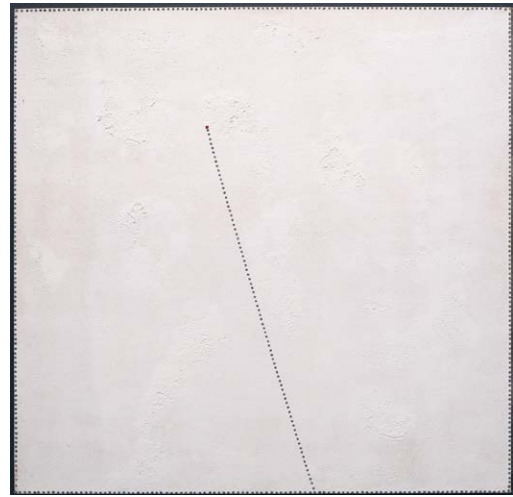
The image shows a wide, flat, and arid landscape, likely a dry lake bed or salt flat, under a pale, overcast sky. The ground is a mix of light brown and tan colors, with some darker patches. The overall atmosphere is desolate and dry. The text "DRY LANDS" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, sans-serif font.

DRY
LANDS



Salt Scalding the Earth



When the salt hardens the blood all that is left is the bones which lie waiting to be cracked in the sun.
Lindsay Harris, 2013

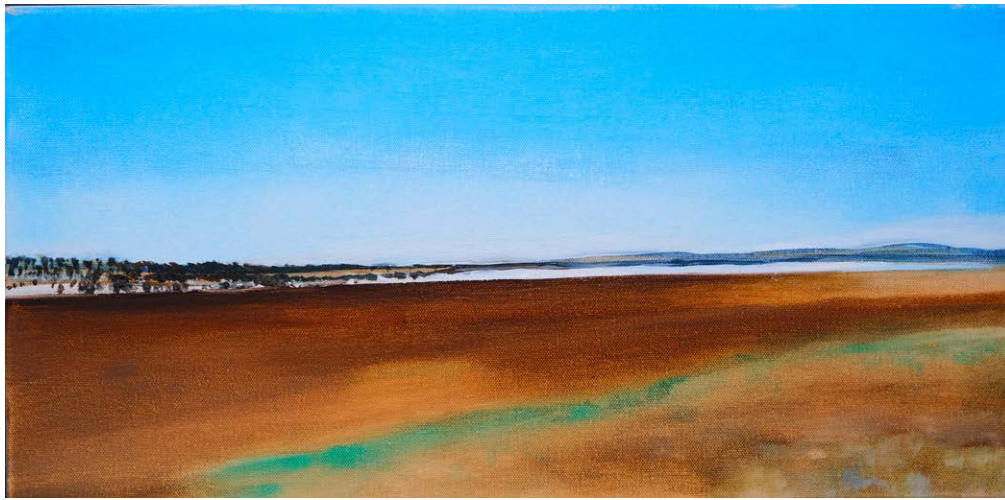
The physical matter of land is always shifting and changing, impacted to varying degrees by weather events, changes in climate, human events and by the plants and animals that reside upon and within it. The land of the Southwest, Great Southern and Wheatbelt areas of Western Australia has undergone radical changes in its geomorphology, especially since colonisation. We have seen devastating deforestation, the deep impacts of the extraction industry, the degradation of the land and biodiversity through monocultural farming practices, urban development, prescribed burning and the effects of climate change, bush fires and drought. Notably, many of these impacts have contributed to a gradual *drying up of the land*, a rising salinity, a loss of endemic species and of bio and geo-diversity.

Landscape painting is capable of telling this story. As artists are observers of the land, they can interpret what is happening to it, within their particular historical moment and place. The reality of the land drying is not new – the devastating impacts of salinity have been known since 1924¹ - but its real consequences on our future in this place are slow to be clearly considered or understood;

“The fact that we continue to believe, despite strong evidence to the contrary, that parts of the earth will remain magically beyond the ambit of capitalist production is what allows us to proceed with such reckless abandon.”²

Through the genre of landscape painting, this exhibition presents six artistic responses to the idea of dry lands. The artists respond to this theme in relation to the land in and around Lake Grace (Jo Darbyshire), Walpole (Elizabeth Edmonds), Kwolyin (Lindsay Harris), Kojonup (Clare McFarlane), the Wheatbelt (Kate Turner) and Bridgetown (Tony Windberg). Together, they offer insights into the morphology of the land and the various impacts it is sustaining.

