

# THE GULLY: LISTENING TO THE STORIES OF THE LAND

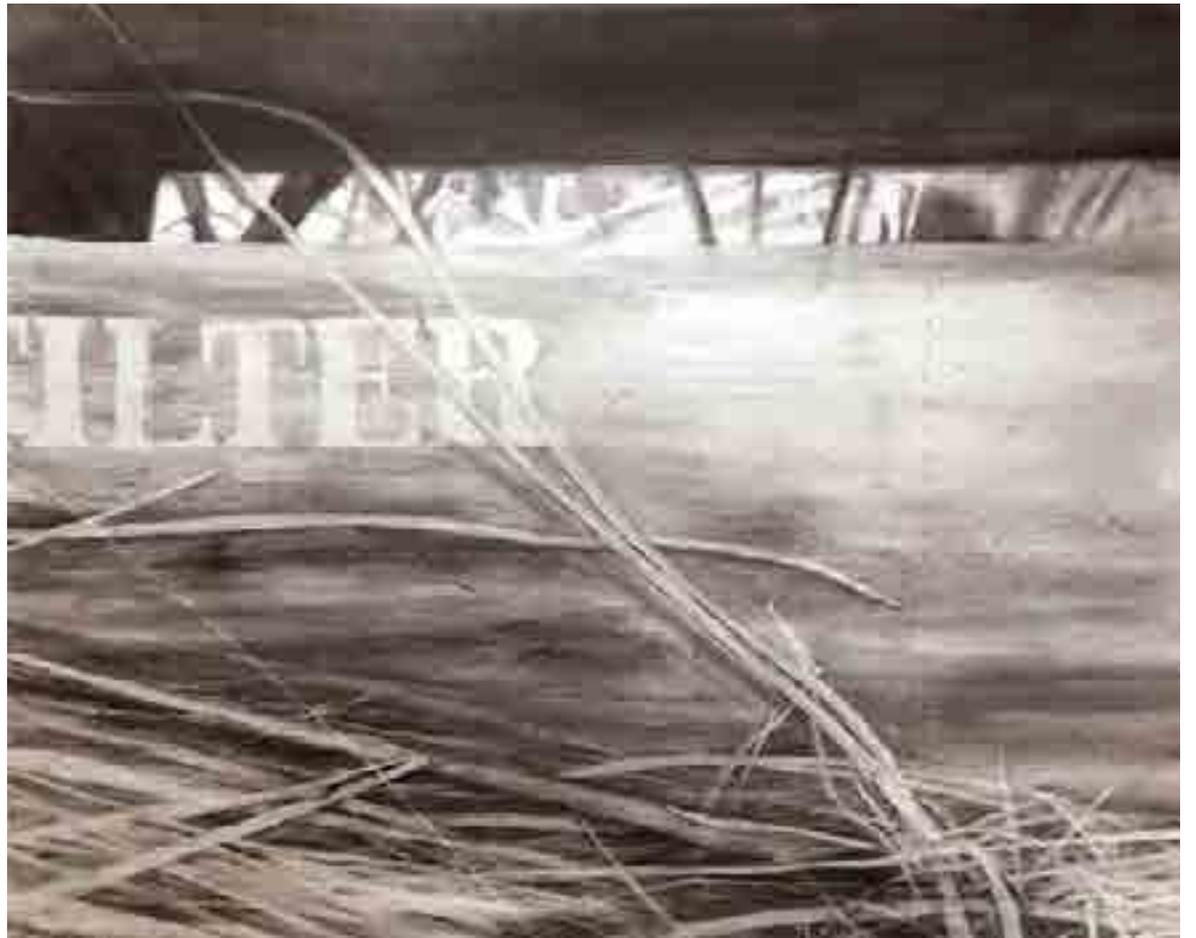
*The entire Greater Blue Mountains is one great gallery of Aboriginal culture. Within this land, The Gully in Katoomba is a dedicated Aboriginal Place under NSW law—the largest in the State, declared in May 2002 in recognition of the continuous occupation of the area by Aboriginal people until they were forcibly evicted in the nineteen-fifties.*

BEFORE THAT it had been a living place for Aboriginal people since time immemorial, with shelter, clean water and food. Before white settlement the traditional owners of The Gully – the Gundungurra and Darug peoples – used this place as a summer camp, described as ‘a sheltered, lush green corridor with abundant sweet water’. The Gully became ‘a haven for Darug and Gundungurra peoples in the late nineteenth century’ (Duggins), until settlement at the foot of the Mountains forced many Gundungurra and Darug people to resettle permanently in The Gully. It would become their ghetto.

Local businessmen and the local council had other plans for this special place on the western flank of Katoomba and in 1946 an amusements park was set up with an old Catalina flying boat placed in the centre of the ornamental lake formed when the Katoomba Falls was dammed. The government bought the land in 1952 and a 2.1 km circuit for race meetings was opened by the Australian Racing Drivers Club. They called the race track Catalina Park. In the 60s it was used for top level motorsport but there were problems with fog causing delays and the track was very narrow and by the 80s it was only used for lap



Wendy Tsai: Craven A Nos. 1-4, charcoal drawings



dashes with only single cars on track at one time – until the mid 90s when it too became history.

