

1/ Ken + Julia Yonetani, *Still Life: The Food Bowl*, Murray River salt Rio Vista House; image courtesy the artists, photo: Shayne Hill

2/ Filomena Coppola, *Wallflower–Mirror, rorriM*, 2011, pastel on paper and Mildura dirt, Rio Vista House; image courtesy the artist; photo: Evan Meades



Mildura *Palimpsest* #8: Collaborators and Saboteurs

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The central work for *Palimpsest* #8 (2011) was Ken + Julia Yonetani's *Still Life: The Food Bowl*, the result of a three-month Synapse art-science residency in Mildura in 2010.¹

The several pieces that make up *Still Life* were located inside the historic homestead Rio Vista (1892), built by George and William Benjamin Chaffey, the brothers who brought irrigation to Mildura. *Still Life* is made entirely from groundwater salt that, 'as part of salt interception schemes, has been pumped out of the ground around the Murray-Darling in an effort to try and reduce salinity in the river system'.² The process was a collaboration; the installation an act of sabotage.

Situated in the sumptuous rooms of Rio Vista, a monument to the wealth yielded from the land, the salt effigies had for me an echo of the Biblical Lot's wife, turned to salt when she looked back, perhaps not ready or willing to relinquish her life of excess in Sodom. While the table loaded with local produce was a spectacular tour de force, the work was kept at some distance from the viewer (for security reasons?) which spoilt the visual deceit. So, for me the other elements were more effective, such as the empty ornate picture frames, which had a subversive presence in the heritage interior.³

Also within Rio Vista was a beautifully resolved installation by Filomena Coppola, dealing with the transplantation of a European decorative tradition into the Mallee's sandy soil. One was prevented from a close viewing of her drawings by an ornate sand work on the floor of the tiny basement room. On the opening night, one could enter the room, but many found that transgression difficult. From the distance of the doorway, Coppola's illusionistic rendering of fur remained ambiguous, a

meditation on the limitations of vision that I really responded to.

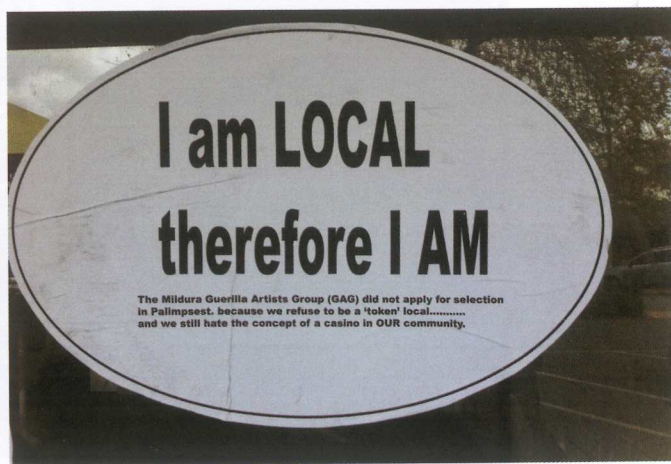
The liaison between art and produce could not be lost on *Palimpsest* attendees. The festival patron and food icon Stefano De Pieri was everywhere. He not only catered for the official dinner and lunches, but came to the openings and symposium. De Pieri's commitment to the place of the arts in his community is to be applauded, as is his message: 'In this global world the reality of how we take care of the place where we live, with all its uniqueness, defines our future survival'.⁴

The final lunch combined a performance by Jonathan Kimberley and Jim Everett, which culminated in an art 'intervention' as we pushed over their orange packing box 'white cube' construction, *The Global Dome Unlimited*. De Pieri has been associated with *Palimpsest* for several years, as has Paul Carter,⁵ who this year contributed an installation in the Old Mildura Homestead-cottage, *Uneasily along the sand* (2011), a mixed-media installation with architect/son Edmund Carter, filmmaker Dirk de Bruyn, and sound artist Christopher Williams. The project was inspired by Carter's recent book *Ground Truthing*,⁶ and deals with the life of Mallee poet John Shaw Neilson (1872–1942): his meeting with Wotjobaluk man 'Jowley', his quest for 'a kind of reconciliation of peoples and cultures with environments',⁷ and his eventual breakdown and hospitalisation in the (now derelict) Old Base Hospital. The vast aspirations of this work were not fully realised with the installation, an unsatisfying artwork (I took a particular dislike to the dressed mannequin) which, without a great deal of back-story, remained impenetrable.

