A HOMEMAKER’S GUIDE TO THE WILDERNESS

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Master by Research of the Charles Darwin University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Signed: Talitha Kennedy

Date:
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ABSTRACT

This research project investigates the concept of human intimacy with the natural environment. I consider my personal experience as an archetype of the chronic contemporary condition, that of an urban dweller looking out from the modern comforts of the domestic and global culture to reconcile my existence within nature.

My move from Melbourne to living amidst the prevailing wildlife of tropical Darwin has honed my fascination for organic processes. This however is a socially critical perspective, which reflects on the cultural implications of perceiving the natural world.

In the context of this research, I relate my artistic approach to a ‘homemaker’- one defined by the security of the familiar - trying to find their way in the ‘Wilderness’. This is a primordial space beyond civilisation where the forces of nature threaten harshness and danger as much as they are the source of fecund wild beauty and truth. The title is a reference to my concern with an anthropocentric approach to the natural environment as much as a metaphor for the exploratory practice-led methodology.

My studio investigations function as a process of representation, from pseudo-scientific fieldwork to sculpture as experiential simulations of wonder for the natural form. The resulting body of work primarily uses black leather, hand stitched into soft sculptures. This visual language retains the vocabulary of the domestic and cultivated - the crafted form, soft toys and furnishings - whereas the materiality of leather takes on a bestial quality suggesting the body and evocative of skin. The physical form of the sculptures are modeled on nature observations - such as plant structures, termite mounds and mangrove root systems, but signify universal life forms of organic growth and decay. The rendering of natural form as something familiar and resembling one’s own body makes for a sensation of simulated intimacy.

In considering how my work is read by a viewer, I draw on the Phenomenological notion of the ‘lived body’, in particular Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘flesh’, where the flesh of the body is how we know the flesh of the world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration ............................................................................................................ i  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................. ii  
Abstract ................................................................................................................ iii  
Table of Contents ................................................................................................. iv  
List of Figures ....................................................................................................... vi  
Preface .................................................................................................................. x  

Chapter 1: Introduction  
The Map ........................................................................................................... 1  
Methodology ..................................................................................................... 1  
Chapter Outline ................................................................................................ 2  

Chapter 2: Seeing the Wilderness  
Looking for Wilderness ..................................................................................... 5  
Darkness falls ................................................................................................... 9  
Path finding..................................................................................................... 11  
Making out the shadows ................................................................................. 21  

Chapter 3: Clinging to the Familiar  
Making home in the Wilderness ...................................................................... 25  
Reinventing the beast ..................................................................................... 31  
Pretty dead things ........................................................................................... 37  
The intimate small scale ................................................................................. 41  

Chapter 4: In the Wilderness  
In and of the world .......................................................................................... 46
Sculptural corporality ................................................................. 48
Immersion in the flesh .............................................................. 53

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Home coming ................................................................. 65

Bibliography ........................................................................ 66

Appendices ........................................................................... 70

Appendix 1: Documentation of Mid-Candidature Exhibition .......... 71
Appendix 2: Documentation of Assessment Exhibition .................. 77
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Tidal zone alongside Bagot Road, Darwin, April 12 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 2: Me in mangroves, November 15 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 3: Wild shadows on concrete, April 4 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 4: Talitha Kennedy, sketches in my visual diaries, early 2009.


Figure 6: Termite mounds. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 7: Canopy vines. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 8: Darwin, photo looking over to Darwin CBD from plane, August 7 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 9: Venice, photo looking over to Piazza San Marco from the bell tower of Chiesa di San Giorgio Maggiore, June 16 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 10: Talitha Kennedy, sketches in my visual diaries whilst in Europe, 2009.

Figure 11: Venetian decay, 2009. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.


Figure 13: (left) Andrew Browne, *Visitation #2*, 2009. Oil on linen. 240x170cm.

Figure 14: Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates*, 2009 – 2011, leather, thread & stuffing (image of various works). Photo: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 15: Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mother-in-law’s Tongue*, 2010. Leather, stuffing & thread. 45x35cm. Photos: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 16: (left) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mound*, 2009. Leather, stuffing & thread. 32x20cm. Photo: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 17: (right) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Twig*, 2009. Leather, stuffing & thread. 42x12cm. Photo: Fiona Morrison.
Figure 18: Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Tree Arbour*, 2010. Leather, stuffing & thread. 45x35cm. Photos: Fiona Morrison.............................................................. 30

Figure 19: (left) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Encrustation* 2011. Leather, stuffing & thread. 18x20cm. (right) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mangrove Mud Pod* 2010, leather, stuffing & thread. 28x28cm. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. .......................30

Figure 20: (left) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mud Branch* 2011, leather, stuffing & thread. 33x30cm. (right) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mound Akimbo* 2010, leather, stuffing & thread. 50x20cm. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. .............................. 31

Figure 21: (left to right) Studio investigations detailing the brute force of stuffing leather, February 3 2011; leather conical shape plump at tip where stuffed and draping where empty, November 23 2010; and the use of pliers required to stitch through leather at seams, April 14 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ...............................32


Figure 24: (centre) Dorothy Cross, *Virgin Shroud*, 1993. Cowhide, muslin, silk satin and metal stand. 201x81x120cm. Tate Gallery Collection (Image source: http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=21259&tabview=work accessed September 04 2009). ............................................................................................. 34


Figure 28: (left) Louise Weaver, *Secrets are for keeping*, 2008. Hand crocheted lambs-wool over hand turned persimmon wood and Japanese rice wine gourd. 26x24x15cm. ......................................................................................................... 38

Figure 29: Kate Rohde, *Pink Cobra* 2009, mixed media, 72x 35x30cm. Exhibited in Kate Rohde, ‘Crystalised’ 2009, Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne (Image source: www.kwgallery.com/artist/kate-rohde/pink-cobra/24/568 accessed December 02 2010). .............................................................................................. 39

Figure 30: (left) The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Galleries, Level 3, Victoria and Albert Museum, London................................................................. 40

Figure 31: (left) Visual artist Anna Reynolds caressing *The Intimates: Mound* at exhibition opening ‘Adaptation’ DVAA, March 05 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. .... 42

Figure 32: (centre) Artist Katie Saunders holding *The Intimates: Tree Arbour* in Talitha Kennedy’s studio December 12 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. .............. 42

Figure 33: (right) Painter Cait Wait nursing *The Intimates: Mangrove Mud Pod* in Talitha Kennedy’s studio December 02 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. .............. 42

Figure 34: Dancer Alex Jordon physically responding to *The Intimates* in Talitha Kennedy’s studio May 20 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.................................. 42

Figure 35: (top line) *The Clay Things* in progress. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. .... 49

Figure 36: *The Extroverted and the Introverted*, 2010. Self-firing clay Photo: Fiona Morrison. ................................................................................................................. 49

Figure 37: *The Clay Things*, installation shot from ‘Point’ CDU Postgraduate Exhibition, November 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. ......................................................... 49

Figure 38: Detail and work in progress of *The Intimates*. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.50

Figure 39: Drawing and construction of *The Intimates: Encrustations*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. .......................................................................................... 51
Figure 40: Construction photos of *The Intimates: Tree Arbour*, 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 51

Figure 41: Construction photos of *The Intimates: Termite Mound*, 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 52

Figure 42: Drawing and construction of *The Intimates: Mound Akimbo*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 52

Figure 43: Construction photos of *The Intimates: Soft Rock*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 52

Figure 44: Drawing and construction photos of *The Intimates: Banyan*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 53

Figure 45: *Shadows’ Embrace* 1 in progress, September 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 55

Figure 46: *Shadows’ Embrace* 2 in progress, January 2011. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 56

Figure 47: Reference imagery for *Shadows’ Embrace*, including ink drawings and photographs. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 57

Figure 48: Detail photographs of *Shadows’ Embrace*. Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 57


Figure 50: Talitha Kennedy, sketches in visual diary June 2010. ................................................................. 61

Figure 51: Talitha Kennedy, sketch in visual diary, detail and *Whole Hole* Photos: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 61

Figure 52: *Looking out, looking in* studio investigation. Photo: Talitha Kennedy. ................................................................. 63

*Dimensions indicate overall height followed by overall width*
PREFACE

Responding to the natural environment has particular relevance in the Northern Territory. I moved to Darwin in 2005, seeking a sense of place that somewhat negated the Colonial overlay of Australia. My hometown Melbourne felt inadequate for exploring Australian vernacular issues. In contrast to Eurocentric urban Melbourne, Darwin seemed an amplification of the Australian experience with strong Indigenous presence and unmistakable South East Asian location. Although my Darwin experience is largely suburban cosmopolitan, this is a place that defies taming. The built environment looks conspicuously temporal amidst the tidal flood zones. The proliferation of mangrove ecologies threaten to reclaim the place, concrete erodes with mould and humidity, termites eat away at buildings, bush hens scratch up the landscaping, plant sprouts break through bitumen.

Here, indigenous art is the dominant aesthetic. The imagery is powerful, eliciting awe and significance without necessarily decoding. Responding to the same place but with a very different art language, forces a heightened awareness of my cultural perceptions and limitations of visual language.
THE MAP

This exegesis documents the reflective process involved in art production, relating the intuitive production of artifacts with the conceptualising of personal resonances in the contemporary cultural context.

I frame this research enquiry as a narrative of exploration, in the spirit of an explorer's journal or adventure guidebook. Thus ‘A Home-maker’s Guide to the Wilderness’ forms an allegoric paradigm that addresses the problematic perceptions of nature.

I argue that contemporary culture relates to the natural environment as other, hence I refer to ‘Wilderness’ as a cultural construct that positions nature in opposition to human culture. My artistic approach addresses problems related to human intimacy with wild nature, so that observing and interpreting natural forms is an attempt to develop an intimate consciousness of nature. I likened this method to ‘Home-making’ in order to describe the process making the other become familiar.

The primary body of work is a series of leather soft sculptures, created to simulate wild nature in terms of the intimate encounter. The process reveals connections with nature as much as it exposes the disconnections to examine our fraught relationship with Wilderness.

