Above: Carole Wilson, Palm Seeds 2010 [detail, series of 20], hand-cut & collaged maps on paper, L-R: 37 x 4cm, 41 x 3.5cm, 42 x 4cm, on loan from the artist.

Front: Carole Wilson, Three Memories 2009 [detail, triptych], patterned Axminster carpet (wool), 140 x 58cm, proposed gift from the artist to the CDU Art Collection, 2011

1 Author unknown, Northern Territory Times & Gazette, Saturday 31 August 1878.
3 De Kooning also once said, “Nature gives me the creeps.”
11 The Nature of Things

Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery
Chancellery Building, Orange 12.1.02 Casuarina Campus Darwin, Northern Territory 0909
Patron: Vice-Chancellor Professor Barney Glover
Curator: Anita Angel T 8946 6621  F 8946 7744  E anita.angel@cdu.edu.au  W cdu.edu.au/artcollection

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Photography: Chris Knight, Skylight Australia.
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The Nature of Things
The physical aspect of this our Northern Territory suggests to one's mind that it had been turned out of the great workshop of Nature to that in the finishing touches had been omitted in order that Art might try its hand in completing the composition.1

Nature, there, is just nature … The attitude that Nature is chaotic and that the artist puts order into it is a very absurd one. If everything is chaotic and that the artist puts order into it is a very absurd one. Nature, then, is just Nature … The attitude that Nature is chaotic and that the artist puts order into it is a very absurd one. When a man ploughs his field at the right time, it means just that.2

He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden.3

The Northern Territory’s first museum – of living rather than inanimate collections and exhibits – was a garden. Located on the foreshore of Francis Bay, between old Port Hill and Stokes Hill, it was opened within one week of the arrival of Geikie’s Survey Expedition (1889) at Palmerston (Port Darwin) by William Friedlaid Haynes (c. 1839-1878), appointed government botanist in 1871.18 Other than reconnaissance expeditions and gardens were planted within the next two years and attempts made to ascertain food crops and economic plants. Haynes submitted samples of these, as well as eucalypt tree fungi, to international and intercolonial exhibitions in Melbourne (1875), Philadelphia (1876) and Paris (1878).4 Tellingly, the “beautiful” was not “lost sight of by society at the time,” and plans to augment the Territory’s natural resources included aesthetically-driven desire to collect and cultivate “flowers, seeds and choice plants,” to gladden the eye with their varied hues and floral loveliness.5

The Northern Territory’s first officially appointed curator was Nicholas Holtz (c. 1886-1913), who succeeded his father Maurice (1840-1923) at the relocated Palmerston Experimental and Botanic Gardens 1891. It seemed only natural that he should later become curator of the Port Darwin Museum (1903-1913) the first permanent, catalogued collection and public exhibition space displaying samples of the northern settlement’s horticulture, agriculture, geology, ethnology and entomology.6 At the same time, more than a century later, in 1970, the Northern Territory’s Museum of Arts and Sciences (now Museum and Art Gallery of the NT) would also be one dedicated to the interdisciplinary study and exhibition of nature and culture – its collections presented, interpreted and appreciated in one museological vessel as a symbiotic whole.

Maps, seeds and a pictorial imperative – charting, planting and creating images – were place-making devices and settlement strategies of the first survey party to the Northern Territory. Cartography, natural history and the visual record laid the foundations for the colonization of the Northern Territory and shaped the nature of human engagement with its Indigenous inhabitants, landscapes, flora and fauna. Paper was at the heart of all these enterprises: for naturalists, explorers and travelling artists. As a carrier and a mirror, paper was a portable, flexible and lightweight device. For all those interested in documenting and navigating the new and unknown. Manufactured yet also of natural origin, it became a “mobile shrine to the appreciation of nature.”8

Clarks’ history of landscape painting was predicated on the Ruskinian belief that natural phenomena were “no escaping nature through abstract representation” , as it simply “brings one closer to the physical structure different from our own: trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, hills, clouds. For centuries they have inspired us with curiosity and awe. They have been objects of delight. They have been the subject of our imaginations to reflect our moods. We have come to think of them as contributing to an idea which we have called Nature. Its rise and development since the middle ages is a part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted once more to create a harmony in its environment.”9

In the late-20th century, post-colonial studies, post-modernist theories and sociological approaches to art as “visual culture” have subjected the pictorial record – stylos or schools of landscape art and recurring iconographic motifs in Australasian art history – to exhaustive deconstruction. Little has escaped retrospective indictment, despite the inherent dangers in treating visual images as incontestable documentary evidence of prevailing attitudes, values and tastes collectively shared by social groups in the past.10

