

# REMINISCENCE

Celebrating 100 years of Australian visionary Judith Wright

A Flying Arts Alliance exhibition  
on tour 2016–17



*Endangered Vessels* (l to r) five vessels

Frances Smith ***Grevillea scapigera***, 2015  
from the series *Life and Resolution* 40 x 20 x 20cm

Frances Smith ***Philip Island Hibiscus***, 2015  
from the series *Life and Resolution* 40 x 20 x 20cm

Frances Smith ***Sweet Myrtle***, 2015  
from the series *Life and Resolution* 40 x 20 x 20cm

Frances Smith ***Yellow Lipped Spider Orchid***, 2015  
from the series *Life and Resolution* 40 x 20 x 20cm

Frances Smith ***St Helens Wax Flower***, 2015  
from the series *Life and Resolution* 40 x 20 x 20cm

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Cover image:

Fiona Rafferty ***Studio View - Mt Tamborine***, 2013  
Drawing and hand-stitching, 90 x 60cm.

Judith Wright refused to live the life that had been scripted for her. She balked at the dispensation wrought by her forebears and sanctioned by her contemporaries. Her poetry and her activism were a result of a deeply disruptive impulse – in short, she paid attention.

And having done so, by word and deed, in celebration and in fury, she pulls us back, even now, from the averted gaze, the numb gaiety of bumptious nationalism and the seductive conceit that we can live our lives, individually and collectively, without consequences. This is her prophetic legacy, and in the centenary year of her birth, at such a low point in our political history, it's heartening to see Wright's life and work honoured in such a way.

Because we need reminding.

She's still on the mountain, at the shore, in our ear, calling us back to our higher selves:

*Turn home, the sun goes down;  
swimmer, turn home.*

**Tim Winton**

June 2015

## JUDITH WRIGHT IS COMMEMORATED

Two artists and close friends, Fiona Rafferty and Frances Smith, have shared this project. Working at a physical distance from each other, bringing different ways of seeing through different materials and processes, they have collaborated. Taking as their starting point their shared knowledge of the terrain of Mt Tamborine, the place where Judith Wright lived for 30 years between 1945 and 1975. From age 30 to 60 this is a time in Wright's life where she writes the majority of her poems, and creative and critical writing. Mt Tamborine is also the place where Wright's "own version of committed humanism" takes hold and where her commitments to the political causes of the environment and indigenous rights evolve.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition takes one of Wright's poems *Reminiscence*, first published in 1973, as its title. It is a poem that does what much of Wright's writing is able to do, and that is link and wrap one present moment – in this case seeing a "babbling, shrieking ... skiesful, treesful" gaggle of parrots – with her own past – a tale told by her father of an old neighbour, "the kind of reminiscence one inherits" – and also, reaches wider and deeper into social histories and cultural histories of place, nature and habitation. Perhaps this is what Gary Clark refers to in Wright's poetry as "the convergence of nature and culture".<sup>2</sup>

Judith Wright's interest in native plants develops in her early days at Mt Tamborine, inspired by her friend Kathleen McArthur, native plant gardener, educationist and wildflower illustrator, with whom in 1962 Wright formed the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. This society rapidly becomes an activist group that campaigns to save regions increasingly under sand mining or development threat from Cooloola to the Great Barrier Reef, including Fraser Island and the Daintree.

Wright's environmental activism, like all her work, never has a single focus. Clark notes how Wright "blends evolutionary ecology, archaeology and reflections on conservation and indigenous rights".<sup>3</sup> Wright, Clark says seeks:

[a] contemporary form of inhabiting the land, which is radical in both its social and ecological import, dealing with environmental deterioration, the problematics of ownership, and the insurgency of Indigenous Australians.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Philip Mead 'Veronica Brady's Biography of Judith Wright.' *Australian Literary Studies Imprint* 19:2 (1999):166, 169.

2 Gary Clark 'The two threads of a life: Judith Wright, the environment and aboriginality.' *Antipodes* 20:2 (2006): 155+. ASAP. Web. 1 Oct. 2015.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

For artists then, in responding to the work of Judith Wright there are many tracks to follow and consider. Fiona Rafferty layers her work, looking at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of critically endangered Australian birds; the orange-bellied parrot, spotted quail thrush and regent honeyeater are all on this list. In *Salinity*, Rafferty uses hand stitching with pen and ink to reference Lake Cooloongup in Western Australia – now a saline lake where the tortoises of the area are found as empty shells. The hand stitching in this work evokes a sense of the tenuous connection here, between all aspects of life: us, and them. A third theme Rafferty develops is *Caring for Country*, an artist book with its interior freshly sculpted out, like the action of vast open mines that make our heads spin. Rafferty here is aligning the ravages of mining with the ravages of volcanic eruptions; both violent and uncontrollable, but one is actually stoppable. “What footprints will be left as a legacy of these times?” Rafferty asks. This work’s title *Caring for Country* is cruelly ironic.

