

Mungo



Top: *Daisy girl*, (2010), oil on board; Middle: *Melon girl*, (2010), oil on board; Bottom: *Mungo girl*, (2010), oil on board

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Brenda Runnegar is a Canberra based artist who had over 30 years experience developing and refining her art practice. She has had fifteen solo exhibition and been included in various high profile group exhibitions including as a finalist and award winner in the Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize in 2013.

Education

2007 Master of Fine Arts by research, Monash University
 1997 Bachelor of Visual Arts in Fine Art (Hon), Qld College of Art
 1984 Diploma of Arts in Visual Art, Canberra Institute of the Arts

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2013 *Mungo Woman*, Belconnen Arts Centre Gallery, Canberra
 2011 *Mandrakes and Miracles*, The Art Vault, Mildura
 2010 *Hills of Sand*, ANCA Gallery, Canberra and Stefanos Gallery 25, Mildura
 2008 *Displacement*, ANCA Gallery, Canberra
 2007 *Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy*, Monash University, Victoria
 2006 *Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy*, ANCA Gallery, Canberra
 1997 *Tous saints*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
 1989 *Left for Dead*, Galerie Constantinople, Queanbeyan
 1985 Bitumen River Gallery, Canberra
 1981 Solander Gallery, Canberra
 1979 Solander Gallery Canberra

More information is available on the website: www.brendarunnegar.com.au.



Woman of fossils, (2011) Oil on canvas, (diptyche).



Top left: *Dancing Tree*, (2009); Top right: *Malley*, (2009)
 Bottom left: *Paddy Melons*, (2010); Bottom right: *Poached egg daisies*, (2009).
 All oil on canvas.

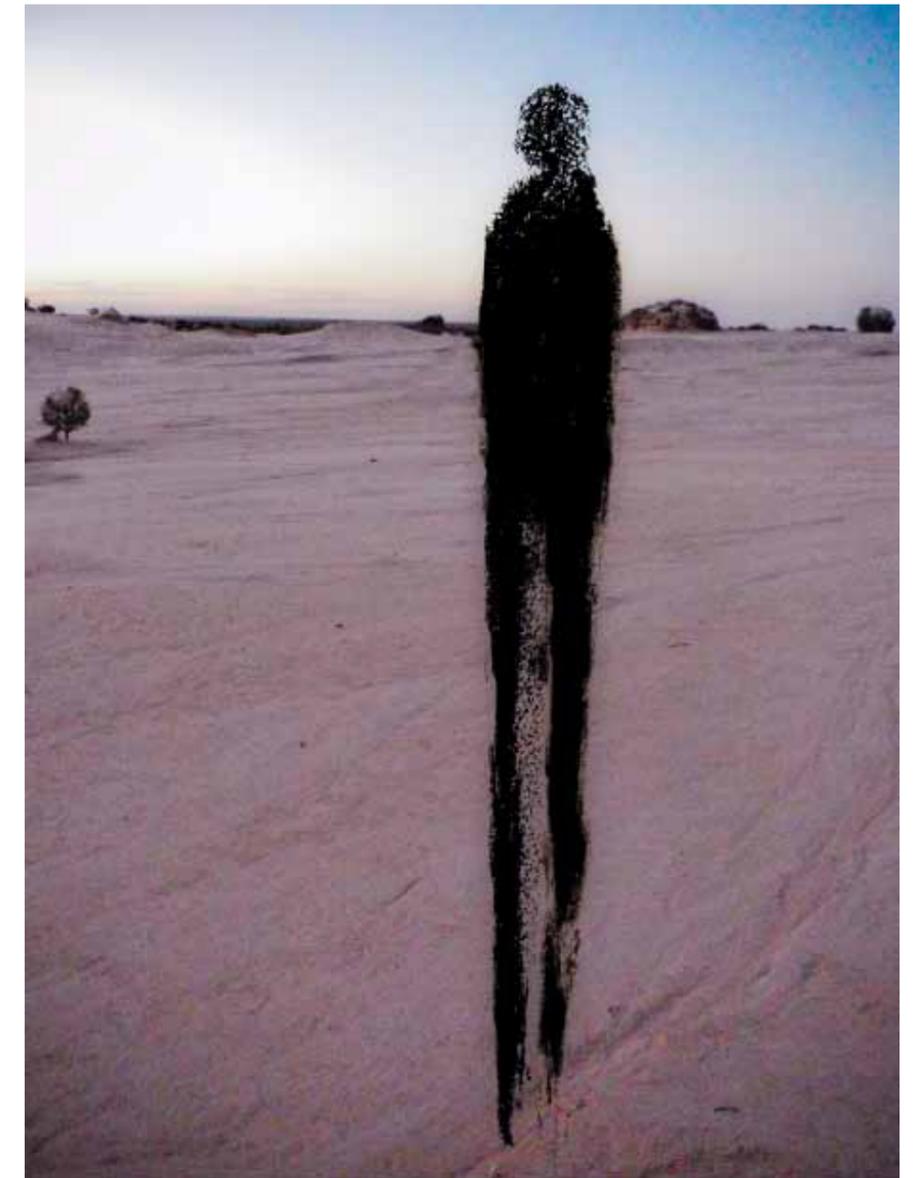
Front cover: *Ghost 2*, (2013), Pigment print on Museo Portfolio Rag paper.