“Dryland salinity is one of the greatest environmental threats facing Western Australia’s agricultural land, water, biodiversity and infrastructure.”³ Artist, **Lindsay Harris**, is well aware of this, having grown up in the small wheatbelt town of Kwolyin and taken the time to deeply observe the land. With resin and pigments on hemp, he paints such subjects as fence posts dotted across the land as futile barriers against the invasion of salt. He describes the progress of salt as aggressive, in that it flouts artificial boundaries like fences and is “spreading like a plague across the land from horizon to horizon”.⁴



In 2017, artist **Clare McFarlane** inherited her family farm in Kojonup. Currently much of the land is leased to farmers who plant crops such as canola and wheat and graze sheep. Within an expanse of 1100 hectares, islands of receding trees dot the land and huddle around creeks as some of the last remnants of native vegetation. McFarlane paints these remnants, as well as the deceptive beauty of the canola in full bloom; the presence of fires on the horizon and; the confrontation of mortality on the land in the form of sheep skulls. There is a beauty and a deep melancholy in the land, that is perceptively reflected in these paintings.

The childhood hometown for artist **Jo Darbyshire** is Lake Grace and she re-visited this place for a residency in 2021/22. In Lake Grace, there was once shimmering lakes encircling the town, now they are mostly salt. In 2022, the Shire of Lake Grace was fined \$75, 000 for unauthorised clearing of native vegetation. The clearing was for the purpose of gravel for roads. It included important flora and fauna habitats, nature reserves and Eucalypt shrublands. The salinity of the ground water in Lake Grace means that water needs to be piped in from the Great Southern towns water supply, Lake Grace is a dry land becoming dryer. Darbyshire's paintings take the raw amber colour of the lakes and contrasts it to the colours and the features of the land and sky. The works range from striking figurative pieces, to bold abstractions and a

wry commentary on the loss of natural swimming holes through a painting of the local pool.

With less variation in colour, but evocatively detailing the land of the Wheatbelt region of Grass Valley (known for wheat and cereal crops), is the painting by **Kate Turner**. The wheatbelt is often held as a timeless landscape, a kind of utopia, in the Australian psyche. Here it becomes a salty, dry, monochromatic and sparse, alien space, like a tabula rasa inviting the viewer to project their own thoughts upon it. The wheatbelt is "a region that was suddenly and violently re-made by capital and then "enamelled" by ideology as the natural state of things".⁵ It contains a paradox at the heart of its very existence, like the romantic image of the canola field. A land area roughly the size of Britain was denuded of trees for its current geomorphology, it is not 'the natural state of things'.

Today, we continue to witness logging of native forests, most notably in the south-west and great Southern regions. **Tony Windberg** works in this part of the world and has had a long interest in the 'scarred and burnt nature of the Australian landscape'. Windberg's artwork is engraved upon wood-look vinyl, he states:

"The faux wood surface was used to wryly emphasise the thin veneer of remnant vegetation, particularly apparent in my Northcliffe/Pemberton surrounds where logging practices were veiled by



a relatively thin buffer from main roadways but immediately obvious on lesser used tracks and shortcuts.”⁶

Through the subtractive process of engraving, Windberg pictures the fate of trees in the face of fire and the futile human attempts to remedy the situation. Marri resin coats his works as a symbolic gesture of healing.

Likewise, **Elizabeth Edmonds** considers trees growing on her family farm in the Walpole wilderness. She paints paperbarks/*Melaleuca preissiana*, species reliant on access to groundwater for their survival. Edmonds “invites the viewer to contemplate the fragility of these species and their ecosystems as a reflection on drying climates, impacts of clearing, altered landscape and fire regimes.”⁷ Edmonds’ waxy trees are like sentinels, they stand proud as reminders of what is actually significant to the identity of this country.

This exhibition is about the stark reality of dry and drying lands; the parched present and future of our country in the rampant quest to make of the land something it is not; to shape and mould it to the needs of production, rather than to the ethics of care and conservation evident in pre-colonial times.



Images from left to right:

Lindsay Harris, *Ngorp Koraar #3 (Blood of the Ancients)*, 2012

Jo Darbyshire, *Looking south, Lake Grace Salt Lake*, 2022

Clare McFarlane, *The dark and the gold*, 2024

Tony Windberg, *Salvation*(detail), 2010

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1. C.J. Clarke, R.J. George, R.W. Bell and T. J. Hatton, “Dryland Salinity in South-West Australia: its origins, remedies and future research directions”, in *Australian Journal of Soil Research*, vol. 40, 2002, p.93
 2. Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, “The Cybernetic Wheatbelt: John Kinsella’s Divine Comedy” in *Angelaki, Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, Vol.26, no.2, 2021, p.52.
 3. See; Dryland Salinity in Western Australia, <https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/soil-salinity/dryland-salinity-western-australia-0>
 4. Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, p.46
 5. Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, p.52
 6. Correspondence with the artist, November 2023.
 7. Elizabeth Edmonds, *Drylands* artist statement, 2023

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Ngala kaaditj Noongar moort keyen kaadak nidja boodja.

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Front Cover: Kate Turner, *Grass Valley, Pale Morning, WA* (detail), 2003, image
courtesy and copyright of the artist and Liverpool Street Gallery

Inner Sleeve: Elizabeth Edmonds, *Resilience*, 2023

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