Frances Smith also responds to Judith Wright’s work in a number of ways, interpreted through clay forms and surfaces. Smith identifies *Inside and Outside* as a particular mode in which Wright worked – always seeking and finding wider connections from a personal encounter; *Birds*, a subject which abounds in Wright’s poetry; *Aboriginal Heritage*, references Wright’s Aboriginal friendships, and her on going sense of colonial complicity; *Conservation and the Great Barrier Reef* acknowledges the extraordinary role played by Wright in voicing concerns that have managed to hold back in the intervening years some of the destructive impact of coastal development on the Reef. As Smith points out here, Wright had the foresight to see the destruction of reef as “a microcosm of the fate of the planet”, which in turn Wright saw as “a microcosm of the new battle within ourselves”; and finally life and resolution, which references the manner in which Wright actively took on responsibilities to change the inequalities she saw around her.

Ideas are the starting point of an artist’s work; then material processes push and pull them into abstraction and out again into the real world. Judith Wright was interested in this process of transformation too, on so many levels. Wright is reported to have said “the personal is not interesting. It is what is beyond the personal that is of importance.” I am sure the works of Fiona Rafferty and Frances Smith in this exhibition *Reminiscence* will make us consider not only what is within them, but also what is beyond them.

### **Susan Ostling**

Senior Lecturer, Griffith University

November 2015

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5 Cited in Fiona Capp ‘In the Garden Judith Wright and Nugget Coombs.’ *The Monthly*, (June 2009).

# Essay

Judith Wright's life seems to fall fairly neatly into three overarching themes – writing (poetry), environmental activism, and concern for Indigenous rights. In the simple, linear version of the story, she began as a poet, went on in the 1960s to a full-time commitment to what was then known as conservation, and then in the mid-1970s turned her attention to the fight for recognition of Aboriginal land rights. Real life is never quite so simple, of course. In fact, all three wove in and out of each other throughout her life, though each had its period of particularly intense focus. Any one of these would be enough for any lifetime. It says much for her passion and energy that she achieved so much with all three.

Judith's childhood poems, lovingly preserved in her mother's scrap books, were already full of responsiveness to the natural world. It was a theme that was to be central to her life and writing, and it's surely no coincidence that the great flowering of her poetry began when she moved to Tamborine Mountain in the late 1940s, at a time when it was still a tiny isolated settlement in the midst of the forest. There, with her lover and later husband, the philosopher Jack McKinney, she fell deeply in love with the astonishing abundance of the rainforest world, its plants and birds and luxuriant beauty. The poems that she wrote in these happy years established her reputation as one of Australia's foremost poets, a reputation that has stood the test of time. I've often wondered what she would have written if she'd stayed in Brisbane. It seems to me that the natural world of Tamborine Mountain, together with the love she shared there with my father, was the gift that gave her poetry its wings.

When she was just 12 years old, Judith wrote a letter to the Sydney Mail (one of the first of a steady stream of letters she would write to newspapers throughout her long life) that ended with the ringing words, "It is a disgrace the way beautiful things are torn up and left to die!" This little girl's outrage back in 1927 sounded the first notes of her later passionate campaign to convince people that the natural world must be protected from our blindly destructive impulses to destroy it.

By the end of the 1950s, that destruction was picking up pace all around her. I remember as a child wandering with her through the beautiful Wallum heaths that then stretched uninterrupted between Caloundra and Noosa, marvelling at the amazing richness and diversity of plants and wildflowers. A bare few years later, it was being "torn up and left to die" by developers. Judith's first impulse, when she and a few friends decided in the early '60s to found the Wildlife Preservation

Society of Queensland, was to try to reach children with the message of the urgent need for conservation of the natural world. Awareness of environmental problems was still almost non-existent then and education seemed to her the best way to spread the message. But very soon the WPSQ, with her as its busy president, was swept up in urgent campaigns to stem the tide of destruction that was threatening everywhere. Victory in the two greatest of these fierce battles, to save Fraser Island from sand mining and the Great Barrier Reef from oil drilling, protected two of Australia's most precious and beautiful places for posterity.