METHODOLOGY

The very aim of creating a body of artwork that addresses notions of human intimacy with natural environment is intrinsically phenomenological; as it broaches issues associated with bodily experience as perception of the world, or being in the world.¹ Thus I have aligned my process, in theoretical enquiry and art mode, with the principles of phenomenological research methodology, as defined by humanistic academic Dr. Clark Moustakas:

In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus. As the fullness of the topic emerges, strands and tangents of it may complicate an articulation of a

¹ For further details see Chapter 2 discussion on Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson, Harper Perennial Modern Thought (New York: HarperCollins, 2008 (Originally published in German as Sein und Zeit by Neomarius Verlag 1962)).
manageable and specific question. Yet this process of permitting aspects to enter into awareness is essential in the formulation of a core question that will remain viable and alive throughout the investigation.²

Such a process-driven strategy corresponds to a heuristic methodology, employing trial and error methods where the outcomes are revealed through creative synthesis:

Knowledge of the data and a period of solitude and meditation focusing on the topic and question are the essential preparatory steps for the inspiration that eventually enables a creative synthesis. The major concepts that underlie a creative synthesis are the tacit dimension, intuition and self-searching. The researcher must move beyond any confined or constricted attention to the data itself and permit an inward life to grow, in such a way that a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated are realised.³

Moustakas’ description of phenomenological methodology directs my studio investigations and the process of evaluating my actions and findings, particularly in relation to being ‘self-searching’ and assessing what ‘rings true’. Such Heuristic experience-based techniques that are exploratory and instinctive correlates with current visual art research methodologies such as “action research” methodologies.⁴

The production of my artwork feeds directly from findings and conclusions generated from my broad cross-disciplinary investigation which includes philosophy, literature, art discourse and learning from other artists’ practices.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This introduction maps the key objectives and methodology for this body of research by contextualising the process through the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Seeing the Wilderness elaborates on the notion of Wilderness in the context of a contemporary relationship with the natural environment. I raise concerns particular to Australia and our colonial tradition, relating how cultural discourse has informed my outlook and line of enquiry. This is elaborated on as an aesthetic of darkness and melancholy affected by the theoretical critique. I interpret Wilderness through discussing the preliminary body of work carried out as personal


³ Ibid. 31-32.

⁴ This is outlined in recent literature and academic discourse including Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt, ed., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London: L. B. Taurus 2007).
observations of natural forms, this ‘pseudo scientific fieldwork’ revealed my approach to the natural environment that informed my visual vocabulary of wildness.

Chapter 3: Clinging to the Familiar introduces the notion of the familiar as a consciousness of the world. Through psychological and philosophical discourse on the home as self, I examine the domestic allusion in my major body of work titled The Intimates. The research objectives are extrapolated through analysis of these leather soft sculptures in relation to an aesthetic of intimacy through the use of animal skin and its cultural associations, craft language, small scale and viewers' tactile response. Contemporary relevance is drawn through the discussion of other artists with similar concerns, their influence and points of departure in relation to my research outcomes.

Chapter 4: In the Wilderness suggests potential resolution as an interpretation of the lived experience of the research. I discuss how my working process became increasingly conscious of corporality and associations to the body. Through relating French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh” to the human relationship with Wilderness, I extrapolate on the process of my final body of work and its realisations.

I reflect on the research journey in the conclusion, assessing the outcomes and how these may be interpreted through exhibition.
SEEING THE WILDERNESS
LOOKING FOR WILDERNESS

Wild nature seems someplace else, somewhere more imagined than encountered. Wilderness is very distant from our immediate reality. Most Australians live in constructed environments, tucked safely away in the comforts of contemporary living. Wilderness may be envisioned as a holiday destination, far away from the everyday. Or something that needs to be protected, helped by giving donations and recycling. Personal perceptions may differ but our vision of Wilderness represents the opposite to the known and the familiar in our contemporary life.

I use the term Wilderness because it encapsulates the perception of the natural environment as dislocated from human culture. I perceive a cultural separation from wildness as archetypal to the contemporary condition. These philosophical and psychological complexities are grappled with in the making of my artwork. Throughout this chapter I draw together disparate interpretations of Wilderness that inform my thinking and generate the aesthetic of my artwork.

Seeing the Wilderness is arguably a futile ambition. Wilderness is not necessarily to do with place but is a cultural construct, as defined by Dutch environmental philosopher Martin Drenthen when he explains:

The word ‘Wilderness’ refers to the sphere that lies beyond culture, a part of the world that is not subject to human intervention and that is not (and can never be) our home.5

Inherent in the concept of Wilderness is the Cartesian duality of mind and matter, the cognito or conscious self, as distinct from the ‘outside world’. Wilderness delineates the non-human from the human realm, thus imposing a view of the natural environment as other. Here I encounter underlying philosophical problems. Specifically, I identify environmental ethical issues and postcolonial dilemmas when reading the Australian landscape as Wilderness. However, there are psychological repercussions for defining nature as separate from human culture. Perceiving nature as other is dialectical, so that by its very definition it conversely defines ourselves. This anthropocentric view shifts the representation of Wilderness from

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being in the interest of the natural environment for its own sake, to reflecting more about our own psyche.

The self-referential perception of Wilderness is epitomised in the colonial conception of Australia that superimposed *Terra Nullius* in order to claim ownership. I feel this legacy still lingers in contemporary Australian culture. I don’t believe we are truly postcolonial: we may aspire, but we’re not quite collectively there yet.⁶

The colonial view continues to overlay our vision of place, inhibiting an intimate relationship with the natural environment. I liken this dilemma to a screen that blocks engagement with what is really there. This is manifested in my artwork as a kind of blindness that abstracts the visual and veils external reality. A realisation brought about through frustration in longing to encounter and interpret wild nature but instead confronting the cultural narratives that make up our perception of place. The conflict of longing for an intimate understanding of the natural environment but acknowledging my contemporary dislocation, affects a forlorn mood of unfulfilled, or perhaps unfulfillable, desire. Although my process is geared towards resolution, I am interested in the aesthetic created by coming up against this impossibility. My work embodies the tension between attraction and repulsion at the idea of Wilderness, presenting a shadowy mirror of our fraught relationship with the natural world.

Whilst not everyone associates such conflict with their relationship with the natural environment, it is an archetypal experience:

> Today, almost everyone living in urbanised centres of the Western world feels intuitively a lack of something in life. This is due directly to the creation of an artificial environment from which nature has been excluded to the greatest possible extent.⁷

Nasr identifies a modern crisis experienced as collective feeling of loss in contemporary life. However one may identify this ‘lack’, it affects a melancholic emotive response. A dark, guilty feeling, that while something bad is happening we don’t want to do all that much about it. This despondency is evident in contemporary culture particularly in dystopian or post-apocalypse narratives that depict a horrific

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⁶ An opinion deduced from the recent ‘History Wars’ debate on the impact of colonial occupation on Aboriginal peoples, which revealed the polarity of Australian beliefs on this matter; discussed by various commentators in Robert Manne, ed., *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle’s Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne: Black Inc Agenda, 2003).

environmental future, by such influential authors as Aldous Huxley, John Wyndham, Anthony Burgess, Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin. This literature picks up on the cultural anxiety over industrial development that affects a counter desire - the romanticisation of nature.

In my art practice I interpret experiential qualities associated with Wilderness, such as, the beguiling wilderness, a longing for something lost, the fear of danger and silencing the human. I develop a psychological aesthetic, more felt than seen, which interprets Wilderness as an emotive experience, an interpretation aligned with environmental historian Roderick Nash:

‘Wilderness’ has a deceptive concreteness at first glance. The difficulty is that while the word is a noun it acts like an adjective. There is no specific material object that is wilderness. The term designates a quality (as the –ness suggests) that produces a certain mood or feeling in a given individual and, as a consequence, may be assigned by that person to a specific place. Because of this subjectivity a universally acceptable definition of wilderness is elusive.

Comprehending Wilderness is elusive is because it is intangible, merely a cultural construct.

The popular vision of Wilderness is those places that are zoned and labelled ‘Wilderness Areas’, but which are actually politicised space. The US was the first nation to enforce a Wilderness Act in 1964, legally designating areas for protection as defined:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognised as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation.

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8 As an example of this author see Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932).

9 As an example of this author see John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (UK: Michael Joseph, 1951).

10 As an example of this author see Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (UK: William Heineman, 1962).

11 As an example of this author see Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Canada: McCcllland and Stewart, 1985).


Australia shares North America’s frontier history, taming Wilderness for new settlement and exploiting natural resources. Colonising land was executed in the conviction that Indigenous peoples did not own land as there were no visible signs of ‘permanent improvements or human habitation’. 1964 seems like an alarmingly recent time to start protecting the environment, an intervention made only when little remains to protect. Referring to ‘man’ as ‘visitor’ reveals that recreational value is often the central motivation for protecting Wilderness, reflecting nineteenth century American transcendentalist thought that contact with wildness is a moral necessity to counter the ‘self-destructive tendencies of civilisation’.

Although I feel strongly about loss of habitat and detrimental change to the environment, I am suspicious of the underlying philosophies that ‘value’ natural environment as ‘sacred’ as it is conditional to our own state of being. Safeguarding Wilderness is more often a token good deed that compensates for our unsustainable lifestyles.

Australian environment spokesperson Tim Flannery came to the view that the wilderness movement is based on well-meaning but effectively colonial ideals. Valuing natural environments on the basis of being ‘untrammeled by man’ only protects an illusory understanding of nature. Flannery notes:

Even though I knew this in my heart, none of it dampened my euphoria when, as a young environmentalist, I heard that another bit of Australia had been “saved” in a national park. Weirdly like a young British imperialist at the height of empire admiring the expanse of pink on the globe, I’d examine maps of Australia and inwardly cheer at the proliferating green areas. It was only when I gave away the falsehood of terra nullius (and the accompanying belief that the land was “ours” to carve up according to our inclinations) that I began to think differently. As you may imagine, the wilderness movement has faced similar difficulties, and even in strict wildernesses the plight of wildlife is just as dire. The hard truth is that the philosophy on which these movements were based was flawed, and there was no magical cure when European interference with the land was done away with. In fact, in many instances, things got worse.

It seems a sad state of affairs when so-called ‘sympathetic’ acts such as National Park protection become a sham of domination.

The melancholy accompanying loss of natural environment is made all the more dark and disturbing when confronting the cultural overlay of Australia’s sordid history. Postcolonial discourses associate Wilderness with Terra Nullius, ‘a land

15 Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 14.

empty of people’,\textsuperscript{17} which justified Britain to place its own values over the landscape. Indigenous academic Marcia Langton critiques the National Park scheme as ‘an institution of power which governs and commodifies “nature” and thereby constructs an imagined wilderness’,\textsuperscript{18} effectively ‘a disguised and politically acceptable dispossession of indigenous people’:

Just as terra nullius was a lie, so was this European fantasy of wilderness.\textsuperscript{19} The Prime Minister’s 2008 ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’\textsuperscript{20} formalised the remorse contemporary Australia feels for the dark side of colonial occupation and yet the harm cannot be undone nor truly rectified.

