

***WindWells: a subterranean history of water in Queensland***

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*WindWells: channelling & divining*

Pat Hoffie and Stefan Purcell

State Library of Queensland Gallery

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Suspended between myth and history, Pat Hoffie and Stefan Purcell's *WindWells: channelling & divining* proposes a new yet contingent relation to the interpretation of the past. It is a re-telling of the story of water, and an attempt to differentiate the narrative from rationalist notions of water as a constant and reliable resource that is nonetheless unmanageable. Fierce disputation surrounds the use and supply of water in Australia, yet as a continuous history water is a singular narrative of colonisation. For this country's non-indigenous population the ongoing failure to understand this substance is Australia's least popular historical concept. From the first moment of European contact with the Australian landscape, securing this resource for commercial and governmental purposes has been a major priority. To this day, state and federal squabbling covers up the overwhelming negligence of these operations.

*WindWells* demonstrates the crucial role of art in the revision of culturally represented collective memory for it questions the politics of history making, while showing a delight for the self-made as reminder of the motivating force of progress in early Australian settler culture. Firmly situated in 19th century southern Queensland, this artwork examines a period the state's rural adaptation from localised subsistence cultivation to large-scale mechanised agribusiness. Until that time, the legend of the pioneer prevailed in public imagination; a legend based on an individualised conception in which European exiles and migrants struggled to make livelihood in a foreign land. At the end of the 1900s, however, this autonomy was wrested away by the commercialisation of agricultural labour.

The exhibition calls up the story of water in Queensland, retrieving three fantastic tales about the contrivance of water in the region from the John Oxley Library archives at the State Library of Queensland (SLQ), including the invention and fabrication of the legendary Australian Southern Cross windmill, the coming of the celebrated British sideshow magician

and chemist Professor John Henry Pepper to Brisbane in the 1870s, and the renowned work of the successful Toowoomba water diviner Joseph Gordon Palethorpe in the late 1800s. Presented in the SLQ exhibition space, HOFFIE and PURCELL employ devices of illumination to create an installation that melds myth with history, in order to differentiate what is tangible from what is fabulous in the narrative of water, as it has been told since the start of European colonisation of Australia.

The lighting is low in the gallery. Shadows fall over the floor, cast from spots behind the looming structure of a full-scale Aussie windmill. On the far side of the space, the windmill's turning blades rotate over a massive projection of stock footage showing factory workers in an industrious mode, churning out metal parts one after the other. According to the exhibition catalogue, this film documents the production of machinery parts in the town of Toowoomba, Southern Queensland, where in fact the Griffith Brothers first invented and developed their windmills in 1876.<sup>1</sup> In front of the windmill, two large cylinders bear an obvious resemblance to corrugated iron water tanks, even though they are made of hundreds of books removed from their covers, with their pages splayed outward. A network of ultramarine blue pipes runs from the windmill across the floor, up the walls and into the tanks, while, on the right hand wall of the entry, two electromagnetic devices continually charge and release concentrated electrical zaps in their small glass chambers. Right next to these, a large circular projection shows thundering storm clouds.

Passing around the tanks, a large plate window is visible, jammed into an alcove in the far, right hand corner of the space. An apparition projected on the angled glass, comprises part of a scene that resembles a magician's set, with a chair and a table covered with a Persian rug. In this apparition a top-hatted and suited man repeatedly walks on and off the stage. He motions with the conjuring gestures of a magician without producing any resulting spectacle. A recreation of Pepper's Ghost, this world-renowned cinematographic contrivance was invented by Pepper in the 1860s and quickly embraced by countless European and American magicians, illusionists and filmmakers. With its stagy aesthetics announcing a theatrical ploy, *WindWells* is redolent of sideshows and 19th century vaudeville, genres that are recognisable for their rough but decorative appliques of bright colour and glitter, and makeshift proscenium arch constructions of flimsy plywood, and with bodies that are often strangely out of proportion. HOFFIE and PURCELL use the term

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<sup>1</sup> Which State Library of Queensland curator Trudy Bennett describes in her essay, "Watery Treasures from the John Oxley Library", reproduced in the *WindWells* exhibition catalogue, Brisbane: State Library of Queensland, 2010.