Through all this the poetry still continued, but as any activist will attest, activism is exhausting, and it was inevitable that the poems no longer came as freely or as often as they once had. Besides, Judith was feeling her age. By 1975 she felt she had given all she had to give to the fight to save the natural world. The WPSQ that she had helped bring into being was now a strong force, able to carry on the battles without her and a new generation of environmental activists had emerged to take the reins. Something else that had long haunted her was now demanding attention with increasing urgency — the immense wrongs inflicted on Australia's Indigenous peoples, which at that time most white Australians still seemed either unaware of or, at best, unconcerned about.

The theme was already strongly present in her early poems and it found fresh focus in her deep friendship with the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal. From the mid-'70s until her death in 2000, it became the dominant theme of her life. With her friend Nugget Coombs she founded the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, dedicated to bringing to the attention of white Australians the urgent need for legal recognition of prior Indigenous ownership of the land. With the Mabo Decision of 1988, a huge part of their battle was won and in her final decade she rejoiced to witness so many white Australians at last prepared to acknowledge and pay tribute to the Indigenous owners. She felt at last that her final task was over. What would she think today?

### **Meredith McKinney**

Daughter of Judith Wright

October 2015



Judith Wright's work was tangible; you could hear, feel, see, and taste her poetry. By responding to Wright's writing, artists Fiona Rafferty and Frances Smith have demonstrated their connection to the author by envisioning three-dimensional forms of her poetry, activism and life. Frances and Fiona have created a celebratory body of work, exhibited in *Reminiscence*, where they have revealed Wright's vast life to the attention of new audiences and re-kindled the affection of many with whom she is already familiar. Fiona Rafferty states her motivation behind creating work for *Reminiscence*:

**“There seems to be very little known about a quite remarkable woman, who was a visionary in many ways and achieved enormous success, without the fanfare that the media today would have embraced with vigour.”**

Both Frances and Fiona have chosen materials such as paper, pen and clay that reflect Wright's diligent letter writing and her love of the Australian country. The artists have included motifs of birds, the Great Barrier Reef and the Australian landscape that remind the viewer of Wright's poetic stories and her resolve to look after our land for future generations. Frances and Fiona have crafted works that at their essence tell a story of Wright's life, and pay respect to her resilience, affection and creativity.

### **Siobhan Nunan**

Curators in Space

Fiona Rafferty ***Extinct Birds***, 2015  
pen and ink and hand-stitching on Arches paper

## Frances Smith

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### Bird Series ***Nest Vessels***, 2015

Birds are a recurring motif in Wright's poetry and are used as a metaphor to express her deep sensitivity to nature; with its abundance of life, beauty, and converse cruelty and fragility. Smith expresses these themes in her work *Nest Vessels* (2015).

Smith has discovered much through detailed observation of the nest's structure. Having found a small bird's nest she began making detailed illustrations and creating forms in clay inspired by the nest. Smith has recreated these organic structures in Southern Ice Porcelain using ceramic forming techniques of carved and applied slip. The surface has been crafted to mimic the textures of the nest and shows the materials of nest – twigs, leaves and feathers. The vessels echo the bird's woven shelters carefully prepared from materials found on the forest floor.

In *Nest Vessel 2* (2015) the appearance of the vessel's form is perforated, there are open areas of carved ceramic allowing a glimpse of the interior. Here the delicacy of the porcelain and the nest's structure are interwoven, reminding us of the enormity of the nest's task, as protector of both eggs and hatchlings.

Wright's poems on birds highlight her concerns regarding the many threats posed to environmental conservation and the inherent fragility of the natural world.<sup>1</sup> Smith's textural porcelain vessels pay homage to Wright's dedication as a champion of nature's beauty.

