

# Water and Wisdom

*An exhibition at RMIT Gallery explores how humans and water are inextricably linked.*

By **Aparna Ananthuni** - February 27, 2018

Water. It is both ancient and modern in its role in culture, in the stories human beings tell about it, and the absolute dependence they place on it for survival and development.

In its summer exhibition, water+wisdom, RMIT Gallery explores the shared and disparate connections to water of lands that were once themselves connected: Australia and India.



Once part of the 'super continent' of Gondwana, the two lands still have many similarities when it comes to water: high rainfall variability, long-established practices of customary water management and competing demands for water from different sectors. This connection is symbolised by the display of a painting from 1999 that was co-created by Indigenous Australian and Indian artists. The artists worked on the painting from either side. Where they met in the middle, they decided to collaborate – on the depiction of the river.

Curated by Suzanne Davies with Helen Rayment, the exhibition guides us through the work of over 40 creative practitioners, and thus through diverse interpretations of the cultural, social, spiritual and economic importance of water and waterways. "In shaping the exhibition, we've drawn on extensive research by experts from India and Australia to

present poetic dimensions of customary knowledge regarding water stewardship,” Davies says.



The exhibition is beautifully eclectic, comprising painted works, photography and video works; as well as material objects such as the finely woven eel traps of master weaver, Gunditjmara artist Aunty Connie Hart. It also features a special, family-friendly Augmented Reality sandbox that allows users to create topography models by shaping real sand, which is then augmented in real time by an elevation colour map, topographic contour lines, and simulated water, enabling rivers to be created.

One of the most striking paintings is the softly luminous *Sacred Water* (2010), by Judy Watson, which depicts the spring waters of Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill Gorge), in the artist's Waanyi Country. Water, the artist writes, is the "conduit" for all she does. "It needs to be respected and cared for, not polluted and drained. It feeds the Country which replenishes the people."



*Judy Watson*

*Source: Art Gallery of NSW Archive*

In *Journey to the River Cauvery* (2012), Bengaluru artist Bhavani GS travelled alongside the river in its journey to the Bay of Bengal. Her video work shows the river as a place for everyday chores where women beat and wash clothes, a place of natural beauty, and a site of spiritual bathing. The artist explains that as she followed the river, it gave her a “different view”, and “she fell in love” with it. The rush of the river, the artists’ feet submerged in its red-clayed shallows, the bloody work of fisherman cleaning giant fish on its banks, all conveyed the multi-layered importance of rivers in India.

The exhibition also uses archival photography to explore unknown aspects of the human connection water – for example, in a series of nineteenth-century photographs, we see indigenous peoples holding dingos; the animals provide warmth, but, importantly, are also water diviners. Dingos were traditionally the special care of women and children, and were, besides helping in finding water, also functioned as hunting aids, living blankets and security. Thus the striking black-and-white photographs show the vital connections between land, water, life, and the human body, held together in indigenous Australians’ embrace of the dingo.



*Ujala Baoli, Mandu, Madhya Pradesh, India*

*Photo: Victoria Lautman, from The Vanishing Stepwells of India by Victoria Lautman (2017)*

A very different, contemporary, series of photographs by Victoria Lautman, captures the crumbling, intricate and ancient stepwells that still stand in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat in India. Some are still of functional use, many others are not. As noted of the obscure stepwell called *Batris Kotha Vav* (thirty-two stories) in Gujarat, its picturesque green vines are "sadly damaging to the structure." The stepwells today represent aesthetic beauty and fascinating histories of diverse patrons, but, as Davies points out, also "provide us with an insight into an often-overlooked relic of sophisticated historic water infrastructure."

Another example of a little-known and ancient form of water infrastructure are the fish traps depicted in another set of nineteenth-century photographs of the stone fish traps

created and maintained for thousands of years by the Ngemba, Wonkamurra, Wallwan and Gombleroi peoples of the Brewarrina region of NSW.



*Elder N'Ahweet, Aunty Di Kerr*

*Source: RMIT University*

A sombre reminder of the current state of waterways in Australia is seen in the specially commissioned documentary, *People of the River*. In it, Elder N'Ahweet, Aunty Di Kerr, says, "I worry about our future... I've seen the rivers go down and down." She also highlights how vital that relationship with water and the land is: "It's important to belong... to connect."

water+wisdom is ultimately about how complex and multilayered our relationship with water is – and how to view water and waterways as purely practical, economic, cultural or spiritual, rather than holding them in our minds as all of those things at the same time, which can put that relationship in danger.

### **Aparna Ananthuni**

Aparna is an aspiring writer of historical fiction and fantasy for young adults and children. She also loves reading, drawing and Indian classical music, and often develops strange obsessions like typewriter-collecting.