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Wandering through paint in the wet tropics

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ABSTRACT

Painterly depictions of landscapes are redolent of an artist's vision and entwine topographical features with knowledge and experience of a place. Significant landscape paintings can become iconic images suggesting the national character of a region. In the genre of Australian landscape painting, images of southern states have dominated the field, while portrayals of the wet tropics are comparatively rare. In this article, artist Jacqueline Scotcher directs a northern lens to the field of Australian landscape painting. Her culturally significant paintings extend the field by depicting the far north region of the wet tropics. This case study reveals how Scotcher's practice-led doctoral research expanded her contextual and theoretical understanding of place, emplacement and phenomenology. In a reflexive process that oscillated between reading, thinking, writing and painting Scotcher has established new knowledge of art practice by developing an immersive walking-painting method. The walking-painting method has much to offer other artists seeking imaginative and aesthetic responses to their environments. Scotcher's work has resulted from considering one's bodily presence, the power of everyday movement and the beautiful import of attending to our unfolding presence in a tangled world of relationships in paint.

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Introduction

Great Australian landscape painters such as Sally Gabori, John Olsen, Brett Whitely and Fred Williams have a remarkable ability to create iconic images of this vast continent. This was apparent recently while traveling through the kilometres of central Australian desert where the landscape appeared to be a Fred Williams painting. It is a strange transition when the landscape comes to resemble the painting rather than the painting resembling the landscape.

Paintings of landscape reveal the artists' former experiences and interaction with the terrain. This was evident in the nineteenth century when colonial artists struggled to paint images of gums trees and kangaroos as their former knowledge of European flora and fauna did not prepare them for an antipodean world. In a similar fashion,

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/rcij.

Jacqueline Scotcher the case study artist discussed in this article, needed to assimilate the new environment of the wet tropics in far north Queensland when she relocated from a southern, cooler region. As the field of Australian landscape painting is dominated by depictions of the cooler and more densely populated southern states, Scotcher experienced a relative blank-canvas from which to invent her abstracted vision of place (Searle 1991). Scotcher used the creative process of practice-led doctoral research to forge a sense of emplacement in the wet tropics. Through a reflexive praxis of reading, thinking, walking, writing and painting, Scotcher cultivated a remarkable body of paintings that evoke life in the hot and humid tropical environment. The works were formulated over three research phases, punctuated by two staging exhibitions and a final exhibition. What follows indicates the new understandings developed in each phase and how they culminated in an original, memorable and culturally significant body of paintings.

Phase one: location to place and external/internal relationships

When Scotcher relocated to Cairns from Lismore she was greeted by heat, humidity, rain, rolling mountains, vibrant vegetation and the unfamiliar scent of tropical flora. To establish a sense of place Scotcher commenced gathering images through sketches and photographs (Scotcher 2018). Sensitivity to the daily changes in the landscape includes an ever-changing horizon line between the sea and the sky over the Coral Sea. At times, the horizon line was demarcated by dark grey skies over a light grey sea and at other time a dark moody sky bore down on a light ocean. On occasions the horizon line vanished behind distant rain. Unexpected delights of the region were found alongside these intense grey skies, in the strong contrast between bright sunlight, deep shadows and vibrant vegetation. These impressions were far from the common picture-perfect depictions of palm rimmed beaches, white sand, bright aqua water and clear blue skies used to promote the region. Scotcher wrote in her journal that the tropics held a tactile sensuality that she wished to invoke in her paintings.

To establish an understanding of place, insights of cultural geographers were reviewed. Edward Casey wrote the term *place* is an 'ambiguous phenomenon', both in theory and geography because place in both these senses has indeterminate boundaries (2013, 276). A geographical *location* can expand and become a *place* if a relationship develops, meanings gather, and familiarity deepens (Tuan 1977). Casey suggests that over time 'Places also gather experiences, histories, even languages and thoughts' (1996, 25). To amass experiences of the Cairns region, Scotcher photographed fleeting views from the car window during drives through areas of rural industry and fields of sugar cane bordered by train tracks. Paintings such as *Western Arterial* are indicative of this phase of gathering information in the region, as shown in Figure 1.

