

RED GUM COUNTRY

NEW WORK BY
EWEN ROSS

Exhibition details

Dates

23 July - 16 August 2008
wednesday - saturday 11am-5pm
and by appointment

Curated by

ANITA TRAVERSO
Director

Consulting + curating
Australian contemporary art

ANITA TRAVERSO GALLERY
7 Albert Street
Richmond 3121
Melbourne Australia

61.3.9428 7557
0408 534034
art@anitatraversogallery.com.au
www.anitatraversogallery.com.au

The Great Sentinels

If, as is often said, life is a journey, then one may do worse than make use of the art of Ewen Ross as a map.

Taking his cue from the core of nature itself, Ross meanders, wanders, strides and glides through his work. At times these beguiling works resemble the time lines of a gargantuan tree or the tracts of a human palm. Elsewhere we can sense the breeze running over the rugged hillsides of a once inland sea.

That Ross is a poet of form is beyond dispute. The lava like flows of his images could be the diary of drought and flood imbedded in the core of a massive eucalypt or the hard gnawing work of termites as they do their part in nature's cycle. They could be plains of corn or wheat or they could be the strange optical effect of a particularly virulent hallucinogen.

Fashion has never been the concern of Ewen Ross. Like fellow Australian journey men John Wolseley and Philip Hunter, Ross takes to the wide expanse of the bush naturally. While most Australians toil beneath fluorescent lights in a minute cubicle in an air conditioned office, Ross breathes the air of the seasons.

He is also something of a trickster. From a distance one ponders his medium. Is it oil paint or water colour? The colouration is too subtle for the rigours of oil paint but too rigorous for the subtlety of water colour. His gently swaying lines are presented in a wonderful array of ochres and deep browns, an extraordinary palette in itself. We are reminded of the paintings of such artists as Willie Tjungurrayi or Makinti Napanangka from Australia's central desert.

But unlike Tjungurrayi, Hunter, Wolseley or Napanangka, and despite our first impressions, Ross is doing something utterly unique in terms of technique. What he does is to some extent closer to sculpture or even printmaking. He carves his 'paintings.' At heart an alchemist, Ross will use almost anything at hand to create his distinctly visceral poetry; his calligraphy is rendered via fire and chisels, similar tools to those used for time immemorial for the simple act of survival, here adapted to create imagery that may well inspire the nomad buried deep inside his viewers.

While these works transport us with their lyrical abstraction they are simultaneously rooted very much in the here and now, a country threatened by drought and fire. Poetic on the one hand, they are also vivid warnings, indeed, bordering on the apocalyptic.

Ross paints what he knows. He grew up in the Wimmera region, a realm reliant upon agriculture but at the same time essentially abused by those who rely upon it. The irrigation systems in this region are, at best, inept and coupled with increasingly rare rainfall threaten the crops to the point of desertification. While there are stories of life in these works, there is also a sense of foreboding.

Ross does not romanticise this aspect of his work. Indeed, when he 'paints' that most majestic of trees, the Red Gum, he eschews the potential of soaring branches and lush growth.

For Ross the soul of the big Reds is interminable and timeless, regardless of whether they are upright or fallen. "They are the great sentinels of this country whose health is barometric to the region," he says. "The secrets of time immemorial are contained in their growth patterns. It's the cross sections revealing this history which fascinate me."

“Essentially these images depict the end grain of the river red gum (*Eucalyptus Camaldulensis*) which has succumbed to the effects of the drought,” he writes. “A decade of dry has taken a severe toll on the great river reds which dominate the country in this region.”

While he is not a political artist, Ewen Ross’ work does remind us of the immediate environment. There is a strange beauty, almost a sense of the sublime, in the devastation of land via drought. In much the same way as Fred Williams could find a minimal sublime in the remains of a devastating bushfire, Ross finds an unsettling poetry in his depictions of the land.

