

## Song, fire, peat, dream....

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Curator, 2014

Jesus's Footprint, the ridges of the sole matching the undulations of the rock; a solidified river; Creation story; the first man.

The Elder, Mark Inkamala, kneels in the sand in Ntaria (Hermannsburg), to show Judith Parrott, the artist who hails from two places in the world: from both Australia and Scotland.

Judith frames the image. She is shooting close, with a view from above: a fringe of grass and scrub; pale sand; red rock and Mark in his baseball cap and blue jeans. Judith takes the picture when Mark's not looking at her but towards his right as though he sees someone coming towards them from the distance. The Footprint is striding ahead, leading us into the Bush.

I put the Footprint's co-ordinates into Google Earth and zoom out: it's almost bang in the centre of the continent. Zoom in and there's a path: the Red Centre Way, cut through to the horizon, straight and flat as the land beneath the hooves of Sidney Nolan's painting of Ned Kelly's horse.

I am red like burning fire  
I am covered with a glowing red down

I am red like burning fire  
I am gleaming red, glistening with ochre...

The couplets are from *Songs of Central Australia* by Theodore Strehlow, as translated by the Australian poet Barry Hill.<sup>i</sup> Strehlow was the son of a Lutheran missionary who came to Hermannsburg – the site of Jesus's Footprint - in the 1800s. The plain white church is still there amidst the scrubby trees. He grew up trilingual in English, German and Arrarnta; was initiated into Aboriginal rites and spent thirty years gathering and translating songs from Aboriginal languages. Although Strehlow was a controversial figure and the book is now out of print, Hill, the poet, believes Strehlow's achievement in cherishing and recording Aboriginal song is a gem, a gift.

The whole land of Australia can be read as a musical score. So says Bruce Chatwin in *The Songlines*. Aboriginal songs are so closely connected to the earth, musical phrases are like map references. An 'unsung land' he says, 'is a dead land'. It is a crime to allow the songs to be forgotten because then 'the land itself will die.'<sup>ii</sup>

Judith is singing the land, both of Aboriginal Australia and of Gaelic-speaking Scotland. She is in harmony here with other contemporary Australian artists who use mapping and music. Julie Gough, for example, looks at unresolved histories often filming outdoors, the land integral to her work.<sup>iii</sup> Michaela Davies, who recently performed to acclaim in Scotland, employs music to rock our sense of agency and limits of control.<sup>iv</sup>

Like Aboriginal song couplets, Judith's works are arranged in pairs though rather than stretching across a continent they span tectonic plates. An Australian image nestles next to a Scottish one. Mark Inkamala kneeling beside the Footprint is juxtaposed with Canon Angus MacQueen in his Barra kitchen greeting his white cat. The compassionate face of the healer Mary Therese Mulladad surrounded by purple-painted Serpents and orange mandorlas in skeins of silk is adjacent to Flora Macdonald, focussed and intent on her spinning.

During the Alcheringa, the Dreaming Time, the Aboriginal Ancestors sang the world into existence. Every rock and creek and hill and tree was born from song. I can imagine Lewis on the Isle of Lewis, in Judith's image, singing the seaweed into shape as he casts it into the net.

Alexander Carmichael, a Greenock Customs and Excise Officer, spent much of his life collecting Gaelic lore, hymns and incantations to cast them into his own net, his well-known book, *Carmina Gadelica*. His aim was to capture the 'genii of the Highlands... before the spirit of modernism' swept them away.<sup>v</sup> He believed this subject - the *chi*, the essence, the soul of a place - should be investigated and compared with other lands; this is a baton with which Judith has run.

Of the Highlands, Carmichael wrote:

'Religion, pagan or Christian, or both combined, permeated everything – blending and shading into one another like the iridescent colours of the rainbow. The people were sympathetic and synthetic, unable to see and careless to know where the secular began and the religious ended...'<sup>vi</sup>

Like Theodore Strehlow, Carmichael has had his detractors. Still, his book is a labour and a testament born of his love and respect for Gaelic tradition and language. He completed the first volume in 1899, incidentally the same year Freud, in Vienna, completed *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Dreams and visions are embedded in Gaelic tradition. Dwelly's Scots/Gaelic Dictionary lists pages of Gaelic words for dream: *aisling, brudair, dreang, fis, sealladh...* Similarly, it records many words for vision: *léisinn, radharc, dailgneachd, taibhse...* The gift of second sight is prized.

In *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin accompanies a Russian man surveying the locale of a proposed railway line from Alice to Darwin. The Russian's job is to identify the 'traditional

landowners'. Western law is etymologically ingrained with the boundaries of land, with fair distribution. The word 'law' itself, as Chatwin points out, has its basis in the ancient Greek word for pasture, *nomos*.<sup>vii</sup> Nomads, like birds and animals, find a Way through.

Chatwin – the Pom - and the Russian go on a journey in a beat-up old truck, meeting Aboriginal men and women along the way; in the towns; in country; missing, out on Walkabout. When they meet, they generally drink or eat together. Bottles of beer popped, steaks on the BBQ - songs and dreaming around the fire.

When Judith asked her Aboriginal colleagues for words which conjured the idea of land, 'fire' was key. Even on a journey, a hearth provides a sense of home. In the Highlands of Scotland the ritual of 'smoothing the fire' was usually performed by the woman of the house. As a part of the exhibition we are re-creating a version, here, in the gallery.

Smoothing the peat is, according to *Carmina Gadelica*, 'artistic and symbolic, and is performed with loving care....' Once complete, over the embers and the ashes, a blessing:

AN Tri numh	THE sacred Three
A chumhnadh,	To save,
A chomhnadh,	To shield,
A chomraig	To surround
An tula,	The hearth,
An taighe,	The house,
An teaghlaich,	The household,
An oidhche,	This eve,
An nochd,	This night,
O! an oidhche,	Oh! this eve,
An nochd,	This night,
Agus gach oidhche,	And every night,
Gach aon oidhche.	Each single night.
Amen	Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Hill, Barry, *Broken Song*, (Random House: Australia, 2012) Kindle Edition, *loc.*491.

<sup>ii</sup> Chatwin, Bruce, *The Songlines*, (Picador: London 1988) 58.

<sup>iii</sup> Gough, Julie, *Traveller*, HDMI video projection, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> Davies, Michaela, *Compositions for Involuntary Strings*, performed at Tramway, Glasgow, 2013.

<sup>v</sup> Carmichael, Alexander, *Carmina Gadelica*, (Floris Books: Edinburgh 1992)30.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>vii</sup> Chatwin, 205.