

Dek Unu Magazine

Solo Exhibitions of Fine
Photoart Portfolios

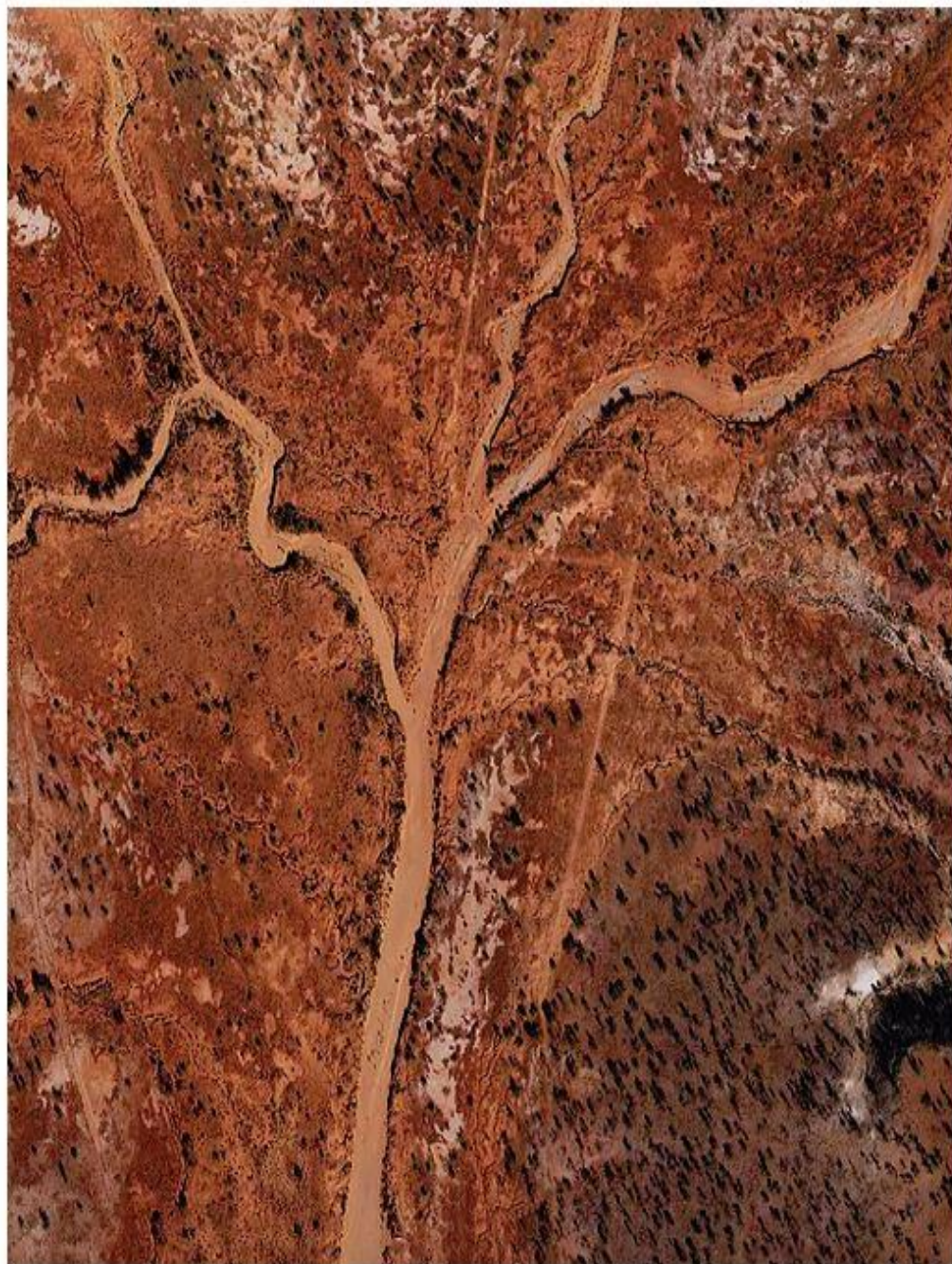
November, 2018

Featured Artist

Paul Harmon

"WaterMarks"

Cover "Bakandji Country 1"
All images © Paul Harmon



Artist Interview - Paul Harmon

Welcome to Dek Unu, Paul. What landscapes...what a project!