While traveling as a car passenger, Scotcher made experimental drawings by holding a pen on a page and recording her bodily movement (as shown in Figure 2). These drawings inspired further investigation of bodily movement and the relationship between the exterior place and the interior artist. The once external geographical location of Cairns was becoming a place populated with internalised relationships of interior/exterior and physical/spiritual binaries. John Firth-Smith wrote: 'painting is not

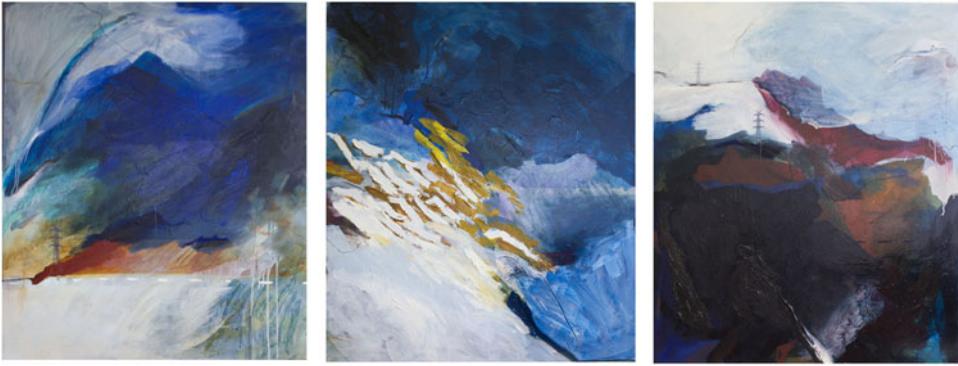


Figure 1. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2014, *Western Arterial*, synthetic polymers & oil on canvas in Scotcher (2018, 26).

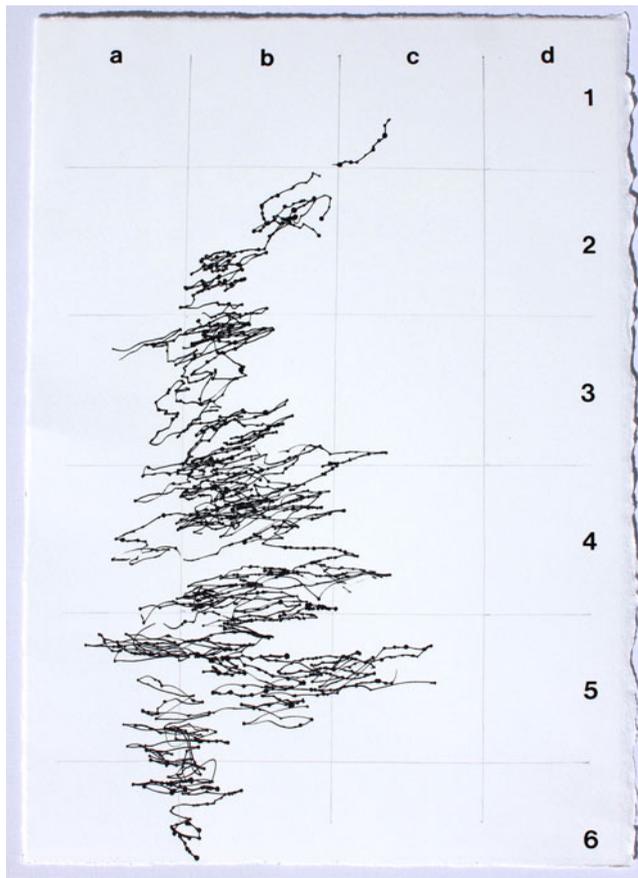


Figure 2. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2011, *Ellis Beach to Rex Lookout*, pen on paper in Scotcher (2018, 27).

always the thing that's happening in the distance, it's the thing that's happening above you and below you and inside you as well' (cited in Wilson 1998, 117). Responding to the continuum of internal/external experience Scotcher moved away

from car travel and sought walking as a means of being in physical contact with place. Walking can be conducted at a fast pace, while listening to music and while talking on a mobile phone, or by contrast undertaken in a quiet non-distracted manner. Scotcher reported in her exegesis that she practiced mindful walking where she consciously minimised distractions and slowed down her pace to look, touch, smell and hear the natural environment (2018).