“steampunk” to describe this aesthetic, thus making an oblique reference to the material and visual impact of the industrial age on vaudeville in Britain, an aesthetic that was crucial to the travelling shows that Pepper brought to Queensland in the 1870s.<sup>2</sup> Highly popular across America, England and in Australia, populations embraced the presentation of science as an extravaganza, being a spectacle suitably conveyed through the vernacular of stage magic (recently exemplified in Terry Gilliam’s 2009 fantasy film, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*).

After the initial enjoyment of its carnival aesthetics, other components of the installation become apparent. Twanging guitar chords, emanating from the tanks and out of a glammed-up gramophone horn attached to the end of one of the pipes, make groans from the belly of the earth, piping up by the windmill or perhaps channelled by Professor Pepper. Closing in by the water tanks, the text of the coverless books is almost legible. As diverse as Spanish, Turkish, Arabic, Persian or Farsi, they form an ironic Tower of Babel tanks, emptied out like the aridity of monolingualistic and anglocentric Australian attitudes.<sup>3</sup> Yet these books are as rich as the ethnically heterogeneous stories that make up contemporary Australian society. Countless indigenous and migrant cultures offer alternate notions and experiences of survival in this land that are not part of popular Australian history. For example, we only hear fragmentary tales of desert Afghanis and their camels in the 1850s; or mythic accounts of Indian trader caravans selling bolts of cloth and buttons to isolated farming women in the early 21st century; or the under occasional acknowledgment of the numerous aboriginal guides who helped European explorers to read the land for signs of water.

Yet it remains possible to defy this forgetting. Photographic reproductions in the installation recover memories of the deeply anxious search for the mysterious wellsprings of Queensland water. On a series of small turntables, alongside one of the water tanks, images of men undertaking water divining are adhered to small upright pieces of cracked mirror, spinning eccentrically. These are prints from Palethorpe’s 1903 booklet, *Water finding by means of magnetism and the diving rod*. *WindWells* reveals the extraordinary Australian quest for subterranean water, “channelling and divining” other material held in the SLQ, including archives on early local windmill development, and the material on Professor

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<sup>2</sup> See the interview with the artists in the exhibition catalogue, by Gavin Sawford.

<sup>3</sup> Exacerbated by the fact that the mostly foreign language books in the installation had recently been de-accessioned from the SLQ collection.

Pepper, whose time in Queensland is documented in the *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* in 1974-75.<sup>4</sup>

How often we recount heroic tales of the “acquisition” of territories by European settlers and conflate it with their search for water. But, what if these pasts are spectral and restless like Pepper’s Ghost? Or phantasmagoric, as *WindWells* suggests? For none of this exhibition is static, and the constant activity of the fantastic blue windmill, the old footage of factory lines in action and the conjuring of Pepper’s Ghost are an allegory of the endeavour for water. In a contingency of fact and fiction this installation channels histories from deep beneath our surface consciousness. Being dispersed, displaced or subverted, the strange juxtaposition of mythology and memory in a project like *WindWells* prompts a curious interrogation and revision of seemingly immutable conceptions of the past. It poses a challenge to the Australian conceptualisation of water as a representation of European thought.

Where water is usually emblematic of the logic of human management of the uncontrollable aspects of Australian nature – which for the British is conceived of as being one of the most confronting of all colonial frontiers – in a peculiar conflation of images of water divining, windmill, industry and magic, HOFFIE and Purcell expose a host of contradictions. Early attempts to survive on the Australian continent are usually told in terms of the failure of the Australian environment to provide for human life, rather than the settlers’ lack of ability to interpret the land and its secrets, even if this was not for want of pioneering imagination or paucity of desire to uncover its mysteries.

