

LIVING WITH LANDSCAPE

Jim Sinatra & Phin Murphy

Jim Sinatra and Phin Murphy are principals of Sinatra•Murphy Pty Ltd., a landscape studio with a design ethos formed through experiences of working in rural and remote Australia. Primary areas of interest include artistic expressions in landscape projects that celebrate the cultures of people and the spirit of nature, and has included community planning and development in rural and remote indigenous communities.

The practice's experiences in rural and remote areas have been essential in driving the sensitivity of their design works. In the urban context Sinatra•Murphy is committed to exploring the role of art in expressing a landscape's identity. Artistic expression is inspired by both literal and enigmatic aspects of the Australian landscape, and developed in a manner to allow the landscape to determine the spirit of a site. The ultimate intention is a presence of place that has the strength and conviction in its elements being born from the site. Jim and Phin have received State and National Landscape Architecture Awards for their publications and design projects.

Excerpt taken from J. Sinatra and P. Murphy. 1999. *Listen to the People, Listen to the Land*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, pp: 1 – 4.) Reproduced with the permission of Melbourne University Press.

We turned the ignition off, and the silence of the place was eerie. The walls of the crater seemed to stand with the sole purpose of keeping the outside world from disturbing its sacred arena: a keeping place for the memories of millennia protected from the expanse of the surrounding landscape. We climbed out of our vehicle. Neither of us felt unwelcomed, but the presence of this place was intense.

We continued on the track leading to the eastern side of the crater until it abruptly stopped, then walked along a small valley - one of the many that disturb the crater's rim. We came across a waterhole a couple of hundred metres from our vehicle, but well hidden from the track. It was guarded by curved rock that had been swept smooth by wind and water since the beginning. Similar pockets of rock dot the slopes of the crater, forming countless caves and natural shelters. We had heard of rock art and hand stencils (1) in the area, but focused on being *with* this landscape rather than searching for things in it. As we climbed the loose sandstone of the inside rim, we came across several natural shelters large enough to house ten to twenty people. They had a definite sense of having been used over the years, and we then partly understood why this place was sacred to another culture and why we were not permitted to camp within its confines.

We drove out of the crater the way we had come, following the track that serpentine through the inner and outer rims shaded by desert oaks (*Allocasuarina decaisneana*) and eucalypts. Thankful for having a four-wheel-drive we traversed the plain, following a series of tracks until we found the place where we had camped on a previous trip. We dug a fire pit and lay the tarpaulin by the Mulga thickets (*Acacia aneura*) which crammed one of the numerous drainage lines that occasionally carry rain-water from the crater's slopes into the desert. After a fire-cooked meal our conversation trailed back to a sign in the crater, erected by the Northern Territory Conservation Commission and the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, which illustrated different world views through sharing two stories of how this landscape was formed.

Local Aboriginal belief understands that Tnorula was formed during the creation time when a large group of women danced across the sky. A mother put her baby aside, resting in its wooden baby-carrier while the women danced. The baby-carrier toppled over the edge of the dancing arena and crashed to earth, transforming into the circular rock walls of Tnorula. The mother and father searched for their child, but the infant was covered with sand and hidden from view. Today the mother, as the evening star, and the father, as the

morning star, continue their search for their missing earth-bound child while the women maintain their dance across the sky as the Milky Way.

According to the Western scientific understanding of Gosses Bluff, the crater is considered one of the most significant comet impact structures by world standards. It was formed around 130 million years ago when a comet of frozen carbon dioxide, ice and dust struck the earth at extremely high velocity. The force of impact resulted in a release of energy equivalent to one million times the energy of the Hiroshima bomb, upturning sedimentary formations of 2000 metres and leaving a crater about 20 kilometres in diameter. Erosion has removed the outer rim of the crater, leaving only resistant sandstone remnants of the core near the focus of impact, which was formed when deeply burned sediments were disrupted by the release of massive compressive forces (Flood 1990).

We discussed these stories in the context of trying to understand the land from different points of views, to observe the world differently from how we had been trained in our particular cultural environment. Experiencing a landscape like Tnorula and learning about distinctly different ideas of how it was created opened us to appreciate and respect landscape in a way which many people have lost through busy, complicated, modern lifestyles. Such experiences are important as they help us to become, again, more sensitive to the inherent relationship between people and land. We agreed that the value of the day's experience lay in the notion of seeing *both ways*. We didn't need the two stories of Tnorula to be printed on a bill-board to realise this. Just to walk through the landscape, aware of our own senses, helped us to respect that this landscape has always been, and no doubt will always be, a significant place for somebody else's culture.

The air chilled and the flames of the fire reduced to coals. Lying on the tarp, we gazed at a clear sky with a view of the stars that can only be experienced in the desert. The dancing women stretched from the sky's eastern horizon to the dark but unseen form of Tnorula; at their centre was the dark shadow of the Emu, which can always be seen in the Milky Way on a dark, clear night.

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1. Stencils are a common feature of rock art, produced by holding an object against a rock face and, with the mouth, spraying liquid pigment around it so that a negative image is created. Stencils of the hand are the most frequent, but objects such as weapons provide information about changes in material culture.

Reference:

Flood J. 1990. *The Riches of Ancient Australia*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.