An Ecoregional Story:
Ross Annels’s regional crafting of landscape memoir

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Ross Annels has a ‘small craft practice, in the middle of nowhere, on the other side of the world. It is a backwater, a sheltering lagoon, in a place on the edge of the world ... [but] studio practices such as this are of great relevancy. The “thinking through craft” that happens in and around such practices has a great deal to say about one of the pressing issues of our time: how we in the West might live a more sustainable lifestyle.” While Ross’s contemporary functional furniture can be seen in homes and galleries around the world and any Saturday at the Eumundi markets on the Sunshine Coast, his recent June 2010 solo exhibition, An Ecoregional Story, at Gympie Regional Art Gallery shows its inspiration.

I’ve opened, judged, and reviewed quite a few exhibitions, but never have I been so close to the subject or the artist before. Ross is my partner in life, in business, and in intellect. So an element of self-examination becomes necessary. I am fascinated by how we express our relationship to land and to country, because I think this helps dissolve our environmental problems. And I think we express this relationship most imaginatively and most promisingly through the arts. So soundscapes, music, performance, painting, and sculpture are all capable of questioning the separation of human from nature. For me, landscape memoir comes with a poetic aspiration to merge with this place, to invite the wild in, to lose myself to a greater spirit that makes me part of country. As Terry Tempest Williams says, ‘One day, this landscape will take the language out of me’, or Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem: ‘Earth, isn’t this what you want? To arise in us, invisible? Is it not your dream, to enter us so wholly there’s nothing left outside us to see?’ In a similar romantic vein, I aspire to not only have a conversation with the bunyip, but to also be eaten by its wildness.

There is a challenge in taking such personal landscape memoir beyond art into the local and the everyday: to design the use of common objects to reflect this nature/culture relationship; to investigate how we might revive craft practice to express our more-than-human nature. Ross’s bespoke furniture is the material outcome of both his environmental idealism and knowledge of design history. He minimises timber use through steam-bent and veneer forms; reduces and reuses, and replants local forest timber in our rainforest plantation. But, more importantly, I think, he allows the design to speak nature’s voice. People sometimes miss this element in Ross’s small studio batch-production chairs, cabinets, and tables. The message becomes subsumed by meticulous issues of craft construction and sustainable technique. We are more receptive to their story within art’s greater freedom, perhaps because we expect messages in art but not in craft. Hence, a

1/ Sprung Series, 2008-10, laminated, steam-bent, and solid silky oak, rose alder, and stainless steel with macro-suede and kangaroo leather, dimensions variable.

2/ Gnutheru, 2009, chair of silky oak and upholstery, 71 x 50 x 110cm. The leaf-shaped back recognises the support of the more-than-human world as humans sit in ceremonial stillness. Indigenous words for country are overlaid with a white grid to make a powerful and reconciled statement about connecting to place.
gallery space aptly displays Ross’s creative philosophy of inhabiting country; we see the art as well as the craft; we see both the wood and the trees of Ross’s inhabited forest.

Ross borrows less from the metaphor and more from the reality of the natural world. He grapples with what emerges when culture and nature have already become unified. This is an unsentimental, but still poetic, living in country. Ross’s art pieces express a darker, more complex wisdom of place. This recent exhibition collects sculpture, images, artist books, and furniture to express the ecoregional philosophy and material thinking that lies behind Ross’s design, as well as his patient and careful making. An ecoregional story is a deep, complex, and celebratory inhabitation of the micro-local place, told through the memory of objects.

Ross Annels’s Sprung Series introduces the point where craft meets art; furniture is pushed to its still highly functional limits, and the final chair with its kangaroo leather is of course most sprung. One of the artist’s books celebrates this craft’s technical and collaborative process of making: Sprung shows how timber becomes so flexible.

Ross and I live under the guidance of Cooroora Mountain (hence the name of our Institute and the basis of Ross’s first artist book, Craft, Collaboration, Celebration), the northern end of the volcanic plugs that form the Glasshouse Mountains. These create the ripples in country, reflected in Ross’s coffee table, that have affected human cultures, both old and new, of this region. Each culture inhabits place differently: on the Gnutheru chair, Ross has inscribed a spiral of Gubbi Gubbi words for nature which have all but disappeared. We both expected that the white rationalist grid, by itself too harsh, would further weaken and colonise this culture, but both lend each other a larger strength. The whole is greater than its parts, and a chair of reconciliation is born. So there is hope for our collective places of human, land, plant, animal, mountain, and sea.

