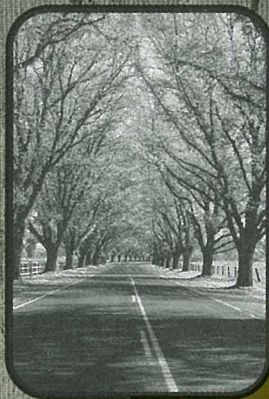


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JANENNE EATON

THE AVENUE OF HONOUR

18 AUGUST – 17 SEPTEMBER 1995

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

Avenue of Honour: Post Modern Histories

Janenne Eaton recalls vividly the winter evening in 1992 when she happened to drive through the Bacchus Marsh Avenue of Honour on her way to Melbourne. At the time, it was the serial image of bare trunks and limbs that embraced either side of the highway which initially attracted her admiration. Lured to stop and walk this landscape of memory, the Avenue began to accrue additional meaning and poignancy as a symbolic grave marker for those individuals whose past life remained recorded on the plaques. Such a profound experience seemed to crystallise a host of other associations and ultimately became the sustaining vision for this installation which re-creates the Avenue as a site for contemplation.

The Avenues of Honour created through the action of communities to honour those who served and died in two World Wars have long languished in obscurity; disregarded as war memorials, overlooked as local history and unacknowledged as significant symbolic landscapes. The regard which Janenne Eaton has for these memorials redresses these past omissions. By searching out the history of these Avenues, their role as a focus of personal memory spanning several generations and the cultural heritage they bequeath to subsequent generations, she undercuts existing categories of artistic practice and our generalised (and generally pessimistic) assumptions regarding national identity.

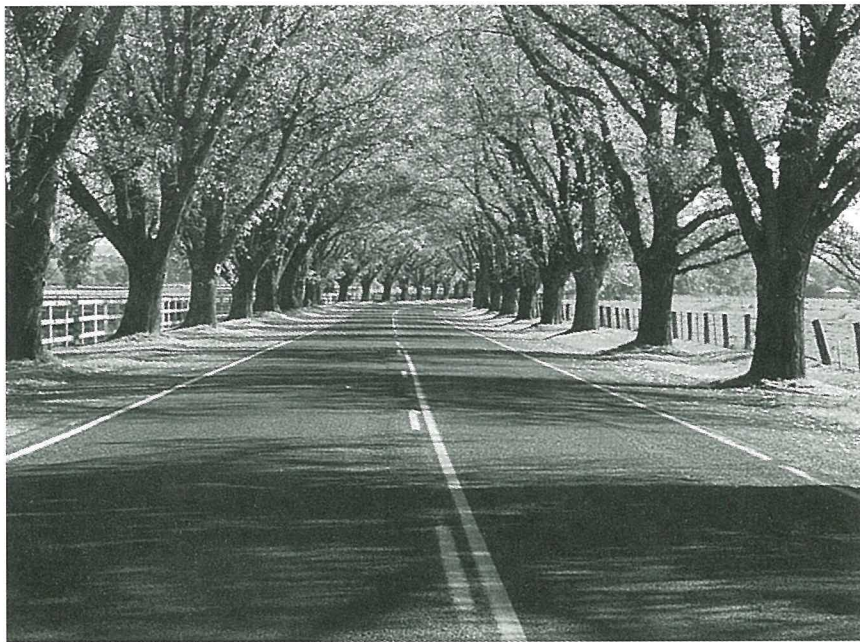
on the land, or a painting of such a scene.”¹ In the viewpoint of the renowned geographer, J. B. Jackson, landscapes are better understood as concrete, three-dimensional, synthetic environments—“a man-made system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community.”² By choosing to represent the Avenue not as a series of static, illusionistic representations but as an installation which records the life of the landscape in process, Janenne Eaton avoids reincorporating the Avenues within existing landscape traditions and instead, she acknowledges how we imaginatively intervene in the physical world to invest our lived environment with deeply felt, yet intangible associations which gather accumulated meanings over time to form a community of images in our memory. For her, the Avenues of Honour are emblematic of the enduring importance of history as the fabric of shared meanings and values which sustain and shape society.