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Above: *Alter Ego*, (2013), Pigment print on rag paper.



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Work inspired by the Lake Mungo area of NSW by

Brenda Runnegar

MUNGO WOMAN by Ann McMahon

A foray into digital media, prompted by a recent period of recuperation and limited mobility, has brought together recurring ideas in the work of Brenda Runnegar. Pared back composition distinguishes Runnegar's drawings and paintings as well as her photographs and these mediums have come together in *Mungo Woman*, revealing a consistency in how she sees and the things that intrigue her. By stripping away or leaving out extraneous visual information, Runnegar focuses on the essence of things. By this means, the space around objects is privileged and imbued with stillness that is meditative and portentous, while important detail is emphasised, or even exaggerated.



Runnegar's fish 'portraits' demonstrated this approach. The fish, each imbued with distinctive personalities, floated in watery voids, either the dark of the deep sea or marine hued and light filled. The works were collectively shown that year in *Displacement*, at Australian National Capital Artists (ANCA) Gallery and one was highly commended in the 2008 Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize. In 2013 Runnegar's light-hearted painting *Cactus* was selected for the Waterhouse and it will be exhibited in Canberra during the show's national tour. Her cartoon-like *Dogs of 2000–01* are a delightful interrogation of difference. At a deeper level, Runnegar is concerned with the human spirit and condition. Her depiction of canine variety is an allegory for human diversity that affirms a shared social nature and existence.



Landscape spaces, in her *Italian gardens* series, 2004-07, were abstracted, decontextualised and peopled with anthropomorphic trees. The apparent naivety of the works is counter pointed by a sense of melancholy isolation and grim humour. Runnegar illustrates famous gardens, created as displays of property and wealth by the owners, now aging and neglected. Using a gentle, light hearted approach she reflects not only on human aging through the quirkiness of her tree characters, but also on the folly of our belief that the environment is controllable and can be reconfigured to suit our needs. Following on, Runnegar's *Canberra after the Bushfires* series, 2003-6, juxtaposes rows of light poles, like scorched saplings, against the raw earth. The works are a meditation on the ephemeral nature of human existence and the frailty of human works in the face of elemental forces.

In 2006 Runnegar travelled to New Mexico, where she visited the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and spent time comparing the landscape with O'Keeffe painting's. Runnegar devotes a chapter to O'Keeffe in her 2007 Master of Fine Arts thesis, *Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy*. She describes O'Keeffe as, "an artist who demonstrates a special connectedness to place," something Runnegar works to achieve in her own painting. Abstraction is an important element in the artwork of both women and they share methodologies identified in *Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico: a sense of place*: manipulation of scale, elimination of spatial recession, colour enhancement and the reduction and simplification of forms.¹

Runnegar also observes that, "O'Keeffe used parts of the landscape such as trees, mountains, desert, rock, bone flowers and shells as both physical and symbolic realities and revealed something beyond the visible subject, thus suggesting linkages to mystery and spirituality."² O'Keeffe's systematic painterly treatment of subject matter: landscape, trees, skulls and flowers, suggests bodily contours and addresses the eternal and the transitory. Runnegar too, explores mortality and the human spirit in her art.

She has written, "Our words for landscape are often projections of an enormous body upon it – the mouth of a river, the foothills, the fingers of a lake, the heartlands and the elbow of a river."³ In *Hills of Sand*, an exhibition of Willandra and Lake Mungo landscapes, shown at ANCA Gallery in 2010, Runnegar first introduces a figure into her paintings. The figure invites us to measure and understand our surroundings through our own sense of bodily-lived-in experience; and it connects our physical needs and reproductive cycles to the fecundity and seasons of the earth that sustains us. It also invokes transcendence from physical existence to a metaphysical continuum and directly relates to spiritual belief and the ancient burial practices that Lake Mungo has revealed.

During a residency at the Broken Hill Art Exchange, Runnegar created the *Ghost of Mungo* drawing series. Mark making in its pure form, these works in charcoal and oil stick on paper resemble shadows. They capture the fleeting sense of figures in the landscape that are almost glimpsed from the corner of one's eye as night falls. It may be a trick of the light as our eyes adjust and sensitivity to movement is enhanced. Or perhaps, while Runnegar camped at Lake Mungo, her imagination was aroused and active, or is it possibly an ability to sense the past, to detect traces that persist?

In *Mungo Woman*, the "ghost" drawings return in a digital form, superimposed onto images of the desert landscape. The shape suggests a shadow cast by the artist / viewer and evokes a sense of presence. Also layered into some of Runnegar's landscapes is a broken doll. Runnegar has used it in the past, to project herself into her artwork and in *Mungo Woman*, it expresses a connection that she feels to the place. Runnegar's visual preoccupations are exposed in the photographs she has selected for *Mungo Woman*. Created in an alternative media, they are consistent with her painter's aesthetic. The images are stripped of tonality and detail by the extreme midday heat. The colours are at their most intense, context by which to measure scale is lacking and perspective seems flattened. In these digital works we see the artist grappling with her experience of the Mungo landscape, its vastness, awe-inspiring beauty and strangeness.

