

# My Space Lyndal Jones



A sense of urgency animates artist Lyndal Jones as she walks me through the historic house that is the site of her groundbreaking Avoca Project. Driven by her sense that "something needs to happen very fast", Jones bought the house three years ago and began restoring it as "a model of possibility" in the face of climate change. Shipped from Germany in prefab form in the 1850s, the house has long been an Avoca landmark and may well become a beacon of global action, as Jones and other artists generate thought-provoking images of sustainability. Jones is a pioneering video and performance artist whose work features in a survey exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art opening today.

## Describe the house and what's happening here.

I started to try to find a model of possibility in terms of climate change. I think the reason so few artists are dealing with it is because it's too big, too frightening. What people are doing individually is fantastic: they're fixing their houses, doing what they can. I realised that if you bring it down to a specific place then you can deal with it. The question then is what, as an artist, can you do. And the answer is that we can create powerful images that become culturally resonant. I'm working with a fantastic land artist, Mel Ogden. My image to her was that I wanted the house to sit on a clear space and be surrounded by increasingly indigenous plantings around that clear space so there is a sense of its foreignness. I wanted to get a sense of the pop-up picture book.

## Why does this house work as a model of sustainability?

The thing about this house that made it absolutely fabulous as an image is that it's a first-generation immigrant. This project

was started during the Howard government, when the idea of being an immigrant was being truly denigrated. So it struck me, what a wonderful thing, to show the ways that something that is very old and of heritage value and an immigrant can change to suit the changing environment. If a house like this can change, then anything can. The symbolism of the immigrant nature of it is what makes it more redolent. It invites our history to inform our future in a really upfront way. You want to charge the object, to lend it more potency. That's what I have to do, but with respect. And some of that really is about how it might offer a possible future direction for the town. This little town, through the (Avoca Project website), is immediately global. My aim is to have it working at a material level in order to make it a poetic image, not for it simply to be an illustration of climate change. And that's the tricky thing. As an artist, I like that people have to come to terms with the fact that a house can be an artwork.

## That's a difficult concept.

Yes, particularly in Australia, where houses are our main source of investment. That's how people understand a home. But this house has provided already such an air of excitement for people. Lots of artists want to come and work here: international artists, local artists. People are really influenced when they come here and work as artists. What happens is they have to save every skerrick of water. The house will come alive as an artwork as people live and work here. I work at RMIT and I'm going to offer the architecture students a project to make an extraordinary structure, using wire (to create) this light, airy wonderful thing that the vegetables could be grown in. It's like setting people problems when they come here. Some of them are just the day-to-day problems of how you live and use water

consciously, and it will be the power issue, too. I want to make a garden sculpture with revolving leaves that will capture solar power. The amount of power being used will be reflected inside by artworks that use LEDs that change colour as you use more power. It will be beautiful, but you'll actually be aware of what you're doing. The same with the water: hydrophones will go inside (the 90,000-litre underground water tank) and we'll put speakers inside the house to set up an acoustic space, so as the water levels change the music will change through the house. I'm calling them "indicators of use" — smart meters that are done as wonderful artworks.

## How does the landscape speak to you?

This is really quite harsh country. This is a tough part of Australia. When you drive up here, you can feel when you move into the tougher kind of scrubby country. But there's a lot of French history here. It's still redolent with the gold era, the Chinese history. There's this European sense but there's also this really hard, country Australia sense.

## You've spoken about the house looking out of place in the landscape. Do you share that feeling?

Most of the artists I know have that a little bit. Maybe that's part of how we can make comment, or observe.

## What has been your greatest creative moment in this place?

I think there was my realisation that I hadn't just taken on a house, I'd taken on a town. You can't just move into a town and make an artwork that is a house, you actually join into a community. Everyone tells the story of how the house was first built in the main street, but then they wanted to build a bigger pub, so they put the whole house on rollers and rolled it down the hill. All the kids in town will tell you, "oh yes, that was the house that was rolled down the hill". It reinforced the

immigrant nature of the house, which is against what our idea of a house is, which is about stability.

## What has been the most challenging aspect of the project?

What is continually challenging is finding the money. We're throwing ideas around about how people can become involved in supporting the project.

## What does this project say about you?

I guess I'm outrageously optimistic, although I am deeply concerned about climate change. I think something needs to happen very fast, and people haven't grasped that. That's a source of such anxiety to me. Although political leadership is pointing in the right direction, it absolutely needs to be driven by an active community, saying "you must attend to this". Is the aim here to confront or console the viewer in terms of what is possible? I think we need to do both. It needs to be a model of possibility. Maybe not consoling, but inviting, and providing an image. The only image we have at the moment is the penguin on the iceberg, and that's such an image of disaster, of great pain. In the face of those things, it's easy to think that one person is not what's important. If you look at Earth Hour, if you look at the website whoonearthcares.com, people are making extraordinary images of possibility that engage people and I think we've got to have some more of those images.

## What do you hope people take away from this place?

It's the same with all my art; I hope they get a chance to play with possibility. Whether they come for a day, or as a volunteer, or for the weekend, just to play. I think that's what art does really well.

Lyndal Jones: *Darwin with Tears* is at ACCA until July 20.

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