

KEVIN TODD'S

# Topographies

LANDSCAPES OF THE IMAGINATION

An exhibition of works by artist Kevin Todd  
about the meeting of art, science and place,  
at the Australian Museum.

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# Topographies

LANDSCAPES OF THE IMAGINATION

KEVIN TODD

Near the village of Guerie, on the road from Wellington to Dubbo, in western New South Wales, there appears a nondescript feature called Guerie Bald Hill. To geologists from the Australian Museum, it is a significant remnant of ancient volcanic activity, a basalt outcrop protruding above the eroded plain. The hill also has another significance - a contemporary social function evidenced by graffiti on the survey marker, bottles and the remains of campfires left behind by local kids. However, the geologist's interest in this hill is predicated on knowledge derived from scientific inquiry. They may enjoy the view, as I did, or the exhilaration of the climb or the sense of space and the autumn sunshine. But geologically this hill's significance is in the age of the rock - over 200 million years old.

If the scale of the landscape in this part of Australia is inclined to engender a feeling of insignificance, then the age of this hill has the potential to make human activity seem futile. Two hundred million years is beyond comprehension; enormous, almost overwhelming. Yet geologists move on the surface, imagining forces and events which shaped the land. They are practical, methodical, curious, motivated, committed to a method of enquiry which desires the certainty of knowledge, of fact.

On an abstract level, the intellectual framework of science provides a means of understanding the world. It is a dialogue of sorts, a search for meaning in relation to place, space and time. The theory, measurement, logic, analysis, scepticism and testing are part of the conceptual framework mediating an inquiry which is culturally supported by the institutional context of the Museum. Science is a function of our culture, western culture, and the scientific activity at the Museum has the potential to tell us much about ourselves and our relationship to place. Indeed, as one of the oldest institutions in Australia, the Museum itself is of anthropological significance. It shows us how we interact scientifically with Australia.

The assumptions we make about the world and the things we seek to know help define places that are significant to us: Guerie Bald Hill for the geologist, a particular view for the tourist, for others, it might be agricultural potential, biological or environmental value or perhaps spiritual significance. These, and other interests, may overlap, compete or even be mutually exclusive in the dynamics of contemporary Australia. However, my interest as an artist, a migrant and a white western male, is in the tension between the desire for certainty, a structure promised by science, and the power of experiencing the Australian landscape - a power which threatens to overwhelm, a sensation which is beyond measurement, analysis or intellectual response. Yet the potential for science to describe, to know, to hope for something concrete, has much in common with an attitude also expressed artistically - the idea that there is an underlying structure or order in nature, that beyond appearance there is something to know, something to understand.

In the desire to express, understand or define our experience of place through the mediation of art or science, certain cultural assumptions are shared: assumptions predicated on abstraction. Ultimately, scientists must operate within a structure which involves an abstract relationship to the object of study. The language they have developed involves measurement, weight, classification and analysis - an agreed method or approach which seeks to describe the object in terms of number or geometry. The experience of the landscape may be a powerful emotional or even spiritual experience but the raw material of the scientist is, ultimately, data. Data which can have form, often expressed through graphs, charts, diagrams and the pattern caused by number.



## LANDSCAPES

## mindscapes

AND RELATIONSHIP TO PLACE

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All of us create landscapes – it is not just artists or geographers that define, describe and depict tracts of land. Indeed, landscapes are more a function of the human mind than we realise, with each of us reacting to particular places or sets of places in ways defined by our individual and cultural experiences. In one sense, there is no such thing as a landscape but rather jumbles of components ordered and bounded through human thought, choice and experience. The choice of which elements, places and spaces are included in particular landscapes is in turn determined by our perceptions and conceptions. In other words, choices are affected by our minds. Indeed, for many groups of people, landscapes are not constructed solely on the basis of what is seen. Instead, they use a combination of visual cues mixed with sound, smell, temperature, emotional reactions and other features. Thus, there can be an infinite number of landscapes which reflect the varieties of human relationships to place.

Landscapes are also difficult to define in a strict scientific sense. For some people, landscapes consist of natural features only, that is, the topography of an area of land. For others, landscapes are cultural creations or are defined as a mix of natural and cultural elements. Landscapes are political – they are contested, defended and celebrated. They can be places called ‘home’, exotic locations or barren wastelands that should be avoided. To be known, they must be experienced but they can never be fully described. This is because not only are they perceived differently by each observer but also because they are constantly and continually changing. The passing of seasons, weathering, human intervention and catastrophic forces of nature combine to transform each and every landscape continually. Thus, for many of us, landscapes exist only as ideals held in the mind; pictures composed of key reference points woven or mapped together through the nature of experience.

