

## Summer Rains

*Summer Rains* is a suite of 12 large-scale photographic prints (or four epic works) each representing large tracts of country. Each work is made up of 3 panels (measuring 105.0cm x 250.0 and 127.0cm x 250.0cm) or, combined, 315.0cm x 250.0cm approximately. This suite of work represents the cyclic nature of summer and is entitled, *December*, *January*, *February*, and *March*. (December to March is the hottest time in Central Australia, as well as being the time of “business” for most Aboriginal language groups and their communities). Each panel is made up of hundreds of taut bras stretched across a flat plane field. This work refers to the symbolic transformation of country from parched, dry, yellow grasses (*December*) into the lush, green, and prolific living environment of life after the rains (*March*). The work insinuates the fecundity and fertility produced by exceptional rains, particularly after prolonged periods of little or no water. In Aboriginal life ways, stagnation is followed by fertility and the anticipation of bush foods, representing benevolence, nourishment, and continuity. Vast volumes of water flow into creek beds and rivers, permanent waterholes replenish, clay pans retain surface water for several months at a time, and temporary and permanent waterholes flourish and provide relief from the heat.

The materiality of the bras and their arrangement mimic the rhythms, patterns, and colours found in the landscape itself. The undulations, the rock formations, the cascading movements found in waterholes, ridges, and ranges, compressed rock beds and geological strata's, the lyrical movement of grasses, bushes, and leaves, fields of hairy, yellow Spinifex that move in the wind, and the long summer Buffel grasses, sometimes one meter in height. These prolonged rains eventually transform a seemingly arid landscape into a dense, lush and verdant green.

This work is sensuous and sexualised, both within its own materiality, and within the multiplicity and potency found in its repetition and profusion. Abject bras are dyed new and stretched over a historic male landscape that has dominated the European imagination and its relationship to history and place. The lyricism and musicality is *other* to conventional representations of frontier settlement and the absent female is made present through sensual form and rhythmic patterns: the connection between body and place—the site of experience, the container of memory, sensor and receptor. The body is reinscribed into space and time and is situated within the specifics of its location—the poetics and politics of place.

Pulpous cups, delicate lacing, elasticity, sensual satins and silks, hundreds of straps, miniature bows, plastic clips, the intricate zigzagging of cotton stitching, miniature flowers, and the fleshiness of an isolated pink bra—reinscribes the physicality and materiality of a feminine presence. Volumes of colour and form—stretched, compressed, straining, pushing, and squashed—reinforce a robust femininity. Dense vivid greens interrupted by pulpous blue forms—proliferate growth, multiplicity, profundity, perpetuation—strata's or fragments that suggest a larger continuum. These works reference both the microcosm and macrocosm of life found in the bush: the detail and the expanse.

These works also signal the climatic changes experienced during the summer months. This is the time of the Big Wet created by a succession of tropical cyclones that work their way south into the Central and Western Desert region. It is a time of extreme heat, atmospheric build-up, humidity, spectacular electrical storms, thunderstorms, torrential rains, flooding, and then the inevitable return of heat once again.

*December* (yellow/brown): *December* is the beginning of extreme heat that will continue throughout the whole month. It is a time of humidity and prolonged build-up, with sporadic rains often occurring around Christmas. Temperatures can range from 20-40 degrees.

*January* (yellow/lime green): *January* sees the first seasonal rains and some relief from extreme temperatures. It is generally considered the hottest month in summer. Temperatures can range from 25-45 degrees.

*February* (lime green/aqua): *February* is the time of prolific rains and the abundance of water: the Todd River flows, waterholes fill up, clay pans retain their surface water, and pools of water can be seen sitting on the desert's surface. Temperatures can range from 25–42 degrees.

*March* (verdant green): *March* sees the dissipation of extreme heat. High temperatures still permeate but lose their intensity. Dense verdant green grasses cover the whole countryside. Temperatures can range from 19–38 degrees.

My initial and subsequent returning to Alice Springs/Central Australia (1993–2004) is a summer relationship to place—*experienced through the body*. The body stripped of all clothing, sweats, heats up, dehydrates, expires, cools off, replenishes. Dries out in heat, softens in moisture, revitalizes in water. Arrives white and flabby, turns dark brown and robust. It maintains a direct relationship to country and climate. In effect, *Summer Rains* reflects and reinscribes my own presence in space and time, and re-creates my own autobiographical trajectory into place.

*Summer Rains*, like *Stereoscopic Histories*, reinstates a feminine ethos. These works aspire towards an Aboriginal understanding of place, wherein country and body are considered intrinsic and inseparable, where one ultimately reinscribes the other. This is a culture based on the inter-relatedness between all things—flora and fauna, country, weather, community, events and happenings, are all seen as one entity wherein each aspect of culture informs the other. These are played out in ceremonies, performances, songs, and storytelling, and can be read in ceremonial markings on bodies, cultural artefacts, and the cartographies often illustrated in contemporary painting practices. Stories are illustrated on the body, performed and ritualised, told orally, sung, or drawn on the ground, onto canvas, or onto bark. This ethos also extends into the spiritual realm, where time is recognized as a continuum: the sum parts of the present, the past, and the future. Similarly life forms exist underground, on the ground, and as extra-terrestrial beings. Life is seen as one, 'the lot' or *awelye*, that is, as a continuum.

