally overlain with the reproduction of two trees from the painting *The Avenue Middelharnis* (1689) by Meyndert Hobbema. The two European trees were severed from their original landscape culture, and hover above the living native Australian landscape. The trees seem, on reflection, to be a metaphor for the divided European psyche that floats detached from and above the native Australian landscape.

Cathedral (2004) marked the beginning of an aesthetic focused on ecology. It is a montage of the Cathedral of Ferns at Mt Wilson in the Blue Mountains and Gloucester Cathedral in England. This cathedral leads to the forest.

Orientation

The landscape of UWS was the tangible starting point for *Coming to Ground*. UWS has campuses at Bankstown, Blacktown, Campbelltown, Hawkesbury, Parramatta and Penrith, occupying large areas of the Cumberland Plain.

CTG had its beginning in a glass dome designed to complement the UWS observatory located on a cleared hillside at Penrith's Werrington North campus. I was initially attracted to the observatory because its dome and porthole windows reminded me of Brunelleschi's domed cathedral in Florence, the Santa Maria del Fiore. I designed an octagonal glass building based on Brunelleschi's dome for the site near the observatory. The glass dome would be the observatory's 'missing' complement. The two domes would symbolise a balance of science and art in the landscape. Later this glass dome and each of the three additional cardinal components came to refer to a population group according to its first contact with the land, and events surrounding that contact.

North, the Casuarina grove, embodies associations with shelter, tree houses, and the sacred groves of Europe, India and Asia. Its internal branches may be pruned to create a cathedral-like space amid the trees.

North acknowledges the Aboriginal people who first arrived here between 28,000 and 40,000 years ago. Traditional Aboriginal domed shelters (made of bush materials) inspired **North**. It is associated with the UWS Hawkesbury campus and agricultural region where violent clashes occurred between indigenous people and the first European farmers who prevented access to the yams growing along the riverbanks.¹³

South is a circular door-less cage-like steel structure referring to the asylum seekers incarcerated at Villawood not far from the UWS Bankstown campus. **South**'s peaked dome refers to the traditional architecture of Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe, places from which recent refugees have arrived.

North and **South** each have two doorways oriented north to south. The perimeter of **South** will be planted with native vines that will eventually cover it. The vines will transform this piece from a 'cage' to a living shelter of plants mirroring the tree grove of **North** directly opposite. **South** and **North** are also linked by the fact that colonisation made Aboriginal people refugees here.

East is a stone structure referring to and symbolically linked with ancient structures around the world including Australian Aboriginal stone buildings.¹⁴ The stone also refers to the colonists, convicts and settlers who constructed the first European sandstone buildings in Australia at Parramatta near the easternmost campus of UWS.

The colony of Australia was first established as a gaol for convicts banished from England. Colonial Parramatta was a blend of institutions, incarceration and farming.¹⁵ Parramatta Gaol was built by convicts of sandstone.¹⁶ Australia's oldest surviving European building is Parramatta's Elizabeth Farm House built in 1793 also of sandstone.¹⁷ Australia's oldest institution is the Female Orphan School (1813-1877). Its buildings and those of the Psychiatric Hospital (1888-1985) remain within the UWS Parramatta campus.¹⁸

West is an octagonal glass structure initially inspired by the UWS observatory. Like the observatory, the dome of **West** is open to the sky to signal a vertical relationship between Earth and cosmos. The octagonal shape of **West** is found in traditional Eastern, Middle Eastern and Western architecture.

West's glass walls will be embedded with colour photographic transparencies of the native Cumberland Plain Woodland, and will recall stained glass windows. After 10 years the photographic trees will begin to fade and be 'replaced' by the living trees of the surrounding native garden. **West** refers to more recent migrants, garden rotundas, plant conservatories, glasshouses, the 'greenhouse effect' and the fragility of ecology and human culture.

Nature Geometry and Art

*The mandala, while widely recognised as an Indian cultural form, is a universal idea, known by many names and embodied in numerous spiritual philosophies. It functions as an integrative device by means of transformation of consciousness (or layers of meaning). From the chaotic outer to the harmonised inner sanctum of the mandala lies a journey toward greater integration and integrity. However, this journey requires crossing a bridge between poetry and pragmatism; philosophy and practice; heaven and earth, in a yin-yang style embrace. This entails "the understanding of the inseparability of knowledge and action"; of heart and mind.*¹⁹

As mentioned above, the layout of CTG is a mandala delineated by trees and shrubs. The outer path encompasses the whole work. The trees and shrubs connect the cardinal components associated with the human population. A central axis of paths reinforces their connections and interrelationships. This axis extends beyond the outer path. From an aerial viewpoint this layout suggests a sundial or a time wheel rotating in a clockwise direction, symbolically re-synchronising the human with and within Nature.

The Golden Section geometry gives architecture a harmonising presence because its Golden Ratio proportions correspond with the growth patterns and structural life forms found throughout

Nature, ranging from DNA's double helix to spiralling galaxies. These correspondences were sacred to our ancestors and remain so for traditional peoples around the world.²⁰

CTG's central mosaic is a Tantric yantra. Its outer squared circle represents the union of heaven and earth in traditional Buddhist cosmologies.²¹ The star at the centre of the yantra is the point at which the viewer is symbolically re-integrated within the native ecology and cosmos.

Nature lives in us and speaks to us through geometry and art. Art seems to emerge intuitively from subconscious or embodied knowledge. Hyperbolic geometry is a form of embodied knowledge. Hyperbolic forms are found in crenulated sea slugs and frilly plants like lettuce. Mathematician Daina Tamina learned that hyperbolic geometry - almost impossible to model in any other way, including on computer, could be modelled through the female handicraft of crochet. In 2007, with the help of hundreds of women from around the world, Margaret and Christine Wertheim crocheted a coral reef to draw attention to the damage global warming is causing the Great Barrier Reef. What was remarkable and unexpected about this collaboration was that as individual women added their own unique embellishments to the basic crochet pattern the coral evolved in a way that "paralleled the evolution of life on earth."²²

The Golden Section, circle, square, triangle, mandala and yantra were used in sacred architecture around the world. Sacred architecture was often aligned with the cardinal points, planets and stars, thus connecting the human with the cosmos and earth with heaven. Examples include the Egyptian pyramids, the Pantheon, Hindu and Buddhist temples, Gothic Cathedrals, Islamic mosques, and North American Indian and Mesoamerican architecture.²³

The task of interpretation is to make sense of symbol fragments or 'broken symbols' by reconnecting them with their absent complements." – Esther Rankin²⁴

Each of the *Correspondence* (2009) photographs shows a china shard with a decal of a native Australian plant connected with its 'living complement' from my native garden in Katoomba. This series symbolises the convergence of two identities, two lives, two landscapes, of two gardens, and of art and life.



Bette Mifsud: *Correspondence* (Wattle) (2009) print on paper 28 x 42 cm

Life and art contain the psychic and spiritual elements of being. Perhaps we share in an ever-present ancient primordial collective human heritage from which art is inspired – 'breathed' and intuited. Perhaps this repository is like the collective unconscious from which influential archetypal symbols emerge. Perhaps it is also a repository of embodied knowledge that generates the patterns, poetry, insight, and creativity that sustain an evolving human culture. As such *Coming to Ground* is not my work alone nor does it belong only to me.

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