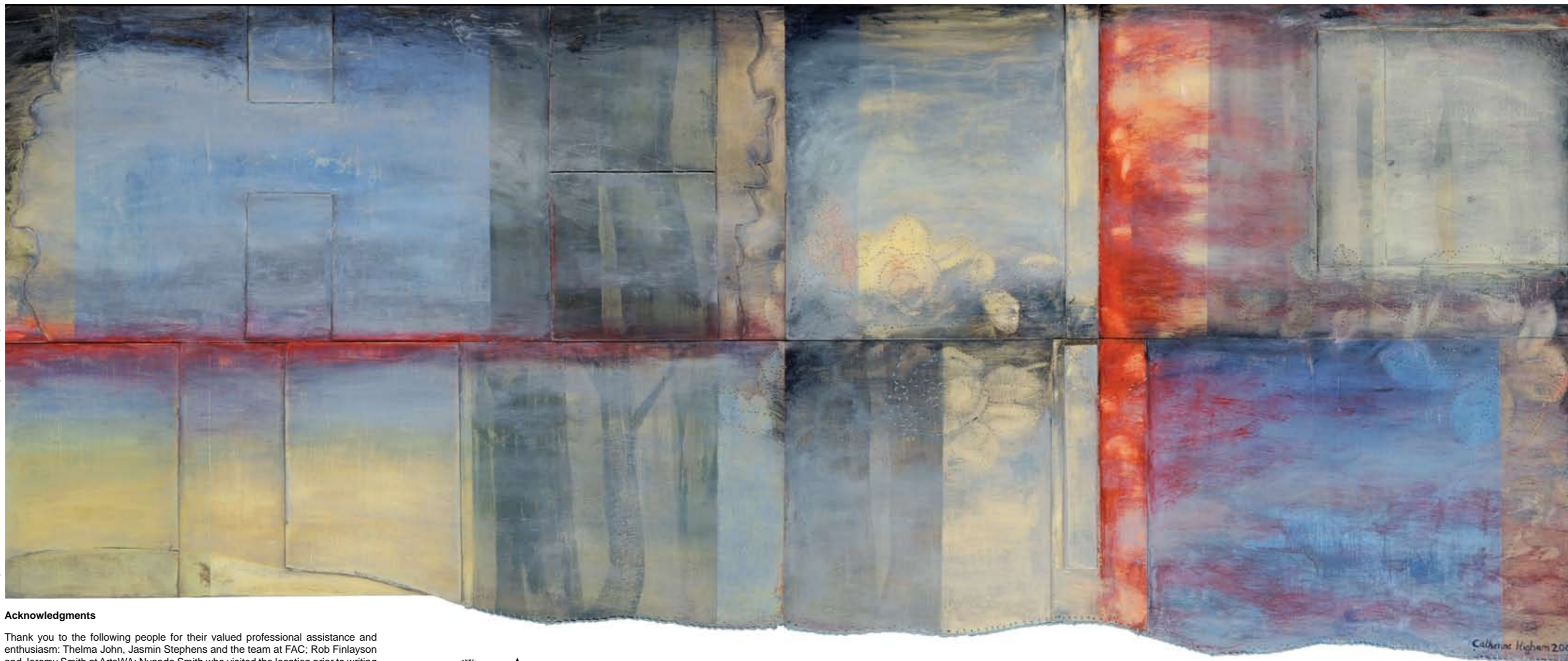


Congregation 2006
100 x 160 cm
mixed media
photographer: Graeme Barrett



Untitled 2004
50 x 50 cm
mixed media
photographer: Victor France



Sensory Connection 2005 110 x 240 cm oil on board and baling twine photographer: Victor France

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A special thank you to Geoff Higham, Aphra Higham, Emily Higham & Dimity Macartney-Snape, who are nothing short of inspirational.

