

Cage of Ghosts

Jon Rhodes

Finding Cages of Ghosts



For 20 years I used Alice Springs as a service town. As a still photographer or as part of a film crew, I flew in, hired four-wheel drives, shopped at supermarkets and disposal stores and within a day or two was on my way to the western deserts and the *Pintupi*, *Warlpiri* and *Jaru* communities—at Papunya, Yuendumu, Kintore, Kiwirrkura, Balgo and Yaruman.

After some months away, the return to Alice Springs consisted of much the same activities in reverse—returning the vehicles, packing away camping equipment until next time, checking and cleaning cameras, sending off film for processing, and lots of telephoning.

Within a day or two I would be on a plane heading home to the east coast. There was no time for sight-seeing. Alice Springs was a redneck, racist town in the 1970s—a place to get things done and then get away from.

All this changed in 1992, when I was driving some members of a film crew from Yuendumu to the Alice Springs airport. We stopped briefly in town at the home of a local artist, and while I waited in her lounge room, my eye was attracted to the bright, jaunty cover of a small book that was propped up on the mantelpiece. Inside, the pages were beautifully clear skyline maps of the landscape around Alice Springs. They were clear because all the clutter of the town was not drawn in, leaving the ranges and rocks easy to see. Their names were spelt in *Arremte* and the writer told me, as I



Brenda Thornley

Skyline Map from *The Arremte Landscape of Alice Springs*

Courtesy of Institute for Aboriginal Development Inc.

scanned the pages, that ‘caterpillar beings’ formed much of the landscape on the eastern side of town, while it was the activities of wild dogs that did the same on the western side. A ‘totemic topography’ within a town! ¹

I could hardly wait to drop the film crew at the airport, race back to a bookshop in town and buy a copy of *The Arremte Landscape of Alice Springs* by David Brooks. ²

I was leaving for Kiwirrkura the next day, so as the sun was setting I scrambled up the closest hill across the road from the motel where I was staying. The guide book said this was *Akeyulere*, or Billy Goat Hill, on the corner of the Stuart Highway and Larapinta Drive. It is a low hill, but even from that height the buildings of the town levelled out and the hills and rocky outcrops seemed to jump up and become more visible.

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I prowled around the top of the hill, using the skyline maps to find more totemic features while I watched the sun start to glint on the crucifix of a distant church. The rocky spaces between the roads and buildings had come alive through the stories I had read of how they were created. I stayed on the hill until dark, watching the shadows, visually playing, hiding and revealing the cross from behind some rocks, seeing Alice Springs with fresh eyes.

All the way to Kiwirrkura and back, I thought about what I had seen from Billy Goat Hill and the juxtaposition of the Aboriginal landscape with the structure of the town. Two weeks later I was back in Alice and met up with the artist Carol Ruff, who had also discovered Brooks' book, visited many of the sites and already completed three or four paintings of them. It didn't take us long to decide to collaborate on making art based on *The Arrernte Landscape*, and over the next two years we roamed the town together, painting and photographing, meeting the Traditional Owners, listening to stories about green beetles and soakages, caterpillar cocoon sites and wild dog creator-beings, until we eventually exhibited *Site Seeing* at the Araluen Centre in Alice Springs in July 1994.³



Jon Rhodes and Carol Ruff
The Battle Ground, 1992–93
 Yarrentye Arltere; The intestines of the Wild Dog; Larapinta Drive, Alice Springs

Later that year, Ruff and I used *A Field Guide to Aboriginal Rock Engravings*⁴, by Peter Stanbury and John Clegg, to find some of the many thousands of sites that still exist around Sydney. I photographed three engravings at North Bondi, Mt Ku-ring-gai and West Head before I decided to put the work aside and concentrate on completing *Whichaway?*, an exhibition of photographs of *Pintupi* I had first met at Yayayi in 1974, and then again at Kiwirrkura in 1990.⁵

The opening of *Whichaway?* at the Canberra School of Art Gallery in October 1998, coincided with a residency at Photomedia, in the School of Art at the Australian National University. As I unpacked my car,



38 Sainsbury Street, Wanniasa, ACT, 1998 (detail)



War Memorials, Wanniasa and Anzac Parade, ACT, 1998 (detail)



The Spook Tree, Wanniasa, ACT 1998 (detail)

I noticed a familiar oval shape on one of the eucalypt trees growing by the side of the road at the entrance to the School in Ellery Crescent. It looked like a scarred tree.