Coincidentally, at the same time as *WindWells* was on display, the adjacent Queensland Museum presented *The Last Days of Burke and Wills*. The story of the duo’s hopeless and tragic search for a north-south continental crossing is familiar to most Australians, although not everyone concurs with it. In 2009, Australian historian Michael Cathcart offered a critical questioning of the mythology surrounding these accounts of water in Australia in his book, *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of our Dry Continent*. Cathcart examines the impact of settlers’ visions of a water-rich land and the aspiration to make their dream a reality. Most of us see this dream today in the massive irrigation and hydro-engineering schemes in the Snowy Mountains and Tasmania, which continue to devastate many Australian river systems. All the while, the heroic tragedy of Burke and Wills maintains a

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<sup>4</sup> Concisely presented in a small secondary room, with a wall of framed documents, including Palethorpe’s handbook and details of Professor Pepper’s work in Queensland.

claim over the Australian imagination, even though, as Cathcart asserts, their supposed mission to locate the great inland sea is yet another untenable myth.

*WindWells* takes on the challenge of this contested history by making it a productive and playful questioning of the construction of history within the institution itself. The State of Library Queensland is bursting with exhaustive and rich archives. It is sandwiched between the Gallery of Modern Art and the Queensland Art Gallery, not far from The Museum of Queensland, so that *WindWells* is located at the physical and conceptual crossing point of contemporary art, state archive and historical and curatorial analysis. Once the sole domain of the scholar, Australian artists are being called upon by state institutions to take up fellowships, such as Tom Nicholson and Tony Birch's work with the State Library of Victoria to create the *Camp Pell Lectures*, presented in 2010 at Artspace, Sydney, or to create exhibitions within state library exhibition spaces like *WindWells*. HOFFIE and PURCELL's work confidently participates in a dialogue with its host institution, generating a dynamic interpretation of history that has the capacity to call up some of the secrets that scholarly or archival practices tend to bury away within their own inherently categorising processes.

Contrary to popular conception, history is not a static entity. It is in a continual state of indeterminacy, a flux that gives rise to consternation and backlash from affected social and governmental forces. This is because collective cultural consensus notably forms around the positive, useful or truthful aspects of the past, a consensus that is geared to suit the prevailing interests of the privileged or ascendant members of that society. All of this plays out in the form of radical forgetting because inconvenient truths are always too close by. Such is the basis of German philosopher Walter Benjamin's contention in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* from 1940, where he propounds that amnesia operates at the service of "historicism", maintaining a set of coherent views that preclude any challenge to its official narrative.<sup>5</sup> Written on the eve of the Nazi devastation of Europe, in this essay Benjamin foretells of a warning that he claimed would come as a flash in a moment of danger. He warned that this apparition would take the form of spectre of a suppressed past, which was about to be raised from the dead (namely Fascism). Nowhere is "historicism" more apparent than in Australia, a nation that holds to the same ideology that came with the British explorers, who were sent to claim the great southern continent as a yet unmapped, unpopulated and timeless territory. We would do well to pay heed to Benjamin's warning, for the global spectre of amnesia is all the more dangerous today for

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. Fontana: London, 1973, 245-255.

being concealed within pantomime campaigns with no-names like the “War on Terror”, the ubiquitous “Peace Keeping Mission,” and, in Australia, the ongoing “Northern Territory Intervention” and treatment of asylum seekers.