**DARKNESS FALLS**

From my exploration of Wilderness discussed in the previous sub-chapter, grew an intense melancholy regarding my own contemporary position. In wanting to interpret Wilderness, all I could see was a legacy of environmental loss and Indigenous oppression. These dark feelings of guilt and remorse conflict with the pleasurable wonder I experience while engaging with the Australian natural environment. They seem like an obstruction, impeding my naive delight for nature.

This darkness has an aesthetic of its own. It is suggestive of our psyche towards Wilderness, a sense of the unconscious and its lure. The longing to experience wild nature is a central theme in nineteenth century Romanticism, a genre of art and literature I am strongly attracted to but remain critical of. The dark and emotive aesthetic of my work owes something to the aesthetic of the Romantic Sublime which identifies the experience of awe and terror in the immensity and chaos of nature. However, I am critical of the notion of the Sublime that relates to nature as

\textsuperscript{17} Marcia Langton, ”What Do We Mean by ’Wilderness’? Wilderness and Terra Nullius in Australian Art,” *The Sydney Papers* 8, no. 1 (1996). 31.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 24

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 22

exotic other. This exoticisation led D.H. Lawrence on a ‘savage pilgrimage’\(^{21}\) including Australia in 1922. His European aesthetics are evident in Lawrence’s loosely autobiographical novel *Kangaroo*, when he writes:

> The strange, as it were, invisible beauty of Australia, which is undeniably there, but which seems to lurk just beyond the range of our white vision. You feel you can’t see – as if your eyes hadn’t the vision in them to correspond with the outside landscape.\(^{22}\)

Lawrence’s attitude sums up how I understand the contemporary Australian experience, when wanting to connect with the natural environment I feel invisibly blocked. I particularly responded to the phrase ‘you feel you can’t see’ and it repeated in my mind as I developed my major body of work *The Intimates*, a series of black leather soft sculpture whose tactility and the blackness are like groping for form in the dark and being forced to rely on your physical senses and not your eyes.

In literature themes of blindness and darkness are often associated with ‘white’ encounters with Wilderness, notably in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1926) but also in novels by contemporary Australian authors Patrick White,\(^{23}\) Peter Carey\(^{24}\) and Kate Grenville.\(^{25}\) The ‘darkness’ that attracts us to exploring unknown wild places also holds the danger of taking us too far from Western culture; hauntingly evoked by Conrad through Kurtz’s dying words ‘The horror! The horror!’\(^{26}\) A postcolonial reading of this darkness is conditioned to our own position:

> ...Marlowe’s narrative in *Heart of Darkness* begins by suggesting that exploration has turned a blank space into a space of darkness and ends by suggesting that it has turned the unknown into the ‘unspeakable’. Indeed, one might argue that, instead of bringing light into darkness as it claims, the ‘civilising’ mission actually uncovers the ‘darkness’ at its own heart. As V.G. Kieran puts it, Africa in this period ‘became very truly a Dark continent, but its darkness was one the invaders brought with them, the sombre shadow of the white man.’\(^{27}\)


I relate this metaphoric figure who tries to see but is obscured by their own shadow to Lawrence’s inability to see ‘beauty’ with ‘white vision’. This aligns with the postmodern understanding of nature as ‘other’, where our perception of nature can only reflect our own cultural conditioning. If we perceive wildness as dark and horrifying it is only because we are so preoccupied with our own constructed culture that we cannot feel comfortable with anything outside ourselves.

The contemporary darkness thus perceived in wildness is no longer necessarily related to ‘white man’ and missions ‘bringing light’ to unexplored places; rather there is a pervasive shadow cast by the modern figure over the non-human. Contemporary life obscures direct engagement with natural environments. I feel anxiety over my inability to let go of urbanity, I feel guilty over wanting modern comforts at the expense of natural habitat and environment and I lament the ramifications of my colonial existence in Australia. These realisations and many more, I’m sure, construct an imposing figure of contemporary human presence over the natural environment.

**PATH FINDING**

In the first year of the Masters research, postmodern readings on Wilderness affected a gothic, somewhat damned outlook in my work. The deeper I considered my relationship with Wilderness, the greater I found contemporary cultural projections to be. Although I was intrigued by the melancholia of focusing solely on the dark disturbing side of our relationship with nature, I yearned to transcend this. I feel our self-referential culture is to blame for indifference to environmental destruction because contemporary culture blinds us to the non-human world:

> Faced with a world in our own image without wild others to alert us to a world outside of our human one, we find ourselves like Narcissus transfixed by our own image as the world fades slowly away.28

It is essential to maintain connection to external reality rather than becoming preoccupied with the world of our own making.

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The encounter with ‘wild others’ underpins this body of research. The ongoing documentation of natural forms developed and defined my personal vision of Wilderness. This body of work takes the form of visual diaries of drawings and photographs that collate my fascination for forms that convey the sensations of wildness. The imagery generates a visual vocabulary of form and aesthetic that informs all of this body of research.

I refer to these visual diaries as ‘pseudo scientific field work’ as the documentation mimics the traditional methods of natural science, such as observation and collection. I parody the empirical quantitative approach and rather than objectively documenting the subject matter for knowledge of the world, I qualitatively assess my experiential interpretation. The systematic collation of my sensual approach to Wilderness defines an immediate and felt experience.

Shifting the perception of Wilderness from outside the human realm to an experience of the wildness around us allows a direct relationship with the natural environment, reflecting a current trend in environmental discourse:

Nature is sold to us as something separate that lives far away from us in wild places, when really it’s all around us, engaging with us more than we guess. The wilderness begins right here where we live.29

Instead of defining Wilderness as some vast legislated terrain, far removed from the everyday I came to interpret it as wild nature encountered. This approach is relevant not only from the line of philosophical enquiry but is informed by my local Darwin experience where the suburbs are forever subject to unruly wildness.

I realised my vision of Wilderness by documenting encounters of wildness throughout my everyday activities. Although easy to miss when preoccupied, wild nature is never too far away in Darwin. The main thoroughfares pass mangroves, storm surge zones and fecund parklands. The few times I intentionally armed myself with drawing pads to observe ‘Wilderness’, on daytrips and camping, it felt rather silly and contrived. When looking for ideal wildness, it never appears quite ideal enough. Instead chanced glimpses out of the corner of my eye induced the sensations of chaotic brutality of nature. This felt experience of wildness perhaps seems all the more wilder in its close proximity with the built environment.

Figure 1: Tidal zone alongside Bagot Road, Darwin, April 12 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 2: Me in mangroves, November 15 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.
Visual journals of collated photographs I have taken form an integral part of my studio investigations (for example see Figs.1-3) and I constantly refer to these photographs when making drawings and sculptures for details and experiential quality. This imagery reveals my recurring interest in forms that convey organic processes (Figs.4-5). I am particularly attracted to things that look as though they are growing and dying and I appropriate these signs of transformation in my work.

My concern with chanced upon Wilderness is presented by representing plants and landscape evidence of animal life rather than depicting animals. Recurring imagery includes termite mounds, vine canopies, mangroves, the branching of trees and twigs, *Ficus* trees, animal holes, plant shadows and other habitats. To offer insight on what I am attracted to in these natural forms, I will elaborate on ‘termite mounds’ and ‘vine canopies’.
Termite mounds are iconic in Northern Territory parklands but are harbingers of destruction in suburbia; they protrude from nature strips and garden beds, swelling over fences and poles, an ever present threat to homes. The mound is never a finite form, either expanding in a seemingly irrational mass or abandoned and eroding. The surrounding earth is gathered by the termites to form the mound in which houses the colony, appearing as though the ground itself is growing up and swelling. I am attracted to these strange, somewhat abject, forms. They appear monstrous, enveloping their environs as if the ground had something underneath pushing it up, like a figure under the sheets.
Coastal vines grow prolifically in Darwin and are endemic in the wet season but die back in the dry. Starting life as insignificant sprouts, they climb, growing into densely webbed masses that dominate the canopy and enclose the space below. The overshadowing vine canopy can appear like a swelling blob, cloaking anything in its way. I have strong sensations when in their cave-like embalmment of feeling hidden and protected but dangerously close to being trapped and caught.

The need to encounter wild nature was made all the more crucial by my experience researching and working at The Venice Biennale throughout June and July 2009. My first time in Europe, this intense ten week period brought about a major shift in my practice which was informed not only by extreme exposure to international historic and contemporary art, but also by the experience of being overwhelmed by the dominance of built forms and human culture.

At times I felt sick with the lack of green. The islands that make up Venice are nothing but built form; I sought out signs of the non-human but the few gardens were too formal and ordered. I escaped to Padua to see the oldest Botanic Garden but this only reinforced the use of nature as commodity and a constructed vision of the world. The swamp island Torcello brought great relief as I was then able to trample alone amidst pathless wetlands with the risk of getting stuck in a bog.
The weight of centuries of human presence and edifice was too much for this provincial Australian. Although I thrived in the culture, history, stimulating social experiences and international scene, the gap between the nature-dominant environment of Darwin and the monument of human civilization that is Venice had all the more impact on me.

Figure 8: Darwin, photo looking over to Darwin CBD from plane, August 7 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 9: Venice, photo looking over to Piazza San Marco from the bell tower of Chiesa di San Giorgio Maggiore, June 16 2009. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.
The visual diaries from my time in Europe reveal the haunting presence of natural forms from Darwin. I dreamt of surreal transformative masses of growth and decay. I began to see my fascination with termite mounds reflected in the eroding statuary of Venice. Carved marble and cast ornaments were everywhere, for me these constructions appeared equally subject to natural forces of time and climate. The major impression from this experience was the ephemerality of civilisation, an experience compelled by invigilating in a derelict 15th Century chapel that was literally crumbling around us. The profusion of marble was eroding and aging into chalk and dust, it coated all surfaces. I literally breathed in the building, coughing up and blowing my nose of this chalky residue.

Figure 10: Talitha Kennedy, sketches in my visual diaries whilst in Europe, 2009.
Returning to my Darwin studio after being in Europe, I used clay to speedily capture the morphing of organic forces and eroding statuary that haunted my mind. I frantically formed clay into evocations of dynamic shifting and growing forms that push and extend then collapse back in on itself. *The Clay Things* (Fig.12) saw my work become more abstract than the earlier representational drawings. These sculptures are monuments to transformation, simultaneously new and unfinished or old and putrefying, ambiguous forms suggestive of palm sprouts, decaying tree trunks, mountains and termite mounds - anthropomorphic, beastly, suggestive and gestural.