Later that afternoon, while browsing in the Co-op Bookshop, I found a copy of *Moth Hunters of the Australian Capital Territory*⁶ and opened it in the middle, at a spread of photographs. In photo 1, a smiling Arnold Williams, from the Ngunnawal Land Council, was standing in front of a scarred tree in Wanniasa, Canberra. The scar in the photograph looked similar to the one on the tree at Ellery Crescent. I turned to the back of the book where the author, Josephine Flood, informed me that ACT Heritage in Tuggeranong could be contacted for further information about scarred trees. Next day they faxed me 14 pages about the scarred trees of Wanniasa, a suburb in the Tuggeranong Valley. I marked the positions of the trees on a street directory and headed south into a violent thunderstorm that broke as soon as I drove into Wanniasa. Through torrents of rain I peered out of my car, determined to find the whereabouts of the trees, until miraculously the sun came out, and I located about 15 scars on trees that were growing on footpaths, in parks, school grounds and front gardens.

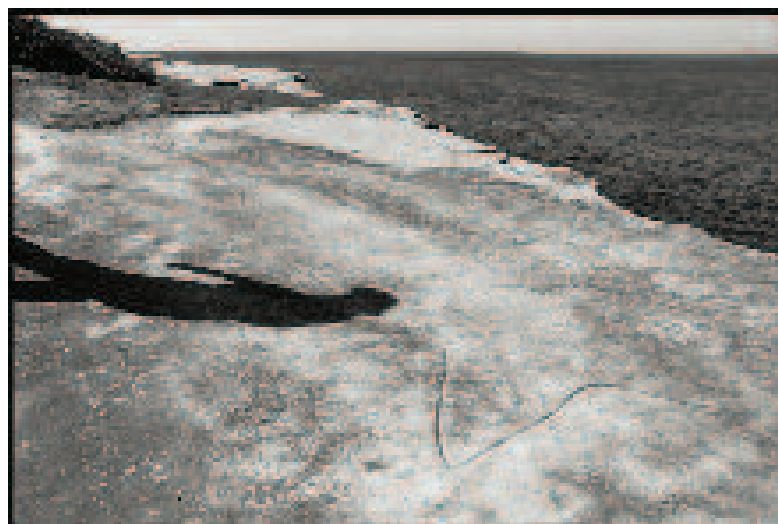


The Caged Carved Trees of Collymogle, Collarenebri, NSW, 1999 (detail)

Over the next month I photographed the scarred trees, met Arnold Williams, heard claims and counter-claims about the authenticity of the scars and talked to Peter Dowling, an anthropologist/archaeologist and a resident of Wanniasa, who was 'quite surprised and a bit startled' when he 'began to see some of the old eucalyptus trees in the valley with scars on their trunks typical of those' he 'knew to be of Aboriginal origin elsewhere'.⁷ Dowling was the first person to notice the scarred trees, as he went about his daily regimen of running, cycling or walking along Wanniasa's extensive network of pathways.

These trees, as well as others found in the neighbouring suburbs of Kambah, Gilmore, Gordon and Richardson are listed as heritage items by the National Trust, the ACT Heritage Council and the Australian Heritage Commission.⁸

