

 Artback NT presents

THE VISITORS

Franca Barraclough

'The Visitors' project enables the Australian audience to have a real glimpse into the majesty and beauty of Central Australia. But it goes beyond that, it goes into the process of colonisation and how that impacts land, country, and people. That's such an important topic that we really need to address here in the 21st century.

Nicole Pietsch, performer and social activist¹





SYNOPSIS

The Visitors is a powerfully evocative exhibition by long time Alice Springs based artist Franca Barraclough that grapples with the conundrum that living in the desert throws into high relief but that is also in play across the nation. She refers to it as the 'dancing duality' of living on Country, of reconciling the push and pull of people and place, of belonging and not belonging, of a landscape that simultaneously repels and holds, emotionally and psychologically. Core to her enquiry is the quest to make sense of where and how we live, wherever we live.

Well known and much loved for her performance-based community engagement projects, here Barraclough turns her inimitable creative energy to the realisation of a series of monumental photographic images and immersive audio-visual experiences. Created over three years and enlisting countless community members in the staging and production, the resulting works combine humour with serious intent in a compelling and reflective way, drawing our attention to prescient global issues through a potent local prism.

National audiences will be drawn by a fascination with the Central Desert as the mythologised spiritual centre of Australia. It is a place both alluring and alienating in the popular imagination and pivotal to a sense of national identity. Barraclough plays with some of these stereotypes and clichés and encourages us to reassess our connection to and impact on place.

The art is all about scale, the scale of the country out here, the scale of the issue, the role of us all as human beings in what can be an overwhelming task redressing the past, assessing the present and planning the future.

Kieran Finnane, journalist and art critic²



Front: *Crowned Land*, 2019, digital print on archival paper, 150 x 400cm

Top: *Go Feral*, 2019, audio visual, dimensions variable

Bottom: *Princess Warrior*, 2018, digital print on archival paper, 150 x 224.5cm

Reflective of specific places and experiences the exhibition has struck a deep social chord with local audiences but its thought-provoking perspective operates on an equally universal level. *The Visitors* is about taking stock of the social and environmental impacts of settlement and, hopefully, about becoming more accountable. This has local, regional and national relevance while also speaking to global environmental and cultural issues.



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

At the heart of the exhibition are nine large scale digital photographs. These commanding images draw on the slickness of advertising imagery to capture the majesty and grandeur of Central Australian landscapes. Reminiscent of tourism panoramas, a touch of escapist fantasy bound up with the real, they are immediately immersive and seductive. In essence, they are composed with an activist edge, their billboard theatrics laced with a subtle and persistent provocation to look again and take note, exposing that wrinkle in the ordinary. They are not one-liners.

‘The Visitors’ is an amazing project, which provides a unique reflection on how we as humans engage with our environment, and the impact that we as visitors have on this vast land.

Nicole Pietsch, performer and social activist³

The “visitors” referred to in the exhibition’s title encompass a broad sweep of the flotsam and jetsam of human interaction with place. The waves of tourists and “travellers” who come seeking the ancient centre and leave behind the detritus of “civilisation”. The “visitors” also include feral plants and animals, introduced weeds, trappings of settler life and hallmarks of colonial governance systems.

The image *The Biggest Buffel Bust Ever!!* kick-started the series. Buffel, a grass introduced for pastoral purposes in the 1870s, has subsequently overtaken the local terrain edging out native grasses and dominating the landscape across large swathes of the central desert. In this grand panoramic image, a line of workers armed with pick axes and mattocks, ant like amongst an endless sea of buffel covered hills, valiantly attempt to eradicate the weed. The futility of the project is at once obvious,

a recognition of the beast let loose and out of control but also a nod to the need to consolidate on the frontline.

The scale of the image allows the viewer to grasp the magnitude and complexity of the ecological change that we, collectively, have allowed to seize hold of the landscape ... It is a critique and a truth telling in these anxious times of environmental change on a global scale.