Water is caught up in the triumvirate mythologies of progress, self-subsistence, with the ideal that it is a controllable and stable resource that can be tapped into at anytime. It is therefore a central character in the narrative of our behaviour towards the land. The story of water represents the paradox of Australia’s imagining of itself, in the contradiction of an impossible conception of a nation laid over a very different reality. It is the one substance that has refused to compromise to ideological impositions from the first moment of attempted European inhabitation until today. Yet the settler myth prevails, while capitalism has taken over the mega-management of resources, so that the greatest access and most unregulated use of water – our most uncontrollable and critical resource – is in the hands of private corporations, agribusiness and irrigation companies. The futility is unrelenting in the ongoing liberal access to water given to mining companies and large-scale farming operations of non-essential but highly profitable yet water sapping crops such as cotton and rice. The ownership of Australia's water has very recently become a widespread concern because of substantial increases of foreign investment in water rights; the sale of these rights totalling millions of litres, according to Deborah Snow and Debra Jopson in their *Sydney Morning Herald* article “Thirsty foreigners soak up scarce water rights,” from 2010. The privatisation of water supply is yet another area where commercial interests have dominated, so that since 2001 an estimated 25 percent of Australia’s drinking water has been owned and controlled by foreign multinationals.<sup>6</sup>

The extent of the problem is hard to fathom, except when it is related to us in narrative form. The tale of one of Professor Pepper’s failed feats of artifice is, for instance, an account of the impracticability of the European mindset in Australian conditions. According to documents located in the SLQ archives, in 1882 Pepper staged a spectacular rainmaking demonstration at the Eagle Farm raceway, Brisbane. It was an ostentatious event, held during a period of extreme drought, making an explicit link between water conjuring and magic arts. But, despite fanfare and explosive fireworks, Pepper failed to produce a single drop of rain, hopelessly raising the crowd’s excitement only to let them down.

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<sup>6</sup> “Future Ownership of Australia's Water”, Media Release on Kellie Tranter’s webpage, 30 January 2007. Accessed 22/09/2010  
<http://www.kellietranterattorney.com.au/tranter-86.htm>

Even though attempts to subject the flow of water to all kinds of practical strategies has seen short-term benefits for civil usages of waterways through extensive management in the form of dams, weirs, locks and barricades, these manipulations are known to have had disastrous and irreversible effects on the complex ecologies of the vast systems that cover millions of hectares of what was once much more arable land. The absurdity of such practices still seems to escape Australians, evident in the language of the media and in everyday discourse, where the ebb and flow of water is often described in rational terms, as a “resource” to be managed or contained. This mindset repudiates any notion of water’s true complexity, and denotes a refusal to consider how as nation we might be subject to water’s continual adaptation and the fact of our total dependence on change itself.

According to Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, our ongoing disregard for the material basis of life causes us to err in our understanding of the forces that drive life itself.<sup>7</sup> Bataille claims that in our exploitation of resources we only acknowledge the earth’s forces in so far as they are useful to us and yet every “living organism... ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life”.<sup>8</sup> Life as an excessive, unknowable and transforming process is treated with the same apprehension and again it is the fixity of the sciences of epistemology and knowledge production that censure the unknown. In the *Accursed Share* Bataille purports that the generative excess of the cosmos is greatly feared by the human race and that this fear gives rise to humanity’s destructive impulses. This corresponds with Charles Darwin’s evolutionary paradox, based on the process of natural selection, which Elizabeth Grosz has argued shows us how life hinges on a practice of overcoming itself to evolve into something completely unforeseen, unknowable and different.<sup>9</sup> Water is an utterly evolutionary substance and is equally indomitable – so what better means to understand the effacement of what we know to exist yet refuse to see than to seek out the mysterious existence of subterranean water on the Australian continent?

The 1919 picture of *Mr Tilney and son water divining*, reproduced in the *WindWells* catalogue, illustrates the mix resourcefulness and mythology invested in the search for water by European pioneers.<sup>10</sup> The whole scene is oddly staged like a magic show. Fashioned in the style of its time, the backdrop and shallow setting contribute to its theatricality. The

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1988, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> *WindWells*, ex. cat., 11.

strangest feature of all is the most obvious: the two men have cast their gaze to the studio floor and are looking intently at a pile of dirt that has been placed there, staring at nothing but dust. By doing this they show that divining water is not simply about locating underground wells but that water can be called up from the deep. Tilney and his son demonstrate how the search for water might be a reciprocal process in which the land is listened to and a spiritual practice to which the diviner applies faith. European empiricism is evidently immaterial to the practice, not because the diviners were spiritualised by finding water in this way but because they tapped directly into a watery consciousness of that particular place.