The oldest tree on our place is a revered crows ash with its strange seed pods and beautiful form; it has become Ross’s sacred tree. His artist book celebrates the tree with misty and mystic pinhole photographs and poetic words, and his crows ash pod stool transforms the sitter into hopeful seed, held within its prickly case. Old growth trees lopped at their base, offer new sapling growth springing out from this partial death; Ross turns this story of loss and life into a sapling throne, so that we literally sit with its lessons.

Our society has raised wilderness into something of almost unobtainable beauty. But being in country is not easy. Our good friend Alison travelled Australia, bringing back a knotty piece of timber, a thick yarn which tells how we put country on a pedestal but rarely travel through it.

1/ Ripples in country, 2009, coffee table of crows ash and Australian red cedar, 130 x 80 x 30cm. Volcanic plug mountains erupt into the landscape of the Sunshine Coast hinterland, their names poor translations of Indigenous connection to place. But what lies beneath?

2 + 3/ It’s not always comfortable sitting in country (between a rock and a thorny place), 2010, sculpture in basalt, silky oak, hoop pine, dowel, and stainless steel, 240 x 60 x 60cm.

4/ Installation view, An Ecoregional Story, Gympie Regional Art Gallery, Queensland, 16 June to 10 July 2010. All images courtesy the artist, Ross Annels. All photographs by Ross Annels.
This side table elevates her journey amongst hills, showing lumber and landscape to be one and the same, allowing us to imagine Alison’s journey through this difficult landscape. A double-ended chair with stone and spikes indicates the co-requisite difficulty of sitting still in country or indeed making a creative living. This piece sits between a rock and a thorny place, and I challenge anyone to walk under its top-heavy thorns without feeling nature’s threat of an alternative future.

Wall panels collectively tell the story of this ecoregion: local timbers of silky oak and blackwood are minimally carved with reference to the topography, the sounds, the ripples, and the non-human, that together build up a layering of country. The last panel plays with the shape of the sounds of birds and gives us a hint of where Ross’s designs will travel next. Making bird noises ‘sittable’ puts Ross’s past scientific expertise in birds with his present exploration of how to express our more-than-human world in objects. Bird calls and their human expression, sounds and their tangible forms, native inhabitations and quiet cultural sitting, might come together in Western culture’s pinnacle object and archetype, the chair.

While we often look at paintings and art for message as well as aesthetic, we rarely ask as much of our furniture or craft. A sophisticated understanding of inhabiting place allows us to revisit the meanings of objects in other more commercial spaces and markets. We could ask the furniture in our homes and offices to do more: to remind us of our animal and plant nature, to unromantically reconnect us to our origins, and to make us yearn for places, not just tourist consumerables in our lives. Ross’s work should make us demand objects and journeys with soul; chairs we can read, tables we can listen to; a chance to let materials speak.

Craft objects have a deep educative role: they act as everyday symbolic teachers of a more materially aware world. An unsuccessful object contributes to the rubbish of our throwaway mentality, a cultural amnesia generated by the excess of meaningless stuff. A successful object is emotionally compelling and persuasive, continuing discussion away from its inception, while referring back to a functional form. In Buchanan’s terms, it engages in a form of ceremonial rhetoric. Craft objects such as furniture can hold the memory of elders within the framework of ceremonial time, collapsing past, present, and future with slow observance. They become maps of cultural emotion, taking the measure of each ecoregional community. And they shape intellectual thinking in their making and their presence.

This is the potential and the potency of both the artisan and the natural resource: to teach the memory of indigenous knowledge, to map out more sustainable lifestyles, and to speak the material’s voice. Here is how we might use the everyday of craft objects to reconnect with an expanded conception of the world. By adding the depth of cross-cultural understandings of environment and place, we live a richer, darker and more complex connection to country.

Ross’s Ecoregional Story is more than a paean of praise to living in the Sunshine Coast hinterland; he uses a darker landscape memoir that encourages us all to think creatively and deeply with country. Both ideas of ‘craft’ and of ‘region’ are uplifted as issues of vital importance in how we sustain the needed human-scale changes in our everyday. Ross’s work re-creates the world into a better metaphor in which we might sit, sometimes uncomfortably, but always with awareness of our human/environment relationship. Herein lies its power.

1. This is a reference to Glenn Adamson’s Thinking through Craft, which concludes that a ‘traditional’ craft object (one that does not address the avant-garde) does not present an interesting case for theoretical discourse, that his most prized crafted possessions, a bowl and a chair, ‘occupy a safe position in the landscape of the visual arts – a lagoon’; see Glenn Adamson, Thinking Through Craft, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2007. p. 169.

An Ecoregional Story was shown at Gympie Regional Art Gallery, Queensland, 16 June to 10 July 2010. Major work from this exhibition continues to be on display at The Gallery in Eumundi on the Sunshine Coast hinterland, and can also be viewed through Ross Annels’ website: rossannels.com.

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