

SEEKING THE SPECTACULAR

Sally Morgan

Sally Morgan was born in Perth in 1951, where she currently works as a Professorial Fellow in the Centre of Indigenous History and the Arts within the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. She is well known for both her art and writing and was the recipient of a number of awards, including the Human Rights award for her first book My Place. She belongs to the Palku and Nyamal peoples from the Pilbara in the north west of Western Australia.

Into an ancient country, the tourists come. They seek the spectacular, and as they stand on top of a rugged cliff, or beside a cascading waterfall, their hand goes not to their heart but to their camera. Cliff and waterfall become immortalised in dramatic holiday photographs, and in glossy brochures that encourage ever more tourists to come. In our approach to preserving the environment we become mercenary, valuing land and life in ways that are narrow and ultimately unsustainable, driven by the tourist dollar and love of the extraordinary. An attitude of dominance means that it is easy to forget that nothing exists in a vacuum. All life is connected.



Sally Morgan *Wannamurrayunga*.

The State of Western Australia is an artificial boundary that came into being after Europeans arrived. Covering nearly a third of the continent the state border dissects a number of Indigenous countries. Before Europeans called Australia home, the state was

part of a much larger whole, a land traversed and nurtured by hundreds of Indigenous nations, each caring for their own boundaries of country. So long before I followed in the footsteps of my ancestors, my inheritance of blood and spirit brought Nyamal country and Palku country to my dreams. Before I ever walked my grandmother's and grandfather's country I dreamed of red earth, spinifex, round stone topped hills, wide river beds, rockholes, waterholes, nightsprings, crisp starry nights and long, hot dusty days. In some of my dreams I could look down and see the boundaries and bloodlines of my belonging. In other dreams I found myself looking deeply into the shapes, patterns and lifeblood of the earth, the rocks and trees, the wildflowers and the bush animals. When I first went to the Pilbara I was surprised to see how accurate my dreams were. The spinifex-covered hills that called to me in sleep were real and so alive. They knew me and I knew them. We belonged together in the same picture and I knew that long after my small life faded like the desert rose they would call to my children and my children's children.



Sally Morgan. *Nyamal Country*. 1991.

When I head out on the Marble Bar road and cross the wide, dry riverbed of the Shaw, I think of my grandmother's older sister and the other old people belonging to my extended family. They had a camp on the Shaw and some of them are buried there. My grandmother's sister was a good singer. Some of the old people say that when they sang for a corroboree you could hear her voice singing out high above the rest. There are songs for everything, but one of her favourites was about a river running a banker. A woman like my grandmother's sister would enjoy singing a wild song on the banks of a river that in the wet was wild. The rivers that crisscross her country are normally a series of deep river pools, but after a cyclone they come down in a rush, flooding the land, drowning the stock, damaging the boundary fences and making the squatter despair. But that's the beauty of country, everything has its place.

I remember the very first night I slept out in the open under the stars the smell of woodsmoke and eucalyptus hung in the air. It was the first time I had seen the night sky from my grandmother's country, so it wasn't surprising that when I finally slept I dreamt of the first fire, the first song, the first dance, the first people. In my dream the old station homesteads dotting the country slowly faded away. There was no muster to finish, no sheep to be shorn, no fences to be fixed and no saddles to be mended. The principles of life were as they had always been for thousands and thousands of years. The people walked the land and there was balance and respect. But change can come in the blink of eye.



Sally Morgan. *Marble Bar Pool*. 1990.

Marble Bar, the hottest town in Australia, is located 120 miles inland from Port Hedland. It's home to the famous, beautifully coloured bar of Jasper that sits in the Marble Bar Pool on the Coongan River. Early in the century the pool was a favourite camping spot for prospectors because it always had water. Men made it their main camp and went out from there to search the surrounding gullies for alluvial gold and tin. With the gold strike came a sudden influx of hundreds of mad eyed miners determined to make their fortunes. In my great-grandmother's lifetime she saw the explorers, then the squatters with their sheep and cattle, then the miners hungry for gold and tin. In the space of one lifetime the whole world changed. On the night I slept in the Marble Bar caravan park the stars were brilliantly bright but the breeze coming in from the desert was a little chilly. I zipped myself up in a small nylon tent and slept on a half blown-up rubber mattress on the ground. Before dawn a wandering horse picked his way through the caravan park and trod on me. When I unzipped the tent and told him to move his hooves he bent down and snorted in my face. Then he showed me his furry rump, flicked his tail high in the air and

swaggered away. It seemed an appropriate reminder of the way my people's lives had changed.

Corunna Downs Station, my grandmother's birthplace, sits between Marble Bar and Nullagine. The first thing you notice when you are heading out to the station are the soft, blue hills in the distance. For a long time there is nothing but a rough, winding bush track and scrubby, open country. Then suddenly there's a fence with a wide iron gate, outbuildings, and the homestead made from anthill mound and whitewashed too many times to count. The station owner or manager may be friendly or unfriendly, depending on his point of view. But whatever the welcome, this place has significance for my family. Here my grandmother was born under a big gum tree and while she was still screaming her first scream her Aunties smoked her to protect her from harm. Here her bare feet ran along the creek bank with the camp dogs following along behind and stirring up the dust. Here the old women taught her how to dance and sing and speak language. Here she hid from cyclones. Here she was whipped with the bullock's cane for stealing a piece of apple pie. Here she learnt how to survive in the squatter's Big House as a housegirl. And from here, she was taken away, never to see her country again. Here, when I look out from the homestead towards the hills, I can't help thinking that squatters may come and squatters may go, but the land and the people will always be tied together.

From a tourist's viewpoint, there is much in my grandmother's and grandfather's country that is not spectacular. In the Port Hedland Visitors Centre I once heard a city fella say that if you've seen one spinifex bush you've seen them all. Yet I never tire of painting them. The one thing my grandmother taught me very early in life was to know the world around you with all of your being. Sight, sound, taste, smell, feel and spirit. When all of the senses are used, then nothing is ordinary. As an artist I can see the life force in everything. Rocks, rivers, trees, plants, animals, people. That's what I paint, the energy of life. I don't worry about what should be protected, because I think it all should. And that makes the task both overwhelming and bittersweet. What I paint today, might not be there tomorrow.

In the south of Western Australia non-Indigenous people celebrated the first Foundation Day of the Swan River Colony by cutting down a tree. It was a signpost to the future, for we have been cutting down trees ever since. In the north of Western Australia sheep, cattle, horses, foxes and rabbits have made it impossible for some bush creatures and plants to survive. Waterholes have disappeared and plastic supermarket bags continue to turn up in surprisingly remote places. The very things which we destroy in our lifetime may one day hold the key to the world's future. But our arrogance allows us to assume that we know what the future holds, and therefore what future generations will need. They may curse us one day.

Even though I live in the city my grandfather is fond of telling me how to avoid being trapped by a river when its running a banker and where to find water in dry and dusty places.

'A nightspring,' he once told me, 'can't be seen. The water isn't there during the day, it only comes up at night. In times of little water you can still work, but unless you know where to find that nightspring you'll die. At the end of the day, no matter how thirsty you are, you have to wait on the nightspring. When it shows itself then you can save your life.'

As I stare out my city window, and see pavement where there once was bush, I wonder –

How do we inspire ourselves and the world to protect the things that are hidden against our time of need?