Drawing upon a background in archaeology, she explores the Avenue as an artefact—a fragment from the past marked by the actions of people and altered by the passage of time—which we arbitrarily reinterpret from a contemporary perspective. In the installation we participate physically in the psychic space created by the memorial and the accumulation

of mutable and multiple meanings which the Avenue has generated over the span of time. As one traverses the rows of hanging, semi-transparent, parchment panels, their regimented precision evokes not only the original Avenue but the symmetrical, ordered ranks of military parades and the cemeteries overseas where Australian soldiers and nurses lie buried. Each semi-transparent scroll is like a palimpsest: in place of the life taken away, the identity of each individual is reinscribed by means of text and image; abstraction and realism. Confronting us, graphite rubbings record the ‘skin’ of each tree and the plaque bearing the personal details for each of the soldiers—and the one nurse—included in the Bacchus Marsh Avenue of Honour. On the back of each panel, a photographic portrait

identifies with indexical accuracy, the particular tree which stands as a poetic metaphor for a human life.

In Stephen Daniels’ analysis, it is no use trying to resolve the contradictions inherent in landscapes; they inevitably incorporate a veritable field of tensions.³ When society actively intervenes in the physical world to support and sustain



For some time now, artists have joined cultural historians and geographers in questioning the simple assumption that nature represents a separate entity romantically positioned in opposition to human culture. Arising from these insights, landscapes can no longer be construed in the restricted sense—intended for artists—as a “view or vista of scenery

its most cherished ideas and values, landscapes, as representations of that society, masks the very capitalist system which supports class structures, the history of colonial acquisition and the imaginary formations of national identity which constitute our modern world. In one sense then, the Avenue of Honour is expressive of a basic human need to preserve the memory of the dead in perpetuity and, accordingly, trees are universally esteemed as metaphors for commemoration. Such organic metaphors resolve the paradox of human existence: although each tree is destined for death and therefore operates as a *memento mori*, each contains within itself the possibility of infinite life by association with the recurring seasonal cycles of birth, life and death. Nevertheless, we also need to acknowledge the different cultural meanings engendered by such universal symbols. Whilst the carved trees or dendroglyphs associated with the Aboriginal burial grounds and ceremonial sites of south eastern Australia reinforce spiritual ties with the land, the Avenues of Honour associated with the same geographic region, originate in Western cultural traditions. The landscapes which first marked the sacred ways of classical Greece and Rome as signs of civic virtue and heroic victory reached their apogee in the vistas and dramatic effects achieved by the formal gardens of eighteenth century France and England. As such, these symbolic landscapes exemplify the rule of geometry which the West has imposed on the natural world so that the Avenues of Honour become equally as expressive of “the regimented militarized state in miniature” as they are products of the urban designs of modernity.⁴

Above all, these vernacular landscapes, created by people in every day life, are localised history. For all Australians, the First World War represented a watershed which ushered in a new and more painful maturity. Given that Australia suffered the highest percentage of casualties amongst the allied forces this inevitably meant that the impact of the war affected everyone—a situation heightened in rural areas where enlistment procedures ensured entire battalions were drafted from the population of a particular region. Located at the periphery of the global conflict, there was little likelihood that relatives would be able to visit the graves of those killed in action—if they were known. Indeed the preference for deciduous ash, elm and oak may have served to reiterate a series of symbolic references which explicitly contrasted the Australian landscape with European theatres of war and fields of burial. Hence the Avenues of Honour which flowered in response to this particular set of circumstances could not be said to celebrate war. Rather, as visual metaphors of death and sacrifice; grief and reconciliation; gratitude and remembrance, the Avenues mediate and bridge the gap between the personal experience of ordinary people caught up in events which

almost defied comprehension and the constructions of nationality which inspired their patriotism and dedication—and in so doing, gave new meaning to existence.