### Kerry Turnbull

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<sup>1</sup> Wright J, *Birds: Poems by Judith Wright* 2003: National Library of Australia



Frances Smith **Nest Vessel 2**, 2015  
carved vessel - from the series *Birds in Nature*  
Southern Ice Porcelain  
38 x 40cm



Frances Smith **Endangered 1**, 2015  
gold lustre vessel  
from the series *Inside Outside*  
porcelain, decals on the interior of bowl on wood stand

Frances Smith **Endangered 2**, 2015  
gold lustre vessel  
from the series *Inside Outside*  
porcelain, decals on the interior of bowl on wood stand

## Frances Smith

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### ***Endangered 1*, 2015**

Frances Smith's *Endangered 1* (2015) is a meditation on the degradation of the natural environment due to human activity. The rich and brightly decorated surface depicts endangered flora from around Australia. The golden glaze transforms the vessel into a sacred chalice which becomes a kind of prayer for the redemption of the human race.

In contrast to the vessel's shimmering outer skin, the dark interior represents the fragile and uncertain future of the natural world. This tension created between the outside and inside – the present and absent – creates a kind of melancholy and leads one to contemplate what has been lost, and the stakes involved in efforts to conserve the environment.

Wright felt this loss of the natural world and was compelled to act to stop land clearing and oil drilling in the Great Barrier Reef by co-founding one of the first conservation groups in Queensland.

During her two decades living on Mt Tamborine, Wright depicted endangered rainforest plants in her poetry:

“When first I knew this forest  
its flowers were strange.  
Their different forms and faces  
changed with the seasons' change –  
  
white violets smudges with purple,  
the wild-ginger spray,  
ground-orchids small and single  
haunted my day:...”

Extract from *The Forest* by Judith Wright.<sup>1</sup>

### **Leanne McIntyre**

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**1** *Five Senses: Selected Poems Judith Wright* 1963, Angus and Robertson, Sydney p 135

## **Fiona Rafferty**

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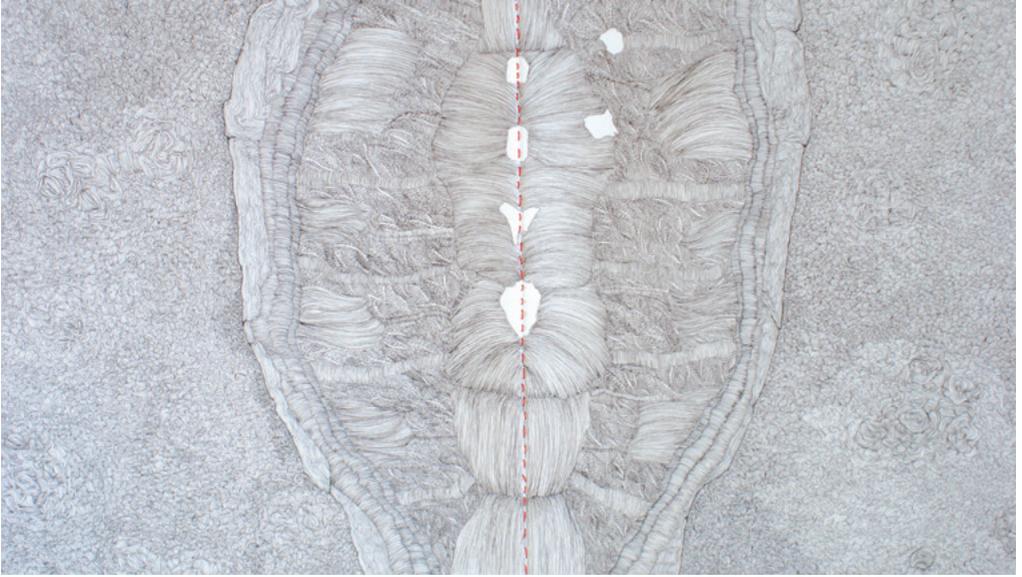
### ***Salinity*, 2015**

*Salinity* (2015) is inspired by Rafferty's time spent exploring Lake Coo loongup, situated south of Perth, Western Australia. Coo loongup derives from the word "Koolangka", meaning "children" in native language, Noongar. It is thought that Lake Coo loongup traditionally represented youth and new life. Today, Lake Coo loongup is shallow at the best of times and the water has become saline. When the lake is dry it reveals a vast, lifeless landscape made up of salt, animal remains and ancient thrombolites.

The intricate black lines in *Salinity* (2015) form the shape of a hollow tortoise shell, much like those Rafferty found while studying Lake Coo loongup. Ironically, Lake Coo loongup presents signs warning "take care – tortoises crossing"; yet, hundreds of empty shells can be found around the lake today. Rafferty's repetitive patterns mimic those found on the empty tortoise shells, capturing the fragility of the environment and the remains of the past life that once enjoyed the lake. The bright red hand-stitched line running through the centre of the tortoise shell represents the connection between humans and nature. By slicing the thread through her drawing, Rafferty comments on the human impact on the environment and the commodification of our natural resources.

