

## Cloaking Devices for Inland Lakes



### ***Critical reflections on Lake Suite***

#### **An essay by Neil Fetting on the *Lake Suite* project by Carmel Wallace**

The cloak has been an important garment within many cultures and societies over thousands of years. In cool climates the practical requirement to keep warm and to protect the wearer from cold, rain and wind is central to their function. However the cloak in all its adaptations and manifestations is more than an *overcoat* of convenience; instead, it embodies rich cultural and symbolic associations.

Possum skin cloaks made and worn by Aboriginal communities across south-eastern Australia were handed down through successive generations and assisted to strengthen cultural identity. These cloaks were often decorated with significant designs, insignias and motifs incised into the pelts and rubbed with ochre and fat for protection. The recent revival of cloak making workshops is seen as an important spiritual healing process for some of these communities.

Even in non-Aboriginal society the cloak has been imbued with symbolism and intrigue. The cloak *covers* or *conceals*, giving rise to metaphors like *the cloak of secrecy* or *under the cloak of darkness*. Further to this, in *Star Trek* the futurist inventions of *cloaking devices* made objects appear invisible. The *murder mysteries* genre is often described as *cloak and dagger*, alluding to the potential of a hidden weapon underneath the loose folds of the garment.

Artist Carmel Wallace, in her multi-disciplinary work *Lake Suite*, a component of the

One River project for the Centenary of Canberra, reactivates the use of the cloak as an object forming associations with place and as a vehicle for narratives created by the movement of people across time. Wallace describes the cloak as being an '*ideal repository of memories, allowing expression not only of outer, public narratives, but also of inner, often hidden and more personal stories*'<sup>[i]</sup>. This is poignantly consistent with their traditional *raison d'être*, but Wallace then connects these to a specific location and the communities within it.

Lake Mungo, Lake Hattah and Lake Hawthorn, all referenced within Wallace's *Lake Suite*, are part of a chain of salt lakes located in north-west Victoria and south-west NSW. Many millions of years ago these lakes were the bed of a great inland sea, a fact made evident in the vast and seemingly limitless expanses of glittering pink-crust rime breaking through the lakes' surface. Some of these ancestral lakes have been dry for 15,000 years while others are subject to the intermittent vagaries of flood and drought in this particular geographic region.

The irony of so much salt, so far inland, is not lost on the artist. Carmel Wallace was in fact born in this region and spent her school days wandering through the semi-arid landscape. She now resides at Portland on the edge of the Southern Ocean where she draws inspiration and interpretation from the marine environment and its associated culture. There, the collection of flotsam and jetsam that regularly washes ashore from fishing and other aquatic industry and other recreational activities, becomes the material and subject for her work.

Wallace does seem comfortable in straddling the duality of place: of coast/inland, and of fresh water/salt water. These dualities are evident in her *Lake Suite* installation. Facilitated by a three-week artist in residence program at the Art Vault in Mildura, Wallace has collaborated with an impressive range of local community groups. She has involved local school children, historical societies, members of local Indigenous communities, women's craft organisations and other interested volunteers in researching stories and in hands-on cloak making workshops. The outcome of these community collaborations is an installation of five cloaks draped upon mannequins and then positioned alongside large, full-length photographic scrolls depicting community members wearing the cloaks in selected and representative sites. The cloaks weave strong historical, environmental and personal narratives that intersect and connect to *place*.

Affirming the notion that *place* is not simply about the physical landscape, Canadian artist Marlene Creates has claimed that, 'the land is important to me, but even more important is the idea that it becomes a *place* because someone has been there'.<sup>[ii]</sup> Wallace's understanding of *place* echoes that of Creates. It is the tangible intervention of *placed persons* into *lived landscapes* that is central to this suite of works, and it seems consistent with her overall *oeuvre*.

Then what of the cloaks themselves? As Wallace herself says, the cloaks represent both the outer or external reality and then, on their inner lining, iconography that refers to private and personal worlds. One such cloak with seemingly personal connections has a veritable bouquet of richly coloured flowers in full bloom covering the outside of the garment. On the inside lining pink silk doilies and dining placemats are embroidered with personal family anecdotes in poetic prose that reference the importance of flowers to local storytellers. This collage of embroidered text in its collective multiplicity suggests the family chatter and discussions held by the women of the household sharing

experiences around the kitchen table. If these are representative of the personal domestic space within the private domain, then the flowers on the outside of the cloak might be the front gardens on show to the outside world.

In a very different cloak, titled *Metal for Water*, hundreds of collected metal bottle tops are sewn onto the outer surface of the fabric while a fox pelt is then draped like an extended fur collar over the top. Wallace moves from the personal to the historical in this work, referencing the journals of the colonial explorers Mitchell and Sturt who navigated the inland of Eastern Australia, including the sites defined by Wallace. In their journals, the explorers repeatedly refer to bartering metal tools and other objects for water and for permission to travel across Aboriginal territory. In 1838, Mitchell wrote, *'I have more than once seen a river chief, on receiving a tomahawk, point to the stream, and signify that we were at liberty to take water from it.'*<sup>[iii]</sup>

In many of the other cloaks, Wallace incorporates natural material from the area: the dried spinifex or tumble-weed grasses poignantly become a regal headdress, or a billowing display of emu feathers that crown a flowing green blue emu egg cloak. Alternatively, Wallace returns to her detritus scavenging sojourns and recycles abandoned fishing nets that twist around the cloak. Upon close inspection the net still holds the remnants of driftwood, fishing tackle, seaweed and coral trapped in some far off destination and then serendipitously collected by Wallace and transformed into a cloak. The global oceanic cycles of transportation have magically returned its bounty to the ancient inland sea of Australia.

Then, in another contrivance, Wallace mediates the introduction of white cotton socks (the sort worn by children to school) onto a cloak. Dyed in shifting tones of blue that denote issues of water quality and depth, the socks effectively link young pupils from the Lake Primary School on the edges of Lake Hawthorn with ongoing environmental arguments concerning river water regulation in this region.

In the banners or scrolls that form an intrinsic part of the final exhibition Wallace has used local community members to model the cloaks. These images locate and then transform the cloaks from aesthetic art objects into symbolic utilitarian objects. The models, young and representative of the future, despite their ethnic, racial and gender differences, all stare proudly beyond the present as if they too affirm the honoured legacy of the Aboriginal possum cloak bearers of previous years.

Wallace has created an important and cohesive body of interdisciplinary work that draws upon our distant and recent histories connected to this place.

*The Lake Suite project was exhibited at the Art Vault in Mildura, 15 May – 3 June 2013 and then at the Belconnen Arts Centre, Canberra, 24 & 25 August 2013. A musical composition was commissioned for the project and performed by a trio of musicians; Ben and Jack Rogers and Nikki Scarlett.*

## **Neil Fetting**

[i] Wallace, C. *One River: One River Lakes Mungo, Hattah and Hawthorn*. Centenary of Canberra. 2013.

[ii] Lippard, L. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of place in a multicentred society*. The New Press. 1997. P.32

[iii] Mitchell, T.L. *Journal of Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia, 2 Vols.* T & W Boone, London. Vol 1. P. 304-5