



FOUR BEAUTIFUL SEASONS, TWELVE FANTASTIC MONTHS

ONE VERY BIG YEAR

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CITY of_Trees ✕



An exhibition by **JYLL BRADLEY**

5 JULY–7 OCTOBER 2013

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

FREE Exhibition Gallery
Open Daily 10 am–5 pm



To listen to Jyll Bradley's audioworks go to www.canberra100.com.au/programs/city-of-trees
All audioworks have been acquired into the National Library of Australia's Oral History and Folklore Collection.



In early 1983 celebrated German film director Werner Herzog (b. 1942) was giving an evening talk at the National Library of Australia. Herzog, one of the most famous living film directors of the time, and known for a string of critically acclaimed films such as *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Heart of Glass* (1976) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), was visiting Australia to present his movies at screenings around the country. Having been warned during his travels that Canberra was ‘boring’, Herzog was taken by surprise: ‘What they didn’t tell me—what no one mentioned—was that you had built your capital city in the middle of a forest. It is beautiful!’.

Perhaps it took an outsider to see, appreciate and draw attention to the fact that the city, which at its founding had been dismissed as no more than a sheep paddock, had evolved to become the wooded capital we know today. In 2013, another outsider, Briton Jyll Bradley, offers an insight into Canberra and its forest of trees. In 2011 Bradley was invited to Canberra to explore the potential of a project for the city’s centenary. She was instantly overwhelmed by the trees. From this she conceived a work of art revealing how trees, treescapes, tree-related folklore and personal histories form a vital and pervasive backdrop to life in Australia’s capital. Indeed, the history of trees in this locale is the history of Canberra itself. Each story is integral to the other.

The first settlers who ventured into the Canberra region were impressed by the abundant grasslands, eminently suitable for grazing, not the trees that are so characteristic of the city today. As Bill Gammage points out in his recent publication *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, the flora and fauna in and around Canberra had been maintained for centuries by the Indigenous people to suit their needs.

Regular burning minimised the trees on plains around the Molonglo and Queanbeyan rivers, with the new grass growth after each burn attracting game. The Canberra of today is unrecognisably changed, transformed from an Indigenous estate to ‘a perfectly good paddock’ for grazing, to eventual renown as a garden city, the city of trees.

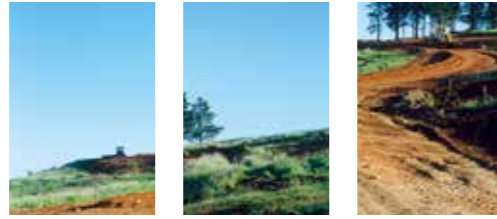
The trees of Canberra are intrinsic to the history of the city and Bradley’s work is an appropriate and thought-provoking contribution to the centenary year. Designed by Chicago architects Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937) and Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1961), Canberra was planned as part of the garden city movement and incorporates significant areas of natural vegetation that have caused it to be known as the ‘bush capital’. It is ironic that the forestation of Canberra is recent and coincidental with the establishment of the city.

Bradley works across a variety of media, using drawing, photography, sound, installation and performance. Born in Folkestone, Kent, in 1966, she trained in London at Goldsmiths and the Slade School of Fine Art. Her practice, as may be expected given the diverse range of mediums she employs, tends towards conceptual art,

rather than strictly painting, sculpture or photography. She mixes aesthetics with history, politics, social commentary and nature to explore the ties between place and identity, often focusing on the complex relationships between culture and the natural world. Bradley is one of a generation of artists who do not consider the purpose of art to be the pursuit of ‘beauty’ for its own sake. Instead Bradley poses artist-constructed social experiences as art. In that sense her work can be considered in terms of the ‘relational aesthetics’ that have informed art since the 1990s. She breaks with the notion of the mimetic or exquisitely crafted object—such as a painting or sculpture—made to be placed in a gallery. Bradley’s installations draw on photographs, drawings, text and sound to create an impact that is more immediate than with traditional media.