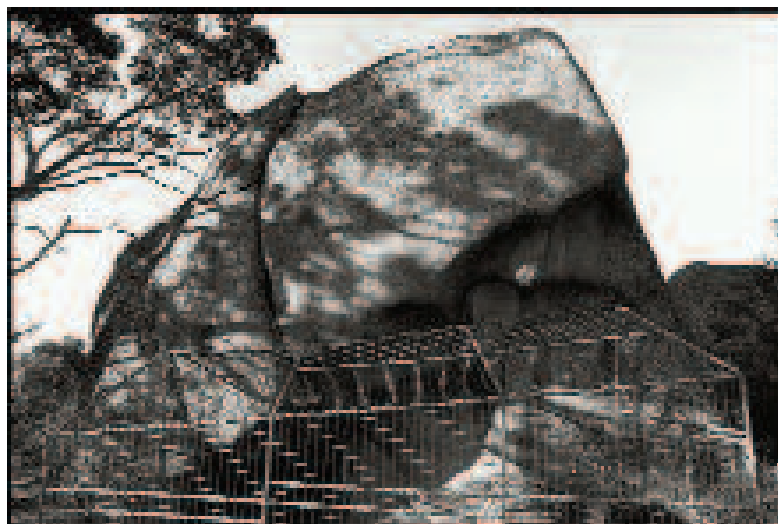
By the time I left Canberra in November 1998, I was enthusiastic about resuming my search for other physical reminders of Aboriginal



Walk by, Mackenzies Point, NSW, 2002 (detail)



The Boorolong Carved Trees, Armidale and Boorolong, NSW, 1999 (detail)



Bunjil's Cage, The Black Range, Victoria, 2001



Bennelong at Grotto Point, Grotto Point, NSW, 2002 (detail)

occupation in south-eastern Australia, where the impact of European settlement has been the longest and most intense. However, rather than photograph a totemic landscape created by ancestral beings, as I had in *Site Seeing*, I wanted this time to find places on a human scale, created by human hands.

The Riches of Ancient Australia, another book written by Josephine Flood⁹, became an indispensable guide in the glove-box of my car for the next eight years, as I followed directions to ceremonial sites such as cave paintings in the Grampian Mountains; bora rings at Burleigh Heads, Tucki Tucki and Lennox Head; rock engravings at Woy Woy, Tamarama, Balls Head and Grotto Point; burial grounds at Condobolin and Molong; carved trees from burial and bora grounds that were placed in schools at Eugowra and Toomelah and in museums at Walcha, Armidale, Collarenebri and Melbourne; and utilitarian sites like grinding grooves at Terramungamine and Hazelbrook, scarred trees in Melbourne and a stone fish trap at Toorbul Point.¹⁰

I became fascinated by the amount and type of protection that surrounded most of the sites that are identified in guide books.



Industrial Grinding, Terramungamine and Dubbo, NSW, 2001 (detail)

Combinations of boardwalks, railings, cages, gates and grilles; large wooden constructions, fences, chains and posts; steel viewing platforms, mesh, perspex, signs, bars and locks are all used to stop or minimise damage to these fragile and vulnerable areas.

Ironically, these places still exist partly because of the barriers that protect and yet isolate them; that are necessary and yet obstruct; that are practical and yet are obstacles. They deny most visitors any insight as to why these places were of such significance to the original people of Australia.

Sometimes, as I peered through the bars and mesh, trying to make sense of what I was seeing, I thought back to what I was told on more than one occasion by Aboriginal men, as they showed me their special places. They said the energy of centuries of the ritual use of ochre, blood, story, dance, song and secrecy was still there, but it was now 'in the ground', under the ceremonial place. It was dangerous to try, but that energy could be reactivated if it was done 'the right way'. Whether this is true or not, it changed my perceptions, and all the caged and contained places I photographed are now not quite as they seem.

Jon Rhodes
August 2007



Cage of Ghosts, Mt Stayplton, Victoria, 2001 (detail)

Jon Rhodes was the recipient of an H.C. Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University in 2006. For four months he lived in Canberra and researched the history of all the places he had photographed. The book, *Cage of Ghosts*, will be published in late 2008