For my research, envisioning Wilderness shifted from problematic cultural narratives to internal forms informed by direct encounters and experiences. My aesthetic thus developed from visual blindness to creating suggestive forms that are elusive and open-ended.

**MAKING OUT THE SHADOWS**

Through studio investigations I found I had no ambition to work with colour for this body of work. The lack of pigment in my clay work felt more suggestive and abstract, however through drawing with ink and charcoal the use of black became increasingly meaningful. Analysing the photographs collated in my visual diaries brought new awareness to the importance light and shadow plays in my work. Initially, I considered photographing natural forms as straightforward documentation of things seen but later, I realised my subconscious manipulation of light to create ambience. Dissolving volume in silhouette emphasises an experiential quality, provoking imaginary allusion in the imagery. Observing this technique brought
greater understanding to the way I see, interpreting consciousness as somewhere in-between the real and the imaginary.

This new aesthetic in my photographs relates to the use of black tanned leather as a medium that is particularly conducive to light and shadow. Light is absorbed in darkened crevices and depths, while the sheen of the leather highlights its contours.

Blackness retains the psychological charge of anxiety and fear evocative of the Wilderness experience. Using black in my work calls to mind the sensation of night, a time of transience where things known become unknown and take on foreboding presences.


The appearance of natural forms caught in flash light amidst overwhelming shadowy darkness evokes the sinister sensations of wildness, as described in relation to the work of painter Andrew Browne:

Browne paints the effects of light, the seamlessness of photographic surfaces and the dark thrill of nature-fear that can strike us, unexpectedly, at night in our own backyards.30

Comparable to my aesthetic, Browne plays with the visible and the invisible through light and shadow to draw on innate reactions to Wilderness anxieties of fear and beauty. I aim to achieve a similar sensation to Brown’s painting through the medium of sculpture, instead of a pictorial representation I am interested in evoking a ‘dark thrill of nature-fear’ in a viewer’s engagement with an object.

The 2010 Balnaves Contemporary at Art Gallery of New South Wales, exhibited a number of contemporary Australian painters under the curatorial premise ‘Wilderness’, interpreting a collective anxiety over environmental causes and cultural disconnection with wildness. Curator Wayne Tunnicliffe discussed Wilderness as an emotive subtext in contemporary art,

...‘wilderness’ becomes much more than just a place untouched by humankind; rather, it is intimately linked to our most fundamental thoughts, emotions, desires and anxieties. In acknowledging our proximity to the natural world and our dependence on it for some of our most visionary ideas we can conceive of a future in which we live with the wilderness rather than at a distance from it.31

My intention for interpreting Wilderness parallels this context; by evoking an emotive response to wild forms my work reveals the anxieties of our contemporary relationship with nature. The discussion of Wilderness in this chapter began to take form in my major body of work detailed in Chapter 2, bringing these melancholy sensations of wildness into artworks allowed new consciousness of wild nature within a contemporary cultural discourse.

CLINGING TO THE FAMILIAR
MAKING HOME IN THE WILDERNESS

We are creatures of the constructed environment; our habitat is the domestic realm. Our familiar reality is made up of modern comforts that protect us from harsh nature. Urban contemporary life is so bound to the human realm that we are blind to the wildness that exists outside our comfort zone.

Figure 14: Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates*, 2009 – 2011, leather, thread & stuffing (image of various works). Photo: Fiona Morrison.

My core body of work *The Intimates* (Fig.14) teases out this fraught relationship by translating wildness in terms of homely intimacy. The series of the hand-stitched leather soft sculptures embody an experience of Wilderness in terms of desire and fear, attraction and repulsion, wonder and despair. However, intimacy is simulated through the materiality of leather and the physicality of small scale. The sculptures resemble to furniture, soft toys and handicraft morph the comforts of the familiar into uncanny beasts. Thus they embody an attempt to reach out and touch wildness while clinging in trepidation to the comfort zone. Like a mediated view from inside a
window, the works evoke an inkling of the horror of our primal beastliness from the safety of home.

In the previous chapter I discussed my work in terms of a melancholic aesthetic caused by the irresolvable cultural disconnection from nature when Wilderness is perceived as other. In this chapter, I attempt to bridge the cultural divide between Wilderness and human culture by moving towards a more phenomenological engagement. The aim is not necessarily to resolve the postmodern condition, but rather to flesh out the emergent problems.

Through this line of enquiry I identify a collective concern with wildness in the context of the constructed environment and the role that craft techniques play in this discourse. Drawing comparisons with other contemporary artists working with these concerns has brought deeper insight to the relevance of my work and has directed further explorations.

The shift in this enquiry may be framed within philosophical terms as a departure from the Cartesian duality of self and world. The duality inherent in the concept of Wilderness as other places the human consciousness in contrast to the natural world. However, the phenomenological approach negates this duality by defining consciousness as inseparable from the external world. The perception of self as interdependent with the world is the motive for my enquiry towards an intimate relation to Wilderness.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger identified consciousness not as objective perception but as ‘being in’ or ‘dwelling’ in the world:

The entity to which Being-in in this signification belongs is one which we have characterised as that entity which in each case I myself am [bin]. The expression ‘bin’ is connected with ‘bei’, and so ‘ich bin’ [‘I am’] means in turn “I reside” or “dwell alongside” the world, as that which is familiar to me in such and such a way.³²

Shifting my consciousness from ‘seeing’ to ‘being-in’ informed a more intimate sensation with wildness. Understanding the phenomenological consciousness as the world manifesting itself in me brought new freedom to define the world as I know it, as I live and feel it. The lived experience is consciousness, as posited by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

Our relationship to things is not a distant one: each speaks to our body and to the way we live. They are clothed in human characteristics (whether docile, soft hostile

³² Martin Heidegger, Being and Time. 80.
or resistant) and conversely they dwell within us as emblems of forms of life we either love or hate.³³

By accepting my subjectivity I moved towards relating to natural environment as dependent on my consciousness of self.

To be conscious of the world is to be intimate with it, to know it as I know myself. According to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, home is emblematic of the known and the self:

> On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have the topography of our intimate being.³⁴

Bachelard applies phenomenological consciousness to the experience of space, relating the aphorism: We bring our lairs with us³⁵ to the subconscious influence of the home on our understanding of the world. Recognising how dependent we are on domestic space for the formation of our psyche allows a deeper awareness of how we relate to the world.

D.W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theories on object relations are based on the notion: Home is where we start from,³⁶ that is, the development of the psyche as reflective of our domestic space. My approach to sculpture is particularly influenced by Winnicott’s notion of the ‘transitional object’,³⁷ the comfort blanket or soft toy that bridges the childhood trauma of becoming a separate individual from the mother. The transitional object simulates the motherly presence as a stand-in or simulacra.

My sculptures are like transitional objects; they operate as intimate stand-ins to mediate the separation anxiety humans feel from the natural environment. The Intimates (Fig.14) provoke the close tactile engagement with simulated wildness, mediating a little of the harshness of its reality. An experience of intimacy is suggested by the tactility of sculpture and the envisioned physical engagement to run one’s hands over the shapely forms and the touch of skin akin to one’s own.

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³⁵ Ibid. 36.


This is as tokenistic a gesture as that of a child holding on to a blanket for comfort – and yet it may do the trick.

Appropriating wildness into an intimate experience in this way is a performative gesture to re-enact the contemporary relationship with natural environment,

We appropriate reality as a whole by overpowering the strange and reducing the unruly to something familiar. In this way, we make the world into a meaningful place, fit to live in, but, just as with human nature this comes at a price.38

*The Intimates* series seem as though wild forms have been overpowered and encased in leather. These controlled and static objects may appear as if covered and weighted with the meanings we bind to them. The loaded leather surface of the sculpture draws attention to the interface between viewer and subject. It is literally the skin of the visible. This interface relays the soothing comfort of bodily interaction but also the horror that comes with the price of human comfort, the flayed hide of domesticated animals. Leather is a violent medium; by using it I stress the latent repercussions of making the wild familiar.

The tactile and bodily qualities of *The Intimates* act to subdue the non-human into objects that are safe and familiar enough to be engaged with closely and affectionately. Craft methods and hand stitching allude to the sentimentality of domestic work so that the objects bear the marks of time and thoughtfulness inherent in the making process. The small scale of the soft sculpture suggests they function in order to be held or nurtured, like a comfort toy to snug. The full sensory experience of a comforting device is evoked with the bodily odour of leather when warmed by touch.

The overall impression of *The Intimates* is as archetypal ornaments, reminiscent of the nature we bring into our homes such as cut flowers, pot plants and natural curios such as collected shells and stones. Like a cabinet of curiosities these uncanny assemblage of forms in fleshy guise present my consciousness of wild nature. It is through the materiality and sensibility of these soft sculptures that I analyse the desire to know wild things and the need to construct simulacrum.

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38 Drenthen, "New Wilderness Landscapes as Moral Criticism: A Nietzschean Perspective on Our Contemporary Fascination with Wildness." 379.
Figure 15: Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mother-in-law’s Tongue*, 2010. Leather, stuffing & thread. 45x35cm. Photos: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 16: (left) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mound*, 2009. Leather, stuffing & thread. 32x20cm. Photo: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 17: (right) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Twig*, 2009. Leather, stuffing & thread. 42x12cm. Photo: Fiona Morrison.
Figure 18: Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Tree Arbour*, 2010. Leather, stuffing & thread. 45x35cm. Photos: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 19: (left) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Encrustation* 2011. Leather, stuffing & thread. 18x20cm. (right) Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mangrove Mud Pod* 2010, leather, stuffing & thread. 28x28cm. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.
REINVENTING THE BEAST

In this chapter I will discuss the cultural resonances of leather and how these associations inform the research and artistic outcomes; however, it is important to establish that the primary motivation for my use of leather is a personal delight in the process.