Bradley has created several major works charting the connections between people and plants. In 2008, her *Mr Roscoe’s Garden* told of a nineteenth-century plant collector and the fate of his collection in Liverpool, making links between his story and wider changes in trade and society. In 2010, *Flower Train* recorded the movement of flowers by rail from Penzance to London and revealed how growers struggled to





Since the 1920s, a selection of Canberra residents have been entitled to a generous free handout of shrubs and trees for their gardens from the nursery—a practice that continues today. But the planting of Canberra is not just an institutional story; many people brought their own trees with them when they came to the new city. Who planted and nurtured what trees, and where, is a curious and ongoing history with many layers. As Bradley observes:

The story of Canberra could be told through the trees; every tree has a human story to tell. Trees are a door or portal leading to an understanding of Canberra and the people who live and work here.

Bradley’s installation features backlit photographs, drawings, interviews and sound, creating a mixture of personal politics and geography in an intimate perspective of Canberra. She teases out aspects of Canberra’s domestic forest, considering different areas and treescapes and talking to people connected with them. For her, Canberra’s National Arboretum is an archive of trees, equivalent in some ways to the National Library. The Library houses ideas and acts as a history of peoples. Trees also record history, their annular markings documenting the seasons and time, their branches fated to flourish, struggle or die.

The trees in Canberra also record the arrival of Europeans and the disruption to the continent that settlement entailed. Even before this, there had always been newcomers and exotics entering via land bridges or floating across the oceans—such as the boab, an early arrival from Africa. But in Canberra the influx of exotic species increased notably following settlement. Initially, the numbers were small: the plane trees around St John’s Anglican Church in Reid, planted by Reverend Pierce Galliard Smith in the 1850s, were among the first. Other specimens brought by settlers have become a record of both taste and economic consideration; inevitably every house was wreathed with roses and apples. There was no gradual planting of the Westbourne Woods in Yarralumla, though, another site that Bradley has documented. The woods were planted by Charles Weston in 1913, the year he took charge of Yarralumla Nursery. By 1920, he had planted 44,900 exotic trees, many into holes blasted by dynamite. The following year, he commenced the planting of the Mount Stromlo pine plantation, locating nearly 1.2 million trees on the slopes. It was hardly a subtle integration of species.

maintain their business in the face of the internationalisation of the flower market. *Galápagos*, in 2012, considered the effects of exotic species on the native plants of the Galápagos Islands. Central to each project has been the idea of the plant as a cultural object.

Canberra is similarly a cultural object, a construct as artificial as its lake, and one of a select group of planned capital cities that includes Washington DC, Islamabad and Brasília. As Bradley points out, there is nothing ‘natural’ about Canberra’s trees: trees were planted as part of the domestication of the bush and planned from the moment the first street was laid out. The first government nursery was established around 1911 on the site of what is now the National Museum of Australia. In 1914 the nursery was moved to Yarralumla, the first plant being produced in 1916. It is estimated that Yarralumla Nursery has grown 50 million plants in its 100-year history.

In contrast, the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, 40 kilometres outside of Canberra, and also visited by Bradley, retains the natural flora and fauna of the Canberra region.

In her audioworks—featured in the exhibition and available for download—Bradley presents the stories of the Indigenous Murumbung Yurung Murra group who work in land management and heritage and offer a different reading of the trees and scrub. For them, Canberra is a network of camp sites, quarries and sacred areas, and of the Dreamtime stories of the Ngunnawal people, underlying the city map. The links between place, time and identity are poetic and obliquely political, offering parallel narratives that are at once confrontational and elusive.

Stories are vital to Bradley’s take on Canberra and trees are the conduit for its citizens’ expressions and feelings of nostalgia, pleasure, awe, calm and civic pride. Bradley’s audioworks, created with senior BBC Radio producer Jonquil Panting, incorporate stories about the trees and ‘tree people’ of Australia’s capital. One voice, in response to seeing the blackened limbs of a majestic eucalypt, the survivor of perhaps many fires, exclaims that it is like ‘a charcoal drawing’. The words have the power to conjure up in our imaginations the tracery of branches and trunk drawn against the sky, and to lead us to muse on beauty in many forms—from the flexible, whip-like sapling to the towering sun-dappled giant—recorded, like a sketch on paper, in the memories of Canberrans. ‘This tree is a book,’ comments another. ‘I can read what happened here by reading the evidence of the tree: fires, droughts, rains.’ Bradley sees strong connections between the National Library and the trees of Canberra, both encapsulating people’s stories, emotions and memories. The treasury of stories that comprises the Library equally has connections with trees in the many leaves of paper that act as doors to human feelings and achievements.