*Salinity* (2015) is a stark reminder of the devastating effects of European colonisation on both Indigenous traditions and the environment, two areas that Judith Wright so passionately fought to protect. *Salinity* (2015) depicts the ghosts of a landscape that should still be fostered as a place of youth and promise for new life, but has instead become a barren wasteland.

**Danielle Harvey**



Fiona Rafferty **Salinity**, 2015  
pen and ink and hand-stitching on Arches paper  
57 x 77 cm



Fiona Rafferty *The Coral Battleground*, 2015  
pen and ink and hand-stitching on Arches paper  
57 x 77 cm

## Fiona Rafferty

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### ***The Coral Battleground*, 2015**

Rafferty's work *The Coral Battleground* (2015) shares its title with a book Judith Wright first published in 1977, recording the fight for the preservation of the Great Barrier Reef from exploratory oil drilling and limestone mining. Wright wrote that she first fell in love with the reef in 1949 when she visited Lady Elliot Island, but her real journey with the reef began in 1963 when she helped form the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland in Brisbane.<sup>1</sup>

The relevance of Wright's fight continues today in the midst of continued threats to the Great Barrier Reef. One such threat is referenced by Rafferty in her work, *The Coral Battleground* (2015) through her inclusion of the Crown-of-Thorns Starfish. Wright recognised the significance of this threat as early as 1968 and noted that despite the apathy of the state government of the time, it was a matter of importance to be argued amongst scientists.

The detailed patterns and swirling lines invite the viewer to contemplate the wonder of the reef and its beauty. The red hand-stitching on one branch perhaps signifies hope for regeneration, renewal and protection of the reef for future generations. As Wright states, "the Great Barrier Reef is still the closest most people will come to Eden."<sup>2</sup>

### **Michelle Richards**

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**1** Wright J, *The Coral Battleground* 2014, Spinifex Press p1.

**2** Wright J, *The Coral Battleground* 2014, Spinifex Press pxi.

# Artist's notes

## Frances Smith

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### ***The Reef Series***, 2015

These three vessels were thrown and carved in Southern Ice Porcelain. In this case the white bright porcelain mirrored dead coral, colour bleached out, life extinguished by the very forces that Judith Wright protested against.

I decided to contrast these natural forms – albeit dead ones – with one of the causes of environmental degradation – the black coal that drives the Australian economy. This is a complicated issue – and to be honest, not my job to solve it, merely to get people to think about it.