Sustaining judgement, scholars such as Nicholas Thomas have maintained that the study of an Australian landscape tradition remains at the heart of any cross-cultural art history, but for quite distinct reasons. For Thomas, landscape art’s “assertions concerning attachment and belonging … river or implicit in sketches, drawings and paintings and in always some statement which seems what to be a visual record of the frontiers or foreshadowing change” rather than condemning landscape art as “merely an instrument of domination, a uniform ideological apparatus that sustained colonial material appropriation”11; he advocates that we approach art as an arena, where art, critical discussion and institutions jostle with each other’s claims.12

At one remove from the ivory tower, art historians today have continued to travel and draw inspiration from nature and the environment – as individuals and as members of artists’ camps or colonies – noting Clark’s pessimism regarding the future of a Western landscape tradition in the concluding chapter of Landscape into Art. For Clark, science and specialisation had so radically altered our relationship to nature: first seen through “our unsensed senses,” then reduced to miniscule abstraction under the probing lens of the microscope – that our confidence in a “natural order” had been eroded. Our belief in its harmony and benevolence, first expressed through the anthropocentric idea of an enclosed garden, was thereby shaken if not destroyed – reiterated in T.E. Hulme’s observation: “there is no harmony in the nature of things.”13

Ruskin’s aesthetic philosophy was predicated on the belief that Art might try its hand in creating a harmony with its environment.14 The framework of this Northern Territory art history – rather than the Northern Territory as a subject matter in Australian art – traces its lineage back to the 18th century and 19th century attempts to come to terms with a new environment. Inherited or transplanted art historical conventions – the picturesque and sublime in landscape, and the realism or naturalism of botanical art – mark “the stages in our conception of nature” in the Far North, in this case, more than half a century later.

Since then, contemporary art – including Australian Indigenous art – has both expanded and contested what we know as nature the living matter and spiritual dimension of landscape. What has fundamentally changed is our sense of human scale, perspective and time. In this sense, the geographic and environmental setting, the physical and geographic site for many of these developments – with the birth of the Western Desert art movement, the reappraisal of rock art, the continued development of bush painting, weaving and sculptural forms and the introduction of paper-based media such as printmaking. Non-Indigenous art, by both resident and visiting artists, though regrettably overlooked too often in this narrative, has also played an instrumental role in how we understand, appreciate and relate to the region.

And looking north, with eyes perhaps better trained than our southern counterparts, an engagement with Southeast Asia, dating back to Macassan contact with North Australia and perhaps earlier, has reconfigured the idea of Australia as an island funded concept: The northern landscape as “a contained world” planted and decorated, hand-cut and sewn, with women by domestic spaces that were thereby beautified. Here, nature is intimately linked to the people who live and breathe in it, the discarded or forgotten objects of another era lovingly restored. A localised aesthetic of home, hearth and garden, shaped by richly coloured lines, forms and patterns, strings and taut fibres, subverts the cartographic and imperialist place of nature. Spatial perspectives and traditional conventions of landscape art are overturned. Wilson’s work also evokes collections and the numinous power of decorative objects such as urns and vessels, their recurring shapes and map-based isolines charting the constant, enduring values we often take for granted in the continued maps of our own and other peoples’ worlds.15

In response to Wilson’s art, a range of more than 100 works from the Charles Darwin University Art Collection, by Indigenous, non-Indigenous and Southeast Asian artists, is exhibited. They capture in other artists’ ideas and experiences of nature, garden, landscape and the environment – both natural and cultural. In its Northern Australia, adjoining regions and beyond. Naturally, works on paper are the most telling here. For the costuming the constant, enduring values we often take for granted in the continued maps of our own and other peoples’ worlds.

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Top: Carol Vineen. Western Desert [2011] 35 cm x 35 cm, acrylic on Mylarcollaged map on paper. 35 cm x 35 cm, acrylic on Mylar collage (collage) gifted by the artist & the Northern Editions Print Workshop, 2000 – CDU1353

Centre: Dorothy Galaledba, Jin-gubardabiya rrapa 2010 [detail, collaged map on paper, 34 x 32cm, acquired by the artist & Northern Editions Print Workshop, 2000 – CDU1347

Bottom: Ochre Landscape, Ochre on Ochre 1997, acrylic and ochre on ochre paper, 25 x 25 cm, gifted by the artist for the CDU Art Collection.