



**John Wolseley**  
***Regenesis - Slow Water - Deep Earth.***

27 January - 25 February 2023

**Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery**

ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY PTY LIMITED ACN 087 467 543 ABN 62 087 467 543  
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1. *Entangled layers of the spectral rivers of the Wimmera Plains - Kurakibiyal to Banyena via Grays Bridge*, 2023  
watercolour, graphite, etching and charcoal on paper  
65 x 85 cm each; 205 x 265 cm overall

**AUD 47,500.00**



2. *Entangled layers of the spectral rivers of the Wimmera plains - leaf canopy, soil crust, fungal web, invertebrate fauna, water and rock*, 2022  
watercolour, graphite, etching and charcoal on paper  
65 x 85 cm each; 205 x 265 cm overall

**AUD 47,500.00**



3. *Termitaria: Indwelling I*, 2020-2021  
woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage, and watercolour on cotton, Mini wash and Gampi paper  
204.5 x 180.5 cm  
219 x 195 cm (framed)

**AUD 43,000.00**



4. *Termitaria: Indwelling IV*, 2020-2021  
woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage, and watercolour on cotton, Mini washi and Gampi paper  
204.5 x 100 cm

**AUD 40,000.00**



5. *Termitaria: Indwelling II*, 2020-2021  
woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage, and watercolour on cotton, Mini washi and Gampi paper  
204.5 x 120 cm

**AUD 40,000.00**



6. *Termitaria: Indwelling III*, 2020-2021  
woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage, and watercolour on cotton, Mini washi and Gampi paper  
204.5 x 100.5 cm

**AUD 40,000.00**



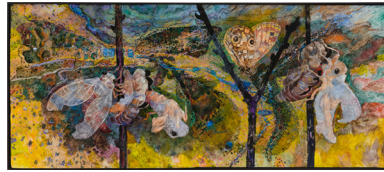
7. *Soft mud termite mounds of the Mallee and cathedral termite mounds of Kakadu*, 2022  
watercolour, graphite, etching and charcoal on paper  
65 x 85 cm each; 156 x 265 cm overall

**AUD 32,000.00**



8. *Entangled layers of the spectral rivers of the Wimmera plains - duckweed (Lenticules d'eaux) misting over the pools of Banyena*, 2022  
watercolour, graphite, etching and charcoal on paper,  
65 x 85cm each; 135 x 265 cm overall

**AUD 32,000.00**



9. *Cicadas hatching by the chain of ponds - Bibbaringa*, 2021-2022  
oil on board  
76.5 x 175 cm

**AUD 32,000.00**



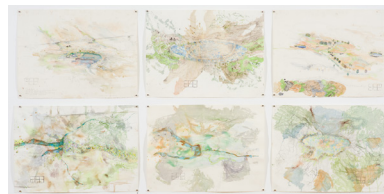
10. *Mallee Drift - desert wind*, 2004-2023  
watercolour and carbonised wood with chine-collé etching on paper  
114 x 253 cm

**AUD 32,000.00**



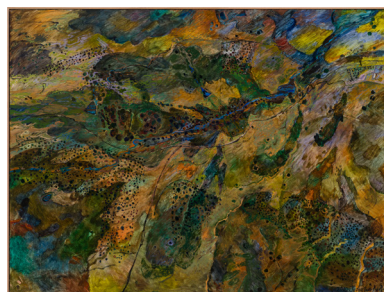
11. *The webs of micorrhyzal hyphae move between the trees on the Carapooee floodplain*, 2022  
watercolour, graphite, etching and charcoal on paper  
57 x 67 cm each; 117 x 240 cm overall

**AUD 29,500.00**



12. *Chains of ponds, moated dams, contour banks and the regenesis of Jillamatong*, 2018-2022  
watercolour, graphite, etching and charcoal on paper  
57 x 67 cm each; 117 x 240 cm overall

**AUD 29,500.00**



13. *What would the world be, once bereft of wet and wilderness? Let them be left, O let them be left, wildness and wet, Long live the weeds, and the wilderness yet - G M Hopkins*, 2019-2020  
oil on board  
93 x 123.5 cm

**AUD 29,000.00**



14. *Chains of ponds, contour banks and the return of the reed warbler, Bibbaringa 1*, 2019-2020  
oil on masonite  
75 x 123.5 cm

**AUD 27,000.00**



15. *Slow water and the rufous songlark, Bibbaringa 3*, 2019-2020  
oil on masonite  
67 x 123.5 cm

