

World Found

Travel Notes by Christel Dillbohner

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In the beginning of May 1998 I travelled for 2 weeks through Australia. 2 weeks are not enough for any continent, but I received a good overview and developed ideas how to plan future travels and sojourns to the Australian continent.

My co-traveler and artist's college Suzanne who suggested this trip into the land down under (she had received a travel grant to study the art and the way of living and

survival of the Aborigines) had to return sooner to the US because of family problems. But that's another story.

After a 12 hours flight from San Francisco, finally arriving in Sydney on a Sunday morning at seven - losing or gaining a day we never were quite sure - it felt good to be on stable ground again. Picking up the rental car, buying phone cards and looking for a hotel, we felt at home - America with a European touch or the other way around. Only that they drive on the "wrong" side of the street. It was quite a challenge to maneuver through the airport and then out into Sydney with major construction work going on - everywhere in the city going on as we found out later: the finishing touches for the upcoming Olympic games.

Luckily most of the stores are closed on Sundays, so there was not much traffic (what a nice European Ritual to have quiet weekends). That made the search for cheap accommodations much easier. Under a cloud covered sky with rain pouring down once in a while we straggled after many detours in Cooee Beach 20 minutes away from the city center. The former sea resort, run down in the last decades, but now in fixing-up-mode offered some surprises - bakeries, Italian cafes and Turkish fast food. Throughout our travels we found all kinds of ethnic restaurants; there was even a Turkish restaurant in Alice Springs. Of course there are also Pubs and diners which offer a very meet oriented menu - and American fast food. But what else is new?

The inexpensive hostel we finally found Cooee Beach offered 8 people in 4 bunk beds on 25 square meters x 10 rooms with the energy of a bee hive. We decided against it, and went back to the city to book a room in the costly but spacious Holiday Inn at Kings Cross. It was a wise decision. We had privacy, a leisurely hour in the bath tub, parking for the car, and everything in walking distance - the gay clubs and book stores, porno shops and drug dealers, and the museums.

Sydney (pop. 8.000.000) is a lively city with a wide spread public transportation system, buses and subway; a lot of parks and gardens. But still, too many cars passing through crowded shopping streets with coffee shops, retail stores and restaurants and bars. Everything is easy to reach on foot - the city center reminded me of London and New York. We didn't do any sight seeing, because the one whole day we had in Sydney, we wanted to spend in front of and with Aboriginal art.

The Gallery of New South Wales has a huge collection of art created by the aboriginal people from Arnhem Land and the Central Desert. The impressive abstract dot paintings of the desert artists - they live around Alice Springs and Uluru (Ayers Rock) - reminded me of various kind of structures of the land, of a mountain, of a rock, of desert ground (macrocosms/microcosms). The storytelling and also the abstract bark paintings from Arnhem Land - in the north of the continent, east of Darwin- radiate a strange energy which feels sometimes liberating and then threatening again. One doesn't want to live with them. Even in the Museum we had difficulties to spend too much time in front of certain pieces. Later during my trip I heard stories about the power and the knowledge of scrocery among Aborigines, and my feelings were confirmed by an artist who works a lot with Aboriginal artists in the out back.

The Australian Museum had a lot of artifacts and tools on display interwoven with the historical documents, images, text and stories of and about the Aborigines since the first

Europeans showed up. The exhibition part dealing with the last 30 years was very informative. It showed a lot of parallels to the US. The civil rights movement in the 60s was concerned with among other issues to accept Aborigines as an Australian Citizen!, to abolish forced adoption of Aborigines children, to give back the land rights and that Aborigines were "allowed" to take any seat in a bus.

It looked like that the bus issue was resolved quickly, but it took the Government until 1992 to give the land rights back. As I learned later in Alice Springs, giving land rights back was very closely connected to the use of the land. By example, around Alice Springs were huge cattle farms. In the 80s it became unprofitable to run cattle in the outback, and one could not do anything else with the bush/desert, so it was quiet a painless decision to give that land back to the Aarante people. That's how it goes.

The elimination of the Aboriginal culture is still in process . In a recreated prison cell one learned how many "black" men die in prison. The people in power supported by the citizens are as helpless as in the US how to deal with the self-destructive energy (guided by the ideas of making money fast etc.) of young males.

Anyhow, there is no way back into the Dreamtime. The era of the nomadic Hunters and Gatherers is over. The last nomads left the Gibson Desert in 1977. (W.J.Peasley, The Last of the Nomads, Fremontles Arts Center Press, 1983).