The first soft sculpture I created with leather was in late 2006 although I had long been excited by the idea of making some kind of new creatures from the skin of a dead animal. I enjoy the sensation of stitching into leather. It is a lively material, resisting the needle, then yielding and stretching to the pull of thread. Stitching pieces together then turning them inside-out is a magical experience for me. Leather doesn’t have the uniform grain of woven cloth, so the exact shape and volume it takes when stuffed is to some extent beguilingly uncontrollable. The suede of the interior grips the polyester fibre filling, allowing for very tightly packed stuffing. Pushing the volume out from the inside is like breathing life into the sculpture, the flat and limp material transforms into a corpulent three dimensional form.
Creating a creature-like object is a physical resolution of my observational drawings. The black-tanned leather sculptures hold similar qualities to my rendering style in charcoal and ink drawing. In comparison to the two dimensional representations, I find it more satisfying to be able to hold and touch a three dimensional representation. As leather is tactile and responsive, the sculptures appear uncannily alive and therefore convey further sensory experiences than the visual.

I approach the practice of making leather sculptures not as a leather-craftsperson who masters techniques of leather-work but rather as an artist appropriating domestic craft and do-it-yourself soft-furnishing skills. My objective with working with leather is not in the technique, instead I place greater significance on employing the associative resonance of the handmade and use of animal skin in my art practice.

Animal skin is loaded with associations of wildness. For example, in Biblical iconography wearing animal skin is an attribute of Saint John the Baptist as it refers to his ministry in the Wilderness (Fig.22).
Wild sexuality is often implied by wearing animal skin, such as wearing black leather as emblematic of fetish subcultures and ‘Leather Pride’ queer culture\(^\text{39}\) as well as women wearing fur as an archetypal dominatrix in Sacher-Masoch’s classic erotic novel *Venus in Furs*.\(^\text{40}\) Sexualised imagery of women often includes leather, fur or animal prints in advertising and erotica. This is subverted by feminist appropriation in works such as Meret Oppenheim’s *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)* (1936) (Fig.23), Dorothy Cross’ *Virgin Shroud* (1993) (Fig.24) and Janine Antoni’s *Saddle* (2000) (Fig.25). These artists use animal skin to link the sexualised women to domestication where she is treated like a farmed animal. By cloaking the figure of the Madonna (the idealised mother) in cow hide, Cross draws comparison to women’s position as farmed cows, cloaked in udders and wedding dress. Although my work is not directly feminist, I am interested in the power issues of gender and sexuality and how this concurs with the usury and eroticising of nature.\(^\text{41}\)


\(^{41}\) This is an insight influenced by reading Patricia Fara, *Sex, Botany & Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks* (Cambridge: Icon, 2003).
My use of leather alludes to the primal association between wildness and sexuality, which refers back to the Romantic notion of the natural environment stimulating primal sensations a revolt against the morals of society. The animal feel of leather and fur may evoke ‘the inner beast’ suppressed in our humanness, such fantasies of beastly wild sexuality free from self-consciousness is caught up with the desire to reconnect with nature. Australian artist Joan Ross uses fur for such resonances:

Not only does fur have a long history as a luxury material associated with wealth, but the fact that its existence has cost at least one life charges it with potency. As a material it retains its proximity to that death, but also to that life. It is unremittingly desirable, begging to be stroked and tousled, promising immediate pleasure as our fingers imagine the nervy warmth of the living animal responding to this sensual exchange. For Ross, this love of fur is related to a profound human need to connect with the natural world and its ideal of unmediated, unselfconscious expression of elemental desires.42

Joan Ross’s allusion to fur and sexuality is connected to power issues of give and take (Fig.26). The ethics involved in the desire to have and the repercussions of taking are unavoidable when using animal skin and Ross reuses kangaroo skin from

souvenirs and products to draw attention to how ubiquitous animal products have become.

![Image](image_url)


When I first began using leather, I conscientiously sought industrial off-cuts but more recently I have been sourcing from wholesalers that are sidelines for abattoirs or licensed kangaroo cullers. I feel guilty of ethical misdemeanor but this is an unavoidable responsibility of contemporary life. Disturbingly, today there are ethical dilemmas in virtually every consumable in our lives. I do not use leather nonchalantly; I reverently use or hoard every bit. There is a sacred quality to it because of the life lost or sacrificed. I trust that this consciousness comes through in the work, that this preciousness is inseparable from the horror at the violence of its creation.

Similarly, the uncanny aura of *The Intimates* (Fig.14-20) relies on the viewers’ simultaneous attraction and repulsion. This is the condition of our exploitation of fellow animals. Leather is an organic material that has become industrialised merchandise; I expect this horror not to go unnoticed as it so often does as upholstery or as a garment. The intimate sensation I employ relies on the common use of leather in providing comfort in manufactured goods, as leather is often used...
where a product has direct contact with our skin such as couches, car interiors, dining room chairs, book covers, bags, shoes, gloves; the list goes on.


The eerie familiarity of leather soft furnishings is also employed by emerging Melbourne artist Aly Aitkin for her self-described ‘mongrel mix of art, human, animal and vegetable’.43 Her rough hand stitching conjures allusions to Frankenstein, that uncanny monster born of the desire for more-than-human power and transgressing the laws of nature. Aitkin’s beastly body assemblages are part furniture, part creature, threatening violence with their exposed teeth but also illicit pity as a created monstrosity. Her practice also develops from personal angst about the contemporary alienation from the natural world:

Aitken is presenting a contradiction of a romantic but naïve sense of detachment to the landscape that we admire but keep distant, “the outside world is often experienced through a window or screen…engagement vicarious and safe…[yet] we fill our clean, sanitised spaces with simulacra of the natural world”.44

Through a grotesque beastly aesthetic in her work, Aitken exposes an uncomfortable truth about our relationship to nature and objects that is strikingly similar to my concepts and art works. Interestingly, Aitkin’s work is overtly referential to animals while I use comparable materials and aesthetic evoking plant forms and landscape.

Through critical analysis of my use of leather, I became more attuned to the consequences of creating objects. For me, leather retains the integrity of life lost in order to beget new creation and working with this idea has brought me to reconsider every man-made construction as having underlying accountability. For example, the plastics and metals in everyday objects are made from natural resources taken from somewhere to make something else; a fork may be cast but there remains a hole somewhere from where the metal was taken. This concern revealed itself firstly as drawings exploring the notion of positives and negatives, like holes and mounds (Fig.50). The Intimates (Fig.14) include recurring forms of voids and erections, this presents a play on the manipulation of volume as something growing positively as heaped masses but conversely hollowing out as negative spaces of cavities and holes. Initially I saw this as relating to organic processes by lending a dynamic and transformative quality to my sculptures, but on further reflection I read these forms as a representation of gain and loss.

**PRETTY DEAD THINGS**

The Intimates allegorise the ornamental use of wildness that is apparent in the way we bring nature into the home. Seemingly innocent flowers in a vase may bring beauty or ‘life’ into a domestic space, but this may have deathly connotations when considering the flowers have been cut from their life source, their ‘death’ prolonged in water and memorialised in an urn.

Beauty at the expense of nature forms a subtext in much contemporary art. Of particular relevance for me is the work of Australian artists Louise Weaver and Kate Rhode, who use craft methods to emphasise constructed nature. Their sculptures conjure taxidermy, hunting trophies and nature displays as ornamental features.

44 Ibid.
Handicrafts techniques and ‘do-it-yourself’ processes such as Weaver’s crocheting and pompom-making or Rhode’s paper flower cutting and hot-glue gun work, draw attention to constructed interpretations of wild nature. With exaggerated ornamental aesthetic, Weaver and Rohde offer a alarming takes on the romanticisation of nature.

Figure 28: (left) Louise Weaver, Secrets are for keeping, 2008. Hand crocheted lambs-wool over hand turned persimmon wood and Japanese rice wine gourd. 26x24x15cm. 

Louise Weaver recreates animals and plants with a crocheted skin, ornamented with haberdashery products such as brightly coloured yarn, sequins or pom-poms (Figs.28-29). The reconstructed skins evoke the power of transformation in nature, such as mimicry, metamorphosis and shedding skin. Constructing surface over animal moulds or actual taxidermied animals emphasises the visible surface as an interface of meaning, as Weaver states:

…[C]amouflage is for me both a physical and psychological state: a way of transforming meaning as well as appearance. The animal and plant forms don’t always resemble real, identifiable entities – so people can create their own meanings in response to abstract forms, and with them new meanings.45

Seeing her work reiterates my explorations concerning surface so that I reconsider my leather surface as a disguise, therefore my plant and habitat forms masquerade as home furnishings. Weaver re-covers taxidermied animals and actual natural

forms thereby literally distorting reality and reconstructing nature. Thinking about Weaver’s visible surface and the invisible inside that forms the volume, induced me to consider my own work and the meaning of an inside made up of synthetic filling and armatures. As Weaver speaks of her process:

in exploring the idea of a tightly woven ‘skin’ across various surfaces, I have also become aware of the types of psychological spaces within –literally ‘bound up’ in – the work.46

When I pack stuffing in to swell my sculptures, I similarly contemplate the hidden internal space and feel as though the internal volume is are a force pushing out the surface reveals the tension of this ‘bound’ inner realm. This direction brought new consideration of the integrity of my sculptures, not necessarily as closed forms imprisoning meaning but expanding forms straining to release meaning.

Figure 29: Kate Rohde, Pink Cobra 2009, mixed media, 72x 35x30cm. Exhibited in Kate Rohde, ‘Crystalised’ 2009, Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne (Image source: www.kwgallery.com/artist/kate-rohde/pink-cobra/24/568. Accessed December 02 2010).

Kate Rohde uses distinctly animal-free materials to reinterpret nature (Fig.29), she accentuates the making process with her unabashed home-craft methods and materials,

The apparent handcrafted fabrication of her work emphasises the human desire to create and control wild creatures. Accompanied by taxidermy sculptures and hand-painted nature scenes, these objects underline “the perversity of frozen moments of animal beauty captured by death – the ultimate abuse of that beauty.” Rohde equally acknowledges this as an idealised experience of nature; contained, perfect,

46 Ibid.
Her fantastical gaudy aesthetic shows up the folly and excessiveness of our perception of the world, nature subdued to romantic fantasy. At first beguiling, the work overwhelms me with a sense of dread and horror that kitschy ornaments may be all the nature we want in our contemporary world.

In contrast to Rhode, my aesthetic is much more subtle and restrained; this may come from a quiet contemplative engagement with immediate wildness rather than a concern with mediated nature. My consciousness of wildness does not depend on dazzling screen media and colour enhanced glossy prints but rather a lived experience. My ornamental language does not refer to the colour and showiness of contemporary culture but rather containment of nature as objectified and gagged. In this way The Intimates represent more discreet and mollified forms, that are forced to function as archetypes and ornaments.