The quest to develop a body of paintings based on receptively walking was a major step forward in the initial phase of the research and culminated in the first of three exhibitions titled *Interior/Exterior Landscapes*. *View from the top of Earl Hill* (shown in [Figure 3](#)) serves as a synopsis of the first phase with vibrant colours and high contrasts indicative of the environment. An exhibition provides an overview that enables artists to assess their development to date and in a similar manner to standing on top of a hill, it can help an artist to imagine the path to future creative work.

Phase two: embodied walking and painting

In the second phase of the research Scotcher reviewed literature in the fields of phenomenology, nature, walking and body-mapping to expand her contextual knowledge.



Figure 3. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2014, *View from the top of Earl Hill No.2*, synthetic polymers on paper in Scotcher (2018, 28).

Key inspirations included founding phenomenologist, German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, who described 'walking as the experience by which we understand our body in relationship to the world' (Solnit 2000, 27). Scotcher's process was affirmed by Merleau-Ponty, Johnson, and Smith rejection of the separation of the mind from the body where the body is denigrated to the purely physical or mechanical and his recognition of the consciousness afforded by the entire lived-body (1993). Further, Merleau-Ponty, Johnson, and Smith claims painters have capacity to give 'visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible' (ibid., 127). It is a complex task to render 'what profane vision believes to be invisible' in paint and yet this is the task Scotcher set for herself.

An investigation of walking revealed the numerous philosophers, poets and artists who have espoused the virtue of walking commencing with Ancient Greeks who practiced walking when they needed to think (Solnit 2000). Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1712–1778] enjoyed lengthy solitary walks in forests while Henry Thoreau [1817–1862] walked amongst nature to simultaneously empty the mind and fill it with a new sense of purpose (Gros 2015). Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century wrote 'all truly great thoughts are conceived by walking' (1889/1998, 34). The poet William Wordsworth walked almost every day for creative inspiration (Gaillet-De Chezelles 2010). After moving from New Zealand to Australia, artist Rosalie Gascoigne came to understand the different markers of the Australian landscape during walks with her children whose playful interactions helped hone her eye for detail (Gellatly 2008).

The virtue of walking, rambling and hiking as it is variously known and its relationship to creative mention above has been endorsed by recent neuroscience research. Oppezzo and Schwartz have confirmed that walking increases creativity and that creativity is heightened in the period following a walk (2014). Walking in natural environments fosters higher levels of creativity than walking in city spaces (ibid.). Further research indicates that people's sense of well-being improves following a walk in a natural setting, 'while a walk in an urban setting has no such effects' (Bratman et al. 2015, 8567). Scotcher's decision to walk in the natural environment, which is less non-distracting than urban spaces, as a means of emplacement through painting was supported by this research.

The natural landscape is a relatively quiet space where Scotcher could attend to the environment. There is an abundance of walking trails in the foot hills surrounding suburbs in Cairns. Scotcher walked daily and spent longer periods camping in isolated natural environments such as Hinchinbrook Island (Scotcher 2018). Nature is complex concept worthy of contemplation. John Bellamy Foster (2016) describes nature as having three main intersecting meanings as follows:

1. The intrinsic properties or essence of things or processes;
2. An inherent force that directs or determines the world; and
3. The material world or universe, the object of our sense perceptions-both in its entirety and variously understood as including or excluding God, spirit, mind, human beings, society, history, culture, etc. (2016, 279)

Scotcher (2018) reports being engaged with the third meaning of the material world, which is the object of our sense perceptions including the spirit and mind.

Journal entries describe how repeated walks along a bush track enabled her to notice en-route experiences such as the sensation of tripping over roots. These bodily experiences increased her immersion in the tropical terrain while respecting the cultural history of the land.

The Australian continent has an exceptionally long history of human inhabitation with Indigenous people caring for the land for over 60,000 years. Sophisticated land management practices such as controlled burning and the conservation of animal breeding grounds by Indigenous peoples ensured that the land and the animals were looked after. Land that was not tendered was considered to be wild (Rose 2008). Walking on land in Australia that had been tendered for so many thousands of years by Indigenous peoples added a further layer of meaning to Scotcher's appreciation of the tropical landscape.

The more time Scotcher spent actively coming into relationship with the environment, the less she experienced distinct divisions between body, mind, landscape and painting practice (2018). Walking also influenced her pace of painting and how the canvases were prepared. In the past Scotcher had a quick painting method with rapid brush movements, however, over time, her strokes slowed and meandered to reflect and embody the pace of the walk. Formerly, the task of priming the canvas have been viewed as a laborious and necessary task, however, this changed to one where setting down the ground was a crucial first step in building a layered and sensuous surface (ibid.). As the walks continued lines and movement became important considerations and their influence in the paintings is revealed in *Wayfaring No. 3* shown in Figure 4.