But as long as the elders are around one can learn about the old costumes and rituals, and listen to their stories about the land, as we saw on a couple of videos in the museum. In one of the videos an Aborigine was making chalk marks on a white woman's face talking about the land, and how one has to encounter the bush, observing the surrounding, looking for special features to find one's way back, otherwise one gets lost in the density of the bush up north, or in the vastness of the Central Desert, (or of the self?):

- A mark between the eyes ∞ to open one's mind
- A mark above each eye ∞ one for looking forward, the other for looking back
- A mark on each cheek ∞ both for being in unison with nature and one's self
- A mark over lips and chin ∞ for staying quiet and listening

I liked Sydney a lot, but I also wanted to get out into the land, traveling on the traces of the People, following their Songlines. But it took a couple more days until I was able to see the red soil, to smell the scents of tropical trees.....first we had to go south to Canberra, the Capital of Australia, tempting us with a mayor collection of contemporary art, and a dinner invitation at the house of a colleague. We left Sydney in pouring rain during the morning rush hour. It took two hours to get into the ranch land. The landscape with its wide rolling hills and the umbrella shaped Eucalyptus trees looked very inviting, but no time for explorations. The only detour we took to get some coffee brought us right into the heart of - America. An architectonic time warp it

seemed to be: the “four corners” with a shell station, Red Rooster, Mcdonald and Sizzlers in a new development next to the freeway! Hey Ho!

Canberra is situated on table land surrounded by low mountains. The city was masterplanned in the early 1900s, but it took until the 60s (2 world wars and what ever came in the way) to transform the ideas. We didn't know that, only felt some kind of artificialness, cleanliness and order. Nothing could get out of control here?! The buildings around the government palace have that space age look. The very small and simple shopping center with coffee shops and restaurants located in the center of the ranch style house settlements reminded me of Holland - a lot of bricks, trees with colored fall leaves, a fine rain.

The National Gallery of Australia has an amazing collection of contemporary art. The work is installed in a way that one has to look over a Paladino sculpture in front of a Kiefer painting to see into a forest of hundreds of earth-tones painted totem poles from Arnhem Land. Then one turns around, and there, next to a Bacon triptych hanging huge dot paintings in all shades of amber and yellow and burnt sienna and dark red and black. A visual adventure!

In the evening we had an informative dinner with Jorg Schmeisser who was, for over 20 years, the head of the print making department in the Canberra School of Art. In the early 80s Jorg had started to work with Aboriginal artists on printing projects. Working on metal plates scratching in lines with the needle tool, or the mark making with a brush using sugarlift, or the treatment of stone reflected in lithography, these are all techniques familiar to the Aboriginal work mode. The master printers did the etching and printing of the plates, and the issuing of editions.

Jorg had invited his colleague Theo Tremblay who belongs to a group of print makers now working in the bush with the Aborigines, helping them to set up their own print shops. Since the early 70s Aborigines are going back to the home land because of the changing land right laws, or they are living in the already existing “reservations” like Arnhem Land. The world wide interest in Aboriginal art created the incentive to establish artist's communities to support them through art making and selling of paintings. Unfortunately a lot is produced for the tourist market and a lot of creative potential is misguided. Sometimes the white art co-ordinator who is the contact person between the community and the art market, is responsible for that.

The idea of creating art independently from the “white and paternal” influence was welcomed by the community leaders. Setting up print shops in the bush, and being able to decide what is produced - with prints one can make good numbered editions of quality work- is a step into that direction.

That evening we learned a lot about the situation of the Aborigines. We finally understood why it was so difficult to get to the communities. Beside the sheer distances and their remoteness - sometimes one can reach them only by plane - they are also not very interested in the “white fellows” knocking at their doors. One has to go through a lengthy process until one is invited through the community leaders for a visit. This all has to be prepared over a couple of weeks. And then depending on the situation in the community, someone may have died or trouble with male teenagers,

and the visit will be postponed from one day to another. One rediscovers slowness and that everything takes time.

Of course, one can travel with the tour bus, well air-conditioned, rolling metal box, containing 50 tourists from all over the world to one of the tourist outposts with dances, and art shops, and "real" bush tucker = seeds, tubers, grubs, honey ants, billy tea and damper (bread); or one can participate in a "flying" whirlwind tour seeing it all, and the remote places especially, for a lot of bucks.

If one wants to get glimpses of the way of life of the Aborigines, wants to work side by side with them, learn about the mythology, listening to their stories, one has to keep ears and eyes open, and the mouth shut, and bring a lot of time along. A good exercise for the upcoming millennium.

I followed that advice during the second part of my travels. The following day Suzanne got on the flight back to San Francisco, and after spending a couple of hours at the airport I was up in the air again towards Darwin. I had an appointment with a print maker at the University of the Northern Territory for the next morning.