A while ago, I travelled to Iceland with a group of professional landscape photographers. This was a formative experience but not in the way that one might imagine. We travelled in a small van from one waterfall or visual cliché to another. It was as if we were collecting trophies and it did not interest me at all. I vowed there and then never to take photos that had been taken before. I acquired a professional drone with the simple intent of shooting abstracted landscapes. Unhappy with the level of abstraction I was able to achieve at the legal height limit of 120 metres, I adapted computer-controlled drone mapping technology



so that I could capture up to 150 overlapping high resolution images that I would later stitch together to give me an apparent height of two to three kilometers. A search of Google Earth for landscapes with an abstract quality led me to northwest New South Wales. After much planning and provisioning, I and an artist friend went on a series of camping trips into what we later learned were the ancient floodplains of Australia's Murray-Darling basin. When I got back with the first images, I was excited by the colours and textural qualities of the landscapes I was capturing. When I stitched these first images together I was blown away by the power of the finished photos.

Though they are gorgeous objects, these images also tell a story.

As a documentary film maker in the late 1980s, I had made a series of award-winning films on the environment and sustainability. So, for a long time I have been aware of the effects and causes of climate

change and, from the beginning of this project, I of course knew that NSW was caught in the worst drought in 100 years and I was also aware of the struggling health of the Murray-Darling River system. At first, though, I expected this project to be visual and aesthetic, not polemical. I was not at all interested in shooting carbon dioxide-producing energy generation or cotton farms and the massive irrigation pumps sucking the river dry. However as I learned more and more what lay behind the visuals I was creating I became focused on telling different aspects of the story - but always with an eye to the aesthetic of the images and the idea of the tension between their beauty from the air and the more difficult truths on the ground.

Your work is also about the original owners of this land, the Barkandji, Ngemba, Euahlayi and Wayilwan Nations.

I showed my first images to respected Australian gallerist and photographic curator Sandy Edwards. Sandy introduced me to Feli McHugh, a Ngemba man who grew up on a aboriginal mission station built near a billabong outside of Brewarrina in far northwestern NSW. By coincidence, Feli was deeply committed to saving the river and particularly his billabong and he was spreading the word of the important role it and others like it played in the health of the river.

Sandy asked me if I would consider expanding the project from western people's relationship with water to include the larger story of humans generally - including First Peoples. I immediately jumped at this opportunity. Without the happenstance of Feli's relationship with Sandy I would never have had the entrée into this world. Feli graciously took me up to Brewarrina to shoot his mission billabong and there I met more elders and was educated and pointed towards other areas of historic and cultural importance to their respective First Peoples nations.

So the project was born of aesthetic attraction but the themes came from the journey itself - into country, into culture and into the knowledge I learned as I went.





Wiradjuri Country 1

All images ©Paul Harm

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Griffith NSW is naturally arid country but has become an oasis of commercial cropping and cloven-hoofed animal farming through the use of irrigated water within the Murray-Darling basin. While this has benefited farmers and consumers, over-allocation of water is done at the expense of important wetland habitats and the associated cultural integrity of First Nations peoples.

Click large image to see text captions.

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Barkandji Country 1

Though visually arresting, the western reaches of NSW's Murray-Darling Basin are now in a perilous state. Where floods and drought used to alternate in a natural rhythm, the rivers and streams now very rarely flow. Instead the little rainfall the system receives is siphoned off to industrial scale farms - an abomination in this fragile landscape.