But, of course, all of these terms are essentially incorrect – ‘painting’, ‘landscape’, ‘abstraction’ – none of these, strictly speaking, apply. With his decidedly unusual technical approach, Ross mines his materials to unveil the gently rolling curves of the land. The unlikely results of this process, while hinting at pure chance, reveal something amazingly universal. By tackling the grain of timber Ross reveals to us the universal themes of nature itself. The grains and colours of the timber resemble the ebb and flow of what was once an inland sea. The waves continue today as a breeze caresses the grasses and wheat, creating an undulating flow – a pattern we see on the surface of the land and as the alchemist Ross reveals, continues within the solidity of the timber grain.

Ashley Crawford
Melbourne June 2008



#01 Red Gum Country, 3 Bridges Crosscut
Engraving + mixed media on ply
120 cm x 103 cm



#02 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 1
Engraving + mixed media on ply
121 cm x 242 cm



#03 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 2
Engraving + mixed media on ply
121 cm x 242 cm



#04 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 3
Engraving + mixed media on ply
122 cm x 126 cm



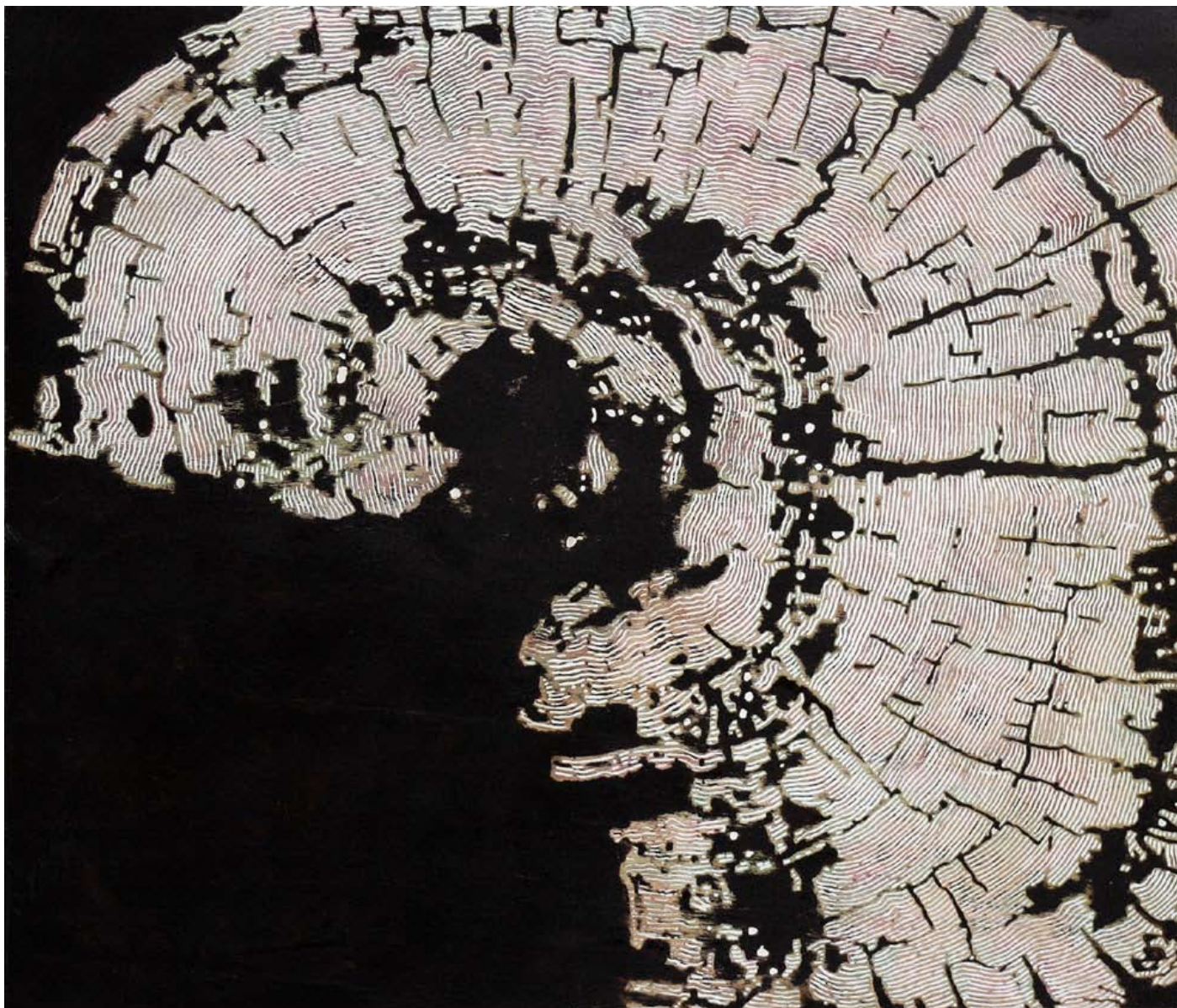
#05 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 4
Engraving + mixed media on ply
121 cm x 242 cm