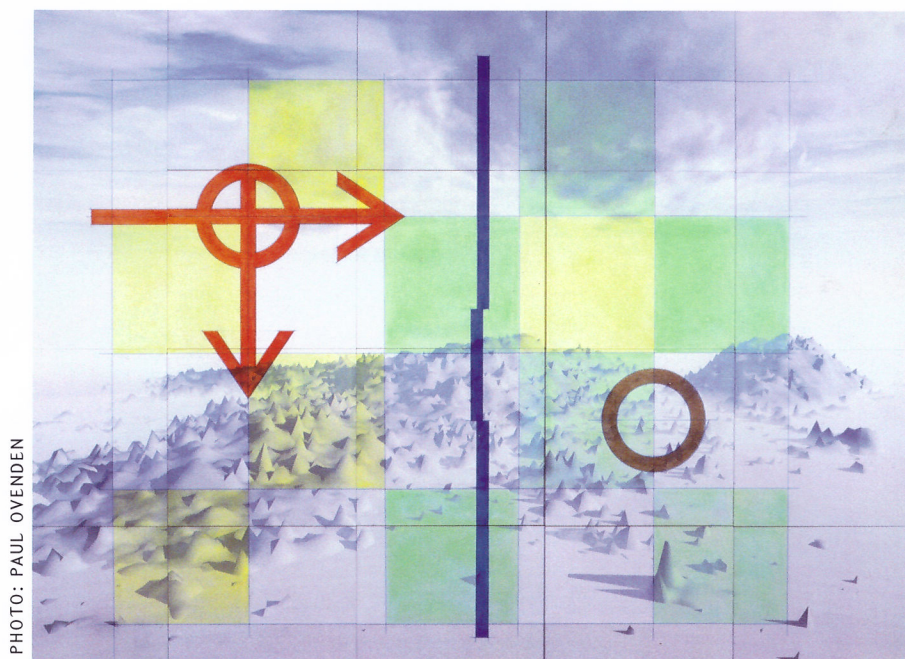


PHOTO: PAUL OVENDEN

Virtual Landscape 1  
2m x 1.6m  
Computer print on paper, pastel and pencil

Essentially, landscapes are interconnected with mapping and constructing models of reality. Today, it is valid to say there are no truly ‘natural’ landscapes left on planet Earth. For hundreds of thousands of years, humans have explored, charted, categorised, settled, harvested, named and defined every corner, nook and cranny of the globe. The process began with the emergence of Homo erectus about a million years ago. Homo erectus crafted stone tools, made ornaments from pierced ostrich shell, engraved bone with crude designs and sailed the first water craft to islands such as Flores, in present-day Indonesia. Homo erectus may also have had other human abilities, such as some rudimentary form of language which they may have used to give the first names to some of the world’s landscapes! Homo erectus was also the first great primate explorer with a wanderlust that took the species far out of Africa, across Europe and Asia, to islands on Australia’s doorstep. Indeed, Homo erectus was the first human ancestor to begin the process of registering and experiencing the world’s great range of natural landscapes.