All images ©Paul Harmon

Barkandji Country 2

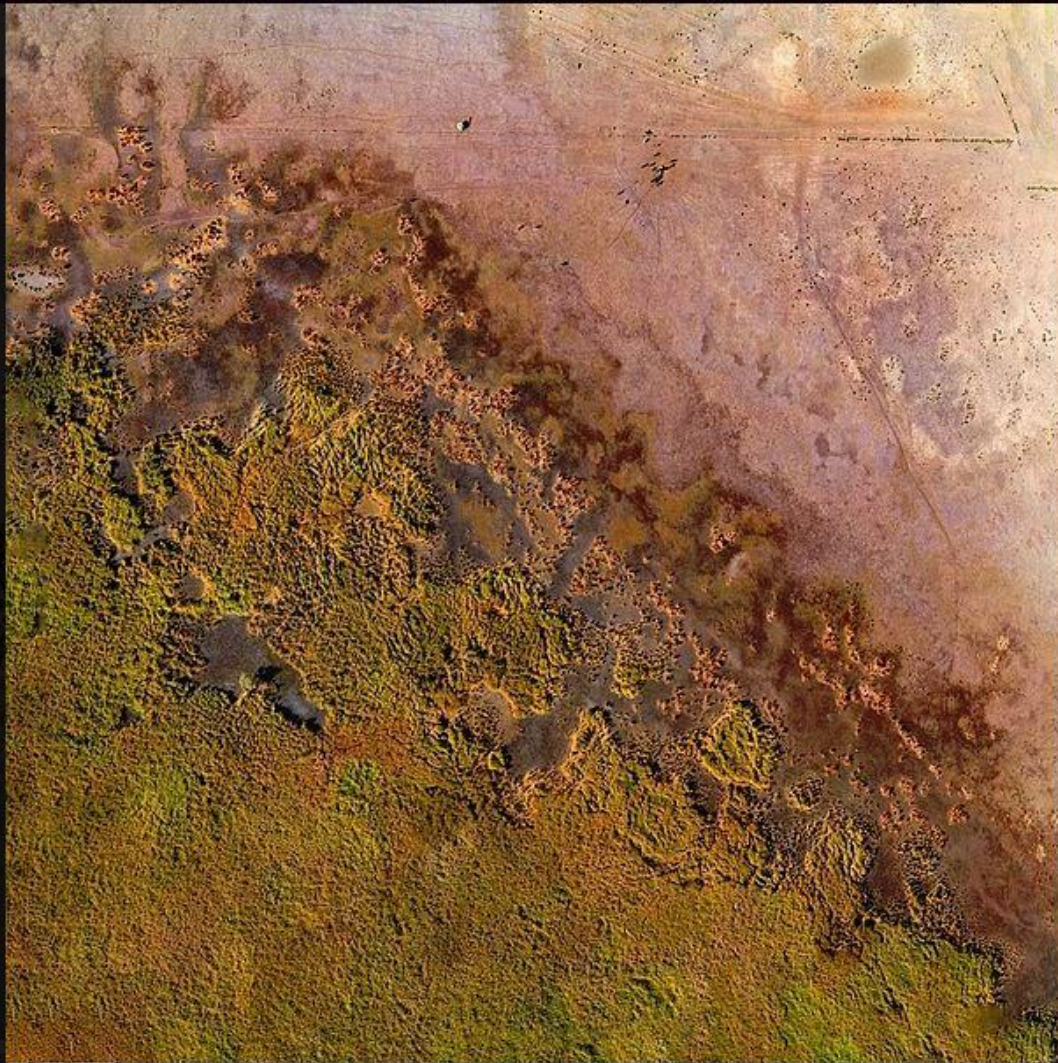
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Majestic from the air this beauty belies an ugly truth where a man-made dam supports cloven-hoofed cattle and sheep that have laid waste the natural environment.

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Wayilwan Country 2

The Macquarie Marshes of central west New South Wales are listed under the international Ramsar Convention as an important wetland of south-eastern Australia. They are of international standing as a major waterbird breeding area with significant First Nations cultural values. However, with cotton farms sucking the rivers dry, little bird life remains in the small remnant marsh that is left.



Ngemba Country 1

All images ©Paul Ham

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Along the Murray-Darling river system were a series of billabongs that would fill in flood. Later, a unique ecosystem in drought, they produced what First Peoples considered a natural antibiotic that would keep the river healthy when released in the next flood. Due to over-allocation to agriculture these floods rarely occur now and the health of the river has declined radically.

large image to see text captions.