Footnotes to Finding *Cages of Ghosts*

- ¹ Totemic topography was a term coined by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen as they recorded many of the Arunta (Arrente) ancestor creator stories at the telegraph station in Alice Springs during the summer of 1896–97. They published the results of this fieldwork in *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1899); and in *The Arunta* (vols I and II) (London: Macmillan, 1927).
- ² Published by the Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs, in 1991, with illustrations by Shawn Dobson and maps by Brenda Thornley.
- ³ *Site Seeing* comprised 20 paired works of paintings and sequences of photographs. It was shown at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 1995, the Cairns Regional Art Gallery in 1996, and Hogarth Gallery in Sydney in 1997.
- ⁴ Published by Sydney University Press, 1990.
- ⁵ *Whichaway?* toured 20 metropolitan and regional galleries in Australia, between 1998 and 2002.
- ⁶ Published by J.M. Flood, Canberra, 1996.
- ⁷ *Aboriginal Scarred Trees in Tuggeranong (ACT) And How to Identify Them*, Peter Dowling, no date, a small booklet prepared for local schools and libraries in Tuggeranong.
- ⁸ The Australian Capital Territory Heritage Places Register, 1998.
- ⁹ Published by Queensland University Press, 1990.
- ¹⁰ Other books I used to find sites were:
 - *Aboriginal Prehistory in New England, An Archaeological Survey of Northeastern New South Wales*, Isabel McBryde, Sydney University Press, 1974
 - *The Melbourne Dreaming, A Guide to the Aboriginal Places of Melbourne*, Meyer Eidelson, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997
 - *Blue Mountains Dreaming, The Aboriginal Heritage*, Eugene Stockton (ed.), A Three Sisters Publication, 1993
 - *The Bora Ground*, Lindsay Black, 1944
 - *Records of Times Past*, Isabel McBryde (ed.), Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1978

Jon Rhodes

(b.1947, Wagga Wagga, NSW)

Solo exhibitions

- 1976 *Just another Sunrise?*
1977 *Australia*
1982 *India the Enigma*
1991 *Kundat Jaru Mob*
1993 *Moving Country*
1998 *Whichaway?*
2002 *Traces*

Collections

- Art Gallery of New South Wales
Art Gallery of South Australia
National Gallery of Victoria
National Gallery of Australia
Queensland Art Gallery
National Library of Australia
National Museum of Australia
Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art
Collection
J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles

Checklist

The black and white photographs were hand-printed, full frame, from Kodak Tri-X 35mm negatives, on Agfa Multi-contrast, gelatin silver, fibre-based papers, in an edition of 5, by Jon Rhodes, between 1994 and 2007. The colour prints made from the painting *The Grave of a Native of Australia* by George Evans (NLA collection), and the photographs by Edmund Milne, in *The Kings Grave*, were copied and printed by digital technology. The measurements referred to in the Checklist are the sizes of individual prints within a series or sequence of photographs and are in centimetres, height x length.

Jon Rhodes has kindly donated this set of the *Cage of Ghosts* photographs to the National Library of Australia.

- 1. The King's Grave**
Wiradjuri
Goobothery Hill, NSW
Grave and carved trees—
combination of painting
(George Evans, 1817)
3 photographs (Edmund Milne, 1913,
1914), 21 x 29cm, and montage of
painting and photographs 2006
9 x 13cm
- 2. Preserved for Posterity**
Wiradjuri
Eugowra, NSW, 2001
Carved tree—series of 6 photographs
28 x 18.6cm
- 3. Regrooved in 1964**
Dhurawul
North Bondi, NSW, 1994
Rock engravings—
series of 8 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
- 4. Balloderree at Balls Head**
Kuringgai
Balls Head, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings—series of
6 photographs and watercolour
painting by the Port Jackson Painter
(reproduced in black and white)
16.6 x 25cm
- 5. 'A most useful native'**
Wiradjuri
Molong, NSW, 2001
Grave and Carved trees—
series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm and 28 x 18.6cm