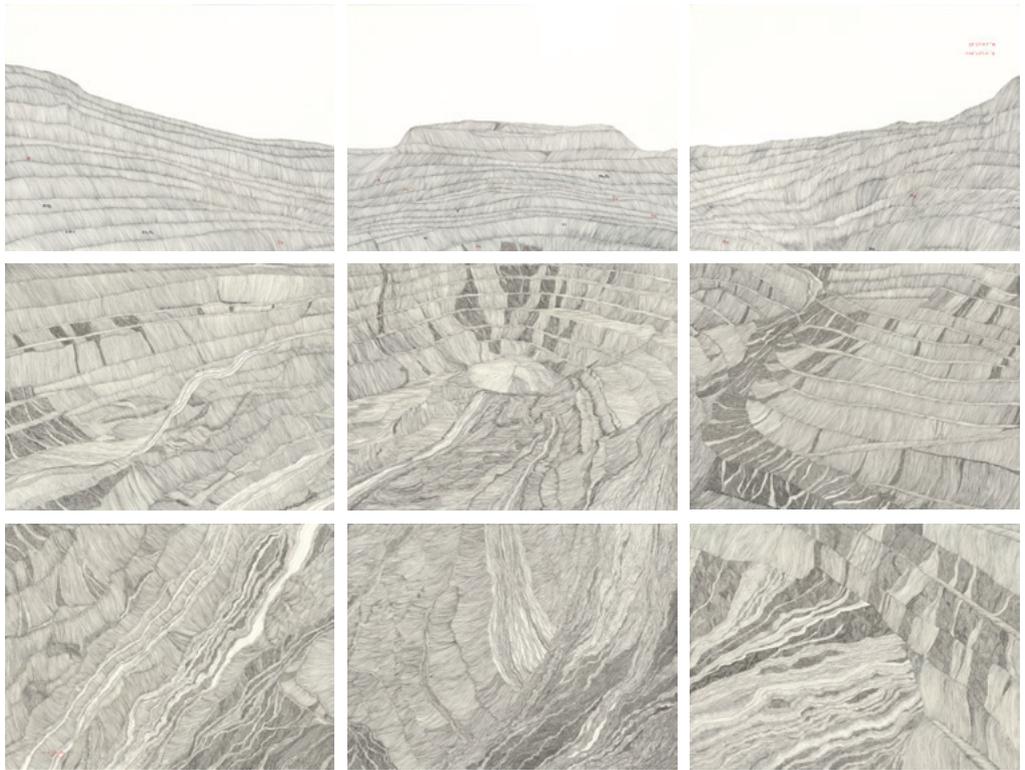
*The Reef* (l to r) three vessels

Frances Smith ***Sculptural Vessel 1***, 2015  
from the series *Conservation and the Great Barrier Reef*  
porcelain on black coal base  
40 x 14cm, stand: 13.5cm

Frances Smith ***Sculptural Vessel 2***, 2015  
from the series *Conservation and the Great Barrier Reef*  
porcelain on black coal base  
40 x 14cm, stand: 13.5cm

Frances Smith ***Sculptural Vessel 3***, 2015  
from the series *Conservation and the Great Barrier Reef*  
porcelain on black coal base  
35 x 14cm, stand: 13.5cm





Fiona Rafferty *Conscience of My Country*, 2010 - 2015  
nine panel drawing  
pen and ink and printing on Arches paper  
231 x 171cm

# Artist's notes

## Fiona Rafferty

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### ***Conscience of my Country*, 2010 – 2015**

Wright was called the “Conscience of My Country” for many reasons, particularly her relentless pursuit of environmental concerns and Indigenous rights. Her voice, through her writing, became the voice of the people caring for the land and its first people.

*Conscience of My Country* (2010 – 2015) is the work that I feel represents the way Judith felt about our country, the landscape and the effects of mining on areas of great beauty. I wanted to create a work on a scale that is commensurate with the magnitude of mine-sites, and the scale of the BHP owned Mt Whaleback mine site in the Pilbara (the basis for this work) is staggering. It is more than 5kms long, 1.5kms wide and will be mined to a depth of half a kilometre. The sheer amount of earth shifted and set aside as tailings, morphs into a manufactured landscape.

The first panel in *Conscience of My Country* (2010 – 2015) was started in 2010 in response to the mining boom in Western Australia and the seemingly endless migration of people seeking their fortune by extracting minerals from our landscape. I spent time on a vast cattle station in the Pilbara, Western Australia, working with farmers and miners who are now sharing the land as they work side by side, mustering and mining. Once the domain of graziers, the Pilbara has become a mecca for the fortune hunters of today.

The final panel was completed in 2015 during much publicity about the Shenhua mine on the East Coast. We are not immune to the cause and effect that the rise and rise of the new Chinese economy has created, nor can we readily and freely admit that our conscience is clear. The latest threat, Shenhua, a proposed coal mine on the fertile, Liverpool Plains near Gunnedah, New South Wales, is testament to the greed of governments where the landscape becomes the sacrificial lamb in the face of development. It is also testament to the power of people, like Wright, who stand up for the environment and give it a voice.

**Fiona Rafferty** is a multidisciplinary Australian artist who explores the natural environment in areas threatened by the intervention of man. In 2009 she graduated from Curtin University with a Bachelor Degree in Art. Since graduating Fiona has exhibited extensively across Australia and England, including the Tate Modern, Middlesex University, Curtin University and Hilltop Gallery. She has also completed a number of residencies around the United Kingdom and Australia.

**Frances Smith** is a Sydney-based ceramic artist who is currently completing an Advanced Diploma in Visual Arts (Ceramics) at the Northern Beaches Institute of TAFE, Sydney. Her work is a reflection on the experiences of her surrounding environment. Before pursuing her passion for ceramics Frances worked as a graphic designer and illustrator for TV studios, print, film and websites.

## Acknowledgements

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Curators in Space is a curator development project of Flying Arts Alliance Inc. and is presented in association with the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts.

### Curatorial Team

**Danielle Harvey**

**Leanne McIntyre**

**Siobhan Nunan**

**Michelle Richards**

**Charlotte Tegan**

**Kerry Turnbull**

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