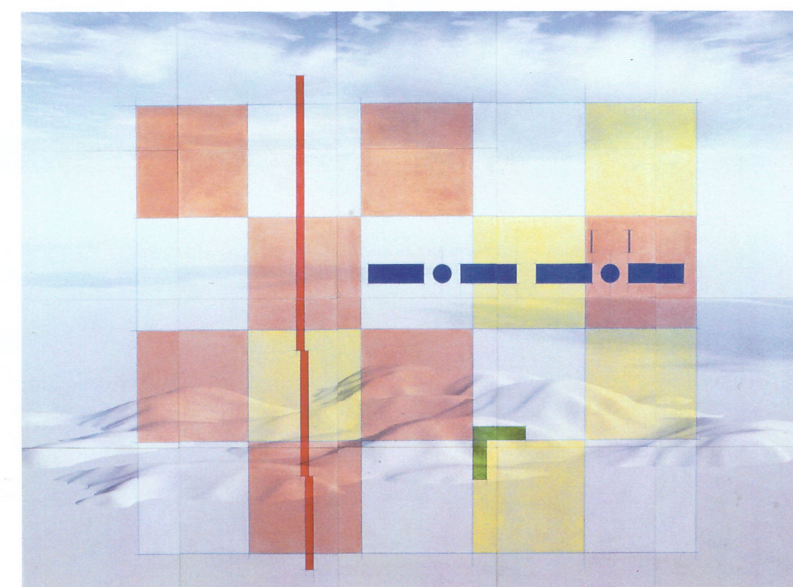
There is much debate as to whether Homo erectus developed into Homo sapiens sapiens in different parts of the world simultaneously or that fully modern humans migrated from Africa a few hundred thousand years ago. For those that believe in the latter, it is argued that Homo sapiens left Africa about a hundred thousand years ago in a second great wave of migration and exploration. They colonised the Homo erectus lands, eventually not only making them their own but also inheriting the Earth. Whatever the case, it appears that landscapes were first marked in a wide-spread symbolic way between 40,000 – 50,000 years ago, with rock paintings and engravings being among some of the more long-lasting evidence. This occurred not only in European landscapes but also in those of Asia, Africa and Australia. People mapped, marked and presumably mythologised every landscape they encountered. Eventually, this behaviour spread to the Americas so that today we find the globe covered with rich and culturally meaningful landscapes. These locations are, of course, usually populated with humans, plants and animals but they are often also inhabited by spirits or fantastic creatures – the elves and trolls of Ireland, the fairies at the bottom of English gardens, the Yeti ‘snowpeople’ of the Himalayas and parts of China, the Loch Ness monster, the Mimi spirits of Arnhem Land or the races of giants in North America, Africa and Europe.

Landscapes now have lengthy histories associated with them. Rock paintings, oral histories, topographic maps, books, movies and computer programs commemorate some of the more significant events that took place. Some landscapes have become sacred for particular peoples or for humanity as a whole. These are often natural places, such as spectacular mountains, waterfalls or places where incredible change is emphasised or experienced – the boundary zones between forms of vegetation, rock, water and sky. Others may be cultural places of profound human experience, such as the battlefields of past wars, graveyards or even entire villages that capture a sacred moment of the past.

PHOTO: LIN SUTHERLAND



Guerie Bald Hill, NSW



Virtual Landscape 2  
2m x 1.6m  
Computer print on paper, pastel and pencil

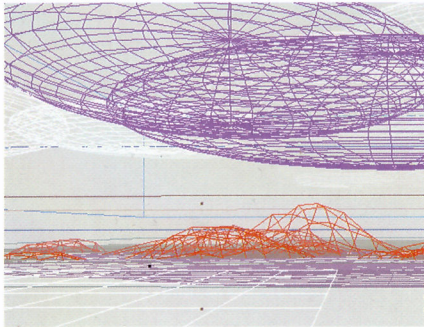
As can be seen, we all have different relationships to particular places. Some of us may have a scientific, clinical, descriptive relationship; others will have one that is more creative, one that taps into the raw energy of the landscape. Relationships may be deeply personal, spiritual, historic, nostalgic or aesthetic. Indigenous people may have a relationship that directly connects them not only to the landscape or a particular place within it, but also to Ancestral Beings of the creative era of the ‘Dreaming’, to plants, animals, other people and the past.

For many of us, there is something we call a distinctive ‘Australian landscape’. This is despite the great diversity of landscapes found within this continent. Often, this is most noticeable when we travel overseas for an extended period. When we greet new and foreign landscapes, we both compare and contrast them with our own. Sometimes we also miss or feel homesick for the Australian landscape. In our minds, we have a conception of what makes Australia unique and special, but often it is difficult to describe in words. For instance, we could describe the natural Australian landscape as the sounds of cockatoos and kookaburras, the golds and greens of eucalypts, the buzzing sound of cicadas on hot and sweaty days, the earthy reds of the arid centre, the brilliant blues of the fringing seas, the feel of sand between the toes, the dusty dryness of the parched interior, the sense of openness, spaciousness, vastness and freedom. The Australian landscape is also mysterious, mystical, magical and mythical, with a strong element of timelessness. It is this aspect that Indigenous Australians often emphasise, while more recent arrivals seem determined to isolate the discrete elements that make up Australian landscapes. Science and the western tradition of putting things in boxes has thus been superimposed over the top of the sheer beauty and majesty of the Australian landscape psyche in much the same way that European, and now a distinct but changing ‘Australian’, culture has been superimposed over the top of the Indigenous.