Kieran Finnane, journalist and art critic⁴

Top: *The Biggest Buffel Bust Ever!!*, 2019, digital print on archival paper, 150 x 450cm

Overleaf: *Hunters Round About*, 2019, digital print on archival paper, 150 x 690cm

Epic in scale and production, the image is populated by volunteers who responded to a call out to come to a designated location, at a designated time, and hack away at the invasive tide of buffel. Afterwards, sweaty and dirty from the exertion, cushioned in the soft sand of the hills and recovering with the aid of provided refreshments, local land care and environmental groups spoke to the assembled group about ecological concerns and how they could engage in a pro-active way to effect change.

Another imposing panoramic image is set in the township of Alice Springs. A young Aboriginal man, carved weaponry in hand, is poised on a roundabout at a crossroads in the centre of town surrounded by emblems of civic law and order. The Alice Springs Law Courts, Stuart Town Gaol, the old and new police stations and a street full of police vehicles, fill the frame. The Residency, a quaint heritage cottage that once housed government officials foregrounds the over-bearing edifice of the new Supreme Court of the Northern Territory. The recently constructed and hotly contested Supreme Court building rises imposingly in this urban landscape and the young warrior stalks it with intent.

The figure of the warrior is small and, at one reading, in a hopeless position, surrounded. But somehow he is also troubling, persistently so, to the authority that all this superstructure attempts to assert.

Kieran Finnane, journalist and art critic⁵

Barracrough collaborated closely with father and son, Sabian and Michael Liddle, prominent local Arrernte people, to realise this powerful image which required nine photographs to be stitched together. In another image an oversized crown fashioned rudimentally from rustic station fencing, weathered wooden posts and rusted barbed wire, sits in the sandhills with the distant ranges glowing majestically in the last rays of the setting sun. This striking image, titled *Crown Land*, prompts reflection on land usage and ownership.

For all the gravitas of the project there is a lightness, a glorious beauty and an offbeat humour that connects the images. Young women standing strident atop Troop Carriers, the ubiquitous 4WD vehicles of the desert, laden with swags, ride them like chariots, the iconic desert ranges rising in the background. A group dressed as feral animals gyrate clandestinely around a campfire. A spiralling collection of domestic goods are laid out with fractal precision in the local claypans. An arcing row of small tents arranged, along with a traditional bush shelter, sit atop the absent-minded choreography of tyre marks left by joy riders in the desert sand. The beauty and its challenges constantly rub up against each other.

I think Franca's capacity to see the multifaceted layers of what it means to be here and of this place are at the forefront of the exhibition. There is endless beauty but where we are butting up against what was and what is, is quite clear. It makes my heart break, and sing, at the same time.

Frankie Snowdon, dancer and choreographer⁶

Props and objects that appear in the images become part of the exhibition's installation alongside a pair of circular works on board. Here Barracrough meticulously glues down a mix of seeds from a variety of native and introduced food plants to create a highly textured, map-like surface. The intricate swirling and grid-like designs reflect the patterning of seed dispersal, harvesting and agriculture in a micro macro play.

The installation of objects and images is accompanied by an immersive sweeping video that takes in the myriad of locations and activities connected to the realisation of the work across three years of production. Encapsulating the theatre and scope of the project, the artist describes it as a moving meditation that knits all the works together in their creative context, locating them in a web of experiential, artistic and conceptual relationships.



AUDIENCES

These works have actually been made in collaboration with the community of Alice Springs and I'm so proud that Franca has been able to address these issues in the amazing way that she has done, and the way that she's brought the community together to be involved is inspiring.

J9 Stanton, artist⁷

Audience experience is core to Barraclough's artistic process which is firmly grounded in community engagement and collaborative practice. She wants people to experience the work in an all-consuming and engrossing way.

The sheer scale of the images creates a sense of theatre. The haunting soundtrack of the video fills the space in a way that encourages immersive contemplation. It is both an overwhelming and an intimate experience for the viewer. The images invite interrogation. They present scenarios that need unpacking. They can't be glossed over notwithstanding their slick, seamless presentation.

I think that there's things in the exhibition that no matter who you are or where you're from, you can connect with. What humanity is doing to the planet. What colonisation has done to this country. What vast geographies can do to your psyche.