The "Jukurrpa" is inscribed onto the land itself. The bodily traces of ancestral beings, as they travelled through country, are embodied in trees, rocks, creeks, rivers, waterholes, sand hills, and other land formations. Their presence may be small, like a rock, or vast like a mountain range. Their emotional states are made present and personified in changing skies, storms, lightening, or rainbows.

The surface of the land is often seen as a skin, affected by fires and rain, wind and sun. Ancestral hair is often associated with long grasses or flowering Spinifex. Seed necklaces are seen as meandering creek beds. Animal fats and ochres are used as conduits or agents to draw ancestral power. A rock hole could be the vulva of an ancestral woman when she sits down for a rest. Sacred paintings illustrate the mappings of ancestral beings and one's custodianship and right to place. People reinstate and reclaim their country by singing and telling stories—generally as they travel through country to hunt, socialise, attend funerals and "inma" (ceremony), and other general business. Ancestral tracks often connect waterhole to waterhole. Ceremonial string symbolically binds language, songs, ceremonies, law, and custom, mediating people's connections to country. The same syncopated rhythms are found in beaded necklaces, batiks, painted canvases, painted bodies and ceremonial songs (Young, 2001). The Ngaanyatjarra's word for country is *ngurra*, meaning "home, camp, base, country". In other language groups, this can also include shoulder or arm. The "Jukurrpa", then, becomes a wholly integrated ethos incorporated into contemporary daily life, ceremony, and law: it guides and articulates Aboriginal life worlds.

As mentioned earlier, the rhythmic patterns, colours and repetitions explored in *Summer Rains* eventuated through a sensitivity and understanding of nature made knowable through an

Aboriginal relationship to place. The natural patterns and repetitions inherently found in nature are embodied and experienced in Aboriginal culture and law. This deliberate rhythmic and repetitive mark making is seen in all forms of material culture: paintings, batiks, barks, artefacts and body painting alike. The musicality and patterning harks back to the rhythmic sounds of ceremonial music and song and the lyricism found within language itself. All become one, *awelye*. "This mathematical aspect of pattern is part of the rhythmic cadences of ceremonial music and song...tapped out with music sticks or boomerangs or whatever is to hand...This rhythm is used to represent the protagonist of the song, and the way s/he move(s) through country" (Hamby/Young 2001). The materiality of memory is embodied and made present. Mythologies are re-enacted through sound and body, re-instated through song and story-telling.

Colour in Aboriginal cultures is also a powerful and intrinsic agent. Rhythms and patterns are created through colour combinations and through differing contrasts. Bright colours make things powerful and dynamic, vibrant and energised—they suggest cultural vibrancy and agency—make links to ancestry and transformation. Colours seen at dusk in the Western and Central Deserts transform skies from blue, to pink, to mauve, to purple, to magenta. The surface of the land changes with rain and fire. Lush verdant greens replace red sand and fields of flowers emerge after prolific rains. Red dirt is transformed into vibrant colour fields of deep magenta, yellow, pink, mauve and purple. Iridescent lime green growth sprouts onto blackened trees and scrub, after devastating fires. Clay pans turn pink after sufficient rains. Red sand and red rock turns iridescent orange at dusk. Red symbolizes power and danger. Red headbands often identify powerful and respected initiated men. People generally avoid wearing red clothing for fear of being struck by lightning (ancestral presence). Culturally, red is seen as a transforming agent, most obviously embodied in the red ochred skin of the Kadaicha (Red Ochre Men). Bush tomatoes are lime green when unripe, yellow when ripened. Red and yellow symbolize fire. Blue refers to waterholes and skies, and symbolises renewal, growth and transformation. Green refers to rain and green growth, and symbolises nourishment and continuity. Red, yellow, and white are the colours of natural ochres. Black is the colour of grounded charcoal. Canvasses are often primed in black acrylic paint—given a black skin (Young 2001).

*Summer Rains* is a body of work that embellishes inter-cultural and inter-subjective engagement. This time, however, Aboriginal culture and life worlds impact onto a European female presence. Through direct contact and the imparting of local knowledge over a long period of time, one participates in a form of cultural *imbrication*—an Aboriginal overlapping that produces a new mutual space from which to share, exchange, and exist in. However, this inter-subjective space is one of acknowledgement for, and respect of, a knowledge system that has existed and survived over, and through, European contact and settlement. This work is an acknowledgement of an Aboriginal *presencing* that exists as a continuum—past, present and future—*awelye*, or, *the lot*, as cited by Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

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