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Justine Muller

- **Sasanki Tennakoon.**

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Artist, Justine Muller, hasn't stopped since graduating from National Art School in 2007. She has spent most of that time on the road, had several solo exhibitions in Sydney and been exhibited as part of the Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize (2015), Dobell Prize for Drawing (2013) and more recently as a finalist in the 2016 Macquarie Group Emerging Artist Prize among others.

Justine's practice is inquisitive and fluid working across painting, photography, drawing and sculptural mediums which are often the result of being on the road and spending time with Australia's First Nation communities.

Her most recent body of work, "Understanding My Country" was exhibited during the Head On Festival 2017 at Juniper Hall in Paddington. We took some time out to catch up with Justine about this body of work and her practice before she took her adventures overseas.

Tell us a little about your most recent exhibition as part of Head On Festival 2017.

"Understanding My Country" is a collection of photographs, stories, portraits, landscape paintings and sculptures all influenced, made and collected over the past two years from my time spent travelling on Country, as well as long periods of time spent living with communities. The photos and stories are the backbone of my research to better understand my country. The landscape paintings are made on plein air using the raw materials sourced on location, such as earth and pigments. The sculptures are made from found materials, wire and wood, sculpted from clay and stoneware. The portraits are painted on pressed tin and are a preview of a larger exhibition and collaboration with respected Barkandji elder and artist Badger Bates.

Can you share some memorable moments with us from your journeys?

So many!

The start of my journey I spent 6 weeks in a swag with my dog. I cooked on the open fire, painted, wrote and read every day. Every night I feel asleep under a trillion stars and woke up with the sun and the birds. I am not a religious or spiritual person but this experience was as close as I have come. I received blessings from an elder who told me I would be safe and welcome on her land.

Learning about my country's history and spending time with the first peoples of this land has been so incredibly rewarding. To be adopted into the communities and trusted has been so special. The simple things like sharing Christmas with a family in Wilcannia, or eating jonny cakes and kangaroo on an open fire while listening to stories of the land, or going hunting for shell fish with the Yolgnu women in North East Arnhem land – these are moments I treasure.

What is your approach when starting a new body of work?

I find it very hard to work and, especially to start a new body of work, in a four-walled white studio.

My work is inspired by my life experiences. If I am doing something I am passionate about then the work will flow from that naturally. I never took photographs thinking of it as an art form, I took photographs because I was inspired by my surrounding and naturally wanted to document it.

I paint when in the desert because I am overcome by the light and harsh beauty and I want to capture that.

I paint people because I am interested in their character and inspired by their story.

Does the subject influence the medium you use?

Absolutely, my materials are changing all the time. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, yes this is true but sometimes words can capture something that my lens can't, just like my paintbrush can capture a mood that my pen cannot write.

I like also to work with materials that are sourced on location, for example: my portraits of the Braknadji people are painted onto pressed Wilcannia tin. This tin is the same tin that the people used to build their homes out of when they lived along the banks of the Darling River, its' part of the town's history.

I also like to paint using the earth and pigments, my sculptures are made from found materials. The places I go are my inspiration so it only seems fitting that the materials should be a reflection of this.

Are there any challenges you've faced producing your work?

I take great care in always seeking permission for work I do with First Nations People. It is against Aboriginal 'lore' to share stories or images without permission but it is also an important part of respect. We have a long history of exploitation in this country and, working with a community, it is always important to build trust and go about things in the correct way.

In doing so it is a much more rewarding experience as I always end up learning more because the communication is open and honest.

If you could change any moment in your life, what would you change and why?

This is a good question, perhaps if you had asked me this a couple of years ago I would have given you a list of things I would change but I believe more and more that everything happens for a reason. I know for certain that the struggles, heartaches and losses I have experienced in life have made me the person I am today. If life was too smooth a ride then I would be void of the ability to empathise, I would not have the strength and resilience to travel alone and I would not have determination and drive. All these things are why I am the artist I am today.

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