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Barkandji Country 3

Images ©Paul Harmon

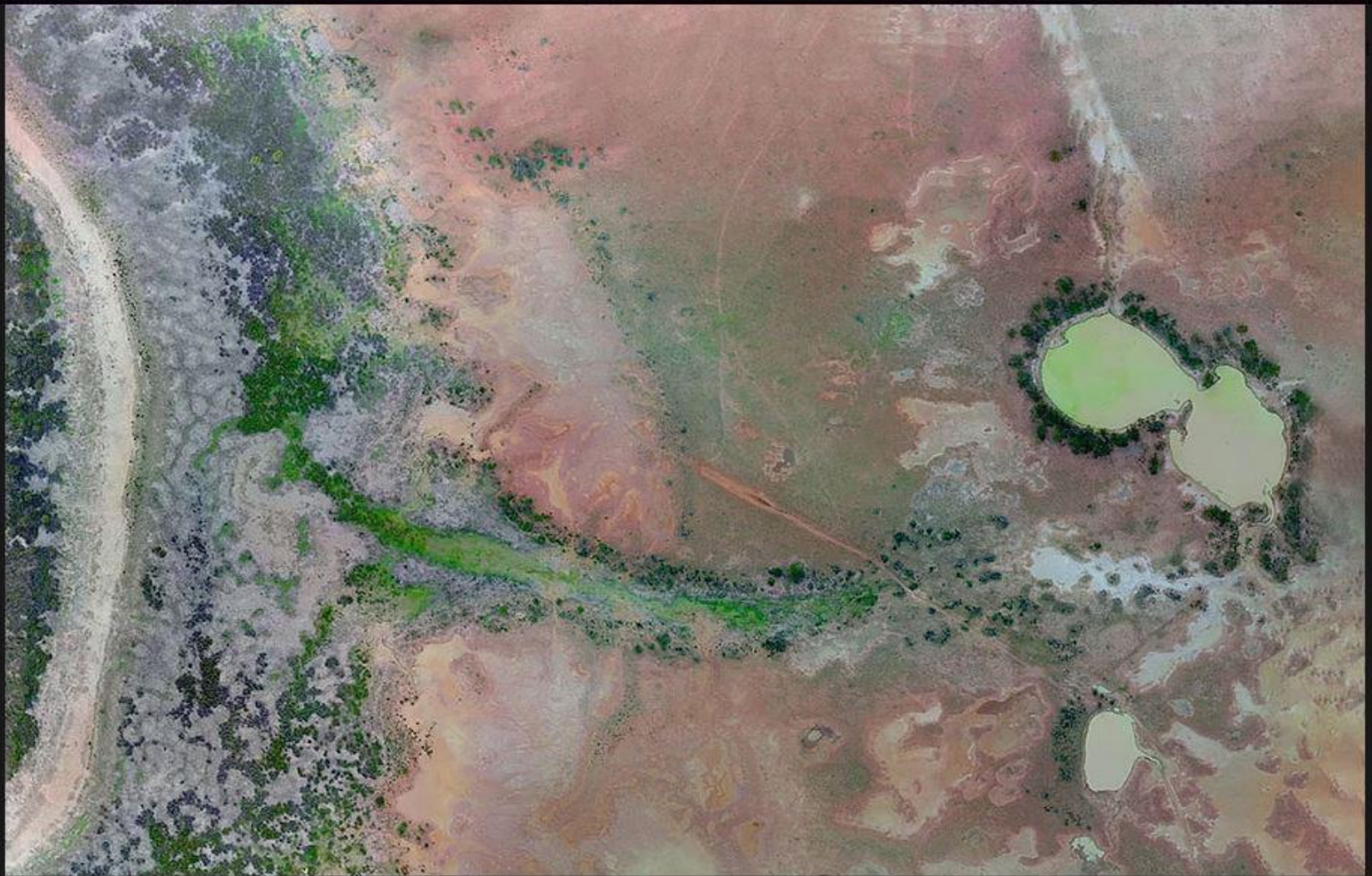
Social media



No longer prone to floods, where billabongs bridged the droughts, post-European settlers rely on man-made structures to keep their hand-fed cattle and sheep alive in this stunningly beautiful, but now over-grazed and therefore largely dead landscape.

[Click large image to](#)

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Euahlayi Country 1

All images ©Paul Harmon. Because of the natural abundance of vegetation and waterfowl, the ancient
 fecundity of the Narran Lakes wetlands has been reduced to almost nothing. Once
 a meeting place of First Nations for trade, festivals and intermarriage, now, with
 water taken by farming, there are only vestigial ponds that can no longer support
 the cultural significance they once did.



Barkandji Country 4

Barkandji country, where the challenge of water within the Murray-Darling basin is most evident, possesses a haunting aesthetic that, even with post-European intervention, presents powerful imagery reminiscent of the indigenous pictographs of Western Australia and the Northern Territory.