This concept particularly takes form in the physical base of The Intimates (Figs. 14-20) these evocations of wildness are purposely made to sit on a constructed flat surface such as a mantelpiece or plinth. They may look wild on top but they are lopped at the bottom and weighted down. This consideration develops from my fascination and repulsion for decorative arts collections in museums, in such places I become overwhelmed by the folly of so much semi-precious metal and labour expended on unusable ornaments and trophies.

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Figure 30: (left) The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Galleries, Level 3, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  

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Kate Rhode cited in Rebecca Cannon, “Kate Rhode ” unMagazine 1 no. 7 (2005). 17.
THE INTIMATE SMALL SCALE

The small scale of *The Intimates* intentionally alludes to both the intimacy of their method of construction and their mode of viewing. The noticeable hand-stitching signals the making process and draws further attention to their scale. Being lap size implies the gesture of their making where hand sewing is necessarily close and involves cradling the work in a nurturing way as it is created.

The artist's physical gesture is an important element to the integrity of the work, a concept developed in the ideas of phenomenological aesthetics:

> The painter “takes his body with him” says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.\(^{48}\)

Initially I perceived that how I 'lent my body' to the work was in an intimate gesture and that this would somehow be retained in the integrity of the work. However, I found that this quality was not just part of my intention in creating the work but that the object itself somehow provoked a similar engagement.

Considering how the viewer responds to the work is not necessarily about an expectation on the viewer; rather, taking audience reaction into account brings new understanding of what the work does. I find it very satisfying to see viewers wanting to touch or hold *The Intimates*. Even when squeamish, people will want to touch or poke. Some people are repulsed, saying: “it is like touching a dead animal”, but others will ask to hold and then do so in a manner that is like comforting the object and comforting one’s self (Figs31-33).

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Figure 31: (left) Visual artist Anna Reynolds caressing The Intimates: Mound at exhibition opening ‘Adaptation’ DVAA, March 05 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 32: (centre) Artist Katie Saunders holding The Intimates: Tree Arbour in Talitha Kennedy’s studio December 12 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 33: (right) Painter Cait Wait nursing The Intimates: Mangrove Mud Pod in Talitha Kennedy’s studio December 02 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 34: Dancer Alex Jordon physically responding to The Intimates in Talitha Kennedy’s studio May 20 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.
These works do not necessarily have to be touched and held; physical response can be fulfilled by viewing alone. This visual tactility is discussed in relation to the work of Eva Hesse, an artist whom I admire for conveying the integrity of making,

You don’t literally have to hold them in your hand to see that Hesse has made tactile things. They do not have to be handled directly to allow us to imagine what they feel like, which may or may not be what they actually feel like. This has to do with the small scale of much of the studiowork and the fact that it could be held in the hand. What Gioia Timpanelli called the ‘hand’s imagination’ extends beyond the trace of the touch of the artist who makes the piece, to the imaginary realm of its handling in a larger sense.49

The ‘imaginary handling’ became an important realisation in the research; The Intimates visually disclose the clues of their tactility. The pores of the leather elicit the sensation of touching one’s own skin or the intimacy of caressing another person. The homely intimacy I discuss in Chap.3.1 gave way to a concentration on bodily intimacy in my work. The desire to caress (Fig.31), hold (Fig.32), nurse (Fig.33) and even dance with these works (Fig.34), confirmed the simulated intimate relationship between artwork and viewer. The fact that the temptation to touch is restrained in the gallery environment made me further consider how the viewers’ physical response may reiterate the theoretical relationship with Wilderness, that is, a primal longing to be intimate but culturally held back.

During my European research trip, I found that I paid much more attention to small sculptures. I couldn’t ‘take in’ large sculpture and two-dimensional works when scanning over the vast array of contemporary and historic works in Italy, Budapest, Berlin and London. Engaging with small three-dimensional work however, allows a very personal and intimate encounter. Circumambulation around a three dimensional work allows an engagement with the work where my gaze envelopes the full volume of the object which casts my presence all over it. Perceiving the object becomes an immersive experience where I may imaginatively inhabit it.

This mode of viewing reflected my vision of Wilderness. Holding and peering in and around a decaying stick induces a momentary glimpse of the immensity of the universe, where I lose myself in its world. This is reminiscent of my childhood image of God, seeing everything that happens in the world all at once; in a similar vein, the art viewer also becomes a creator.

The significance of the performative aspect of my work led me to reconsider the role of my practice which seemed in contrast to a formalist mode of object making.

Further consideration of the psychology of the viewer/object relationship, was brought to light by reading psychoanalytically critical artist Mike Kelley:

Generally, I believe that small figurative objects invite the viewer to project onto them. By this, I mean that the viewer gets lost in these objects, and that in the process of projecting mental scenarios onto them they lose a sense of them physically. The experience of playing with dolls is a case in point. The doll becomes simply an object to provoke daydreams, and its objecthood fades into the background. Once the fantasy is operating, it could be replaced by any other object. On the other hand, I am interested in objects with which the viewer empathises in a human way – though only as long as the viewer, and the object viewed, maintain their sense of being there physically.50

Kelley raises concern that this psychological engagement devalues the artwork as an autonomous object. For The Intimates the potential to ‘provoke daydreams’ is relevant as I intend to encapsulate the ‘fantasy’ of Wilderness and a ‘projected’ consciousness through the artworks as transitional objects. Reading my works as ‘standing-in’ for Wilderness means that the experience of encountering The Intimates may inform a viewer’s relationship with the real non-human wild.

In the process of constructing The Intimates I worked towards aesthetically simulating an intimacy with wildness. The qualities of domestic guise, tactile leather, noticeable crafting and ornamental shape compose the integrity of the artworks as simulations of wild forms. This shift from concentrating on the object-ness of the works to the viewer’s relation to it brought about a new body of work; and with it the possibility to go beyond the objectified consciousness of Wilderness.

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IN THE WILDERNESS
IN AND OF THE WORLD

To be at home in the Wilderness is to live in and be part of wild nature. The intimate relationship with the natural environment need not mean losing one’s self; rather, the possibility of immersion through equal consciousness of both self and the external world.

On completing the majority of sculptures that form the series The Intimates (Figs. 14-20) I began to feel resolution in the research when the philosophical enquiry and the studio explorations converged towards a greater awareness of the body. This was realised through developing The Intimates, particularly in making the preliminary series The Clay Things (Figs. 35-37) where the impact of my body on clay became of interest and subsequently brought new readings to the leather soft sculpture. The leather surface rendered the plant and habitat forms as corporeal and the sculptures appear creature-like in presence and physicality.

The leather itself - or rather the hide of the animal that was – became increasingly important in my process. I felt the need to let the skin present itself with its own power and this generated a new body of work. In contrast to the closed sculptures of The Intimates, this work demanded to be left open, both aesthetically and conceptually. This brought further emphasis on the use of leather as a surface of contact, an interface between viewer and meaning.

The shift was initiated through comprehending my body as an implement of making, as opposed to perceiving my hands simply as tools of my cognitive brain. This insight paralleled the phenomenological notion of the body as location of conscious experience, as Merleau-Ponty notes:

> We are rediscovering our interest in the space in which we are situated. Though we see it only from a limited perspective – our perspective – this space is nevertheless where we reside and we relate to it through our bodies. We are rediscovering in every object a certain style of being that makes it a mirror of human modes of behaviour. So the way we relate to the things of the world is no longer as a pure intellect trying to master an object or space that stands before it. Rather, this relationship is an ambiguous one, between beings who are both embodied and limited and an enigmatic world of which we catch a glimpse (indeed which we haunt incessantly) but only ever from points of view that hide as much as they reveal, a world in which every object displays the human face it acquires in human gaze.\(^{51}\)

Earlier in this research I interpreted this concept of the ‘lived body’ as reducing the world to human-ness where no matter how deep we look at or experience the world,

\(^{51}\) Merleau-Ponty, The World of Perception. 53.
our consciousness was condemned to be only a reflection of ourselves. At first glance this seemed anthropocentric, perhaps relevant for postmodern narratives but when applied to the natural environment may determine value as equated to human commodity, nature only valued for what it does for us.\(^{52}\) But this initial interpretation was still bound to the empirical duality of self and world, from which phenomenology offers a departure.

Merleau-Ponty’s later writings go further than the ‘lived body’; his notion of “flesh (la chair)” proposes a consciousness that intertwines the boundaries of perceiver and perceived:

That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. …Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or a prolongation of itself; they are encrusted in its flesh, they are an annex or a prolongation of itself; they are encrusted in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made up of the very stuff of the body.\(^{53}\)

‘Flesh’ as the unifying ‘element of Being’\(^{54}\) suggests a way to articulate a relationship to, with, and in the world. The body becomes inseparable from the natural environment; we come to know the external world through consciousness of the body - ourselves as ‘a thing amongst things’. For me, this concept allowed me to consider myself ‘embodied’ and ‘immersed’, intimately engaging with the non-human realm as part of my humanity.

Environmental thinkers have appropriated flesh to re-envision a sustainable relationship with environment. Rejecting environmental strategies based around better resource management, researchers in eco-phenomenology suggest an alternative to this type of dualist thinking:

\textit{...[W]e are not just units of consumption and the world is not just a resource pool for humans. Environment is not the inanimate background object against which we as subjects can act as separate beings. The reality of our situation is being environed,}
being engaged in an embrace, not as an optional extra – a lifestyle choice – but just how it is.\textsuperscript{55}

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh offers this potential to live alongside the world and as part of it, rather than thinking of nature as our creation or our adversary and therefore expendable to our way of life.

This line of thinking brought me a sense of relief from the melancholy hopelessness of our contemporary relationship with Wilderness. It turned my attention to ‘embrace’ the world as ‘just how it is’ rather than representing the human transgressions against nature. I may not have a full philosophical comprehension of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh but ideas brought about by reading \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}\textsuperscript{56} and eco-phenomenological analyses generated a later body of work.

Before detailing the influence of flesh on my work, I will recount the development process in light of an awareness of the body.

\textbf{SCULPTURAL CORPORALITY}

On reflection from making developmental works \textit{The Clay Things} from August to November 2009 and \textit{The Intimates} from late 2009 to March 2011, the presence of the body became increasingly evident and significant in my work. Working with clay brought an awareness of the impact of my body on the form; which in turn brought a bodily reading to the leather soft sculpture and lent additional power to the leather as ‘beastly’ body.