Restricted Access—MEN ONLY
- 6. The Diamond Tree**
Gumbainggir
Nambucca, NSW, 1965–2004
Carved tree—series of 6 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
(1st photograph by Ken Ward, 1965)
- 7. Industrial Grinding**
Wiradjuri
Terramungamine and Dubbo, NSW,
2001–2003
Grinding grooves—
series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
- 8. The Cage of the Black Cockatoo**
Djabwurrung
Mt Langi Ghiran, Victoria, 2001
Cave paintings—
series of 8 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
- 9. War Memorials**
Ngambri
Wanniassa and Anzac Parade, ACT
1998
Scarred and canoe trees—
8 photographs
War Memorials—4 photographs
28 x 18.6cm
- 10. Walk by**
Dhurawul
Mackenzies Point, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings— sequence of
9 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
- 11. The Boorolong Carved Trees**
Aniwan/Nganyaywana
Armidale and Boorolong, NSW,
1962–1999–2002
Carved trees—
series of 13 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
(left— photograph by William
Webster, F.R.P.S. 1962)
- 12. Jimmy Crow's Nest**
Waka Waka
Crows Nest, Queensland, 2004
Sculpture and replica gunyah—
series of 5 photographs
28 x 18.6cm
- 13. Foyer Bora**
Gamilaraay
Toomelah, NSW, 2004
Carved trees—
series of 8 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
- 14. The Spook Tree**
Ngambri
Wanniassa, ACT, 1998
Scarred tree—
series of 6 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
- 15. Cage of Ghosts**
Djabwurrung
Mt Stayplton, Victoria, 2001
Cave paintings—
series of 8 photographs
16.6 x 25cm

16. **Gumbooya**
Kuringgai
Allambie Heights, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings—
series of 9 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
17. **Baiame and his Women**
Kuringgai
Mt Kuring-gai, NSW, 1994
Rock engravings—
series of 12 photographs
18.6 x 28cm and 12 x 18cm
torn photographs of various sizes
18. **Bennelong at Grotto Point**
Kuringgai
Grotto Point, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings—
series of 7 photographs and
watercolour painting by the
Port Jackson Painter (reproduced in
black and white)
16.6 x 25cm
19. **How They Were Made**
Kuringgai
West Head, NSW, 1994
Rock engravings—
series of 8 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
20. **The Last Tasmanian Tiger**
Yaitmathang
Mt Pilot, Victoria, 2001
Rock paintings—
series of 11 photographs
28 x 18.6cm
21. **Monkey Bars**
Ngambri
Wanniassa, ACT, 1998
Canoe trees—series of 9 photographs
28 x 18.6cm
22. **The Caged Carved Trees of Collymungle**
Gamilaraay
Collarenebri, NSW, 1986–1999
Carved trees—
series of 11 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
(photograph top right by Marion
Ravenscroft, 1986)
23. **‘Cherished Museum Exhibits’**
Gamilaraay
Melbourne, Victoria, 2005
Carved trees—
series of 10 photographs
16.6 x 25cm and 25.8 x 17.2cm
24. **Bulgandry Backfence**
Darkingung
Woy Woy, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings—
series of 5 photographs
28 x 18.6cm
25. **Cars and Scars**
Ngambri
Wanniassa, ACT, 1998
Scarred tree—
sequence of 12 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
26. **Last of the Upper Bellinger Natives**
Gumbainggir
Bellingen, NSW, 2003
Grave—series of 7 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
27. **Many Eagles Fighting for Their Country**
Yugambah
Burleigh, Queensland, 2004
Bora ground—series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
28. **Bunjil’s Cage**
Djabwurrung
The Black Range, Victoria, 2001
Cave paintings—
series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
29. **Red Hand Perspex Cage**
Gundungurra
Glenbrook, NSW, 2003
Cave paintings—
series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm and 28 x 18.6cm
30. **Grinding Highway**
Darug
Hazelbrook, NSW, 2003
Grinding grooves and wells—
series of 5 photographs
17.5 x 26cm
31. **Suburban Bora**
Bundjalung
Lennox Head, NSW, 2004
Bora ground—series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
32. **38 Sainsbury Street**
Ngambri
Wanniassa, ACT, 1998
Scarred tree—series of 6 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
33. **Pay as You Enter**
Darkingung
Milbrodale, NSW, 2003
Cave paintings—
series of 7 photographs
28 x 18.6
34. **Bora to Burial**
Bundjalung
Tucki Tucki, NSW, 2004
Bora ground—
series of 13 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
35. **Ceaseless Tidal Trap**
Gubbi Gubbi
Toorbul Point, Queensland, 2004
Fish trap—sequence of 8 photographs
18.6 x 28cm
36. **And the Trees Grew up Dancing**
Gamilaraay
Boonal Bridge, NSW, 2004
Sequence of 5 photographs
28 x 18.6cm

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Cover: *Preserved for Posterity*, Eugowra, NSW, 2001 (detail)