For Janenne Eaton it is critical that the Avenues of Honour enable the landscape of war to be re-feminised, highlighting women’s actions as historical agents and the intimate and personal role they play in the process of conflict and resolution. Research reveals that the creative inspiration for the Avenues of Honour originated with Mrs Tilly Thompson, one of the managers at the Lucas Clothing Store in Ballarat.⁵ Under Thompson’s leadership, women employees (known colloquially as the ‘Lucas Girls’) enthusiastically raised the funds and organised the labour and materials required to create the first Avenue of Honour at Ballarat in 1917—a monumental memorial of 4000 trees which originally lined the first ten miles of the highway to Melbourne. In the past, the caring, procreative and nurturing role which women sustained during war time—either in the domestic sphere or in their professional work as nurses—has generally been masked by the heroic myths of masculine endeavour which served the needs of a young nation state. As a consequence, the majority of memorials erase recognition for the women who served as nurses during the wars. To redress this omission, Janenne Eaton painstakingly embroiders in scarlet and blue satin-stitch the cloth name plate for Sister Kathleen Rogers.

These living memorials to the dead are unique to Australia’s cultural heritage and they characterise the cultural landscapes of Victorian country towns and suburban High Streets, yet they have not been given the recognition they deserve. It is the grander, official monuments, set in stone by professional craftsmen, which are accorded privileged status and which remain the focus of remembrance locally, regionally and nationally—despite the fact that they invariably render the war in abstract and depersonalised terms. By contrast the Avenues are, without exception, determinedly egalitarian: those honoured are grouped not by rank, but according to the name of their family or their date of enlistment. And, unlike the official memorials, Avenues of Honour embody the collective spirit of those communities who spontaneously conceived, created and produced these memorials. On 18 August 1918, a special issue of the *Bacchus Marsh Express* recorded in detail how people from outlying areas gradually converged on the site to participate in the opening ceremony and witness the climactic moment when the 281 trees were planted simultaneously on the call of a bugle. In conclusion, the newspaper listed the soldiers and nurse who had been commemorated and the names of those who had planted a youthful Canadian elm.

For those whom Janenne Eaton interviewed who remained intimately connected with these events, a dense web of memories still surrounds these Elysian fields. Nevertheless, history is never passed down intact as a given set of inert traditions, consciously or unconsciously we contribute to the process of cultural change by reinterpreting the past through our perceptions of the present. Similarly the Avenues are not static repositories of history but dynamic entities which have unfolded and altered over time as events and people have intervened in its life-cycles. In the constant process of historical change which has occurred over several generations, the original saplings have grown and engulfed the picket fences which initially provided them with protection, trees have sustained accidental damage or they have died and subsequently been replaced. In recording this recurring pattern of decay, ruin and restoration—and the errors and variations which have inevitably occurred — the installation becomes further testimony to the nature of our human endeavour.

In retrospect it is evident that Avenues of Honour emerged at a particular moment of time when the lifestyle of many Australians was still intimately connected with the land and the skills and knowledge gained through a life of rural labour. Without doubt the progress of modernity swept away many of these experiences and the locus of memories they produced. Already in the Second World War a new, pragmatic puritanism prevailed: hospitals, swimming pools and halls took precedence over the serene Avenues which formerly bordered the peripheries of country towns and inner urban settings. Indeed, as highways became ever more expressive of a lifestyle where our work and leisure experiences of the landscape are transmuted by the speed of travel, Avenues have been removed in the name of efficiency and safety—and history erased. Today, barely fifty Avenues remain—approximately one third of the number originally planted.

It might be thought that the series of exclusions which have relegated the Avenues of Honour to relative obscurity (if not oblivion) are confirmation of the widespread notion that history is obsolete—that we have no need for such symbolic landscapes now databanks have become “nature for post modern man.”⁶ However Janenne Eaton resists these responses to our contemporary world. Her situated practice accords more closely with the adversarial strategies advocated by writers