Like De Pieri, Carter has given *Palimpsest* a particular flavour. As another *Palimpsest* regular has written: 'Many of the



1/ John Vella, *The Great Escape—Home and Away (part 1)*, 2011, archival inkjet prints, Kar-Rama Motel objects, room 20, Kar-Rama Motel; image courtesy the artist, photo: Shayne Hill



2/ LEAP Project Space window with a sticker by Mildura Guerilla Artists Group (GAG); photo: Merryn Gates

artists responding to Palimpsest embrace Carter's idea of mythoform. They engage with the site-specific mediations between the natural and cultural worlds.⁸

The curators for Palimpsest 2011 were Helen Vivian (responsible for Rio Vista, the Old Mildura Homestead and the video program) and Kristian Häggblom. Häggblom's project took on the locally iconic Kar-Rama Motel and was a highlight of the weekend. Several rooms were given over to artists, some occupying them as mini-theatres, for which they are eminently suited. Of these the standouts were Finnish artist Tuomas Laitinen's film *Undercurrent* (2011), that captured the emotional disconnect between cultures when travelling, and the Japanese collective Chim Pom's *Black of Death* (2007–08), a video about 'murders of crows'⁹ in Tokyo. This work struck me as I had driven to Mildura across the Hay Plains, and had encountered many crows pecking at insects on the road and playing possum with the traffic. Häggblom, himself a photographer, drew on contacts he had made during residencies to bring these two fine international contributors into Palimpsest, a strategy that truly justifies the local/global rhetoric. Others responded to motel culture, notably John Vella's *The Great Escape—Home and Away (part 1)* (2011) that literally took ubiquitous motel paraphernalia on holiday. Artist collective Modus Operandi's hot, oppressive, pungent *eight minutes later* (2011), was a dystopic experience in orange, and reminded me of the happenings of a bygone era, but a lot quicker!

While Rio Vista and Kar-Rama were the principle sites, Palimpsest spread into empty shops, clock towers, cafes, petrol stations, art galleries, and ancillary venues whitecubemildura (an Artist-Run-Initiative) and The LEAP Project Space, whose window was emblazoned with a sticker by Mildura Guerilla Artists Group (GAG) proclaiming that they did not submit to be included in Palimpsest, which made me wonder what the process actually is.¹⁰ Within LEAP the work by Maree Clarke, a local Yorta Yorta/Mutti Mutti woman now living in Melbourne, was exceptional. *KOPI – connected to country* (2011) comprised group and individual photographs of Indigenous men and women in traditional and modern mourning. Thirty-eight mourning caps, reflecting a cultural practice specific to the Mildura and representing the Victorian Aboriginal nations, were placed in a 'landscape' of soil and trees.¹¹

Palimpsest continues to morph. It inherited the energy and environmental concerns of the groundbreaking Mildura Sculpture Triennials (1970–1988), when conceptual, performance and land art were in the ascendancy. It has cemented the reputation of Mildura as an art 'place-making' site, but the extent to which such

a sustained exposure to contemporary art impacts on the wider community is a question that, from my observations during the opening weekend of Palimpsest, needs to be asked. A new element joined the mix this year with the establishment of UniVARS, a (Visual Arts Research Studies) residency program housed adjacent to the Mildura Arts Centre. Geoffrey Brown, of La Trobe University – Mildura Campus, curated a group of five postgraduate art students nominated by universities around Australia whose work continues in the tradition of conceptual and performance art practice.¹² Their work injected energy into the program as well as widening the support base for the festival.

1. The work has also been shown at Arterial Gallery, Sydney (June 2011) and *GV Art, London (October 2011).

2. Helen Vivian, <http://arterialgalleryblog.blogspot.com/2011/06/interview-with-helen-vivian-curator-of.html>

3. *Still Life: The Food Bowl* is a group of cast salt objects including ornate French picture frames representing the five senses, Rococo pillars topped with bowls and urns overflowing with fruit, a dining table adorned with local produce and a large chandelier made with 5000 individually cast grapes.

4. Stefano De Pieri, Palimpsest patron and member of Arts Mildura Board.

5. Paul Carter has been involved since *Palimpsest #5*, 2003 when he was a symposium speaker.

6. Paul Carter, *Ground Truthing: explorations in a creative region*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2010.

7. *Collaborators and Saboteurs*, *Palimpsest #8*, catalogue, p. 26.

8. Neil Fetting, 'The Space of Palimpsest', *Double Dialogues*, No. 7, Winter 2007.

9. The collective noun for a group of crows.

10. *Palimpsest #1* and *#2* were un-curated (1998 and 1999), but curators have been involved since *#3* in 2000. *#4* (2001) was held in a very large fruit packing shed, the Aurora, about 20 kilometres from Mildura and incorporated an Art/Science symposium. *#6* in 2006 was expanded to become the Murray-Darling Palimpsest.

11. *KOPI – connected to country* was exhibited in Italy, New York, Melbourne and Mildura simultaneously.

12. La Trobe University – Mildura campus is the Education Partner in Palimpsest. Participating universities were: University of Melbourne, Victorian College of the Arts; University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts; Monash University Art and Design; and La Trobe University Media Studies.

Mildura Palimpsest #8: Collaborators and Saboteurs, hosted by Mildura Arts Centre and curated by Helen Vivian and Kristian Häggblom, was held in Mildura, 9 to 11 September 2011. www.artsmildura.com.au/palimpsest

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