Touring with the airport bus from one hotel to another through a warm and heavily scented tropical night let rise the feeling of vacationing in a place where I had been before. During my early morning walk I still had that feeling of familiarity and dreaminess, the feeling of being in the south of Europe, - a fresh and clear morning announcing a humid day with the intense fragrance of various blooming trees. That made me smile the whole day. As I heard later, the "Wet" was just over, the dry season with a mild spring air just started. It felt very good to be in a sunny and warm environment for a change after all that rain in Sydney and Canberra, and Berkeley.

Darwin (pop. 70,000) is surrounded by water and mangroves and looks a bit like the south of Florida. Besides that the tourist routes are crossing here, people talking about going to Kakadu State Park; taking the sealed road to the Kimberlys or Alice Springs; conquering dangerous dirt roads or no-road into the heart of the desert with a 4-wheel drive - male dreamings from all over the world; besides all that Darwin seemed to be a quiet city with an active center and an open shopping mall surrounded by neighborhoods with houses on stilts in tropical gardens.

I saw green ants, rode a bike to the ocean to look for pigments at the bottom of the cliffs, and met for the first time Aborigines while taking the bus to the University. The meeting with Basil Hall, the head of the print studio at NTU, was very insightful. He took the time to show me work by different Aborigine artists, talked about the process and explained the stories/dreamings the prints were based on. I saw wonderful prints, fresh, dynamic without the cultural baggage of art history of the western world. Among them were prints removed from the visual language of Aboriginal mark making through the new media, which created a new language connected to our visual language, and with that connecting to human history or the human condition.

I learned, that the artists today tell only parts of their dreamings. Important details are omitted, elements are missing, signs and symbols are only suggested. And that makes

total sense, because the bark paintings and the dot paintings were done for rituals. The barks were hidden in trees, and only retrieved at a certain time of the year, like all the other artifacts which were elements for the group's dreaming. The dot paintings were mostly done on the desert ground with desert sands. After the ritual was over wind and rain did their part in razing the traces. The only other "public" exhibition spaces were caves and rocks near important water holes.

Creating works of art which were sold to museums and collectors/researchers started around the turn of the century. At first there were only the bark paintings, followed by the acrylic paint movement on canvas in the 60s.

What impressed me quite a bit is the dedication of Basil and his master printer Leon, and Theo and Jorg down in Canberra, who whole-hearted support the creative cause of the Aborigines with their time and energy against the odds of poor financial support through the Government. It was an enjoyable day at the print shop, and I hope I will be back there one day to work on a project.

That day's evening entertainment stood quiet in contrast to the beginning of the day. In the "Green Room" at my 40s hotel, (obviously not destroyed through hurricane Tracy, but a bit out of shape), two white women were shrill dancing and singing obscenely, or obscenely dancing and shrill singing 60s songs in front of a mostly male, white audience. Friday night male outfit : shorts, shirt and knee socks, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, and looking for ...whatever. I preferred wandering around in the balmy night air.

The next morning I went on a walking tour to the Botanical Garden and the Museum through the quiet neighborhoods and along the beach. I met a group of Aborigines walking about in the early morning light. Suddenly they are there. One doesn't hear them walking or talking. A loose cluster of seven or eight women and men of various ages, murmuring conversation, like a creek running through a meadow, passing swiftly, leaving a faint scent of deer behind, and gone. Felt like a dream/scene/song from an other time. I turned around to "see", but they seemed to be swallowed by the shadows of the trees, or did they merge into the trees? Or did I invent them?

The afternoon plane took me from Darwin to Alice Springs, to another adventure: Flying over the ever changing landscape made me wish for a small plane which I could direct: let's go over there, lets go down here, is that a crater, a water hole, a salt pan? Follow that river bend, go along that rocky spine.... All these different tones of green and blue, of red and green, of red and white and ocker. There they were, the abstract dot paintings! How did the Aborigines know? Why were they able to understand the land's minute details? How did they see it? Or was it only my imagination that I saw the rainbow snake and the dancing lizard dreaming imprinted into the landscape?

I photographed a lot, and suddenly just as some reddish tall standing figures showed up in the green, the mirror of the camera slipped and got stuck. Whose powers were at work here? After we had passed the "painted desert" the camera started working again. (But I have enough photos, also views from the flight from Alice Springs to Sydney to give a night-long entertaining slide show!)