Wayliwan Country 1

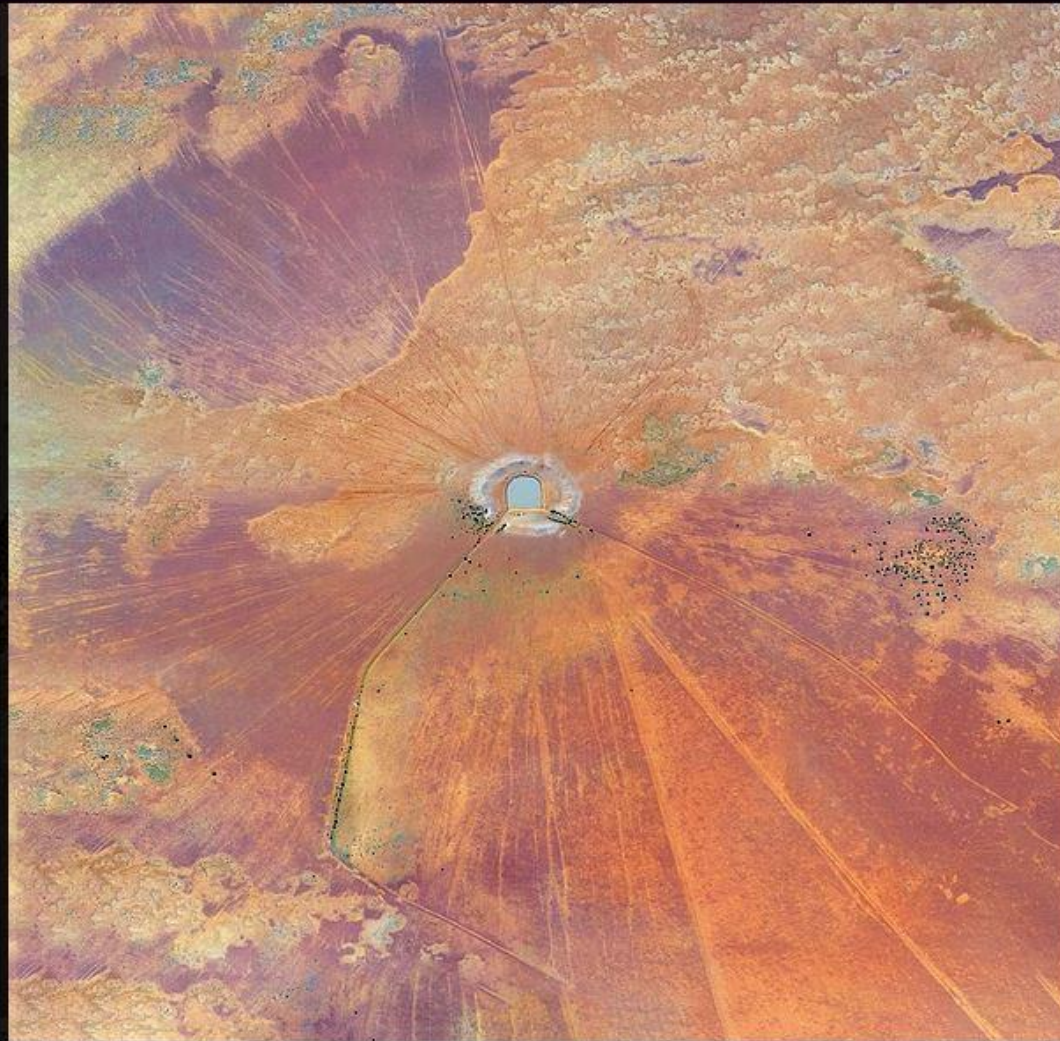
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Due to overgrazing, a healthy, naturally vegetated landscape had become nearly barren. In the 1960s, a few far-sighted people began to reseed native plants into painstakingly-made 6-inch-high pond structures that have allowed some of the original plantscape to return. These works are on such a vast scale that they can be seen from space.

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Barkandji Country 5

Though this country is breathtaking in its colour and redolent of a spirituality that can not be easily denied, this image, when enlarged to its full native resolution, is over 2.5 metres wide and clearly shows sheep around the dam whose cloven hooves have denuded the landscape of its natural cover. This leaves the topsoil without structure so the little soil that remains is prone to wind erosion.



All images ©Paul Harmon

Barkandji Country 6

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In the denuded floodplains, small levees have been built by post-European settlers to stop the little rain that falls gaining speed and further eroding the land. The land seems to hold the spirit of the people who have lived there for over 65,000 years.

Artist Interview - Paul Harmon

Your printed images are very dramatic!