Anyone who has ever attempted to map continental water in the past has discovered first of all that nothing is constant. Its underground lakes and wells constitute a byzantine system of interlocking, porous and fluid networks and channels, and the dependence of European settlers on surface apparitions of water that came and went formed the increasingly unproductive story of fixed catchments and controls of waterways that denied the greater flow of water beneath the surface. On the other hand, the dependence of European settlers on surface apparitions of water that came and went subsequently formed an increasingly unproductive story of fixed catchments and controls of waterways that denied the greater flow of water beneath the surface. Again, the behaviour of successive Australian governments portrays a political premise that comprises a *prima facie* Imperial narrative of the continent of Australia. Two powerful ideologies continue to emanate from this story: first is the denial of the unknown in ourselves, and, second is the maintenance of an ordered idea of nature.

Paul Carter tackles the predicament of the Australian desire to order and deny our relationship to the environment in a 2008 article called "Dry Thinking, on Praying for Rain".<sup>11</sup> In this article, Carter contends that water in this country does not behave according to the Eurocentric notion of constantly flowing rivers and full reservoirs. He adds that this false imaginary alienates us from a metaphysical experience of our continent, with its constantly fluctuating and irregular but rhythmic cycles of wet and dry, which arrive in uncontrollable and seemingly useless extremes. What Carter proposes is that we should cease trying to change the way water works and start acknowledging how we might be changed by the behaviour of water and how are we adapting to this change. To reiterate the politics of the

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<sup>11</sup> "Dry Thinking and Human Futures" was published in German in December 2008, in the *Lettre Internationale*, however, on 29 April 2010, Carter delivered an English version of the paper at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies, North Melbourne. [www.ipcs.org.au](http://www.ipcs.org.au)



situation, “dry thinking” is Carter’s way of describing an authoritative and imposing attitude to inhabitation and our avoidance of a necessarily contingent, responsive and reciprocal relationship to place. This shift in mentality would, in Carter’s words, “call on us to relocate our thinking in the environments that have inspired it,” to arrive at a new metaphysics of belonging that encompasses water’s contrary nature.<sup>12</sup>

In contending with such concerns, HOFFIE and PURCELL’S installation fortunately avoids truisms or superficial answers in relation to water. Over and above issues of climate change and sustainability, *WindWells* makes a far more significant point by questioning the primacy of the institution of knowledge itself. Water and its lack of reliability are central to the Australian psyche today and *WindWells* raises an allegory of our repressed desire for water. Everything in the gallery is dry, the writhing blue pipes are hollow, and the tanks are empty, while the turning windmill and the images of water seekers and water makers yearn for the elusive liquid. The interpretation of the history of Queensland’s water in this project highlights the unspeakable aspects of the dilemma, which underpin the ongoing contested relationship that non-indigenous Australia has to this continent.

When unitary histories are offered up one of the most important questions to ask is, why were other versions left out of the picture? In the case of a mythical imagining of water in Queensland it is clear that state government can ill afford aberrant artesian stories mingling with the meta-management water plan. Yet the elision of these irreconcilable truths reveals that such acts are not only about forging a one-dimensional national identity, they constitute an erasure of a political kind. This assertion might seem like a stretch, but the constraint of individual autonomy in Australian society is more widespread than ever, and the practice of a self-sustaining search for subterranean water is a lawless activity, just as it was for pioneers. While an attitude persists that 19th century practices like water divining are incompatible with contemporary Australian environmental wisdom, and the pioneering ethic is for the most part insupportable today, there is much that we might learn from their techniques. Further scrutiny reveals that the politics of water governance is scarcely more progressive today, with the prevailing notion that the Australian continent should act as a giant aquifer or a non-porous container for water. This “catchment” ideology was established in the early 1900s, with massive damming projects like the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme and The Ross River Dam. And catchment thinking still drives policy today, evident in the recent commissions such as the enlarged Cotter Dam in the Australian