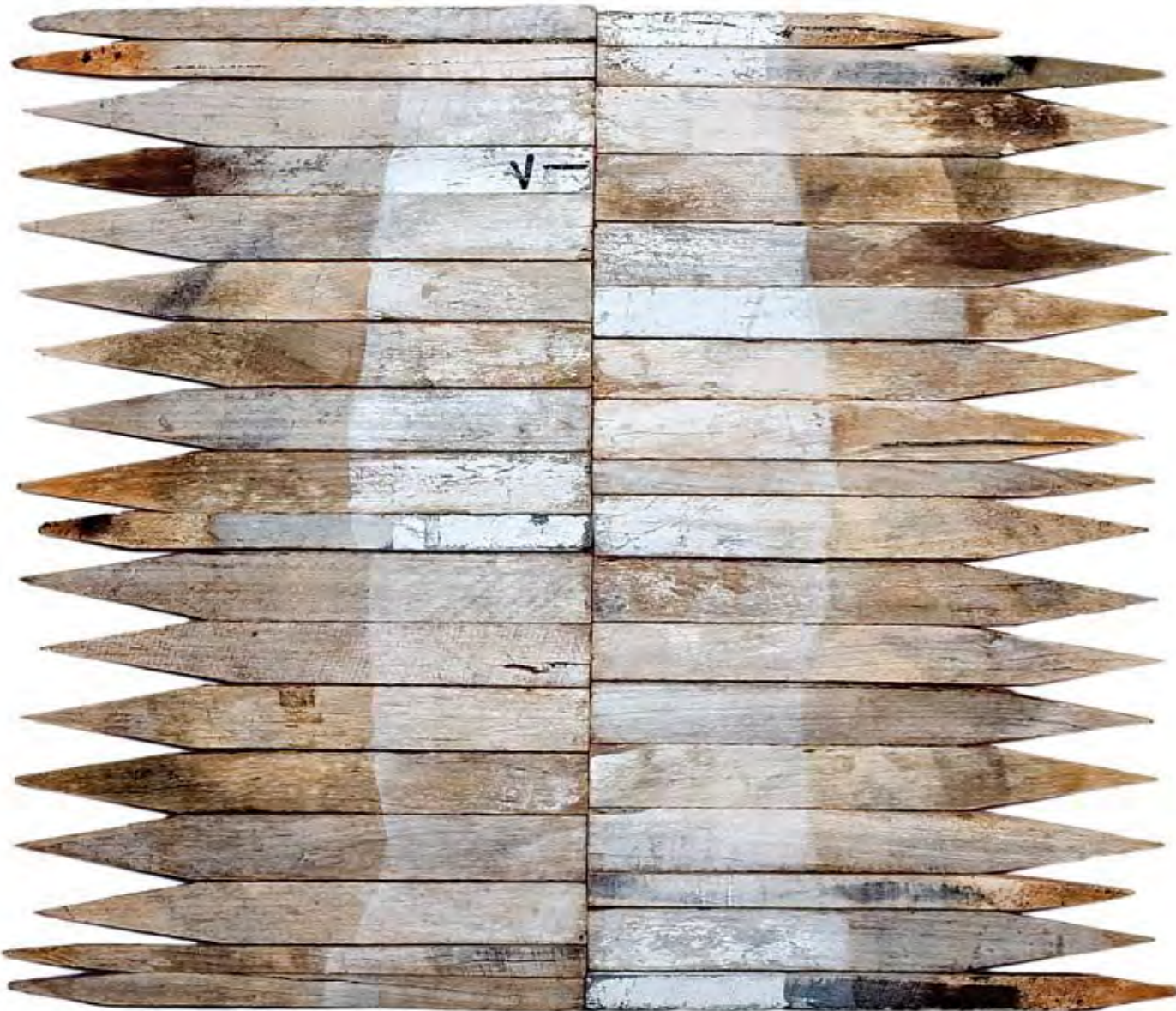
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www.catherinehigham.com.au



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Catherine Higham *Presence*

FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE



Wings 2005
80 x 100 cm
mixed media, field trial pegs
photographer: Graeme Barrett

+Presence: place: connection

The works in *Presence* map a personal study, an intimate tracing of the experiential aspect of landscape – what the artist Rosalie Gascoigne described as a ‘being in country.’¹

The 3000-acre farm that Catherine Higham has lived on for a decade sits at the tip of Western Australia’s Great Southern region, bordering the Wheatbelt, and it is this lived site that informs the basis of her practice.

Working directly from the site, Higham’s process features the collecting of found objects to create works of assemblage. Her relationship with location concentrates on areas travelled as part of a daily practical routine: walking a patch of bush close to her house, or driving a road ferrying kids to and from a school-bus stop. This working methodology, as fashioned by practicality, features slow moves: a noticing of temporal changes, and seasonal differences – described by the artist as ‘a wandering, like when I was a child.’²

Her approach departs from landscape work that depends upon a visitation, from *plein* air painting through to land art traditions, where an artist visits a location, and then leaves. As an inhabitant of the site Higham offers a different meditation: on the process of *staying*, upon the eking out of a living within a place.

Furthering connection with location is the use of method. Higham’s work follows in the traditions of twentieth-century Australian artists working with found objects, where items remain linked to their original source. Over the past half-century Australian artists as disparate as Gascoigne, Robert Klippel or Theo Koning have worked with their materials so that they retain their original connotations as well as being subject to both the artist’s and the viewer’s transformative gaze.

For Koning, it is the alleyways and community op-shops scoured for objects that emerge in the works: a toy remains scuffed from a child’s fingers – and Higham similarly allows the site to remain, sometimes literally, in the works. Lichen covers a section of untreated bark in the construction *Uncovered* – and in *Wings*, clumps of dirt hang from the tips of 36 field trial stakes, the fluid white markings from their utilitarian purpose uninterrupted save for original texta marks.