Frankie Snowdon, dancer and choreographer⁸

Communicating with broad audiences underpins Barraclough's collaborative and inclusive way of working. She wants us all to try and make sense of the web of relationships that underpin the way we operate in the world. While being message based, the exhibition is anything but didactic and presents a myriad of possibilities to draw out discussion with broad scope for meaningful education and public program events.

Top: *The Visitors*, Araluen Arts Centre. Photographer: Rusty Stewart

Bottom: Franca Barraclough, Artists Floortalk, *The Visitors*, Araluen Arts Centre. Photographer: Rusty Stewart





ABOUT THE ARTIST

Artist Franca Barraclough has been actively and influentially engaged with the local arts community of Alice Springs for over twenty years. Her practice is marked by its diversity, with memorable achievements in performance, installation and photography, each medium overlapping the other, and drawing on the strength of previous explorations.

Barraclough's performance-based work is solidly grounded in community engagement which has made her a go-to person for inclusion in diverse artistic events, festivals and projects as well as within organisations seeking to engage audiences with a range of content in meaningful ways. She has worked with and mentored successive waves of practitioners within the dynamic artistic community of Alice Springs and has delighted and moved audiences consistently.

In recent years Barraclough has turned her hand to creating photographic imagery engaging, choreographing and co-opting a diverse range of local community members and fellow creatives, drawing participants into her collaborative projects with a sense of purpose amongst the joy of art making. While her work is often tinged with humour she is an artist that works with serious intent to comment on the world around, highlighting the idiosyncrasies, absurdities and profundities of human relationships to each other and to the environment.

Franca is like part of the DNA for the arts community here in Alice Springs. Her vision as an artist is phenomenal but she has this ability to ground it in a way that we are able to touch it, feel it, stand in it and be part of it.

Kalimurty Saraswati Suich, social worker⁹



Top: Installation view,
The Visitors, Araluen Arts
Centre. Photographer:
Mick Walters

Bottom: *The Domestic
Universe - Ground*, 2018,
digital print on archival
paper, 105 x 185cm