**AUD 27,000.00**



16. *Study for What would the world be, once bereft, of wet and wildness, Bibbaringa 9*, 2019-2020  
charcoal and pastel on drafting film  
86 x 120 cm  
108 x 143 cm (framed)

**AUD 8,000.00**



17. *Study for Slow water and the rufous songlark, Bibbaringa 7*, 2019-2020  
watercolour and gouache on cotton paper  
57 x 76 cm  
66 x 85.5 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



18. *A natural history of slow water, Bibbaringa 6*, 2019-2020  
watercolour graphite and coloured pencil on cotton paper  
57 x 70 cm  
66 x 79 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



19. *Study for Chains of ponds and contour banks, Bibbaringa 4*, 2019-2020  
watercolour and coloured pencil on cotton paper  
57 x 76 cm  
66 x 85.5 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



20. *Lolloping hills and the two dams, Bibbaringa 5*, 2019-2020  
graphite and watercolour on cotton paper  
58 x 76 cm  
66 x 85.5 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



21. *The hidden layer of insects and soil biota*, 2022  
watercolour on paper  
79.5 x 98 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



22. *Kurakibiyal to Banyena via Grays Bridge*, 2022  
watercolour on paper  
79.5 x 98 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



23. *Ephemeral rivers of the Wimmera plains - Red Gum, Banyena*, 2022  
watercolour on paper  
56 x 76 cm  
79.5 x 98 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



24. *Call of the Reed Warbler*, 2022  
watercolour on paper  
79.5 x 98 cm (framed)

**AUD 6,000.00**



25. *Healing the Fowlers Creek gultch, Bibbaringa 8*, 2019-2020  
watercolour on cotton paper  
47 x 61 cm  
57 x 72 cm (framed)

**AUD 5,500.00**



26. *Key to Jillamatong regeneration*, 2023  
watercolour, graphite and coloured pencil on cotton paper  
57 x 76 cm

**AUD 5,500.00**

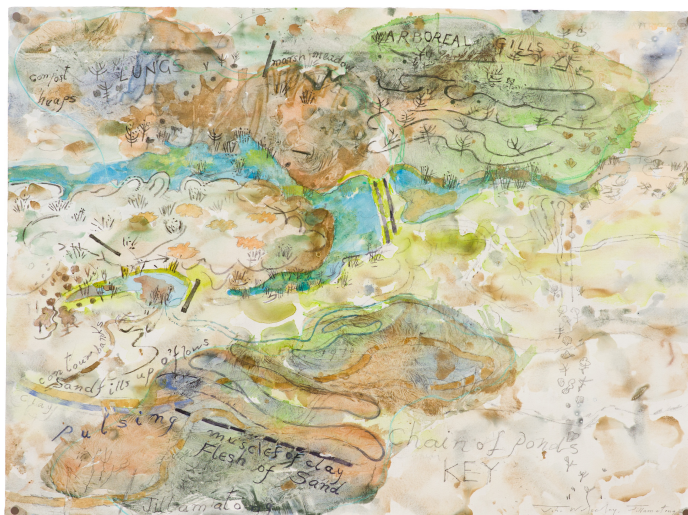
*John Wolseley would like to acknowledge the brilliant work of Kaitlyn Gibson, printmaker, in the production of these art works.*

*He would also like to pay his respects to the traditional owners of the land on which these paintings were made including;*

Dja Dja Wurrung  
Wotjobaluk  
Wiradjuri  
Waveroo  
Walbanga  
Dhudi-Djapu

**John Wolseley** arrived in Australia in 1978, living and working throughout the country until settling in the Whipstick Forest in Central Victoria. His work has been acknowledged and celebrated through numerous exhibitions, grants and commissions, including, in 1996, the publication of a scholarly monograph by Sasha Grishin, *John Wolseley: Land Marks* (reprinted 2015). In 2005, he received an Honorary degree of Doctor of Science from Macquarie University and the Australian Council Visual Arts Emeritus Award. In 2016 the NGV, Melbourne presented a major exhibition, *John Wolseley: Heartlands and Headwaters*. He has been curated into important group exhibitions, including in 2012, the *8th Biennale of Sydney: All our relations*, and most recently, *Still Life* (2022, Buxton) and *The National* (2021, MCA). The National Museum in Canberra staged *Midawarr Harvest* in 2016, which was the culmination of Wolseley's decade-long collaboration with the celebrated Yolngu artist Mulkun Wirrpanda.

John Wolseley's work can be found in all state galleries in Australia and numerous public and private collections.