The initial intention to work with clay was to hastily and sculpturally sketch the visions of organic processes that haunted me in Europe. However \textit{The Clay Things} soon took on a language and integrity of their own, aside from being precursors of \textit{The Intimates}. Working with clay became more about process than modeling, the construction echoing the organic forces I sought to envision. I worked the clay to its limits, extruding to collapse, stretching until sag. I evoked the transformation of growing and decaying by enacting the forces of gravity and time. Clay is a particularly physical medium; working with it showed me how referential sculptural

\textsuperscript{55} Isis Brook, "Can Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of ‘Flesh’ Inform or Even Transform Environmental Thinking?." 361.

\textsuperscript{56} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}. 
practice is to the body. Kneading demanded the full force of the body and I noted that all the makings and shapes of the clay forms were dependent on the size of my fingers and span of my hands. The resulting forms are at once wild nature and products of my body.

Figure 35: (top line) The Clay Things in progress. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 36: The Extroverted and the Introverted, 2010. Self-firing clay Photo: Fiona Morrison.

Figure 37: The Clay Things, installation shot from ‘Point’ CDU Postgraduate Exhibition, November 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

The experience of working with clay brought a bodily interpretation to The Intimates. The sculptural connection to body is particularly readable in soft sculpture and anti-form work, made all the more clear from seeing the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) survey exhibition Soft Sculpture. The inherent corporality of the medium is raised in the catalogue essay which includes reference to art historian Briony Fer’s description of soft sculpture as anthropomorphic:
… [soft sculpture] invites a ‘language of anthropomorphism, of bodily projection and empathy. Bulbous forms, organic forms seem deliberately to inscribe an erotics of the body’.57

**The Intimates** suggest anthropomorphic imaginings of nature. The formal quality of soft sculpture rendered in leather is overtly corporeal. Twigs become limbs, canopy as flexed muscles, mounds like fat rolls, seams as scars. The soft sculpture tradition extrapolates on sculpture's relation to the human form with materials fleshy and flaccid, where forms are subject to gravity and convey the ephemeral or temporal nature of life.58

![Figure 38: Detail and work in progress of The Intimates. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.](image)

The process involved in *The Intimates* series saw the formative idea for each sculpture from drawings but a greater part of the form is owing to the construction process. Every piece experimented with the medium differently, each informing or contrasting the next. Some works were assemblages of components; I freely formed the individual elements in works including *The Intimates: Mother-in-law’s Tongue*, *Encrustations* and *Mangrove Mud Pod* allowing the form to develop through fitting the pieces together assessed by intuitive composition. *The Intimates: Termite Mound* was generated by jig-sawing together leftover remnants without much preconception. *The Intimates: Tree Arbour* started as individual tree forms with

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prominent hollows; I patched the two together to mirror these cavities. The engorged canopy grew from the desire to play with the idea of sheltering between trees, with the base to be cradle like, while the whimsical legs counter-balanced the weight of the overall figure. *The Intimates: Mud Branch and Mound Akimbo* are very close to drawings inspired by mangroves. I made the armature first then draped the leather around, intrigued by the tension achieved from the base seamlessly stretching to the extremities. *The Intimates: Soft Rocks* were pieced together, sewn inside out then transformed by stuffing. *The Intimates: Banyan* was a strange combination of techniques, constructed from armature and responds to surface.

Figure 39: Drawing and construction of *The Intimates: Encrustations*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 40: Construction photos of *The Intimates: Tree Arbour*, 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.
Figure 41: construction photos of *The Intimates: Termite Mound*, 2010. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 42: Drawing and construction of *The Intimates: Mound Akimbo*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 43: Construction photos of *The Intimates: Soft Rock*, 2011. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.
Differing techniques propelled each new work by experimenting with new patterning and construction methods. Using remnants or draping leather for patterning changed the way I cut this material, so that I became increasingly aware of the division of the hide. Draping considered the elasticity of the complete hide and responded to the original shape, while assembling components was largely determined by the shape of the off-cuts, producing variations on responsive making. This process led to the desire to apply the power of the full size and shape of the hides through my Shadows’ Embrace works (Figs.45-48).

**IMMERSION IN THE FLESH**

Reading further into Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of flesh led me to interpret my works in reference to the body and, consequently, to more deeply question the position of the viewer and subject.

The Shadows’ Embrace series was made late 2010 to April 2011 as further exploration of the idea of the body in terms of inhabiting the perceived Wilderness, or ‘being-in the world’. These resulting works are more architectural and spatial explorations than the domestic objects The Intimates. The shift in late 2010 to large draped leather pieces developed from thoughts raised in Chapter 3, where I discussed leather as a loaded surface and as an interface between viewer and subject. This enquiry led to experimenting with leather as pure surface. Instead of leather encasing closed forms, the new work emphasised the presence of leather in its own right.
Working with complete hides of cow and kangaroo leather brought greater attention to the animal that was, the edge of the hide corresponding to the contours of its body. The full surface mass becomes a tangible looming presence of beastliness. These works signal the body as location of consciousness, referring to the body as an interface of perception.

Although these new works are larger, they are not necessarily large scale; rather they reflect the scale of the animal as it was. In this way they also confront the scale of the viewer, this is in contrast to The Intimates’ small scale that were encountered by circumambulation and projection; Shadows’ Embrace forces the viewer to encounter the beast face to face, or body to body, ‘just how it is’.

My later body of works Shadows’ Embrace, are potentially inhabitable cut out screens. The viewer can see the object and be seen amongst it. They are like the skin of the visible, both revealing and concealing. The void of the cuts and the solid black of the leather interact and the consciousness of positive and negative shifts with the movement of the eye. The cuttings were developed from drawings of shadows and silhouettes (Fig.47), forms that are transient and fleeting. The imagery references tree shadows, vines, the holes of decaying leaves, skulls, ‘animal print’ of tiger-like fur patterning, and Rorschach inkblot test; things wild, ambiguous and psychologically projective. Viewers tell me that they search for figurative clues and meanings, or that the works are powerful but unsure why. The impetus to translate this imagery was spurred by photographing my shadow in amongst the canopy shadows, it brought the idea of the human form as part of the wildness. These screens thus enact a sense of the seer (myself or viewer) as a ‘thing amongst things’, inseparable from the natural surrounds.

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59 Isis Brook, "Can Merleau-Ponty's Notion of 'Flesh' Inform or Even Transform Environmental Thinking?." 361.
Figure 45: Shadows’ Embrace 1 in progress, September 2010. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.
Figure 46: Shadows’ Embrace 2 in progress, January 2011. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.
Figure 47: Reference imagery for *Shadows’ Embrace*, including ink drawings and photographs. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.

Figure 48: Detail photographs of *Shadows’ Embrace*. Photos: Talitha Kennedy.
I do not mean to over-simplify the complexity of Merleau-Ponty’s flesh by literally translating flesh as leather; rather, using leather led me to this theory. As skin and the body became more significant in the enquiry, the notion of the lived body gained new relevance. I read further phenomenological texts, so that when I came across a concept called ‘flesh’, it grabbed my attention because of my interest in skin and leather. I found the suggestive and open ended ideas presented by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* as a relevant and apt means of relating intimately with the natural environment and thus the world.\(^{60}\)


Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh has been appropriated in diverse fields including art and environmental philosophy. Of particular relevance is the phenomenological interpretation of Louise Bourgeois’ oeuvre, a renowned artist whose work is often discussed for “their emotive qualities rather than their formal influence.”\(^{61}\) Her art has strong influence on my work both for the bodily materiality of her sculptures and the uncanny experience they exude, described as “an object [that] breeds

\(^{60}\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. was published posthumously as an unfinished manuscript and compilation of drafts and working notes. Merleau-Ponty died suddenly before finishing this now seminal text so his definitive account of flesh remains open to interpretation.

discomfort and fear" and "its efforts to tap or channel that invented shadowy aura." Bourgeois was wide ranging in media and scale and yet she always evokes a psychological presence that is both deeply personal and universal, a quality I aspire to emulate when interpreting the universal forces of wildness and the personal intimacy of reverie felt in Wilderness. The themes of personal and universal are illustrated through ambiguous imagery suggestive of both body and landscape:

Bourgeois alternates between internal, bodily processes and external, natural processes, and barely distinguishes between the two in her descriptions. The "oozing of milk" shares the properties of the volcano and the spring; likewise the body shares the properties of the habitat or "what protects it." This interplay between body and the outer world is central to the concept of flesh where "the world is made up of the very stuff of the body," the fleshiness of my leather soft sculptures that interpret natural landscape is directly evocative of this idea.

In compliment to the bronze works and large inhabitable structures by Bourgeois are the small soft sculptures that are more literal interpretations of the body. Of particular note is her sculptural handling of the material with obvious hand stitching that appears like both wound and mending, for me this has an acutely corporeal sensibility. Bourgeois’ fabric works are argued by art historian Lorna Collins as directly relating to Merleau-Ponty’s flesh when she discusses Seven in a bed (Fig.49):

Seven in a bed seems to realise and release the libidinal tenets that Merleau-Ponty appears to grope for with flesh...that comes forth from Bourgeois’ instinctive desire to express palpating and moulding matter, which seems to gush out of the works as one looks. There is such sensual poetry to the tactile – in looking one desires to touch, and seeing becomes a different kind of perception, rather like squashing and fondling, just as those figures act out in front of me. In this way perception is reconfigured…and gains an intimate encounter with ‘wild being’; thus disclosing flesh in the flesh of this encounter.

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63 Wagner, "Bourgeois Prehistory, or the Ransom of Fantasies." 20.

64 The parenthesis denote excerpts from Louise Bourgeois’ written journals cited in Speaks, "We Bring Our Lares with Us: Bodies and Domiciles in the Sculpture of Louise Bourgeois." 98.

65 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible. 139.

I particularly respond to the visible tactility implied in flesh, identified in Bourgeois’ hand-stitched doll-like figures. They are touching and thus describing their touch-ability as both object and subject. The interchange of male and female arises through flesh, as dissolution of gender is inherent in concepts regarding the personal becoming universal.

Through the course of this research I came to see an underlying theme to intimately relating to Wilderness as the individual human desire to be ‘at one’ with the rest of the world. I found strong resonance with the concept of flesh and the idea of universal totality as discussed by art theorist Kaja Silverman who outlines renewed relevance to the archetypal classical theme of Orpheus and Eurydice, as an expression of the “yearning for wholeness.” Reading Silverman’s analysis brought me to an awareness of wholeness and consequence. As explored in my works, Whole Hole (Figs.50-51) which are suggestive of the male and female interchange, not necessarily as sexual but as an analogy of the balance of life forms, dependent on one another for creation. For me this idea of dependence also relates to material and form, so that I recognised a recurrence in my work of a form that suggests construction or getting taller with the form of taking away such as a hole or negative shape. Such forms are evocative of male and female sexual body parts which are in themselves universal forms of creation.

