

The River Belongs to Everyone

NSW report by Ineke Dane

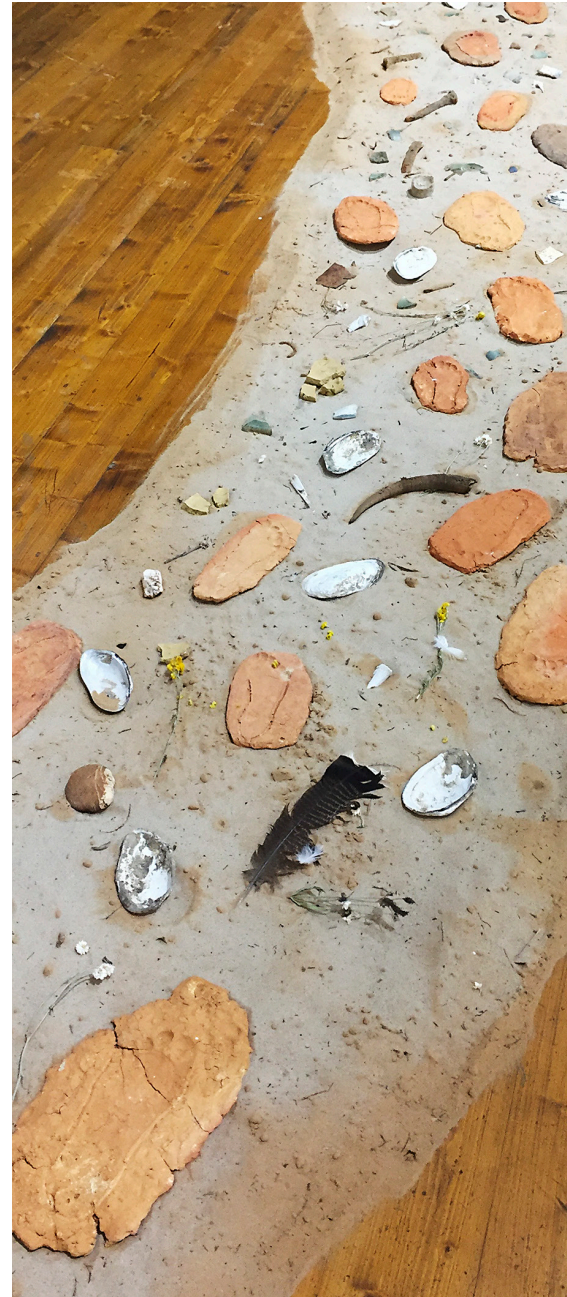
Recently I had the privilege of working with artists and activists Badger Bates and Justine Muller as curator for their exhibition *Barka, The Forgotten River* at Broken Hill Regional Gallery, held from 8 June to 30 July 2018. Their works were multi-disciplinary – linocuts, photography, sound, sculpture, painting and ceramics – and, brought together through the exhibition, spoke to the looming disappearance of Australia’s Barka (or Darling) River. A deeper reading of the exhibit showed a correlation between this disappearance and the evaporation of a culture and its people whose name is eponymous to the river: the Barkandji.

Muller’s *River of Hope* (2018) – a trail of ceramic footprints on a re-created sandy riverbed snaking its way through the gallery – anchored the exhibition. Crafted from clay sourced from the Barka riverbed, the footprints were impressed by more than 200 residents of the nearby Wilcannia, each as unique as a thumbprint. The result was a poignant, intimate and earth-based portrait of a people whose loss, via the collapse of the Barka, is corporeal.

Muller asks: “As a society, do we care and protect museum fossils more than we care and protect a living culture where people and nature are under threat? Traditionally footprints were left in the riverbanks as ancient deeds of the people’s connection to their country and the river.”

Clay here – used in its rawest form – was the conduit for conveying meaning beyond words, connecting site and culture in a work of sheer depth and sophistication.

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Below left: Installation view opening night
Photo: Jason King
Below: **Badger Bates** and **Justine Muller** *River of Hope*, detail 2018, photographs various dimensions
Photo: Jason King

Opposite: **Badger Bates** and **Justine Muller**, *River of Hope* detail, 2018 river clay footprints, sand found objects sourced from the Barka around Wilcannia, various dimensions
Photo: Ineke Dane