Living life along moving lines

In the paintings, lines oscillated from macroscale and microscale, floating mercurially in one's imagination and forming a mountain range at one time and the path of a



Figure 4. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2015, *Wayfaring No.3*, synthetic polymers on canvas in Scotcher (2018, 45).

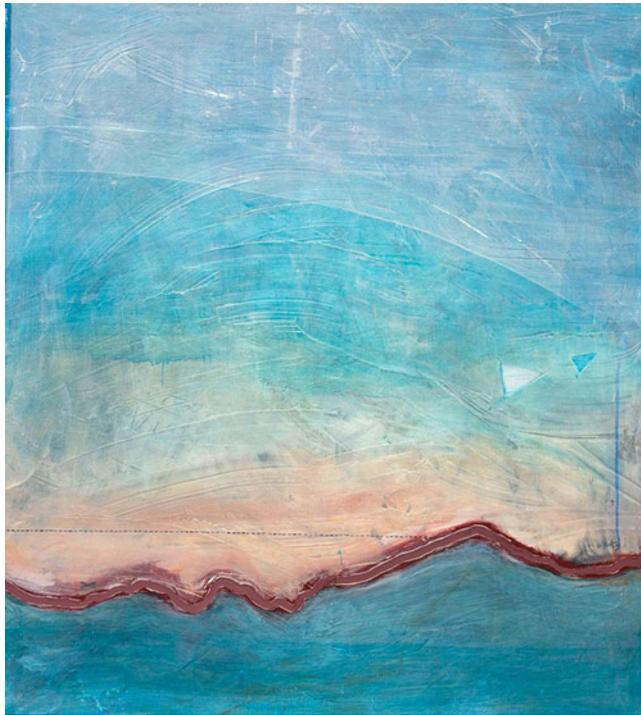


Figure 5. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2015, *Headspace*, synthetic polymers on canvas in Scotcher (2018, 39).

river in another moment as shown in *Wayfaring No. 3* (Figure 4). Lines were drawn from observations of paths, insect trails, tideline debris, ridgelines and waterways (Scotcher 2018). Scotcher reports being inspired by Paul Klee's concept of a line that 'goes out for a walk' (1960). This idea was extended by Tim Ingold's extension of this idea that lines that generate new lines (2007). Ingold and Lee describe life as one long conversation, one long walk or a continuing story and relationship with the world around us (2006). This idea was extended when Ingold wrote, 'Life will not be contained, but rather threads its way through the world along the myriad lines of its relations' (2007, 103). Along with lines, Casey suggests that symbols are a way artists can orient themselves in the landscape (2004). According to Casey, artists 'borrow conventional symbols so as to put them to unconventional uses', therefore developing their 'own private system of topographical symbols' (ibid., p.151). Marks such as hatch lines, directional markers, margin coordinates and aerial views representative of physical and internalised paths emerged as mnemonic elements in Scotcher's paintings as shown in *Headspace* in Figure 5. Scotcher (2018) reported earlier thoughts of being embedded in a new place where supplanted, as life became a process that transited along moving paths and lines.

The second phase of the research can be viewed as setting a solid foundation for the final stage. In colloquial terms this phase could also be termed a 'slog' with long periods of walking in heat and rain, reading, thinking, writing, painting, trying, not achieving and trying again and succeeding. During this time in the reflexive two and



Figure 6. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2017, *Solescape*, synthetic polymers on canvas in Scotcher (2018, 72).

froe of practice-led research, tactile experiences were gathering, knowledge was being assimilated and creative solutions were emerging. The second staging culminated in the exhibition *Trilogy* that provided further opportunity for reflection and for the course towards the final destination.

