

Measuring the land: five days in the Pilbara Mags Webster

From the safe distance of Perth (or anywhere else for that matter), it feels like you can contain the Pilbara by words and images. But once you are actually there, bearing witness takes on a different meaning. The Pilbara defies you to capture its essence; you try, yet all you have at your disposal is an everyday language or imagery. You have to lift up to another level to meet with the challenge, and it is not a given that you may succeed.

For five days during March 2010, I was lucky enough to travel through the Pilbara¹ in the company of the writers William L. (Bill) Fox, Barry Lopez and Mark Tredinnick, the photographer Paul Parin and the artist Larry Mitchell. Five people whose responses to the experience would be expressed each day in a variety of ways: in private notebooks, constantly to hand and criss-crossed with script and sketch; in myriad images taken from every angle and at all times; and in conversations undertaken in transit on the road, or around the dinner table at night, a continuous download of information, of description, of trying to make memories fit the scale of the land traversed that day.

I believe there is an instinctive response for a writer when confronted with unfamiliar land. The impulse is to write oneself into it, to reach for story, build a scaffolding of sense that will somehow envelop the space and peg down the endless horizons. Thus the writer records his relationship with the land, and another layer of mythos accrues, just like strata beneath the surface crust.

Likewise, the photographer literally 'frames' the scene, makes a two-dimensional facsimile of what he or she sees. If attentive and skilled enough to push beyond the obvious, the photographer may manage to capture something transcending the visual. The resulting image might show us more than we ever could have seen, even had we stood alongside when it was taken.

What happens, then, for the visual artist, who, travelling without paints and canvas, may rely only on memory, snapshots, and notes to decode the ideogram of landscape and topography he carries in head and body, back to his studio?

Every artist (whether working through words, music, the body or a visual medium) has his or her own creative process. Some go about it more consciously than others, some more obviously than others.

But in each there has to take place some alchemy which acts on what is held within them and externalises it, transforms it from a concept into an object: a painting or a poem, a symphony or a dance.

If Larry Mitchell took notes or made sketches during that trip, I was not aware of it. I remember seeing him take photographs, but most of the time he seemed to be experiencing his surroundings through his body, barefoot whenever possible, immersed in a waterhole, or floating on the salty skin of the warm waters of the Dampier Archipelago. I perceived this almost limbic connection with earth and element as the mark of someone who truly finds their peace away from the built environment – and maybe from most people too.

I don't know how Larry was able to carry all of the knowledge inside him to create these paintings of the Pilbara, but I imagine he understands his personal alchemical process well. On the road, back in March 2010, he was circumspect with his energy, self-contained. A person who drew little attention to himself, he was private, discreet, scrupulous in respecting other people's space. One of the most well-read people I have ever met, his conversation was often about travel and literature. I suspect he held most of himself in reserve, soaked something of his surroundings inside, and now, many hours of studio time later, we have this extraordinary record of his encounter with the Pilbara.

Some canvases, like the rock art cage on the Burrup (*Burrup Peninsula*) and the diptych of a low hill as the light is changing (*The Black Hill*), I find particularly mesmerising. The depth and intensity permeating this series of art demands something of the viewer that I believe is rare in contemporary landscape portraiture (and I do relate to these paintings as if they were portraits rather than 'landscapes'). Like the scenery that inspired them, they cannot easily be absorbed with a cursory glance. They bear witness to the Pilbara's enduring patina, ancient marks inflicted by the elements and the restless upheaval of the planet itself, and more recent ones inflicted by humankind and industry. They look at the Pilbara unflinchingly, and demand that we must too.

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¹ We travelled from Tom Price through Karijini up to Millstream, on to Dampier and from there to Port Hedland via Cossack and Roebourne.