This layering of the landscape is what Kevin Todd’s creations are all about. They are mindscapes in the extreme, for nowhere do they actually exist in three dimensional space. But they are also real, tangible objects that express a history of mapping, marking and manipulating. They illustrate some of the profound changes Australian landscapes have recently undergone while also reminding us of the different ways in which people perceive or conceive of landscapes. Finally, they warn of a future perhaps not to our liking. For if we continue on our present course, we may reduce our landscapes to places without birds, plants or even humans. But it is not too late if we come to terms with and care for our landscapes now. Australia and Australian landscapes, both physical and cultural, are truly unique. Let us rejoice and celebrate the richness of our heritage in order to bequeath such a gift to the future.



Abstract art also seeks to understand or express that which is beyond literal depiction. Abstract artists seek to explore or express some underlying characteristic of the subject or the representation/perception of the subject in the same way that scientists also seek to explore beyond the purely visible. They both express their interaction with the world in abstract form and use this abstraction as a method for knowing. The resulting models have aesthetic characteristics and the order (form) inherent in scientific data and in abstract art may be an analogy for the order or structure we imagine exists in the natural world.



Virtual Landscape 3  
Wireframe

The images in this exhibition, and indeed all computer images, mimic this hypothesis in that they have a structure behind their appearance – the mathematical code of the computer where the image exists in non-visual form. The technology that was used to create these images is implicit in their existence. The landscapes I have constructed in *Topographies* have both an imaginative and mathematical/technical basis. The images have been produced entirely within the computer and without the aid of photography. Within the computer, they exist as three-dimensional wire frame models which were rendered and then printed on paper. The virtual world has been constructed to replicate a model we imagine for the real world. The images, like the model we imagine for nature, are underpinned by mathematics.

However, the landscapes are also evocative, expressing a sense of space/place which can best be described as 'west of the Great Dividing Range.' They exist as types of landscape rather than specific places, a kind of categorisation which seeks to express something of the experience of space/place and time. The clouds, shadows and atmosphere of the images suggest the ephemeral nature of experience and there is almost a sense of the photographic moment in the works. The landscapes, however, feel timeless, beyond reality but somehow credible. The viewer's physical relationship to these large images, their size and the viewing distance, contributes to a sense of detachment as the viewer is positioned spatially above the landscape.

The scientific process is alluded to by the presence on the surface of the prints of hand-drawn abstract shapes and symbols derived from geological maps. This overlay speaks of the system that the scientist applies or projects onto the landscape with particular colours relating to geological time periods. The aesthetic qualities of the symbols and colours are accentuated in the context of these works and they are used to comment on a scientific attitude rather than for their usual descriptive purposes.

However, there is a sense of absence in these images, of their being incomplete – as if to say that science on its own isn't enough. Scientists would not deny this. Yet, both their activity and their method are central to our culture and play an important role in our understanding of nature and, indeed, ourselves. But certainty is a rather small island and somehow the activity rather than the result seems crucial. Scepticism, creativity, doubt, emotion, measurement and imagination are some of the human attributes used by both artists, scientists and the kids who sometimes spend the night on Guericke Bald Hill.

## BIOGRAPHY

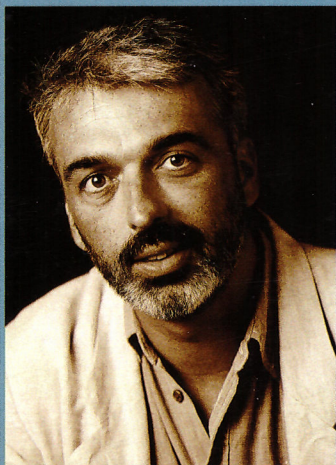


PHOTO: CARL BENTO

Kevin Todd was born in Cork, Ireland, in 1960 and came to Australia in 1981. After studying photography at Sydney College of the Arts, he completed a Master of Fine Arts at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart.

He has exhibited widely in Australia and overseas and has been involved in a number of art/science projects and architectural commissions. He is currently co-ordinator of art and design at the University of the Sunshine Coast.