I had five days in Alice Springs. The original plan had been to rent a 4wheel drive and to go from here to one of the communities, and to Uluru. But that was too expensive to do alone, and also not such a good idea to do on my own. From Alice Springs to Uluru

one drives over a sealed road for about 500 km through desert land, almost the distance between San Francisco and L.A. but nothing, really nothing in between, besides a truck stop or a gas station, and those close down on the weekend and after 6 pm. Empty, wide open land - I wasn't ready for it yet.

The other option would have been taking the tour bus and exploring the desert from an air conditioned environment and experiencing the spiritual center of the Australian Aborigines with my "white fellows". I wasn't ready for that either.

I was here to learn and to understand, what it meant to be a hunter and gatherer, and to survive in such an environment for over 40000 years. I wouldn't even survive in for four days.

So, I decided to stay in Alice Springs, to take in slowly and thoroughly the bush, by foot or by bike; and read, listen, look . I installed myself in a small cottage with a kitchen belonging to a group of similar looking cottages next to the dry river bed and a sacred site of the caterpillar dreaming, behind a golf course and the casino with a the air conditioning running day and night. We are a loud people, producing lots of lot of artificial noise. It is sometimes hard to get away from it.

Alice Springs (pop.20.000) is situated in a mountainous area which serves as a collecting basin of underground water ways. Only after heavy rains the running waters are visible. The town reminded me of Californian resort/desert towns. The town serves as a crossing for tourists and a trading post for Aborigines. The area around Alice Springs brought back to mind the rocky desert of Joshua Tree Monument. It is redder, bigger and has a lot of different looking wild life like kangaroos, wallybies, emus and thorny devils.

Another major difference is, that after passing through the four blocks square of city center, leaving the houses with their desert gardens behind, passing through the outskirts, one encounters the silence of the bush. No settlement in sight. No cars, no people, empty, beautiful land. Because it had rained a couple of weeks ago everything was blooming, covered with fresh green. Looked like the garden Eden, the primal garden. Later I learned, that what I thought was unspoiled land, had been changed by the cattle farmers hundred years ago. They had brought in the buffalo grass as feed for their herds which one could see everywhere now, and which had extinguished the sharp, pointed grass blades of the spinifex.

Strangely enough in the beginning of my stay I had difficulties to find my way around. There was the sealed road for the white fellows to take into town, and there was the footpaths along the dry river bed the black fellows took. I was aware of it, I was able to read the lay of the path, to see the hundred of thousand feet which had created it, but I couldn't cross over. Something was between me and that way, something was hindering me to step into the other world. With the time I got bolder and used the foot paths, but I always felt like an intruder.

The groups of Aborigines I encountered on my walks were idle walking or sitting around drinking beer, and wine out of cardboard boxes, or coke with rum, and smoking. Every time I passed one of these groups I said hello, very often I received only

astonished looks. They obviously were very poor, and lived in an nearby ghetto-like run down government housing complex. Children and dogs playing in the sand under the shady red gums. In the evening the voices got louder, drunken anger filled the air. When the shops closed in the early evening, the Aborigines were the only one who drifted around the deserted shopping mall. These were the lost souls of a time past.

One day I spent taking a walking tour with an Aboriginal guide to explore the bush, read the plants and learn about the edible seeds and fruits. A very eye opening experience. With that information I was able to read and understand the land a bit better. For example, in dry river beds one can always dig for water, and the water holes have to be cleaned and tended. The white gum trees are offering water storage in their trunks, one has to look for dark spots on the bark. Wild figs are growing close to the mountain ridges, and bush coconut hanging at the tip of the branches of eucalyptus trees (suddenly one sees them hanging from every tree) are made by a wasp which builds the "fruit" around her nest.

Another day I spent at the main water hole of Alice springs which was in former centuries a ritual place for women. A longagated basin containing water the whole year around lined with white gum trees. Flocks of white and pink parots called galah are living in those trees.

Off and on I looked at work in the various galleries in town. One gallery had organized an exquisite show of abstract paintings by artists from Arnhem Land. Powerful work. They also showed a couple of the prints I had seen in Darwin and Canberra. The other galleries were catering to the tourists with not so impressive work. It was quite sad to see use amounts of canvases unstretched laying in huge piles on the floor.

With the bike I rode through bush covered land to Simpson Gap 25 km away, passing groups of shady gum trees and desert oaks, and flowering mulga trees. The power of a running water had created that doorway to the next valley over millenniums. Through this one only the men were allowed to leave the valley. Women and children hat to pass through the Honeymoon Gap.

Then one morning the air port bus picked me up, and we passed through the Heavy Tree Gap towards the new world.

I hope, one day I will come back to Australia. To Gero I have suggested a trip with tent and cooler, renting a 4wheel drive and exploring the continent from Darwin to Melbourne via Uluru, or the other way around.

We will see.