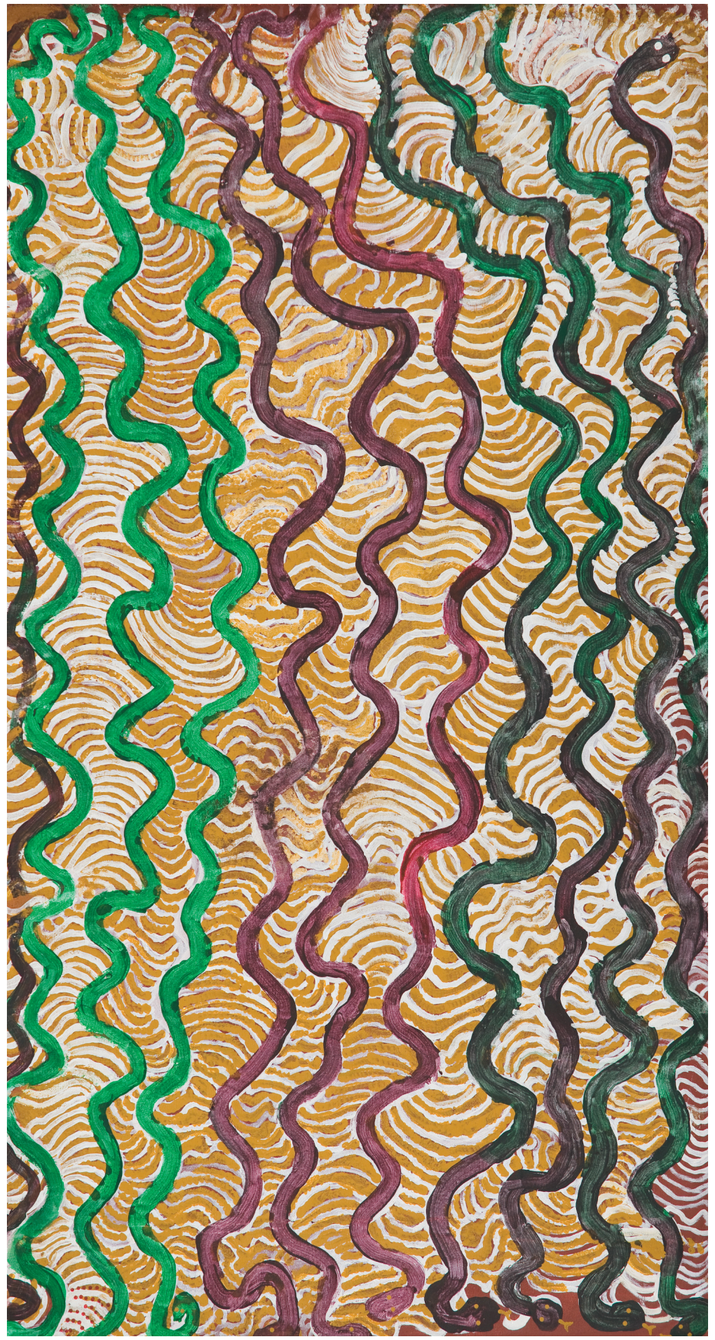

Above: Reggie Jackson, *Kuniya* 2006, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 102 cm, gifted by Robert Michael Moon to the CDU Art Collection under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2009 – CDU1576

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, 39 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.
2 Willem de Kooning (1950) quoted in: S. Yard, *Willem de Kooning: Works, Writings, Interviews*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona, 2007, p.113. De Kooning also once said, "Nature gives me the creeps".
3 Horace Walpole's description of renowned 18th century landscape designer William Kent, in: S. Herrington, *On Landscapes*, Routledge, New York & London, p.17.
4 R. Aitken & M. Looker (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens*, Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Garden History Society, 2002, p.292.
5 *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*, Saturday 31 August 1878.
6 The Port Darwin Museum was established following a cycle of exhibitions run by the Agricultural, Horticultural and Industrial Society of North Australia (1902-c.1909). Nicholas Holtze was its President between 1903-5. See: A. Angel, "Collecting and Exhibiting the Northern Territory: Retracing a Museum History on the Frontier from pre-Federation to the early Twentieth Century" in: L. Mearns & L. Barter (eds), *Progressing Backwards: The Northern Territory in 1901*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 2002, pp.115-158.
7 K. Murray, "What's new in paper", *The Tallis Foundation – 2008 National Works on Paper*, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, catalogue essay, pp.1-4.
8 K. Clark, *Landscape into Art*, Penguin, Middlesex, England, 1949, p.17.
9 F. Haskell, *History and Its Images – Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1993, pp.3-9.
10 N. Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999, pp.18-19, 49 & 53-4.
11 Quoted in P. McGuinness (ed), *T.E. Hulme: Selected Writings*, Fyfield Books (Carcanet), Manchester, 1998 & 2003, p.xviii.
12 R.L. Herbert, *The Art Criticism of John Ruskin*, Da Capo Press Inc, New York, 1964, p.xvi.
13 When asked by Lee Krasner why he would not paint nature, Jackson Pollock replied, "I *am* nature".
14 Robert Smithson in: J. Flam (ed), *Robert Smithson – The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1996, p.162.

CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY

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The Nature of Things

Top: Lena Kuriniya, *Bush Potatoes – Bulkud* 2002, etching, WP edn 20, 25 x 20cm [image], gifted by the artist & Northern Editions Printmaking Workshop, 2002, CDU Art Collection – CDU1150

Centre: Kate Miwulku, *Long Hairy Yam* 2002, etching with chine collé, WP edn 20, 25 x 20cm [image], gifted by the artist & Northern Editions Printmaking Workshop, 2002, CDU Art Collection – CDU1149

Bottom: Carole Wilson, *Mrs Darwin's Birds* 2010 [detail, installation of 30 birds], stencilled & hand-cut collaged map on paper, 34 x 32cm, acquired by the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU1925

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 in the rough, that the finishing touches had been omitted in order that Art might try its hand in completing the composition.[1]

Nature, then, is just nature … The attitude that Nature is chaotic and that the artist puts order into it is a very absurd point of view … All that we can hope for is to put some order into ourselves. 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 Fort Hill and Stokes Hill, it was planted within one week of the arrival of Goyder's Survey Expedition (1869) at Palmerston (Port Darwin) by William Brelsford Hayes (c.1839-78), appointed government gardener in 1871. Other subsistence and experimental gardens were planted within the next two years and attempts made to acclimatise food crops and economic plants. Hayes submitted samples of these, as well as exotic 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 an 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 Holtze (c.1868-1913), who succeeded his father Maurice (1840-1923) at the relocated Palmerston Experimental and Botanic Gardens 1891. It seemed only natural that he should later became curator of the Port Darwin Museum (1903-c.1913): the first permanent, catalogued collection and public exhibition space displaying samples of the northern settlement's horticulture, agriculture, geology, ethnology and art – including photography.[6] More than half 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 interrelated 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 a new township in the Australian tropics and shaped the nature of human engagement with its Indigenous people, 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 intimate medium – an "inscription device" for recording and navigating the new and unknown. Manufactured yet also of natural origin, it became a "mobile shrine to the appreciation of nature"[7] in Northern Australia, whence it travelled spreading its messages across the country and the globe.

The framework of a Northern Territory art history – rather than the Northern Territory as a subject matter in Australian art – traces its lineage, disrupted though it may be, to these first 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 the same sense first outlined by Kenneth Clark more than half a century ago:

> *We are surrounded with things which we have not made and which have a life and 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. We have recreated them in our imaginations to reflect our moods. And 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 part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted once more to create a harmony with its environment.*[8]

In the late 20th century, post-colonial studies, post-modernist theories and sociological approaches to art as "visual culture" have subjected the pictorial record – styles or schools of landscape art and recurring iconographic motifs in Australian art history – to exhaustive ideological deconstruction. Little has escaped retrospective indictment, despite the inherent dangers in treating *all* visual images as incontestable documentary evidence of prevailing attitudes, values and tastes collectively shared by social groups in the past.[9]

Suspending 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 … overt or implicit in sketches, paintings and prints are not always simple statements about who owns what": they "also depict or foreshadow change". Rather than condemning landscape art as "merely an instrument of domination, a uniform ideological apparatus that sustained colonialism's material appropriations", he advocates that we approach art as an *arena*, where art, critical discussion and institutions jostle with each other's claims.[10]

At one remove from the ivory tower, artists today have continued to travel and draw inspiration from nature and the environment – as individuals and as members of artists' camps or colonies – notwithstanding 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 unaided 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".[11]