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67 Orpheus is presented as the archetypal creative figure who rages war against women after failing to bring back his true love Eurydice from the underworld, it is only in his death when they are together in the underworld that male and female are no longer rivals but equal and analogous, as related to the history of art and culture in Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). 7.
Returning to the influence of *The Visible and the Invisible*, my work took on new meaning from reading and interpreting Merleau-Ponty’s text. Translated from French and unfinished, nevertheless I find his language poetic and suggestive, not only conceptually enriching but also visually and sensually evocative. I come to an understanding of the philosophy to the best of my ability but I have allowed myself to appropriate the text towards envisioning an artistic response. His writing is evocative of tactile and physical imaginings that assisted in developing my work, for example:

My body in the visible. This does not simply mean: it is a particle of the visible, there there is the visible and here is my body. No. It is surrounded by the visible. This does not take place on a plane of which it would be an inlay, it is really surrounded, circumvented. This means: it sees itself, it is visible – but it sees itself seeing, my look which finds it there knows that it is here, at its own side – Thus the body stands before the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of embrace. And between these two vertical beings, there is not a frontier, but a contact surface.
The flesh = the fact that the visible that I am is seer or, what amounts to the same thing, has an *inside*, plus the fact that the exterior visible is also *seen*, i.e. has a prolongation, in the enclosure of my body, which is part of its being.\(^6^8\)

The ideas and images evoked in this passage directly influenced my thoughts on interpreting the experience of intimacy with Wilderness into objects, resulting in the *Shadows‘ embrace* series (Figs. 45-46). I do not intend to pinpoint Merleau-Ponty’s words as directly translated in my work but suffice to say that the analogies of ‘seeing’ and ‘seer’ as articulated in the above quote, have generated a great progression from the blindness identified in Chapter 2. The shift from objectively viewing Wilderness to a phenomenological immersed engagement has seen my work diverge from closed sculptures. The installation works are both physically open and open to interpretation; at this point the viewer’s encounter is as one amongst the work, rather than from looming over looking in.

Although Merleau-Ponty’s description of flesh remains suggestive and open-ended, this theory is seminal in contemporary philosophy and its application to environmental philosophy influenced the recent environmental discourse Ecophenomenology.\(^6^9\) Although I am a curious and widely informed artist, I cannot quite gauge whether I completely grasp the complexity of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of flesh in relation to consciousness of the world. Regardless, the effort to comprehend a phenomenological consciousness of Wilderness has brought new revelations to the research enquiry and generated a very fulfilling artistic response.

The later body of work (see images of assessment exhibition Appendix 2) includes suspended and lean-to installations *Shadows’ Embrace*, these works are varying spatial explorations on the concept of *Whole Holes*. *Shadows’ Embrace* and *Shadows’ Hide* are suggestive of inhabitable space that acts as both visible things and imagined disguises for the body. The drawing-like cut-outs in the leather hide is evocative of the vertical silhouette forms of the tree canopy as well as the dappled shadows cast on the ground underneath the canopy. I imagine the works as like the flayed skin of the visible; it has become tangible as a cloak or screen that at once hides the viewer but allows the inhabitant to view unseen. This experience explores the idea of the body as part of the world, what is visible in the world may be

\(^6^8\) This excerpt was taken from working notes dated December 1960 and published in Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. 271.

comprehended as a surface that our eyes caress but suggests hidden meanings beyond us; comparable to the skin of our body that visibly defines us but we feel the mystery of our internal organs as indicative of our true state of being.

Figure 53: *Looking out, looking in* studio investigation. Photo: Talitha Kennedy.
CONCLUSION
HOME COMING

Starting from the desire to see Wilderness, the research path led towards an intimate engagement with the immediate natural environment. With the aim to examine the human relationship with wild nature, I came to critique the philosophical problems regarding the contemporary separation between human culture and the non-human realm.

The major series of works The Intimates were created towards simulating intimacy with wild nature, but new realisations were further developed through the making process and consideration of the viewer’s physical engagement with these leather soft sculptures. The possibility of a phenomenologically immersed relationship with nature prompted studio explorations with complete hides of cow and kangaroo leather. Comprehending how the bodies of work inform one another will be expanded through exhibition and public viewing. In light of the research outcomes, the final installation and selection of works evoke a sense of making home in the gallery space through artwork placement and consideration of the viewers’ position and orientation.

Throughout the research process I have achieved greater freedom in accepting the conflicts between vision and meaning. This required trusting the studio process by permitted more playful experimentation with materials with an aim towards a state of reverie in which to examine philosophical concerns, rather than a process of intellectual interpretation and designed outcomes.

The overarching accomplishment of this research is the consciousness, both personal and artistically, of myself at home in the world. The process of longing to see Wilderness and then intimately engage with wildness led not to a break-down of boundaries between the human and non-human realms, rather it led to a greater awareness of the self as part of nature.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1: DOCUMENTATION OF MID-CANDIDATURE EXHIBITION

ADAPTATION: Sarah Pirrie & Talitha Kennedy
Woods Street Gallery, Darwin Visual Arts Association Inc.

An exhibition about exchange from one side of the studio space to the other. Artists Sarah Pirrie and Talitha Kennedy work on their individual practice but are influenced by each other’s progress, ideas, failures and ambitions. This exhibition showcases recent work in a collaborative context developed while sharing a studio as part of the Master Candidature at Charles Darwin University.

Woods Street Gallery
Open Wed-Sat 10am-3pm
Darwin Visual Arts Association Inc. (DVAA)
Frog Hollow Centre for the Arts
56 Woods St (CPO Box 1616) Darwin NT 0801
(08) 8911 0351 info@dvaa.net.au

www.talithakennedy.blogspot.com

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www.talithakennedy.blogspot.com

www.sarahpirrie.com
Exhibition Notes: Talitha Kennedy

This joint exhibition between myself and Sarah Pirrie marks the half way point in our two year Masters Candidature at Charles Darwin University (CDU). This is an apt time to get the artwork out of the studio and in the ‘white cube’.

In the gallery context the studio work becomes something quite different. In the gallery the artwork is removed from its studio birthplace where it sits amongst the tools of its creation and alongside its siblings that didn’t quite make the cut to the exemplary exhibition. This exhibition forms an important experiment in the visual art research undertaken in Masters, the installation process revealed how the artworks translated the ideas and what works didn't fit together in to this context.

In the CDU studio, I have been ferreted away for almost a year - reading, looking, making work through trial and error, wrestling with ideas and trying to navigate the artistic process as research. Often the art practice can be alienating as personal concerns become all consuming. The deeper I go into my research the more evident it becomes that my individual life experience informs my understanding of all that I read, see and the conclusions I come to. In building up the memory catalogue of art and ideas, never has it been so blatant that my art is something of the sum of me. I feel something like a factory machine, consuming big batches of diverse visual material and theory, churning it through self-reflection in order to excrete a little art object out the other end and somewhere else there is a huge waste extractor for discarded information that doesn’t make it through my filters.

Anyway, all this feels to be going on alone on my side of the studio, but in sharing a studio I am also privy to Sarah’s own production on the other side of the dividing wall. It is during our therapeutic tea breaks that conversation analyses our immediate concerns – which artist or critical article has just ignited an idea, how to achieve a certain reading of the work, evaluating what is successful in the work, etc. And this has become an important part of the research process.

So if my work is a sum of my influences, there must be some shared ground between Sarah’s work and mine. Whenever I pass though Sarah’s working space to get into mine, I (at least subconsciously) have to reassess what I am doing in light of her progression. And this factor raises as many parallels as it does points of departure.
My research is process driven. It develops from direct observation of natural forms and somewhere along the line becomes art objects as I illustrate the nature of representing them. My Masters research is instigated by a personal quandary to do with my obsessive desire to visually respond to the landscape as the foundation for the culture I operate within. In Australian culture I feel there is an ongoing anxiety when approaching representations of nature when operating within the history of Western tradition. My research leads me towards a reading of the short history of Australian landscape art as something of a stage for the human condition that is subject to contemporaneous cultural positions.

By titling my research topic “A Homemaker’s guide to the Wilderness” I position myself as a ‘guide’ or ‘interpreter’ to the cultural; construct of the ‘Wilderness’ that is nature as ‘Other’, as untamed or ‘untainted’ by perceived ‘civilisation’.

So in this way my ‘Still Lives’ drawings show my observations of natural forms in isolation to place, landscape or vista. Like artifacts in a museum or trophies on a mantelpiece the drawn forms ‘float’ against the ‘neutral’ blank paper. The drawings are integral to my working out of ideas and understanding the ‘organic’-ness of forms but they often feel a little too closed, too prescribed to stand alone. I feel the need to make sculptures as they are more akin to the sensation of the ‘original’ natural form. I like to think my leather hand sewn sculptures have a life of their own and can be viewed with free associations. The nature of viewing a small 3D object allows an open reading as one can see from many perspectives, feel and –in the case of leather- even smell the ‘fleshed out’ ‘drawing’. The ‘Clay Things’ act as sculptural sketches in the research process where I am working towards a stronger command of sculptural construction. The ‘Veiled Forms’ –sculptures and drawings are also sketch exercises in the nature of transforming the flat material of leather into a ‘stuffed’ sculptural form. The ambiguous ‘props’ underneath the surface are hidden but also reveal the form. The nature of using leather is about presence of material, associations of the body in sculpture and the fact that it is the preserved skin of a once living creation means a return of the flattened surface literally rendered flesh.

Sarah’s work on the other side of the room also deals with making life on a surface but there is obviously a very different approach to the nature of ‘surface’ than mine; and the two combat it out in the White Cube.

Talitha Kennedy March 2010


Looking through Sarah Pirrie’s work to Talitha Kennedy’s installation in *Adaptation*, 2010.

APPENDIX 2: DOCUMENTATION OF ASSESSMENT EXHIBITION

A homemaker’s guide to the Wilderness

Solo exhibition by Talitha Kennedy.


Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Banyan*, 2011. Leather, thread & stuffing. 35x35cm

Talitha Kennedy, *The Intimates: Mound Akimbo*, 2011. Leather, thread & stuffing. 48x20cm

Talitha Kennedy, Shadows' Embrace 2, 2011. Leather. 270x220cm.
