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 Arrernte and the writer told me, as I 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 Arrernte 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 Akeyulerre, 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.
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.  

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.  

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,
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* 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 Wanniassa, 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 Wanniassa, 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 Wanniassa. 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.

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 Wanniassa, 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’. Dowling was the first person to notice the scarred trees, as he went about his daily regimen of running, cycling or walking along Wanniassa’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.

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

I became fascinated by the amount and type of protection that surrounded most of the sites that are identified in guide books. 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
Cages of Ghosts
Aboriginal Scarred Trees in Tuggeranong (ACT) And How to Identify Them

1. The King's Grave
Wiradjuri
Goobpondhi 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
Dhurrwull
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

6. The Diamond Tree
Gumbanggar
Nambucca, NSW, 1965–2004
Carved tree—series of 6 photographs 18.6 x 28cm
(1st photograph by Ken Ward, 1965)

7. Industrial Grinding
Wiradjuri
Terramungamin 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
Scarred and canoe trees—8 photographs
War Memorials—4 photographs 28 x 18.6cm

10. Walk by
Dhurrwull
Mackenzies Point, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings—series of 9 photographs 16.6 x 25cm

11. The Boorolong Carved Trees
Aniwan/Nganyayona
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
Crow 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 Stahlton, Victoria, 2001
Cave paintings—series of 8 photographs 16.6 x 25cm
16. Gumbooya
Kurrajong
Allambie Heights, NSW, 2002
Rock engravings—
series of 9 photographs
16.6 x 25cm

17. Baiame and his Women
Kurrajong
Mt Kurrajong, NSW, 1994
Rock engravings—
series of 12 photographs
18.6 x 28cm and 12 x 18cm
torn photographs of various sizes

18. Bellerby
Kurrajong
Bellerby, NSW, 2001
Grave—series of 7 photographs
16.6 x 25cm

19. How They Were Made
Kurrajong
West Head, NSW, 1994
Rock engravings—
series of 8 photographs
18.6 x 28cm

20. The Last Tasmanian Tiger
Yarramundjeri
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 Collarong
Gumbia
Collarong, NSW, 1986–1999
Carved trees—
series of 11 photographs
16.6 x 25cm
(photograph top right by Marion Ravenscroft, 1986)

23. ‘Cherished Museum Exhibits’
Gumalany
Melbourne, Victoria, 2005
Carved trees—
series of 10 photographs
16.6 x 25cm and 25.8 x 17.2cm

24. Bulgandry Backfence
Darlinga
Woody 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
Bellinger
Gundungurra
Bellinger, NSW, 2003
Grave—series of 7 photographs
16.6 x 25cm

27. Many Eagles Fighting for Their Country
Yugambeh
Burleigh, Queensland, 2004
Bora ground—series of 9 photographs
18.6 x 28cm

28. Bunjil’s Cage
Djalukurrung
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
Hazlewood, NSW, 2003
Grinding grooves and wells—
series of 5 photographs
17.5 x 26cm

31. Suburban Bora
Bandjalang
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 25cm

33. Pay as You Enter
Darlinga
Milbrodale, NSW, 2003
Cave paintings—
series of 7 photographs
28 x 18.6

34. Bora to Burial
Bandjalang
Tucki Tucki, NSW, 2004
Bora ground—
series of 13 photographs
16.6 x 25cm

35. Ceaseless Tidal Trap
Gubi Gubi
Toorbul Point, Queensland, 2004
Fish trap—sequence of 8 photographs
18.6 x 28cm

36. And the Trees Grew up Dancing
Gundalara
Boonal Bridge, NSW, 2004
Sequence of 5 photographs
28 x 18.6cm

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