

# trace

## Jan Davis at Langford120

by Alex Selenitsch, Melbourne-based poet and architect, and senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Melbourne



Jan Davis, *McMillan's waistcoat*, 2011, digital print, 104 x 84 cm

left

Jan Davis, *Southbound*, 2011, digital print, 84 x 100 cm

**Parallel confrontations run** through recent digital prints by Jan Davis. Two groups of these works were exhibited at Langford120 in North Melbourne in September-October this year. The first group of works known as *walking home*, originally shown in Brisbane at grahame galleries + editions in 2010, took up the southern half of the Langford Street gallery, and a new set of works titled *trace* were pinned up across the north walls. Both groups consist of greyish to black and faded colour surfaces in watery ink, with added line either as marks or diagrams. In the *walking home* set, drawings in various formats are placed over smoky blotched surfaces which cover the entire sheet of the paper. In the *trace* works, the full sheet of darkness appears to have been taken up, and folded over a few times, revealing white paper surrounds which carry additional drawings and marks.

Both sets of works were inspired by an account of a white woman seen among the Kurnai tribes of Gippsland, the account being published in 1840 in the *Sydney Herald*. The sighting was reported by explorer Angus McMillan, and was the expression of a particular Australian myth of European and Indigenous absorption. The myth is still current, being acted out as the drama of host and guest, with the former being, despite recent suffering and victimisation, a stable 40,000 year-old entity, and the latter an unstable, contradictory bundle of roles such as visitor, invader, prophet and profiteer.

McMillan's sighting of the captured white woman as she vanished into the bush with the Kurnai, and the cache of clothes and objects found at their deserted camp have provided Jan Davis with two kinds of image to put together. One kind concerns memory and trace and is therefore immaterial, and the other is material, literally so through the abandoned clothing.

McMillan's inventory of the clothing, piece by piece, is the inspiration for these new works. With only a few exceptions, each work is an apparently full-size drawing of a folded garment. In her notes to the exhibition, Davis describes her procedure:

'I took ink and brush and passed my hand back and forth across the surface of the paper. The action became like walking, my passage laying down trails of ink, blending the stories with the surface of the paper... The paper carrying the washes, stripes, grids and stories was then fashioned, folded, and secured with needle and thread, becoming the items of clothing listed in McMillan's inventory or becoming the terrain across which the search parties and the fugitives ranged...'

Davis uses dotted line to fuse these two states of becoming: the dotted line being both a description of stitching and the representation of a path. This aphorism comes to mind: *walking stitches the country together*. It's true for both nomads and explorers.

But some of the 'stitching' in these works is flattened real stitching. Davis continues in her exhibition notes: '...I pressed the folded and

stitched objects through a scanner to create a type of print matrix from which I constructed these works...'

At this point, the physicality of plate-making is invoked, with a difference. A three-dimensional object is flattened (printed?) to make a plate, which is not an object but a temporal arrangement of data (one bit after another in a chain). This is then spread over a flat sheet by a machine. Davis' printed images are surprisingly tactile and three dimensional, due to the shadows of the stitching and folds, and the pixellation of the print. In many of the works, the wet ink and slightly oily shadows give the impression of skin.

A cascade of host to guest confrontations spiral out of this physicality: the Kurnai absorbing (and resisting) the Europeans, a white woman against the explorers, history against the visiting artist, the artworks which suffer the roaming viewer and critic, the plate which receives the paper, the body which accepts the temporary garment, and landscape which tolerates the map. A double aphorism comes to mind: for guests, *a map is the skin of country*, and for hosts, *the skin is a map of country*. •

*trace* by Jan Davis was shown at Langford120 gallery, 120 Langford Street, North Melbourne from 15 September – 29 October 2011.