The way I shot the series produced images of massive resolution – the finished stitched images are up to 2.4 metres wide at their native resolution of 300 dpi. The prints will be shown in February at the Casula Powerhouse Gallery. The size is essential to the work. The Powerhouse has a long, raised gallery that when seen from the ground floor will present the work at a distance. From afar, viewers will see the scenes as if from the air. Up close, however, the gallery prints will reveal the ugly truths on the ground - stolen land, stolen water, inappropriate and illegal land use, environmental degradation and a dispossessed indigenous population fighting for the country in which their spirituality and identity are so enshrined.

Yours is a highly technology-dependent art. Talk about your gear and how you use it to do what you do.



I used to be a bit of an equipment nut. When I first got back into photography I had a great passion for my D800E. I think I would have brought it into our marital bed if I was allowed. I loved reading lens reviews and getting all the bits and pieces. For me technical equipment is not only necessary to render an idea but can also inspire.

I had had a vague idea that I might like to abstract the landscape by looking straight down from a drone and bought a Phantom 4 Pro to experiment with. At the same time I was doing a philosophy course at Sydney University with a wonderful teacher by the name of Kerry Sanders. In class Kerry happened to mention that Jackson Pollock had been inspired by Navajo Indian sand painting and an idea started to form. Using Google Earth I had seen these wonderful shapes and intriguing forms in Western NSW that reminded me of aboriginal topographic dot paintings and I thought aerial views of that topography would make wonderful artworks.

Frustrated by the low legal altitude limits of drones and the angle of view that that height produced, I discovered that drone mapping software could be used to shoot multiple overlapping images which could later be stitched together in Photoshop. After much experimenting with the drone and multiple versions of data-reliant mapping software, I finally found a methodology that would allow me to go into areas with no internet data and produce these shots. Without the right technology it would have been impossible but without the idea there would have been nothing to shoot.

What is the arts environment like where you live?

I live in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales which is about 90 minutes' drive from Sydney. A lot of arts workers are attracted to the Southern Highlands because of its proximity to Sydney and its abundant natural and cultivated beauty. Some of Australia's most important artists live here.

Some artists like to work in community, others are loners; but, all of us have been led, mentored or influenced somehow.

Mostly I follow my own star but one person in particular was important. After retiring from the film industry I lived with my wife in the south of France for a year. My wife was writing a book and I had a lot of time on my hands so I started shooting a series of long exposures looking at wind in the landscape. The work caught the eye of Martial Lorcet, a wonderful Parisian photographer who was, luckily for me, living in our little village and had his own professional printing setup and gallery. He was the first person to take my photography seriously and we became fast friends. I owe him a lot.



Artist Interview - Paul Harmon

You trained and worked in film and TV and your still images are as carefully-composed, color-conscious, and painterly as the best paintings. Are there design, drawing, color theory, or art history courses in your background?

Other than attending film school full time for three years I have never had any training in design, drawing or painting. I was, however, a very image-driven film director and imbibed technical expertise from the Directors of Photography I worked with. Having said that, I really think that it is painting, particularly impressionism, that informs much of my aesthetic. Though it is not on trend, aesthetics is very important to me. I was quite involved in university politics so socio/political change interests me, but the way something looks is what excites me now – its what gets my mind racing and my blood pumping. Although my images have a definite political message, I have problems with images that need to have written intellectual context in order to exist. I'm more of the "if I could have said it any other way I would have" school of thought.

What's in the future?

This project is really the start of a much larger work in which, instead of looking at humanity and water along the Murray-Darling Basin, I hope to examine the changing relationship of humanity to water on a global scale in a time of climate change. To this end I wish to attract financial support so that I can shoot similarly styled works in places like Greenland (melting glaciers), Kiribati (threatened by rising sea levels) and the refugee camps of Africa – all of which to one degree or another can be traced back to climate change. This is not a money making proposition for me. Any profits from the work will go to an appropriate environmental organization. I think artists have to become part of the fabric of this debate – at the moment, in spite of overwhelming evidence of danger, action



seems to have stalled. I'd like to be part of the choir of voices that brings it back to the boil. I am looking for ideas and support to bring this next project to bring this next stage of the project to fruition and would welcome any inquiries about this sent to mail@thinkingpictures.com.au.

These images and others are on view on my website: <http://thinkingpictures.com.au/> and are, of course, for sale. Please email me for more information about them as well.

Thank you, Paul, for your artwork and for your commitment to raising big issues beautifully.

Thanks. Watch for drone photography from Greenland ... Coming soon!





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