#06 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 5
Engraving + mixed media on ply
121 cm x 242 cm



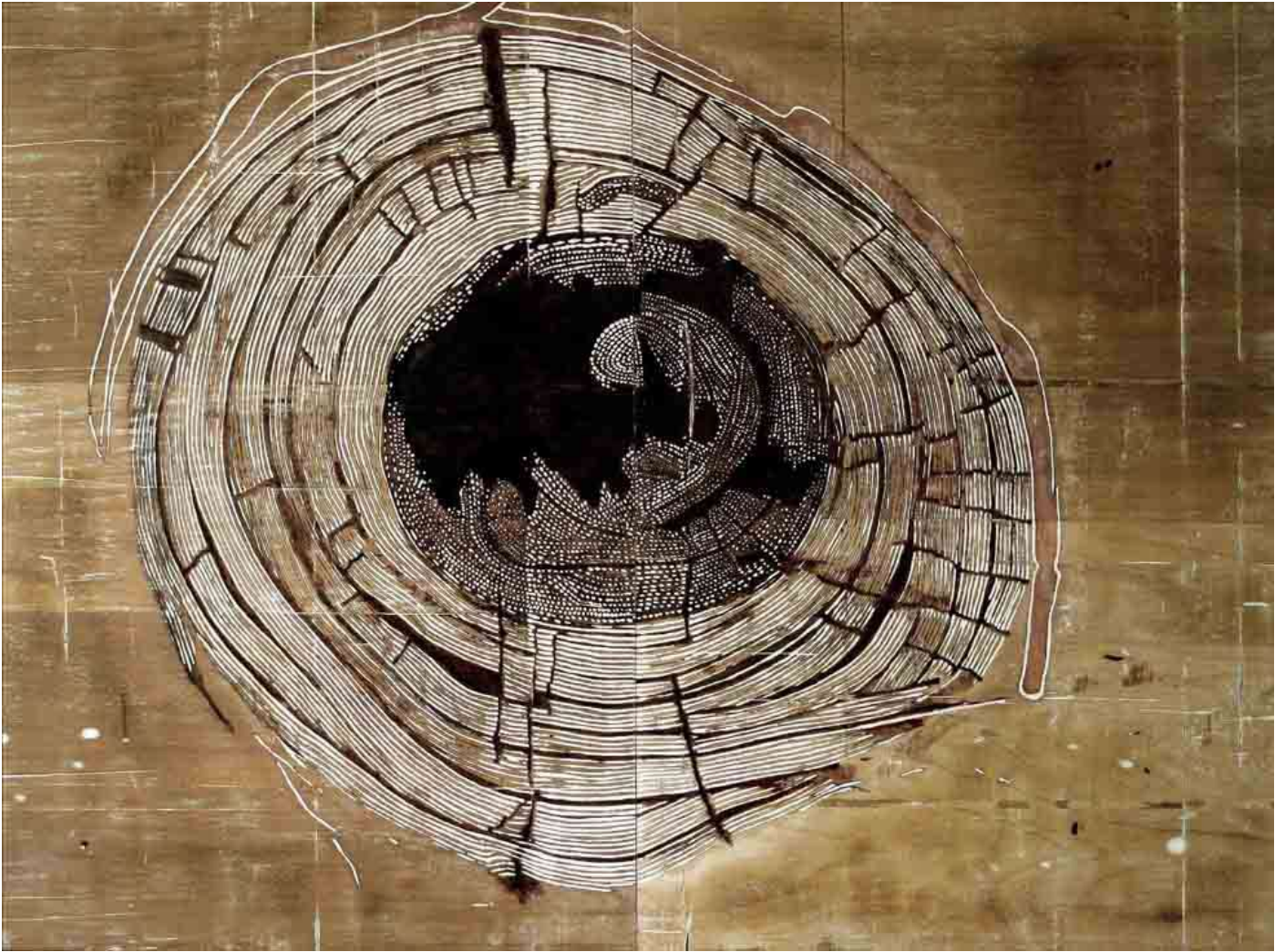
#07 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 6
Engraving + mixed media on ply
122 cm x 140 cm