The works in *Mungo Woman* might best be described as surreal and Runnegar has created a surprising and striking ideography to convey her feelings for Lake Mungo. The subject matter that Runnegar deals with in *Mungo Woman* is complex and borders on the macabre. And ownership of ancient remains and their treatment are sore points. Runnegar's sensitivity and gentle humour has however, created a thoughtful and respectful body of work. Her paintings, in particular, are oddly endearing and convey a sense of meditative repose.

Ann Mc Mahon is an artist and writer based in Canberra.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Barbra Buhler Lynes et al., *Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico: a sense of place* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University press, 2004), Page 16, quoted in Runnegar 2007, page 27.
- 2 Runnegar, *Landscapes of Melancholy and Desire*, Monash University 2007, page 26.
- 3 Ibid

MUNGO by Brenda Runnegar

My exploration of the unique nature of outback Australia began in Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory where I managed an Aboriginal Art Centre. I travelled to many remote communities over a large area of the state and used this opportunity to study Aboriginal culture and its complex relationship with the land.

Lake Mungo is part of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area of far western New South Wales and is a very special place for me. Not just because it is overwhelmingly beautiful but because the evidence and associations with the human past evoke a landscape with a sense of wonder and beauty and suggest a place where the spiritual is an ever-present reality.

This area is an outstanding example of major stages of development in the earth's evolutionary history. The palaeontology that underlies it demonstrates that it was once a lush environment teeming with animal life and with an abundance of water, fish and fresh water mussels.

In 1969, while mapping evidence of ancient shorelines in the dry basins of the area, University of Melbourne geomorphologist Professor Jim Bowler discovered burnt human bones buried in the sands of Lake Mungo. The bones were later found to be the remains of a young woman, now known as Mungo Lady and later determined to be the oldest human remains found in Australia.

In 1974 Mungo man was discovered, his body covered with red ochre. This finding is the earliest known example worldwide of a sophisticated and artistic burial practice - thus confirming the area as an established archaeological location. Other ancient burials are still being found including those of children.

I made a number of visits to the area including two residencies at The Art Vault in Mildura during both the heat of summer and mid-winter. On each visit I photographed extensively at different times of the day. To me the most successful photographs were taken during an extremely hot day in January where



the temperature was still over forty degrees at eight o'clock in the evening. The light changes were remarkable from strong glaring whites to subtle mauves and pinks and pale yellows.

I was drawn to include stories associated with the Mungo lady whom I refer to as "Mungo Woman" and this facilitated an ongoing exploration of her forms and symbolism and has enabled me to explore the parallel functions between art and spirituality and the more intangible idea of how place, nature and gender can connect in art. Like O'Keeffe, I have used parts of the landscape as both physical and symbolic realities, and as a geography of the unconscious in which human forms masquerade as natural features and landforms. The red-orange soil associated with the earliest discoveries has been used as resting places for many of my figures.

Early works from the series resulted in my exhibition *Hills of Sand* which were exhibited in Mildura and in Canberra in 2010. The theme of the exhibition was continued with a selection from a second series of works including *Woman of Fossils*, and *Botanical Woman*, shown at The Art Vault in Mildura in June 2011. Mildura celebrity Donata Carazza opened the exhibition. In her speech she said:

These figures are not so much inert or breathless; they appear like sleeping ghosts, protectors of the land, so close to the surface, yet deeply imbedded in it, still releasing their ancient power through the growth of trees and flowers. The fluid body forms resting in the earth link us back to the natural world which sustains us and which we ignore at our peril.

During the research for the project I interviewed a number of people closely connected with the area and read important texts that focussed on the area and its history. There is much debate about the exact age of the relics and it is suggested that the bones may be more like 60,000 years old. Controversy also surrounds the "ownership" of the relics – who owns the past?

On 11 January 1992, Mungo Lady's bones were handed back to Indigenous custodians at a ceremony at the Walls of China, Gol Gol in Lake Mungo National Park marking a breakthrough in relations between scientists and local Indigenous people. It was also in defiance of a wider claim of scientists to rights of access to relics of the past and their questioning that they belong to their assumed contemporary descendants.

My knowledge of what lay beneath the surface is evident in many of my works. Others completed towards the end of the project have become less specific and literal but do, I hope, still provide the viewer with a sense of mystery and wonder. I recommend a visit to the area, preferably on a night when the moon is full. I promise you it will be an experience that you will not forget.

Brenda Runnegar, September, 2013

This catalogue provides a selection of images from the exhibitions Hills of Sand and Mungo Woman.

Images Top left, bottom left; top right and below: *Dune #1,#2,#3 & #4*, (2013)), oil on board.