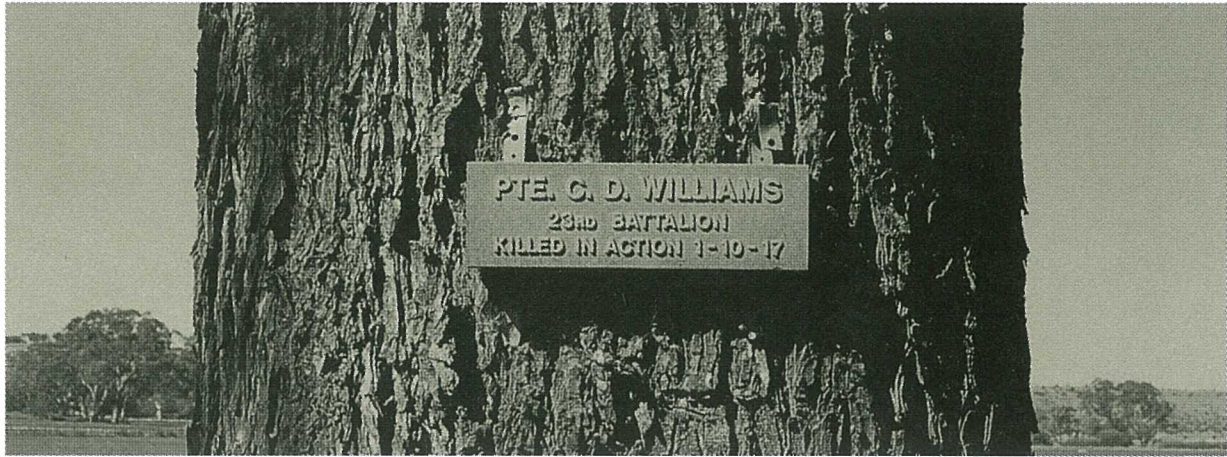
such as Andreas Huyssen who have challenged contemporary artists to recuperate meaning and value for a humanist tradition by searching out the histories previously hidden by master narratives.⁷ Through her admiration for the vernacular landscapes created by ordinary people in every day life she recovers meaning for the memories, stories, and inter-



connected narratives of identity which make up localised histories. Her installation presses into service an eclectic juxtaposition of materials including parchment, graphite, embroidery and photography to engender new poetic meanings for the Avenues to remind us of the rich and vital fabric of meanings and values which link us to the past and in so doing, help us negotiate our future trajectories. The Avenue of Honour is successful if, in our imagination, we dream of visiting these cultural landscapes.

SYLVIA KLEINERT

- 1 J. B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 147.
- 2 Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p. 8.
- 3 Stephen Daniels, “Marxism, Culture, and the Duplicity of Landscape,” in *New Models in Geography: The Political Economy Perspective*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), Vol. 2, pp. 196-220).
- 4 Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p. 136.
- 5 For research in this area see, Janine Haddow, “Avenues of Honour in Victoria,” M.A. Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1987 and her “Avenues of Honour,” *Meanjin*, Vol.47, No.3, Spring 1988, pp.421-424.
- 6 Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 10, p. 51.
- 7 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.



“History is full of forgotten moments of great intense human passion and expression.
The business of fixing things in art in some way or another is to make them live on and make that
available to one’s contemporaries and succeeding generations.”

THOMAS CROW, *THE AUSTRALIAN*, 14 JULY 1995

An archaeological point of view began to influence my art practice at the start of the eighties. At that time I was undertaking studies in Prehistory at the ANU. The influence it has had on bodies, or ‘series’, of works produced since that time is various; sometimes appearing as a source of subject, or as processes that echo archaeological methodology, or a combination.

It could be said that I fell for the Avenue of Honour as an artist, then tackled it as an archaeologist. In the evenly spaced, stark, winter trunks of the trees, echoes of the compulsive repetition of rows of simple abstract forms that I had been dealing with in my paintings over a long period, provided the decisive flash for making this work. Simultaneously, the recognition of the Avenue of Honour as an artefact of local cultural history, and one that remains a functioning part of our environment, suggested it would yield numerous levels of meaning. And, of course, some of these meanings will have altered significantly with the passage of time.

The appropriateness of a multi-disciplinary approach came from a recognition that a metaphor existed between the artistic processes that might be employed in making the work, and the methodology the archaeologist would employ to reveal meaning in the archaeological record. Each tree signifies an individual artefact within the defined ‘assemblage’ (the entire Monument itself). The artistic/data gathering processes yield, by a series of numerous, intricate and repetitive tasks, the individual ‘narratives’ for each of the artefacts within the ‘assemblage’. The

data gathering process, through photographic and frottage techniques, becomes finally, the physical entity of the work of art.

Tree by tree this ‘trace’ of the monument reveals a visual narrative, a product of the passage of time and instances of human intervention. Further, because of the repetition of technical and artistic processes, and the aesthetic decisions made, additional variations accumulate. The artistic intervention adds to the narrative of the Avenue itself.