#08 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut 7
Engraving + mixed media on ply
87 cm x 102.5 cm



#09 Red Gum Country, Shrives Crosscut
Engraving + mixed media on ply
114 cm x 244 cm



#10 Red Gum Country, Harrow Crosscut Diptych
Engraving + mixed media on ply
182 cm x 240 cm



#11 Red Gum Country, Carmichael's Crosscut
Engraving + mixed media on ply
122 cm x 140 cm



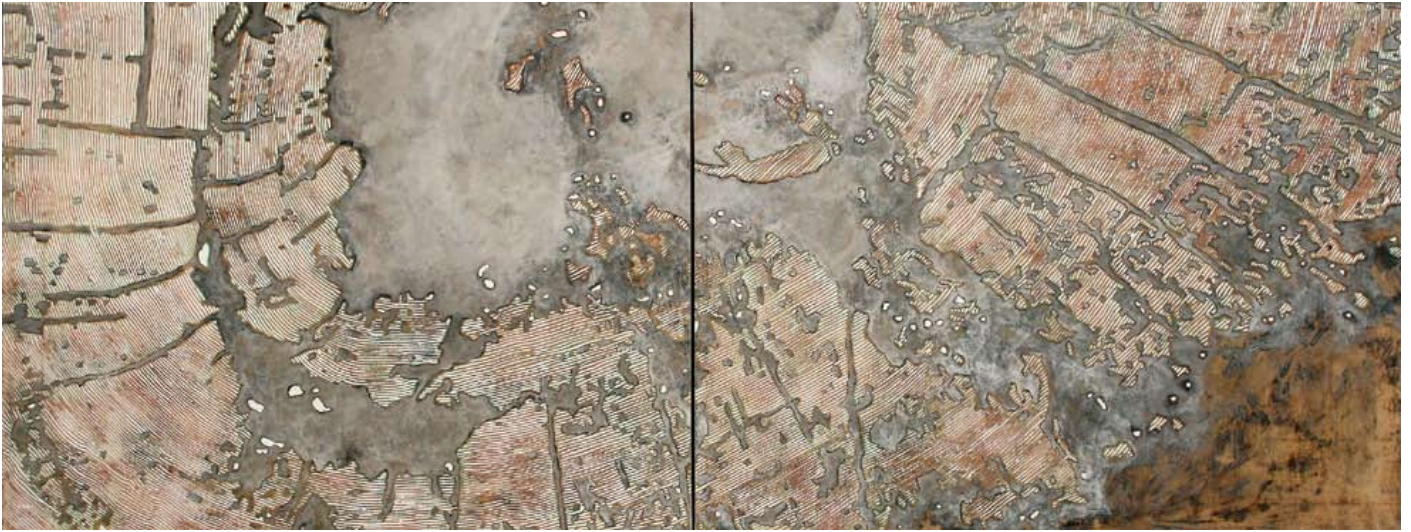
#12 Red Gum Country, Kanagulk Crosscut 1
Engraving + mixed media on ply
120 cm x 103 cm



