



“Too much ask ...” Murray River 2010

"... [the natives] then told him there was "too much ask" about him, and they blamed him for bringing the whitefellows there; adding that they did not like him; and an old man calling to the rest to kill him, for that he was no good, two spears were immediately thrown. These Piper parried with his carabine, and then instantly discharged it at the foremost, wounding him in the right jaw. The rest immediately disappeared among the reeds. The wounded savage fell, but Piper loaded again and killed him by another shot through the body."

Major Thomas Mitchell - *Journal of an Expedition* (1848)

ARTIST STATEMENT

For several years, I have been exploring the landscape as a metaphor for human relationship to environment, culture and heritage, examining immigrant responses to the Australian landscape and contrasting them to indigenous relationship to environment.

"Too much ask ...", based on landscapes around the Murray River, extends on my series', *Welcome to country* and *Wounded country*, which superimpose documents of early white settlement over preserved natural landscapes, and incorporate iconic symbols of nature and spirituality with vintage book pages representing a range of responses to Australian settlement. They are particularly concerned with relationship to indigenous environment and culture.

“Too much ask ...” Murray River 2010

For millennia before white settlement, and for two centuries since, the Murray River and its tributaries have supported life in this dry and inhospitable continent. Now the river system is dying, a result of "too much ask" in the uses of its water for irrigation and industry. Although the economic, social and political ramifications of this are increasingly reported and debated, for most of us who live in urban centres near the coast, the concerns seem remote. In early 2010 I travelled along the Murray River, from The Coorong in SA to the Murrumbidgee Junction in NSW, and from the Barmah Forest to Lake Mulwala in Victoria, recording the river, its forests and its wetlands.

In the series "Too much ask", these contemporary photographs of the ravaged Murray River environment are overlaid with text from the journals of early explorers along the Murray such as Charles Sturt and Thomas Mitchell, providing a naïve lens for viewing the landscape, indigenous people and events of early settlement. These are accompanied by archival book pages depicting white settler interpretations of Australia, its landscapes and people (eg from a 1930s Australian Encyclopedia) which are overprinted with images and textures of the Riverina and other iconic images. Also created from this series of photographs are mandala-like images of the same landscapes, evoking both its ancient past, and similar representations in the sacred images of both eastern and western spiritual practice.

The series prompts viewers to see their relationship to the Australian environment and indigenous culture through the lenses of naïve settler, interloper, explorer and exploiter, and to consider their own complicity in the subsequent degradation.

Welcome to Country/Wounded Country – 2009

This series, a precursor to "Too much ask ..." is based on photographs in the Royal National Park. It uses landscape photographs overlaid with maps and texts created by early settlers, juxtaposes the wounded skin of native angophoras with gravestones of early settlers, and reveals an anonymous anthropological image of a young Aboriginal girl as a ghostly presence embedded in the brutal beauty of Australian landscape.

Belinda Allen, January 2011

