

AUSTRALIA

Manning,
New South WalesKate Dorrough
at Manning Regional
Art Gallery

The fertile life of rivers and streams has always stirred the human imagination. Throughout Western history, poets from Coleridge and Tennyson to Emily Dickinson have waxed lyrical about the force of a river flowing out to the sea, or the quietude of a gentle brook or trickling stream. Late in the 20th century, Australian painter Arthur Boyd based most of his final series of paintings around his beloved Shoalhaven River. For a decade, contemporary Sydney artist Kate Dorrough has explored her fascination with the landscape of Australia's inland rivers. She speaks to this in her recent exhibition entitled *The Lyrical River*.

With profound childhood memories of swimming in the deep river waters of the Wollomombi (in northern NSW), Dorrough has long been drawn to the symbolic quality of rivers as a powerful source of life. The river landscape has also provided Dorrough with the opportunity to expand her art practice. Since the 1980s, Dorrough has primarily been known as a figurative painter, but in recent years she has increasingly diversified her practice, creating more simplified abstract landscapes, as well as turning her talents to functional handcrafted ceramic vessels and objects that resemble essential organic forms.

Dorrough spent a month in Mildura, Victoria, capturing the changing moods of the Murray River, forming the basis of her series *The Enduring Landscape*, shown at Melbourne's Catherine Asquith Gallery in 2011, and in 2012 a solo show entitled *The Enduring Landscape and the Inland River* at Sydney's Arthouse Gallery. For this exhibition at Manning Regional

Art Gallery, Dorrough has expanded her ambitions to make a theatrical mixed-media presentation of river life that is specific to the Manning River environment of the northern tablelands. To make this multi-faceted interpretation, she has incorporated abstract paintings, rustic ceramic and concrete sculptures, video projections, and fabric hangings, to build up a multi-sensory experience of the river environment. The common link among all these forms is a rich materiality that evokes a visceral experience of the environment for the viewer.

This series was developed over several trips to the Manning River region; undertaking *plein air* sketching, which was further, developed

and expanded back in her Sydney studio. She was inspired by the diversity of the area, with its inlets, deltas, tidal flats, lagoons, and islands. The artist explored the Harrington and Saltwater National Park, where the river meets the sea and observed the abundant fish and bird life of the Cattai wetlands.

Using acrylic paint on linen, her layered paintings possess a rough-hewn texture that suggests hidden depths, with calligraphic lines floating on the surface like some kind of primeval markings on the land; this is echoed in the tactile surfaces of her ceramic vessels.

Moving from room to room through the exhibition is akin to wandering along a winding riverbank: the

large-scale acrylic paintings are stained with deep pigments—sea green, turquoise, golden yellows, salmon pinks, and deep amber.

Concrete rocks tinted pink and ochre are embedded with oyster shells and ceramic fragments, like fossils from the River's depths. Scattered among these works are water birds coarsely assembled from branches found along the river bank, as well as loosely constructed emblems of river fauna and sources of human industry—fish and dairy cows, oysters and fishing boats that sit on rough concrete plinths. In exploring the River's history, Dorrough's materials and forms reference the farming of the Manning region, as well as the timber industry that thrived by the river. Underlying all of this commercial history, she acknowledges the ancient history of the Biripi people upon this land.

Sounds of rushing water fill the gallery rooms, alongside a video of the flowing river itself. The mystical aspects of the river are addressed by a series of ceramic water 'sprites,' simplified bleached forms with human-like features. They act symbolically like ancient river spirit totems, which may allude to a hidden indigenous presence.

Dorrough's works address the elemental forces of the river, as a source of fertility and life through its constant movement and cycles of creation and erosion, renewal and destruction. Her abstract works suggest a primal language in the land. It is only through communion or connection with the environment that we can decipher its meaning.

All the pieces here work to create an exhibition that is multilayered and multifaceted. Through an immersive visual experience here, Dorrough aims to alter the viewer's perception of river life, helping us to appreciate the uniqueness of this complex and fragile ecosystem that needs our protection.

Victoria Hynes



Background: Kate Dorrough, *Running river*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 152 x 168 cm. **Foreground:** Kate Dorrough, *Sculptures, Effigy of a River*, 2019, concrete, foam, ceramic shards and shells, acrylic paint, 90 x 58 x 57 cm; 32 x 34 x 30 cm; 70 x 97 x 63 cm, and 38 x 36 x 34 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.