Key to Jillamatong regenesis, 2023  
watercolour, graphite and coloured pencil on cotton paper  
57 x 76 cm

In the last few years, I seem to have spent much of my time wandering along rivers and creeks. This started while I was engaged on the *Earth Canvas* project when six artists were paired with six brilliant regenerative farmers. We celebrated and documented the farms, and our work became the touring exhibition, *Earth Canvas*, which had its grand finale at the National Museum in Canberra this past Autumn. Walking over the land and following the creeks and chains of ponds, we found how so much of the regeneration of these farms has been about the slowing down of water, and the rehydrating of the land. Since white settlement, so much of the Riverina had been cleared of trees that the water rushes down the rivers and creeks to the sea along veritable drains. Fast water causing gulches and drastic erosion.

As we documented these farms, we found that the husbanding of water enjoys a splendid vocabulary. Living water has always invoked fabulous names like: fen, bog and swamp, ditches dikes, and berms. We discovered that most of the features with these lovely names had been drained or erased over the last hundred years or so. But not on the farms we were exploring. On Bibbaringa, Gill Sanbrook has evolved her land from a bare, depleted landscape to a rich, fecund farm with complex vegetation and a dark healthy soil, hydrated and swimming with microbial life (Catalogue 9, 13-20, 25).

After working on the *Earth Canvas* project, I continued wandering along rivers and creeks. I drew the moated dams and reed beds on Martin Royd's magnificently regenerated farm Jillamatong near Braidwood (Catalogue 12, 26). I then travelled down the Murray and then followed its tributaries down to the rivers beyond my home near Bendigo. I was bent on researching the remnant bits of country where the river systems behaved and worked in the way they used to before white settlement. In particular, I became obsessed with how many of Australia's inland rivers formed 'chains of ponds' along the floodplains.

Charles Massy wrote in his revolutionary book – *Call of the Reed Warbler* – “Like many before me, I dearly wish I could be transported back in time to go for a long walk through the pastoral ecosystems of Australia prior to white settlement. Just once to walk across grasslands un-grazed by the cloven-hooved animals of white settlers; ...to feel the soft ground underneath and access the depths of layered mulch; to witness fully hydrated landscapes and see how the original chains of ponds looked and functioned; to hear the cry of bustard and reed warblers...to glimpse bettongs and bilbies busy about burrows beside inland streams, and to listen to insect and birdsong under river red gums and she-oaks.”

I have been very lucky down the years to have met passionate experts and lovers of the landscapes which I paint. During this projects – my own particular *Pilgrim's Progress*, in the Riverina and the Wimmera – I have sometimes felt as if I had fallen into one of those classic stories where a mythic guide has appeared out of the mists. Some kind of ferryman like Charon as he guided souls across the river Styx. Or perhaps Hermes the god of flocks and herds. I'm not sure whether they would approve but I reckon that it is appropriate that I should be giving these kinds of accolades to writers such as Charles Massy and Peter Andrews because like Hermes they are both farmers – and visionaries. Visionaries of the earth in the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson and James Lovelock.

Rob Youl, the naturalist and Landcare expert took me to some fascinating bits of country where the water courses flowing within marvellous remnant woodland spoke to me about living, vital, healthy ecosystems. Looking at the Google earth maps of Kara Kara National Park one sees landscapes which seem to have the generative energy found in Chinese paintings of dragons. These dragons being embodiments of 'chi' in which the flow of water is so often identified with the nature of the Tao. As Lao Tzu says – *It is best to be like water, nurturing the ten thousand things without competing, flowing into places people scorn, very like the Tao.*

In April 2019, I began documenting the source of Middle Creek in the forest near St Arnaud, and followed it as it bubbled up in the fields of Sam Medlyn and Meagan Barham; and then as 'chains of ponds' it moved through groups of river red gums, some of them of gargantuan size (Catalogue 11).

Later in 2020, I moved my base camp to Grays Bridge and did several forays following the Avon River (this stretch of it properly called the Kurakibiyal in the Djaara language). This was where I really felt I was entering, almost burrowing into the land. The river moves across the endless industrial cropping lands with their heavy reliance on fertilizers and insecticides. When the land was cleared of the trees which had hitherto held the banks of the river in place, the rushing water carved out deep channels. Over the years, these became a sunken river. The red gums which had been left on the banks slowly slid down and grew horizontally and now strangely resemble human torsos and limbs. Some of these have the feeling of stranded whales as they create bridges over the river bed, their giant limbs reaching out and resting on the further bank.