Higham is frequently drawn to objects that have been marked physically – that are mottled or scarred by activity or age. Incorporating forms pitted and twisted by weather, or holes burrowed by insects or machinery in wood that she uses as threading points for baling twine or wire.

The place that emerges from these laden constructions reference an amalgam – a landscape at once organic and cultivated, responsible as equally for death as for vivid life. It’s a place where combine harvesters start fires, and the hum of buffering winds blend with vibrations from machinery. And a place of past lives – Nyoongar grinding-stones and buried settler-crockery layer the ground that Higham walks.

In the painting on board *Sensory Connection* a smoky haze shadows the right-hand panel, bringing to mind the soft hues synonymous with the Heidelberg School artists. In fact, this smoke is possibly more treacherous than that which Streeon or Condor might have witnessed – referring to the bush-fire that threatened the homestead two years ago.

Also layering Higham’s entry point are the conflicting elements of myth and translation that have historically defined Australia’s sense of the regional – notions of frontier, shelter and entrapment, what Kim

Torney describes as ‘a paradox...of refuge and threat,’³ along with contemporary cultural imaginings of the rustic, authentic, and ‘tree-change’. By grounding representation in direct experience, Higham attempts a fashioning of place beyond what Deborah Edwards describes as ‘the landscape formulations [that] have long carried the weight of a broader national symbolism’.⁴

The work *Congregation* incorporates the industrial, used to symbolise human activity. Electrical cables, extension and computer cords are sewn through fence planks: joined in a physical ‘thread’. This use of stitch – as a symbol of continuity and connection – appears as a recurring trope throughout the works in the exhibition, binding the materials both structurally and metaphorically. In *Memory*, hot-pink baling twine threads a floral pattern through boards: the fluorescent colour determining the year of the harvest, and a manufactured mark of femininity.

In the assemblage work *Witness*, a scrap of family curtain sits wedged between weathered planks which clasp the material – pattern faded and edges fraying – in a snug intertwine. The use of wood signifying tree/house-post and agriculture clutching the interior world of family and personal memory suggest a melding of these elements, and the intersecting relationship between them.

The primary material of wood used in the works – Wandoo, Jarrah, Redgum – references the symbolic status of this material: as life and structure, as well as its folk and biblical connotations. As Torney details, the image of the tree in Australia’s history has operated as a ‘microcosm of the bush image, containing suggestions of both entrapment and shelter.’⁵ Hollow trees featured in early colonial narratives as imbued with the power of luring women and children and were also used as prisons – while at the same time providing the base material for settlement.

Two previous site-based works installed at *Sculpture by the Sea* Cottesloe and Bondi in 2006, consisted of a dressing of tree limbs with clothing, and in the series *Verses* Higham utilises the negative space of a burnt Redgum trunk, suspended from the ceiling. Encouraging a physical response by the incorporation of Braille and treatment with aromatic oil, it hangs like a floating shell, alternatively a carcass or shield, coaxing the viewer into a realm of physical touch.

Extending the meditation on being in place is this use of the phenomenal field: a calling attention to the sensory: and by doing so, a coaxing of connection with material, to ponder the place of humans within a bigger system. For Higham, for whom a spiritual association with the landscape also grounds this personal relationship, the works in *Presence* are steeped with private connotations of experience, revealing an intimate exploration of place, and offering a vital contribution to the wider cultural search for an understanding of this place in which we live.

Nyanda Smith

biography

Catherine Higham was born in Tasmania in 1964 and now lives and works at her property in Williams, Western Australia. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts) from Edith Cowan University, WA in 2000, and has since received a number of grants and commissions. *Presence* is Higham’s fourth solo exhibition. She has also exhibited in several group shows including *Sculpture by the Sea*, Cottesloe, WA and Sydney, NSW in 2006 and *Biennale Internazionale dell’Arte Contemporanea*, Florence, Italy in 2005. Higham has been exhibiting since 1988 and her works are held in corporate and private collections both in Australia and overseas.



Uncovered 2004
35 x 50 cm
mixed media
photographer: Victor France



Witness 2004
44 x 23 cm
mixed media
photographer: Victor France

¹ Mary Eagle, ‘Rosalie Gascoigne’, Fine Arts Gallery, The University of Tasmania, 1985, p 3

² Conversation with author, 26 November, 2006

³ Kim Torney, *Babes in the Bush: The Making of an Australian Image*, Curtin University Books, 2005, p 42

⁴ Deborah Edwards, *Material as Landscape: Rosalie Gascoigne*, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, p 17

⁵ Kim Torney, *ibid*, p 42