



Dale Harding, *SPINE 2* 2018, Gosford quarry sandstone, hematite, off-form concrete plinth, University Art Collection, UA2018.25.2. The commission on Eastern Avenue will soon have native grasses planted.

Bridging the divide

In 2018, the University commissioned artist Dale Harding to create a major new artwork spanning three sites along the City Road entrance – at the entry of the new Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences (LEES) Building, and either side of Eastern Avenue outside the Madsen and Carslaw buildings. Harding is a descendant of the Bidjara, Garingal and the Ghungalu peoples of Central Queensland. Ann Stephen spoke with the artist as he was working onsite in August.

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How have your ideas developed since you began the commission?

Public art has not come up before as applicable for me. But this commission has been like a residency, which really supported me; so far, it’s been three weeks. It suits the way I work to be present in the discussions, and I can see the benefits in the work, shifting and refining ideas where necessary. For instance, looking at the LEES Building, I could see the architecture was very sensitive to the site and very elegant, so you can’t just impose your work on it. The dialogue about landscaping has been important, understanding the way the University’s space is used and interacted with – these are really important considerations.

Eastern Avenue is a complex and very busy area.

How does your work deal with these elements?

A key thing is the flow of the line of sight from the entrance off City Road and up and down Eastern Avenue. The form of the avenue offers compression and release. Entering from City Road, the slight elevation rising to the north allows the work to reveal itself as you move through the space. The approach mirrors for me how the Great Dividing Range has those planes before the kick-ups of the cliffs.

So you are bringing a sense of your own country from the Carnarvon Gorge into the urban university.

I’m certainly not looking to impose my family’s culture here, but the work is definitely an acknowledgement of the Great Dividing Range. You could walk north up the Great Divide all the way from Victoria to the Carnarvon Gorge and beyond to Grandad Bidjara country, and a bit further up to Townsville. The sandstone of my country leads all the way to Sydney via the Great Dividing Range and many of the university buildings here have been built from that sandstone. My works will make a connection between the University’s campus on Gadigal territory and the culture that my ancestors have passed on.

Why did you place the sandstone blocks on the diagonal concrete plinth outside the Madsen Building?

The choice of rectilinear sandstone blocks is in part a response to minimalist art. This morning I was able to stand on the site with an iPad and align the site for the plinth along the north/south axis. It has all locked into



Artist Dale Harding, during installation in late 2018, worked with stonemasons and plasterers across three sites

place really beautifully, with the two sandstone blocks sitting side-by-side with no hierarchy. There are also lines of sight almost due east to the corner of the LEES Building wall painting.

How does the ready-made petrified tree fit within LEES Building?

The Moreton Bay figs lining City Road are very sensitive and important to the shared thinking about the whole site and surroundings of the LEES Building that houses Environmental Sciences. The petrified tree, being formerly botanical, is a material signifier and can be read and understood through scientific or historic knowledge. There are other lines of enquiry and meanings from cultural, spiritual and philosophical understandings embedded in the relation between the living trees and the petrified log. The parts of the ancient tree trunk are laid out on a white plinth made of the same material as the space-age lab facing it.

How have Indigenous cultural issues informed your wall painting?

I begin with a line of inheritance in rock art, but there’s been a shift in the work. What’s occurred over the intensities of this year is that the wall paintings have become mine. I now see two parts of my life, there’s the cultural responsibility and there’s my contemporary art practice.



Dale Harding, *SPINE 3*, 2018, concrete, concrete oxide, hematite, University Art Collection, UA2018.25.3. The wall painting looks back to both the artist's ancestors' rock painting and to modernists like Mark Rothko and Robert Hunter.

As an offering to the University campus, which is multicultural, I'm going for a universal approach to the wall painting. It's not bound to the rock art of my ancestors, to cultural or community connections but more aligned to contemporary practice as I've brought different histories and new materials into my work. It's not separate from cultural practice, but it's culturally safe, in a new way. I can really stand by the work as contemporary art.

For instance, the interior wall painting at the Lees Building entrance is a departure from my previous use of locally sourced ochres. Instead, I'm using lapis lazuli as the blue pigment; vivianite, which is bluey-green; hematite, a blood-red oxide; and a pure lemon ochre from Italy, which is a commercial pigment. The paintings are literally illustrations of my breath; I use a little atomiser to blow the pigment onto the wall. I appropriated the atomiser from Sidney Nolan. Nolan had been to see the rock art at Carnarvon Gorge in 1948. He rode in on horseback and then went onto the Royal Ballet in London and appropriated rock art techniques using an atomiser spray with negative stencils to blow paint onto the costumes.

What other artists have informed your work on Eastern Avenue?

I learnt from Robert Andrew and the way he uses oxides. These are commercially produced concrete oxides, ones

he has been using for years. I was also looking a lot at this 1950s painting by Mark Rothko, in terms of building up the surface, accumulating the colour. I worked the plaster using my hands and a spoon. The renderers who I was working with were amused; it's the opposite to what they do with their trowels, smoothing the wall.

I mostly used a brush for the colour, I deliberately chose to use more or less opacity when I was mixing the paint, putting a little bit on then accumulating and building up the layers. I also used a roller. I saw the recent Robert Hunter show [at the National Gallery of Victoria, 2018] and remembered the contribution of the roller on his wall painting at Josh Milani's gallery. At that time, I was a punk undergraduate art student, and Josh asked me to assist Robert. It was brief, but I remember a lot from that experience, so thought why not use a roller here. The roller is used in patches across the Eastern Avenue wall. I was also looking at other monumentally scaled works, like Sally Gabori's painting and Gemma Smith's ceiling, both commissioned at the Queensland Law Courts. I'm looking a lot at modernism, not in the field of appropriation or reverentially, but just working with it, just doing it.

Dr Ann Stephen is Senior Curator, University Art Collection