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Mud and Dirt: Australian Soil as Self-Expression.

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Australia is a vast and ancient land of desert and mountain ranges that have been sculpted by the forces of nature resulting in a huge range of coloured muds, dirts, soils and ochres. The aborigines used and continue to use, coloured clays and ochres to decorate their ceremonial artefacts, bodies, caves and bark paintings. They use yellow and red obtained from ochres including ironstone and limonite, black from charcoal or manganese ore and white from pipeclay or gypsum. After grinding these finely, the aborigines mix them with water and a natural fixative of gum or resin is added if necessary.



Figure 1. Australian Aboriginal dancer. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.

I live in the small seaside settlement of Connellys Marsh in Tasmania, the island state of Australia. My coastal environment is important to me as the major source of my muds and dyes and as the inspiration for much of my artwork.



Figure 2. *Connellys Marsh, showing Di McPherson's residence. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.*

My artistic career began with my training as a graphic designer and I have worked in Tasmania, Britain and Zimbabwe, where I lived for 14 years. In 1976 I returned to Tasmania and decided to study for my Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts Teaching). Although I did not realize it at the time, Africa was an unconscious influence in my artistic development.

In the 1990s I left teaching to concentrate on my own creative work and since then I have attended dye workshops and conferences in Australia, Canada, the USA, Japan and India. These experiences have enriched my development as an artist, exposing me to a broad range of techniques and processes, some of which I have incorporated into my artwork.

I attended the Mud Painting workshop in the late nineties given by Philomena Hali, a textile and fibre artist from the desert city of Alice Springs, which is known as the 'Red Heart' of Australia because of the colour of the land. I learned to mix muds with water and paint them on to damp cloth. I was unaware that without the use of a mordant most of the colour would wash away. Mordants act as a bond, helping to fix the dye to the fibre, making it light and colour fast and they can also alter the colour. I liked the serendipitous nature of mud painting and used it in combination with other materials.

'Earth Beat' and 'Coastal' were two artworks which were exhibited concurrently with the natural dye conference, 'Colour Congress' in Ames, Iowa in 2002.



Figure 3. 'Coastal' 35" x 19". Collection of the artist. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.

A conference bonus was the opportunity to attend the workshop given by American basket and textile artist, Judy Dominic, called 'Bogolan fini' (Mud Cloth) Modified. I learned that the Bamanese dyers of Mali, first prepare their cotton cloth with a tannin-rich mordant, made from leaves and branches. Iron-rich river or lakebed mud, collected the previous year, is used to paint the patterns onto the cloth which is then left in the sun for several days before rinsing. To achieve a rich black, the process may be repeated three or four times. Finally, any unwanted colour is bleached out.

Judy's modification was to replace the river mud with potting soil, and the tannin and sun with Soya milk—a mordant. This helped the mud to stick to the cloth when rinsed, and with numerous applications the colours, although pale, built up. With this knowledge, shortly after my return I collected some black mud from the creek bank at the end of our pristine beach, mixed it and other muds with Soya milk and left the painted cloth in the sun for a week before rinsing and better colour was achieved after two applications, but deeper tones still eluded me.

At the same time I was experimenting with Silver gum (*Eucalyptus cordata*) and a year or so later, when extracting dye from their leaves, I wondered whether the tannin in the dye would act as a tannic mordant on cotton fabric and if mud was mixed with Soya milk would it be more permanent after rinsing? The results of my speculations proved to be successful.



Figure 4. *Di McPherson mud painting. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.*

A pivotal point in my artistic career occurred as a result of attending a dye workshop in Australia, taught by a visiting Canadian dyer, Karen Casselman, who introduced the class to many innovative techniques and processes. Karen opened my eyes to a new world of natural colours which I wanted to explore and I did not have far to go, as it was right on my door step!



Figure 5. *Di McPherson and Karen Casselman with joint work, Nova Scotia, 2006. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.*

There are over 700 different species of gum trees (*Eucalypts*) growing in Australia. Tasmania has 15 endemic species, which includes the tallest flowering tree on Earth, the 300 feet high *Eucalyptus regnan*. The wonderful thing about *Eucalypts*, as far as a dyer is concerned, is that they are substantive—that is, they fix to the fibres without an assistant and can be used as a tannic mordant.

I had previously dabbled with natural dyeing—but I now became serious. I wanted to find out more and decided to do my own research focusing mainly on the vegetation growing nearby.