As well as recorded comments from Canberrans discussing their connections with trees, associated sounds and poetry blended with sound grabs can be heard in specially designed sound portals made from cardboard. The portals, standing like tree trunks in a clearing, curl like a leaf to enclose listeners. They are located amid drawings on sheets of paper that Bradley secured from the herbarium at the Yarralumla Nursery. The old blotting paper was intended to be used to press plant specimens for preservation but was given to Bradley for the project. ‘It is really beautiful,’ says Bradley, ‘as some of it has the imprint of past impressions of plants that were once pressed between the leaves of paper. It also bears the other marks of time, of yellowing—



literally soaking up years and light.’ Bradley has drawn the trees of Canberra on the blotters but in a different way: using a photocopier. The medium in the drawings remains graphite, like the ‘lead’ in a pencil, but in a powdered form applied electrostatically to the paper in a burst of light. Bradley’s starting point for what she calls her ‘light drawings’ is taking the used blotter, reading the marks already there and drawing out the individuality of the sheet in each pass in her process. The drawings are abstract, yet they are as suggestive as the tones and textures of a watercolour wash.

The combination of the mechanical and the organic in the photocopy drawings is reiterated elsewhere in the installation and conjures up the presence of the city’s buildings and streets among the trees. In the slightly darkened entrance to the exhibition, a panoramic image of trees in light boxes is illuminated like a stained-glass window, and the whisper of voices from the audioworks further enhances the notion of a contemplative space. The images in the light boxes evoke mood rather than detail. ‘I became interested in where light ends and trees begin,’ says Bradley, ‘or where trees become lights and light becomes trees.’ The relationship of light and space is central in the installation.



Bradley explains:

I’ve been inspired by the modernist roots of the city—the circles, triangles, arteries and how trees map these out and the messages and meanings that these forms held for the Griffins ... We walk around the city almost unconscious that we are moving through a hugely symbolic, meaningful space created by them—one intrinsically informed by light: be that through a concept of ‘enlightenment’ or through the photosynthesis that grows the trees that meant so much for them.

Bradley’s drawings are made from light and carbon, the building blocks of plants. Her installation directs attention to the connections between trees and paper, and between paper and the preservation of thought. This is echoed in the pile of scatter-proof prints in the display, overruns from a giveaway from *The Canberra Times* intended as a keepsake for readers and now literally ‘scattered’ to the public. More proofs are presented framed on the wall. Scatter proofs are used to check colour before a publication is printed. These are printed with images depicting historical Canberra, juxtaposed by Bradley with her own photographs of the city today, implying a journey through time for the city and its trees and for the artist making the work. Here are the growing trees; here are the pioneers; here are the Griffins; here are the forestry students; here are the sites where Bradley worked. The proofs draw attention to the transformation of landscape into city, of paper into printed matter.



Like the blotters with the impressions of plants still in the paper, the scatter proofs bear traces of history, ghosts of what was, and imply a future book as yet to be written—its printing, and thus completion, held in suspension. In the memories held on paper—itsself the memory of a tree—we have the ghost of ourselves. Canberra is haunted by a genius loci, or spirit of place. Its genius loci is not, as poets might have it, a dryad-like spirit, but its environment, with its unique mix of native and introduced trees. Sentinels to our capital, Canberra’s trees suggest a collective identity, bearing testament to the history of the land and the 100-year story of the city. They reveal human stories, myths and mysteries about the people who lived, built, suffered and survived before imprinting a part of themselves in the fabric of this place. Bradley’s *City of Trees* allows us to pause, see, listen, and sense the flow of history, the air of eternity in the rattle of gum leaves in a dry wind and the sigh of casuarinas on the Molonglo and Queanbeyan River plains.

Michael Desmond, 2013

***City of Trees* by Jyll Bradley is a Centenary of Canberra project, proudly supported by the ACT Government, the Australian Government and the National Library of Australia.**