Of particular interest to me, working from tree to tree, was the palimpsest of variabilities and nuances seen in the growth patterns of individual trees and in the unpatterned variations of the coded military texts on the metal plaques. These create a resistance to the Monument’s symmetry and order. In the individuation of tree and name, a kind of ‘hand drawn’ poetic enters the work, undermining the structural ‘mathematics’ of the monument’s ‘metered cadences’.

Most official war memorials are like master narratives of historical events. They tend to obscure the unruly actions, and experiences in the lives of ordinary people that make up those histories. Moving from tree to tree one encounters in mini-biography a sensation of the individual lives represented in the pressed metal texts. As Christian Boltanski said in a recently televised documentary on his work, ‘when we are told that two thousand died in some upheaval, it is not two thousand, it is one and one and one....’

JANENNE EATON St Kilda 1995

JANENNE EATON

Born Melbourne 1950

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1993 Ben Grady Gallery, Canberra
1992 Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
1991 Ben Grady Gallery, Canberra
1990 Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
1988 Milburn & Arté, Sydney
1987 Contemporary Art Space, Canberra
1986 Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne
Mori Gallery, Sydney
1984 Mori Gallery, Sydney
1983 Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 *Hard Rain*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
The Print, the Press, the Artist, and the Painter—Limited Editions and Artists' Books from Art Presses of the ACT, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
Unpeeled Art, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, Victoria
Two Weeks – A Group Exhibition, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
The Baillieu Myer Collection of the 80's, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne
- 1993 *The Australian National University Collection Exhibition*, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
- 1992 *Canberra and Regional Artists in the Parliament House Collection*, Parliament House, Canberra
Works on Paper by Contemporary Australian Artists, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
The Land, print folio exhibition, AGOG Gallery, Canberra
Compact Art – a Clear Case, Ben Grady Gallery, Canberra
- 1991 *The Gold Coast City and Conrad Jupiters Art Prize for Painting*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland
- 1990 *Sun, Smoke and Steel*, National Touring Exhibition, 1990–1992, Studio One, Canberra; Tin Sheds, Sydney
- 1988 *Ten Years of Tapestry from the Victorian Tapestry Workshop*, National Gallery of Victoria
- 1987 *Backlash: The Australian Drawing Revival 1976–1986*, The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- 1986 *Monumental Drawings*, Contemporary Art Society of Australia Gallery, Adelaide
Hugh Williamson Prize, Ballarat Art Gallery, Victoria
The Repeated Image, an exhibition from the Griffith University Art Collection. Brisbane Civic Art Gallery and Museum
- 1985 *6 Drawing*, Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart
Australian Perspecta '85, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1983 *New Art, Selections from the Michell Endowment National Gallery of Victoria*, "Banyule" Gallery, Heidelberg

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- Sasha Grisin: "The Print, the Press, the Artist, and the Painter — Limited Editions and Artists' Books from Art Presses of the ACT", Australian National University, 1994
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Timothy Morrell: "Big Drawings", *Art and Australia*. Vol. 23, No. 3, Autumn 1986

Robert Nelson: "Semiotic History of the Fold", *Agenda*, No.33, Sept. 1993

Robert Nelson: "Marked by the Past," *The Age*, 24 December 1994

Ursula Prunster: "Transformations" (*Australian Perspecta '85* catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985

Geoff Wallis: *Unpeeled Art*, (catalogue), Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 1994

REPRESENTED

Australian National Gallery Collection, Canberra; Holmes á Court Collection; National Gallery of Victoria Collection, Melbourne; Parliament House Collection, Canberra, Baillieu Myer Collection, Melbourne; The Australian National University Collection, Canberra; National Australia Bank Collection, Melbourne; Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat; University of Western Australia Collection, Perth; Murdoch University Collection, Perth; Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston; Darwin Community College Collection, Darwin; Griffith University Collection, Brisbane; The Canberra University Collection; Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Surfers Paradise; and private collections in Australia, and overseas.

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18 August — 17 September

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I thank Bill Ferguson for his constant support and whose work remains an inspiration to me. — Janenne Eaton

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