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<sup>12</sup> Institute of Postcolonial Studies July 2010 newsletter. Accessed 22/09/2010  
<http://ipcs.org.au/publications/ipcs-newsletter>

Capital Territory and New South Wales's latest project at Tillegra. Floods, nonetheless, pose as great a problem as droughts, not only because of the immediate havoc they wreak but also because water managers have no idea of what to do with all that "useless" water afterwards.

In its alternate, somewhat anarchic historicisation, *WindWells* aligns icons of the industrial age with mythic histories of water. Rolling rainclouds gather force, machinery parts are forged, while the windmill turns without wind. Professor Pepper's ghost endlessly returns in his top hat, cane and waistcoat to call up a forgotten period of popular European culture in which the inexplicability of the sciences were gleefully elucidated by illusionist arts and where magic was thought of as easily interchangeable with logic. Coming at end of the first hundred years of Australian colonisation, the magic show was popularised around the mid-late 19th century alongside the birth of photography, which was widely imagined as yet another manifestation of the supernatural in a material form.<sup>13</sup> Other conceptions of photography existed at the time but, with an emphasis on the staged imagery of Tilney the water diviner and the carnivalesque Pepper, Hoffie and Purcell chose the psycho-spiritual incarnation of photography over its rational or empiricist lineage.

Situating the search for and production of water at the juncture of three powerful forms of conjuring – the windmill, the magician and early photography – Hoffie and Purcell have not shied from presenting their ideas as illusionism. Although sympathy for magic has a profound place in the project, as viewers, the main job we have is to recognise how the icons of illusionism are embedded in the continuum of history. Already lodged in our consciousness, the windmill, for example, is an icon of pioneering endeavour, yet Hoffie and Purcell reconceptualise the legend by reinscribing the machine as a "windwell". And, technically speaking, the common moniker is inaccurate, because a windmill's primary purpose is to sluice water to power a mill to grind down grains into various kinds of flour, while the Australian version is a glorified pump. Still, in collective Australian imagination, the windmill is both ubiquitous and enigmatic; its rusty cries an unforgettable reverberation for anyone who has ever visited the countryside.

The windwell is inseparable from its practical purpose of plumbing the groundwater, but this is a fiction because its blades turn without any wind and the well is dry. We know this because the blue pipes in the SLQ Gallery have been perforated with thousands of tiny

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<sup>13</sup> See *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, Clement Cheroux et al., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

holes, each one emitting a beam of light, creating an array of twinkling stars instead of spouting water. Yet the pipes wend their way through the gallery, in and out of the walls, feeding subterranean wisdom into the empty tanks via its magic plumbing system.

Our relationship to the Australian environment is not so different: in dry country you never know the next source of water. Survival depends on a constantly search for a new supply. Except, during the last two centuries of colonial habitation in Australia, such contingency has been difficult to conceive. The imaginary European vision of constantly manageable supplies of water, of flowing rivers, consistent rainfalls, temperate seasons and full reservoirs was a fiction from the start. We now face a time in which a new awareness of the land constitutes the best prospect of sustainable habitation. If the underground waters could be heard, as they are in the pipes and tanks in *WindWells*, they would intone to us that instinct should be our guide. But, like the coming of new languages to a country, the diversity, underworldliness, inaccessibility and irrationality of intuition is like a thousand babbling tongues: we understand nothing. That is where Palethorpe and Pepper's practical magic reminds us how we can be resourceful with knowledge, to know how to intuit a future that is more in tune with the metaphysics of the land.