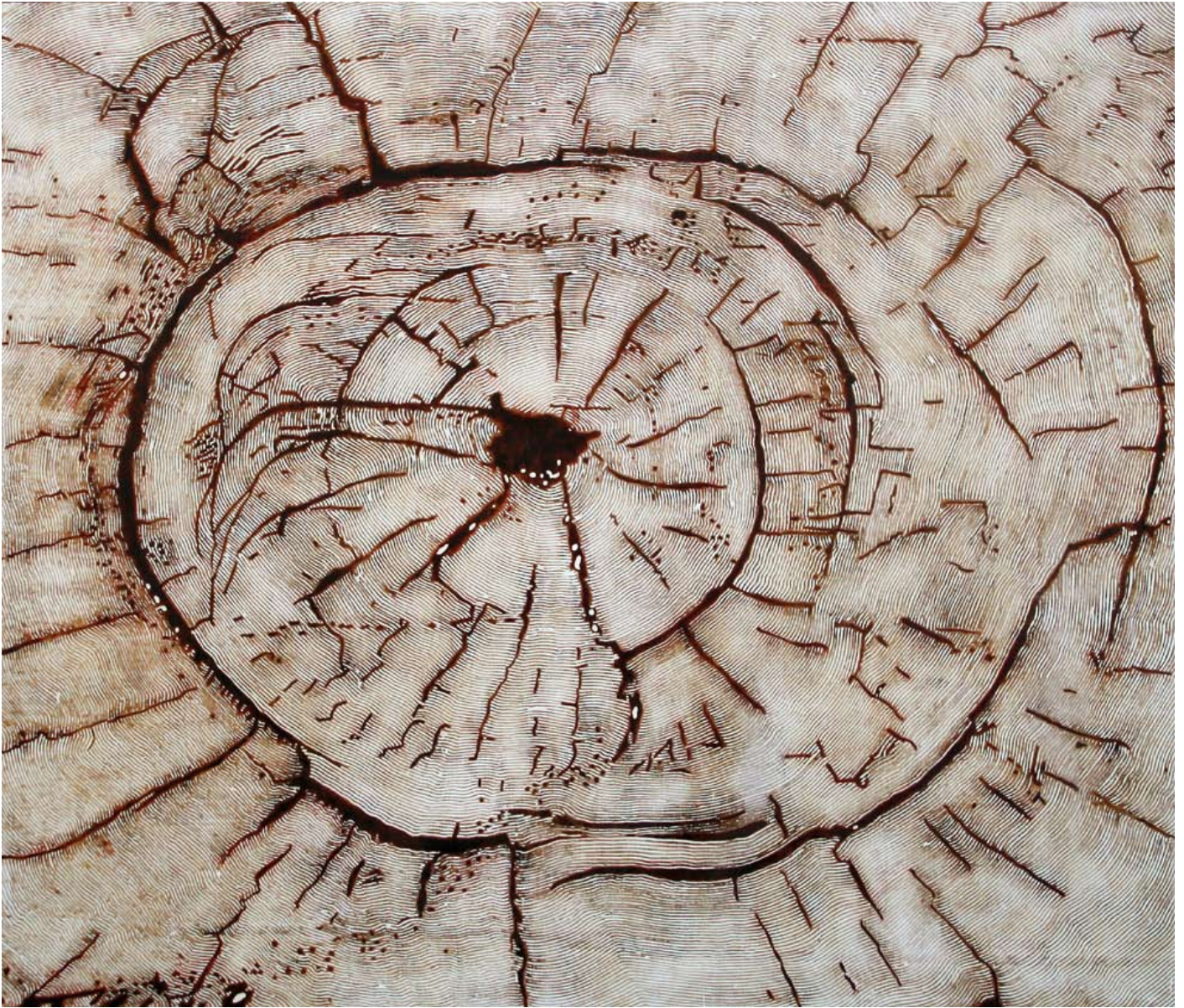
#13 Red Gum Country, Kanagulk Crosscut 2
Engraving + mixed media on ply
100 cm x 103 cm



#14 Red Gum Country, Kanagulk Crosscut 3
Engraving + mixed media on ply
122 cm x 140 cm



#15 Red Gum Country, Fulham Crosscut Diptych
Engraving + mixed media on ply
94.5 cm x 244 cm



#16 Red Gum Country, Old Pendale Crosscut
Engraving + mixed media on ply
122 cm x 142 cm



#17 Red Gum Country, Pine Hut Crosscut Polyptych
Engraving + mixed media on ply
243 cm x 243 cm



#18 Red Gum Country, Old Pendale Crosscut Too
Engraving + mixed media on ply
115.5 cm x 132 cm