Phase three: wandering in paint

In the third phase of the research, Scotcher developed an immersive style of painting that was rich in layered associations. Art theorist Arthur Danto notes: ‘works of art are ‘embodied meanings’ that are reminiscent of ‘wakeful dreams’ (2013, 37–48). Wakefulness conjures the artist’s ability to rouse people to a vision that they may not have seen prior to experiencing the artwork. To achieve paintings capable of eliciting a ‘wakeful dream’, Scotcher created a gentle sense of movement in her paintings that was underwritten by her walks in nature. Scotcher reports the influence of Frederic Gros who wrote: ‘close your eyes and feel your body the layers of landscape dissolving and recomposing ... The colour of the sky, the flashes of leaves, the outlines of the jumbled hills’ (2015, 97). In Scotcher’s painting, the landscape floated mercurially from one scale to another, reminiscent of fractals that repeat in nature at varying scales.

As Scotcher painted, she reported deliberately drawing from her ‘sensuous core of experience’, appreciating the lived body as a source of movement, experience, memory and imagination (Toadvine 2010, 87). When painting, a barrier such as a key colour decision or ‘what next?’ situation emerged, rather than forcing an outcome in the studio, Scotcher would walk to the local beach and back. With tacit knowledge gathered from mindful walking, Scotcher felt an increased confidence to apply compositional respite and to increase areas of space in her canvases. A transitory sense of place was evoking in a meshwork of entwined paths layered in time, memory and embodied knowledge (Scotcher 2018).

Scotcher’s painting practice transitioned from location to place, from external to internal, from physical to spiritual and culminated in a form of wandering in-painting. In the studio, emplaced bodily knowledge from many walks merged with the painting



Figure 7. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2017, *Hinchinbrook Island Walk No.1*, synthetic polymers on canvas in Scotcher (2018, 71).



Figure 8. Jacqueline Scotcher, 2017, *Hinchinbrook Island Walk No.2*, synthetic polymers on canvas in Scotcher (2018, 71).

process. Merleau-Ponty, Johnson, and Smith comments: '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' (1993, 123). As Scotcher brought walking and painting into dynamic interaction, the distinction between land, sea and sky are blurred in an interwoven matrix that oscillates in scale and perspective, as shown in *Solescape* (Figure 6) and *Hinchinbrook Island Walk No.1* (Figure 7). The weight of the paint reveals imaginary and physical wandering. In many respects, it is with the artist herself meandering through the work.

The *walking-painting* process enables the work to move into an uncharted imaginative territory representing the experience of past walks and imaginary future walks. Scotcher's *walking-painting* process was her means of emplacement in the wet tropics. There is much to offer fellow travellers in the arts in her immersive *walking-painting* method that is detailed in her exegesis (Scotcher 2018). This transferable method can be applied by other artists seeking imaginative and aesthetic responses to their environments. Scotcher recognises that 'the world we inhabit is never complete but continually surpassing itself' (Ingold 2011, 13). Emplacement is a continuing relationship and perhaps this is why Scotcher often includes horizon lines that allude to an unreachable destination in her compositions such as the *Hinchinbrook Island Walk* series shown in Figures 7 and 8 (Scotcher 2018). As the writer, Charmaine Clift observes: 'The one certain thing about going north in Australia is that the further north you get the further north you want to go' (1970, 222), an invitation Scotcher may take up in the future.

Conclusion

Scotcher's creative body of work is significant in the field of Australian landscape painting for its beauty and the rendition of a previously unseen vision of the hot, humid landscape of the wet tropics. Scotcher quietly connects the act of painting and everyday pedestrian movement with contextual and theoretical knowledge that coalesce in a culturally significant body of work. Her *walking-painting* method contributed new knowledge of arts practice. It is a method that involves an earned relationship to place that does endeavour to master the environment (Scotcher 2018). It is a method that treads lightly while considering one's bodily presence, the power of everyday movement and the beautiful significance of attending to our unfolding presence in a tangled world of relationships.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Robyn Glade-Wright is a practicing artist and lecturer who seeks to create a sense of disquiet in her works of art to engender reflection about the kind of life (and death) we impose on sentient creatures. Glade-Wright's works of art respond to the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene in a

form that conflates beauty and dread, and allure and anxiety to provoke contemplation of these terms in an effort to foster a sustainable future for life on this small planet.

Jacqueline Scotcher is a visual artist who investigates themes of landscape, place and movement. How walking receptively through natural landscapes can be evoked through abstract painting and how this duality works to enrich emplacement via sensuous means, drives Jacqueline's practice. Recent research focusses on the tropical environment of far north Queensland and aims to highlight the value of direct human-nature relationships in fast-paced contemporary lifestyles.

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