

Six Artists / Seven Days

AWC Opening speech by John McDonald: 2 August 2025

When I was asked, more than ten years ago, if I'd like to come along with an artists' trip to one of the AWC properties, I leapt at the chance. I've always been fascinated by remote locations - those places only Aboriginal people have called home. In order to understand this vast continent, it's necessary to see it in all its variety, in all its many moods and guises.

Through the AWC I've been able to do this, with the double, triple bonus of seeing the country through the eyes of artists, scientists and ecologists. Whatever I've been asked to do, I've been happy to do it. I'm not in a position to contribute millions to the AWC coffers, but I'm more than happy to support the work they do in using my skills, and my access to a public that loves both art and the environment. Of all the many, diverse things I've been involved with over the past decade, the AWC project has been my very favourite. It has given me more than anything else has, and allowed me to feel a connection with this country I never felt before.

I begin by speaking personally, because I'm sure that every artist who has been on one of these trips – or two of them, in the case of Charmaine Pike – has felt something similar. Travelling to some previously unknown part of Australia, learning about the ecology of the region and the wildlife one finds there, is colossally exciting. Going up in a helicopter and surveying that incredible, sprawling landscape is the experience of a lifetime. Going out at dawn and watching the crew extract small furry animals from traps, to be monitored and studied, is just tremendous. Meeting the Aboriginal rangers such as Christine and Margaret was a real surprise. I've encountered many people in remote communities, and these women's self-confidence and humour were quite exceptional. As for their tracking skills, we learn in the film they could easily spot where animals had been fighting or mating, but my favourite moment was when one of them pointed to a spot, laughed, and said: "A lizard chased a spider down a hole!"

Throughout the trip, Kathryn and Anna lugged their heavy cameras and sound equipment from one demanding location to the next, tirelessly recording interviews and shots of the landscape. What they've come up with, is quite exceptional. Watching the film that accompanies the trip, I felt as if I was getting right into the mind and personality of each artist. They had original and heartfelt things to say. They bared their souls and expressed exactly what they felt about their experiences. There was a lot of laughter and a few tears during this week, but of all the AWC trips I've been on, this was the one in which the group felt most close-knit, most in harmony and sympathy with one another.

Was it because, aside from macho me, one scientist and two chefs, it was an all-female cast? Six women artists, two female filmmakers, every other scientist, ecologist, AWC officer and ranger, of a female persuasion? It was a completely Amazonian affair that has made me think: Perhaps it might be better if we let women run everything. Although I'm aware of a few examples where this would be bad policy – one of whom sent me a rather vicious email this week - none of them were on this trip.

Having been on these journeys before, watching artists trying to come to terms with the place, and often wondering aloud what on earth they were going to do, I was completely confident this group would produce the goods. When they were cajoled into a show of work-in-progress, late in the week, the results were super positive. Everyone appreciated and commented on everyone else's work, and the overall level of confidence rose rapidly.

To arrive at Defiance and see the art on the walls was a revelation. I think it's great. It absolutely sings! And I'm not one to make vain, empty expostulations over an exhibition. Each of the artists – in their own, very personal styles – has given it 100 percent. Each of them has created a distinctive body of work that captures the feel of that environment, and the inner echoes it generates.

Discussing the film with Lea, beforehand, we both agreed that Kathryn and Anna had made something that's less like a documentary and more like a work of art, but Lea wondered if it didn't get a little too personal, a little dark and melancholy, when we should be beating the drum on behalf of the AWC's great work. Frankly, I don't think that's a problem. What we see in the film is borne out in the works on display: a general experience of discovery that becomes a form of self-discovery, a sense of personal healing that springs from days spent in this rugged, lonely, beautiful place. It is, in essence, what the AWC's work is all about: a close connection with Australian nature, through the conduits of science and art, that makes us all feel as if we've been blessed to live in this country; that makes us feel willing to stand up and help protect it from all the bad influences that lurk in the shadows – whether it be feral cats, or those feral business people and politicians ready to trash the environment in the name of short-term profit. Science and art are tools by which we understand the world, and ourselves. They don't often get the chance to fraternise as closely as they did at Newhaven for seven days last year. From this point on, the relationship can only get closer.

John McDonald's work may be found on [Substack here](#).