

Artists turned inside out in Residency project.

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Local artist Kirstie Rea felt a little worried about her current exhibition, which opened at Craft ACT on Thursday night.

A Pialligo-based glass artist with a string of awards, international teaching and artist residencies to her name, Rea was the inaugural director of Canberra Glassworks and has taught for many years at the ANU School of Art. A week before this exhibition's opening, she was worried how her work was going to be received.

"There's no object--I'm not using glass", she gasped earlier this week, as we sat together in sagging armchairs, looking at lines of wool thread recreating the space beneath a bush hut verandah in her studio space.

The *Gudgenby: traces* exhibition, which she shares with textile artist Paull McKee, is the end result of her residency at the Gudgenby Read-cut cottage in Namadgi National Park. This was a joint Parks and Craft ACT project which ran from February to May last year. Rea and McKee each spent 5 weeks living in the old 20s-built, pre-fab cottage which was restored by the Kosciusko Huts Association in 2005.

Rea's 3 wool-thread works—describing structures of or near the hut, and a vista of the Brindabellas -- shows the influence of North American artist Fred Sandback, who also used thread as a sculptural material. Rea's woollen lines suggests the volume of the building or the mountains in the distance, but also captures the sense of vacancy and lost histories--both settler and Aboriginal—that the valley contains.

Rea is clearly outside her comfort zone. In our conversation it becomes apparent that the landscape virtually *made* her let go of what she did best.

"I felt I had to answer to the complexities of this place, the dingoes and the kangaroos. I was very conscious of being watched for hours by all these creatures, as I sat watching them." Rea felt a palpable sense of loss, a conflict between known and unknown histories, but also the vigour of what remains.

McKee, who initiated dialogue around joint Parks/Craft ACT projects back in 2004-5, seems to agree. He felt he too was being teased into a different relationship with time. McKee's method with fabrics is to gather fragments of blankets, cloths, and men's clothing, re-line and re-display their qualities [including their gaps and holes] so that their histories can be felt and experienced.

Whereas even a year ago, he was talking about ‘loss’ and ‘absence’, he now sees the blankets as marks of resilience, continuity, generosity. “Someone has saved these scraps; someone else has cared enough to salvage them and hand them on to me.” Continuing the tradition of the early 20th century swagman’s ‘make-do’ culture, he now sees the his-story of the *waggas* [self-sewn blankets, so named after the flour sacks from Wagga mill used as backing] as a culture of *abundance*. “We have what we need.”

This carries a lovely echo of what I hear in conversation with head Park Ranger Bernard Morris: ‘I myself am never alone in the bush, I am never lost, I am safe. There is always company’.

The Gudgenby cottage, well set-up with 3 bedrooms, kitchens and combustion fire, is yet not an artist’s studio. For the artists, it was virtually a walk-in, walk-out situation, demanding minimal technical interface. McKee’s days were spent thinking, breathing, painting and sewing; Rea’s were spent watching, walking, taking photos, and drawing images onto small squares of glass, some of which are on display in the foyer at Craft ACT. Both artists engaged with an influx of visitors on Open Days which allowed members of the general public to come in, chat to, and see an artist at work. For the rest of the time, the experience was one of *immersion*—a project with a sense of slow build.

Former executive director of Craft ACT, Barbara McConchie, who was at the helm of the project since Paull McKee first approached her in 2004, says this was a characteristic of the project as a whole. “It had a slow evolution,” she says, ‘but one of its strengths through this was the building of solid relationships over time.’

Head Ranger Morris agrees. From an initial sense of caution he found it exciting to ‘see what happened’ in the Parks/art exchange. The value of it, for me, is that it foregrounds this human process of seeing, experiencing and interpreting.” In themselves, National Parks are neither ‘natural’ nor a fixed entity, but are themselves a cultural construct, defined in relationship to urban environments which value --or do not--wild spaces as areas of conservation and recreation.

In the time since the residencies, the project won the NSW/ACT Landcare award, for both bringing in a new audience to the National Park and a new kind of awareness or sense of relevance of the Park to urban dwellers--a feature lauded by the Landcare committee.

The national finals of the Landcare Awards is being held in Canberra on June 24. Readers can view details about the 88 finalists for this award online at landcareonline.com, and vote for the project they would most like to see supported with a trophy and \$1000 cash prize. Voting for the People’s Choice award is open online between 30 May and 23 June and the winner will be announced at the national Award Ceremony.