Below Grays Bridge, I descended into the dry riverbed and wandered along till I came to the first of the pools which had formed as the water backed up against the tangles of debris and branches which had been washed down by the floods. Each afternoon, I would draw a pool and then erect a tarpaulin over the tangled structures of woven branches and flotsam – like shambolic Gothic cathedrals – in which I would spend the night.

These river beds are corridors filled with the richest diversity of birds and animals. Before climbing down into them I would look across the vast treeless plains and become increasingly depressed by the paucity of creatures and the desperate monoculture of these cereal deserts. One windy day, I peered over the bank and was pelted with waves of blown sand and dust. The degraded soil was no longer anchored by roots and fibrous matter and was simply blowing off the land. Sliding back down into the river bed was like returning to another dimension. It reminded me of when Anne Hughes was telling me about her time doing the plant list for Carapooee Creek. She said that she used to describe the floodplain bit where there was a rich number of species as Heaven and the overgrazed and cleared land further down the creek as Hell.

After several nights like this, I began to imagine myself again in one of those ancient works of literature – particularly those which incorporate myths of descent into the nether world. This fantasy of tumbling into a mythic dimension was encouraged when the river tunnelled along below the cemetery of the lost village of Korokubeal, and past evidence of old diggings of veins of metalliferous earth. It was here that Hermes popped up again. It might have been the meal of questionable mushrooms found on the creek bank which diverted me into mythic realms, but as I followed the river bed I found myself becoming part of one of my favourite poems – *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes* by Rilke.

*And they, like silent veins of silver ore,  
were winding through its darkness. Between roots  
welled up the blood that flows on to mankind,  
like blocks of heavy porphyry in the darkness*

*But here were rocks  
and ghostly forests., Bridges of voidness  
and that immense, grey unreflecting pool  
that hung above its so far distant bed  
like a grey rainy sky above the landscape.  
And between meadows, soft and full of patience,  
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway  
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.*

I spent a lot of time drawing the curling limbs and torsos of the river red gums (Catalogue 23). In the moonlight I would move past their shimmering forms and each one would take on a different aura. There would be a creature

of the deep, a cuttlefish perhaps, or a dugong, and near it the translucent grub or pupae of some wood boring beetle. It was the striped and mottled texture of the skin of the branches and boles, so silky and tender, which made me think of sleek animals like tiger quolls, deer or seals. And of naked human limbs and torsos. The forms of the river red gums hung with the swags of tattered bark took me back to Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* – the painting which had such a great influence on me when long ago I was at art school in London. And to his *Death of Actaeon* depicting the transformation of Actaeon into a stag.

I suppose I am not alone here – so many poets and painters have been fascinated with the idea of humans shifting back and forth between animal or bird or even plant form. Having spent so many years with Yolŋu artists wandering along other rivers I have become accustomed to the way stories of metamorphosis are central to the creation myths, ceremonies and song cycles. When an artist writes their notes for an exhibition catalogue like I am doing now they are likely to let slip that this whole topic of transmutation – the way forms and images slip in and out of different figurations – is one of the primary interests of our painting life. A slab of Cezanne might move between being the torso of a human figure or the side of a mountain. How often does a sculpture by Henry Moore move between being landform and human form.

Like Titian, I carried a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in my rucksack, together with a paper, *Blown to Witewitekalk: placenames and cultural landscapes in north-west Victoria* by Edward Ryan. The synchronies between these two texts were fascinating. I was overwhelmed by the way the mythopoetic stories of a culture so much older than that of the Greeks and Romans had sprung from this very river bed. One of them related to a stretch of water properly named Banyena but now known as the Richardson River. Here according to Ryan, the main informant from the Wotjobaluk tribe who was called by the European invaders by the name of 'Morton Plains Bobby' described how the ancestor figure Kurn burned down the giant pine tree which linked the ancestors of that rivers people to the sky. When the tree fell some of the people were left in the sky, and the depression now known as Lake Bolac was formed. The kernels of the pine tree fell out across the country to become stones near Lake Tyrrell which I had passed on my way (Catalogue 1, 8, 22).

As I drew the river each day there was a veritable menagerie careering along it. Goannas, lizards, foxes, and even a feral cat. There were sacred kingfishers and fuscous honeyeaters and one day I was thrilled to hear the song of a reed warbler in the golden stands of phragmites reeds. All day numerous brown treecreepers fidgeted up and down the tree trunks. They were the ones I had read about in the *Witewitekalk* essay which had been here when the Bram brothers started a contest with Gertuk the treecreeper who then unleashed a bag of whirlwinds forcing them to cling to trees for support. One night in the moonlight I looked down into the pool I had been painting and saw the reflection of a tall murray pine holding the milky way in its arms.