Clark's history of landscape painting was predicated on the Ruskinian belief that natural phenomena *in their direct relationship to humanity* serve as the subject matter of art. Ruskin was in fact more radical. For Ruskin the artist (rather than art historian), the natural sciences comprised an essential part of his temperament and emotional engagement with the world. Unlike the theoretical sciences, they plunged him all the more into an absorption of the visible exterior of nature – "the only thing that might rival artistic imagination". Yet in art, even the "wildest bit of nature" bore the imprint of the creative mind and emotions and since "nature is thus inconceivable without the intercession of the human imagination, so are the sciences that describe her."[12]

Today, landscape art in its widest sense has breached the historical boundaries of painting, although paper and traditional materials, alongside new technologies, continue to play a critical role in overturning our remaining preconceptions and prejudices as to what constitutes "art" and "nature". The relatively new multidisciplinary field of environmental history – the study of human interaction with the natural world over time – has reinstated the role of nature as an active force in human affairs, rather than as a backdrop or screen for human history. It has driven home the notion that there is no way of relating to nature without culture: the two are inseparable. Nature is not "out there" as an element external to our being, or simply a subject for an artist to resolve in a new medium, but an intrinsic part of ourselves – our *own* nature.[13]

A reassessment of abstract art – seemingly the enemy of naturalism and traditionally mimetic landscape conventions – was perhaps no better achieved that in the art and writings of American artist Robert Smithson (1938-73), a leading exponent of contemporary movements towards non-formalist, site-specific and environmental art in the 1960s and early 1970s. In his fascination with physical maps and naturally-occurring crystalline forms, Smithson regarded abstraction in art as simply a reduced order of nature: a representation of nature devoid of realism, based on mental or conceptual reduction. For Smithson, there was "no escaping nature through abstract representation", as it simply "brings one closer to the physical structures within nature itself".[14]

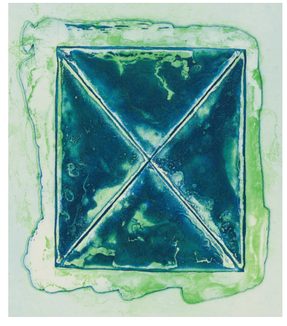
Since then, contemporary art – including Australian Indigenous art – has both expanded and contracted how we see nature as the living matter and spiritual dimension of landscape. What has fundamentally changed is our sense of human scale, perspective and time. In this process, our most primal place-making traditions and our sense of the past, as much as our political beliefs and values, have been radically reframed and reflected in art.

North Australia has been the testing ground and the cultural 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 bark 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 Australian Indigenous peoples and perhaps earlier, has reconfigured the idea of Australia as an isolated island continent. In this context, what does one make of a nation defined by a political or physical map alone, when both nature and culture – environment and art – have conspired to say otherwise?

The Nature of Things features a selected survey of 24 works by Carole Wilson dating from 2007 to 2010, as the centrepiece of this exhibition. Both the subject matter and materials of her art speak of alternative narratives in Australian art history: "contained worlds" planted and decorated, hand-cut, stitched and sewn, by women in domestic spaces that were thereby beautified. Here, nature is intimately studied and revealed, 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 tufted fibres, subverts cartographic imperatives of place. 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 contour maps of our own and other peoples' cultures.

In response to Wilson's art, a range of more than 100 works drawn from the Charles Darwin University Art Collection, by Indigenous, non-Indigenous and Southeast Asian artists, is exhibited. They capture other artists' ideas and experiences of nature, gardens, landscape and the environment – both natural and cultural – in Northern Australia, adjoining regions and beyond. Naturally, works on paper predominate. As a significant portion of a North Australian university art collection assembled and located in the Northern Territory, and as the curatorial premise for this exhibition, this art offers a regional perspective on a subject that reaches well beyond the walls of the academy. It makes us look more closely at the beauty and wonder of the natural world, at "small things forgotten" as more than mere fragments of the "big picture" of Australian landscape art – and makes us think more closely about *the nature of things*.

Anita Angel, Curator, Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery
13 April 2011



Top: Carole Wilson, *Mrs Darwin's Birds* 2010 [detail, installation of 30 birds], stencilled & hand-cut collaged map on paper, 34 x 32cm, acquired by the CDU Foundation for the CDU Art Collection, 2011 – CDU1925

Centre: Dorothy Galaledba, *Jin-gubardabiya rrapa bugula* [Fan-shaped mat & sea water] 2002, etching, WP edn 20, 24.5 x 24.5cm [image], gifted by the artist & Northern Editions Printmaking Workshop, 2002 – CDU1151

Bottom: Yuan Mor'O Ocampo, *Ode to Water* 1997, etching, WP edn 25, 25 x 22.5cm [image], gifted by the artist & the NTU Print Workshop, 2000 – NTU571