Footnotes

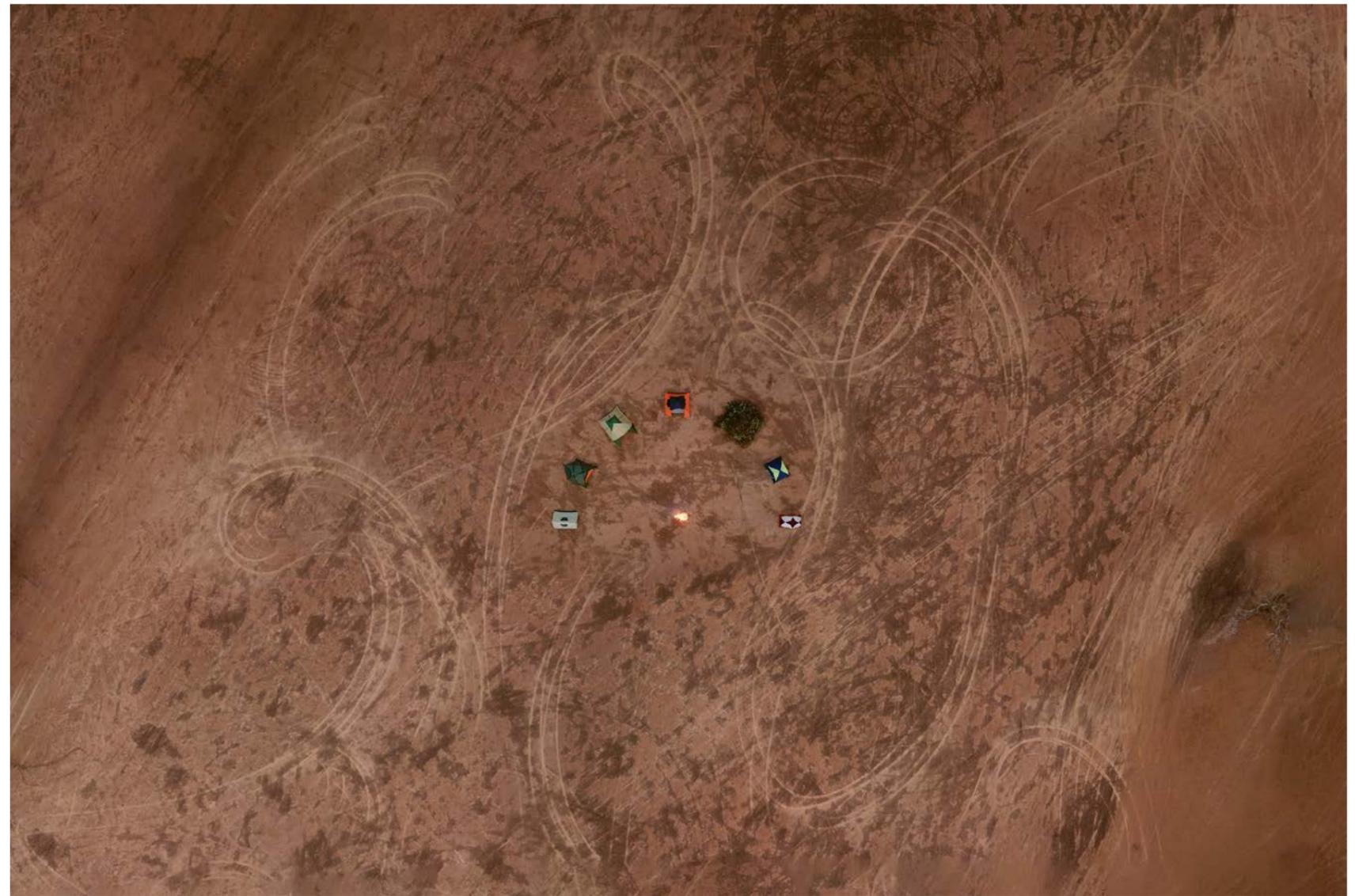
- ¹ Nicole Pietsch, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020
- ² Kieran Finnane, Questions of Scale and Artful Answers, Alice Springs News, 13 November 2019
- ³ Nicole Pietsch, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020
- ⁵ Kieran Finnane, Questions of Scale and Artful Answers, Alice Springs News, 13 November 2019
- ⁴ Kieran Finnane, Questions of Scale and Artful Answers, Alice Springs News, 13 November 2019
- ⁶ Frankie Snowdon, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020
- ⁷ J9 Stanton, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020
- ⁸ Frankie Snowdon, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020
- ⁹ Kalimurty Saraswati Suich, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020
- ¹⁰ Duncan Leggoe, interviewed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 4 February 2020

'The Visitors' makes some really interesting commentary about the overlay of white culture on Aboriginal culture and our impact as human beings on our environment. It's like a little colonial snapshot, and it's that sensitivity to place and that melding of cultures, which I think we're still really struggling with. How to authentically all be here together somehow.

Duncan Leggoe, Alice Springs resident¹⁰

Top: *The Great Outdoors - Aerial*, 2019, digital print on archival paper, 98 x 146.5cm

Bottom: *The Great Outdoors - Ground*, 2019, digital print on archival paper, 98 x 235cm





SPECIFICATIONS

Objects

9 x large scale unframed photographic images

1 x video projection with audio

1 x rolling image projection

2 x circular works on board – wall or floor installed

2 x 3D installations

Installation

Running metres – approx. 70 metres

Requires 2 projectors

Audience Engagement

Education kit and family trail

The artist is available to engage in public activities including workshops, talks, performances and community projects subject to funding and in development with specific venues

Cost

\$3,000 plus GST (freight included)

Contact

Neridah Stockley, Visual Arts Touring Manager

08 8953 5941

art@artbacknt.com.au

Top: Installation view,
The Visitors, Araluen Arts
Centre. Photographer:
Mick Walters

Bottom: Installation view,
The Visitors, Araluen Arts
Centre. Photographer:
Mick Walters