Somewhere on York Plains, I laid out my own long line of Fabriano rag paper and found myself trying to describe this journey between the layers of the earth and sky. I cut the roll of paper up into separate sheets and on each one I painted models of each layer. On some I mapped the webs of mycorrhizal fungus which wove themselves under the ground and connected to the trees. I had recently read *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben and been excited by such expressions as '*The joyous entanglement of the ancient webs of mycorrhizal fungae.*' He wrote: *...these fungae operate like fibre-optic internet cables, their thin filaments penetrate the ground, weaving through it in almost unbelievable density. Over centuries a single fungus can cover many square miles and network an entire forest.*

On each rectangular window I drew the meeting of two or three lamina or layers of a particular place. I find myself using words like lamina and layer in the sense that I often feel that we humans move between different modes of being, strata you might say, some of which are physically very much there, and others which exist in another more subtle and abstract dimension. I felt as if I was moving under the blankets of some extraordinary bed, or I was burrowing along like a grub in the ground. A mode of travel which my 'wawa' (sister) Mulkuḿ Wirrpanda had encouraged when she gave me the name *Ilanguḿ* – a moth or beetle larvae – all those years ago. Here I did the first of my multi-panel paintings or polyptychs. I called it *Entangled layers of the spectral rivers of the Wimmera plains — canopy, soil crust, fungal web, invertebrate fauna and rock* (Catalogue no 2).

Each section or panel was devoted to one or two layers or lamina of the river bed. In each panel I used a different perspective, sometimes traditional, sometimes  $\frac{3}{4}$  bird's eye view, or even worm's eye view.

I described these different layer-scapes with a number of headings:

- The foliage layer, made up of thousands of leaves and petals.
- Another foliage layer – duckweed misting over the still pools, (In French so much more poetic – *lenticule d'eaux – un plant aquatique flottant*).
- The great skeins and nets of fungus hyphae as they link the trees.
- The rhizosphere layer of microbial and other biological worlds in the soil – cyanobacteria, worms, heliozoanes, and animalcules etc.
- Biological soil crusts of living organisms on the soil surface; algae, lichens, bryophytes and archea etc.

I am ridiculously excited by this 'Landscape Polyptych' way of doing things. I've pinched it from the Japanese Ukiyo-e printmakers. It enables me to include in one work a number of panels which have different modes or graphic systems in each one. There's my charcoal rubbings on paper, and the more cartographic birds-eye view drawings of the land surface. Or the worms eye view of the strata under it. And there is the more traditional landscape mode. Usually, I tend to have these modalities in separate paintings. In these multi-panelled works they are on different panels, juxtaposed with each other to make a diffracted and yet unified single work which brings together the different systems found in a complex bit of country.

Last year I followed the Avon River until it joined the Richardson River (properly known by its Djaara name, Banyena) There I set up camp in a curl of the river on a farm which the McAllister family are bringing back to a state of regenerated fecundity. In place of the use of powerful insecticides and volumes of fertiliser they are using organic fertilisers, and nitrogen fixing clover. I drew more ephemeral pools, and continued drawing mayflies and other aquatic insects on the etching plate which I had carried in my ruck sack since I started my wanderings along regenerated rivers and creeks back in 2018. I loved documenting these insects which like reed warblers are such emblematic signifiers of healthy living streams and habitats (Catalogue no 21).

Each time I drew the duckweed covered pool below Richardson Bridge a lone Australasian grebe would swim past. This year she came towards me followed by seven exquisitely mottled baby dabchicks. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October the flooding waters came hurling down the river bed and soon rose up to my camp site. Just in time the brave and stalwart Dougal McAllister came charging down the hill and took me back to the Bonnie Brae homestead. My swag and several drawings were swished away and are now probably floating somewhere near Lake Bolac.

– John Wolseley

Peter Andrews, *Back from the Brink: How Australia's Landscape can be saved*, 2006

Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason:Essays*, 1995

Seamus Heaney, *The Midnight Verdict*, 1993

Charles Massey, *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture, A New Earth*, 2017

Annie Proulx, *Fen Bog & Swamp*, 2022

Edward Ryan *Blown to Witewitekalk: placenames and cultural landscapes in north-west Victoria* in Hercus, Hodges and Simpson (eds) *The Land is a Map* 2000

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