Blue gum *Eucalyptus globules*

Bushy yate *Eucalyptus lehmannii*

Messmate *Eucalyptus obliqua*

Silver dollar *Eucalyptus Cordata*

Silver wattle *Acacia dealbata*

She-oak *Allocasuarina verticillata*

Native cherry *Exocarpos cupressiformis*

Native indigo *Indigofera australis*

I began to collect information, making notes in my workbook that included date, species, growing conditions, process method etc. I put a Testfabric strip in each dye extraction which showed the dye reaction on a range of fabrics, diacetate, cotton, nylon, polyester dacron, orlon, silk, viscose and wool. Through my research I have discovered a palette of colours ranging from red to pale yellows through to rich browns and blacks, and blue and greens from acid to olives, which I use in creating my artworks.

I presented the results of my research in the form of a poster at the International Dye Symposium, Naturally, in Hyderabad, India in 2006, where I also gave a dye workshop and demonstrated the techniques I use in creating patterns.



Figure 6. Poster presented at the International Dye Symposium, Naturally, in Hyderabad, India, 2006. 48" x 35".
Collection of the artist. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.

Tie and dye is a simple resist technique that I use with materials like marbles, chick peas, soya beans etc. In 'Bush Dreaming' soya beans and chick peas were tied into the silk which was roughly pleated and tied before dyeing in an extract of native cherry (*Exocarpos cupressiformis*) and alum with post mordant baths of copper and iron.



Figure 7. 'Bush Dreaming'. 79" x 40" 2000. Private collection. Photographer: Di McPherson.

I am always looking for different effects that can be achieved and ideas sometimes come to me on my daily walk. One day after it had been raining, I noticed streaks of colour coming from squashed *Eucalyptus globulus* gum nuts on the road and wondered what effects could be achieved using them. I collected some nuts, tied them individually in silk and cotton fabric, pounded them to simulate the squashed effect, and left the fabrics soaking in water for three weeks. Liquid and fabrics were put in a dyepot and processed for an hour and twenty minutes with the result that an imprint of each nut was transferred onto the fabric.

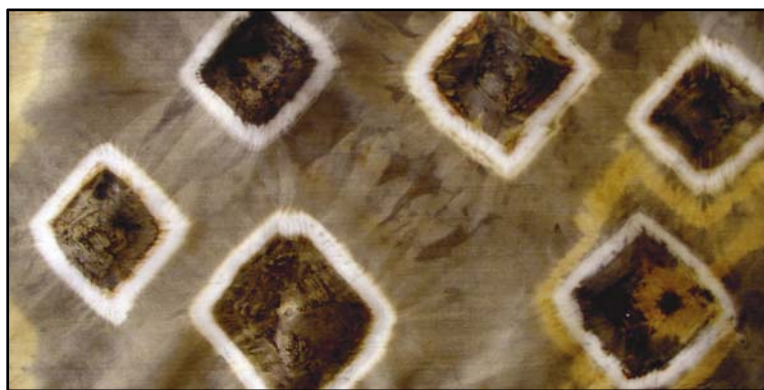


Figure 8. 'Gum nuts'. 6" x 10". Collection: Collection of the artist. Photographer: Di McPherson.

My research and experimentation also includes investigating the use of rusty iron objects in a variety of ways and one technique I use is to fold the iron into the fabric with the result that an imprint is left. When I was invited to give a presentation and be guest artist at the Second

Japanese Natural Dyes and Pigments Conference in Okinawa, Japan in 2005, I created two works using this technique and two by folding and clamping.



Figure 9. The artist and her work at Onna Village Museum, Okinawa, 2005. Photographer: Karen Casselman.

The red dyes in my grandson's woollen blanket were extracted from madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) and the Silver Dollar gum (*Eucalyptus Cordata*), the blue is from *Indigo tinctoria* and the other dyes are all Tasmanian. My research with *Indigofera australis* has been encouraging, yielding a pale blue, however this tends to disappear when overdyed.



Figure 10. 'Eric's blanket'. 48" x 42". Private collection. Photographer Ewen McPherson.

Since my incredible textile tour to India two years ago, I have been using Indigo (*Indigo tinctoria*) and Madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) to create works for the exhibition 'After India', which were exhibited in Australia during this year.



Figure 11. 'Remembering Jaipur'. 79" x 34". Private collection. Photographer: Di McPherson.

In 'Spirit of the Land, Tasmania', which was hung in the exhibition 'Australia Naturally' during the 7th International Shibori Symposium in Paris this year, I used Blue gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*), Native cherry (*Exocarpos cupressiformis*) and *Indigo tinctoria*.



Figure 12. 'Spirit of the Land, Tasmania'. 12" x 12". Collection of the artist. Photographer: Christopher Cowles.

The patterns and colours in the natural world are inspirational, often providing the catalyst for my research and artworks. I would like to thank the organisers of The Textile Society of America's 11th Biennial Symposium, 'Textiles as Cultural Expression' for giving me the opportunity to share the results of my natural dye research with conference participants and to be enriched by the culture of Hawaii and the many wonderful textile exhibitions.