For fifty years this beautiful and culturally important place was subjected to short-sighted, short term and arrogant developments. To what end? In the greater scheme of things, it has been the briefest of histories which has nevertheless left the most cruel of scars. At last we are waking up and beginning to realise what we stand to lose when we fail to respectfully connect with this land.

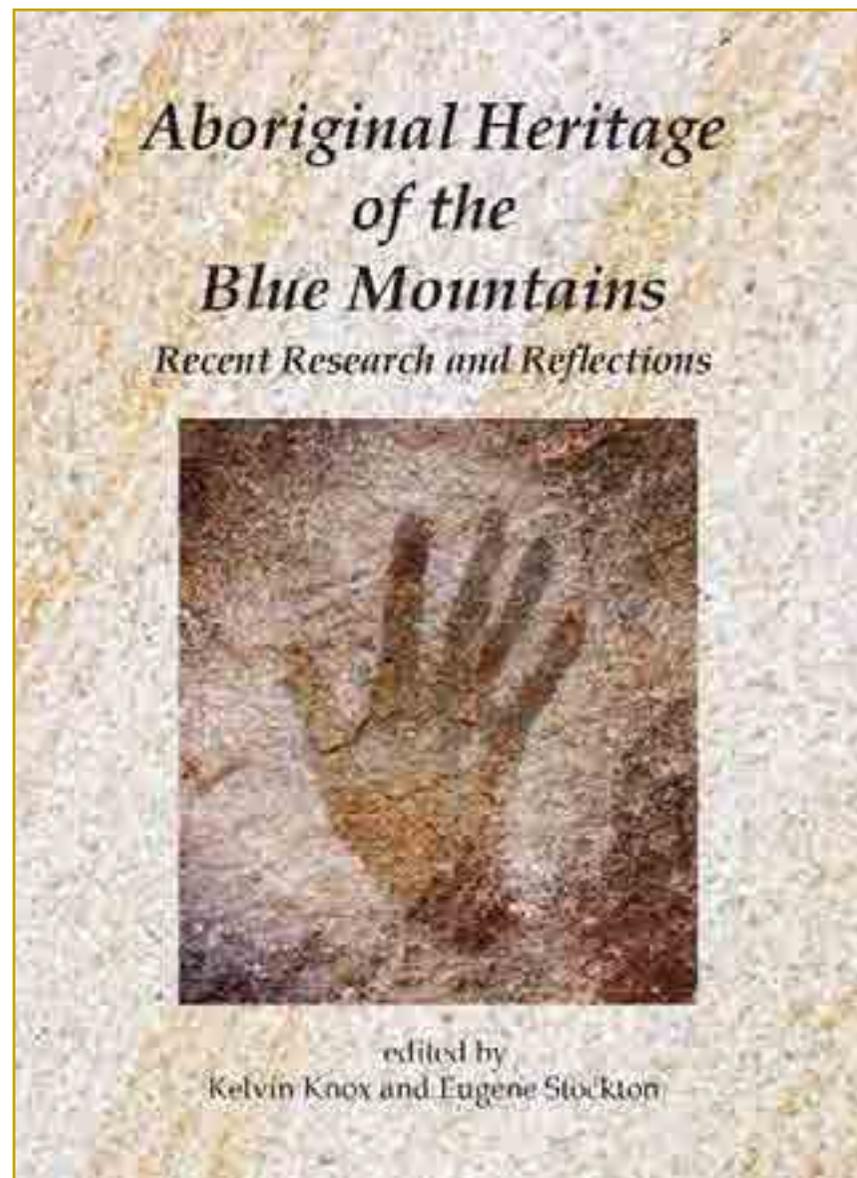
In a recent Exposé exhibition at Blue Mountains City Art Gallery of a project by Wendy Tsai entitled *Drawing Kedumba* ('Falling Water' or Katoomba), the artist painstakingly mapped The Gully through drawings, photographs, videos and embroidery. Gundungurra man David King performed the Welcome to Country which gave witness to this hidden Country in the heart of Katoomba – the headwaters of the Kedumba River which includes The Gully where David's mother Mary King spent her childhood. Most visitors and even some locals have no idea The Gully even exists and it is still called Catalina Park Raceway by Google Earth.

Today The Gully is back with the traditional owners. It is beautiful and bountiful. Visitors can stroll along the old raceway which is now a walking track, through reclaimed bush, swamp and wildlife habitat. There are display boards which tell the stories of the people of this place; there is the Garguree Swampcare group.

Molly Duggins has written of Tsai's tribute to Kedumba, describing a 'history of shadows, of ancient spirits, of palpable place, of enshrouded destruction' which haunts her work. 'Her visual exploration of the trajectory of the Kedumba Creek formation... offers an intimate reverie of place, at times intensely tangible, at others tantalisingly ethereal. Materialised through thirty-eight large drawings of the river's path gridded to the wall to form a meandering landscape 14 metres long and 3 metres high, this installation implicitly challenges the Western landscape tradition – a tradition in which shadows are either expunged or transformed into spectres. For Tsai, the resonant shadows imprinting the varied terrain around the Kedumba Creek grow out of the ground itself, pulling the receptive wanderer into place, connecting body with earth.'

Tsai: 'I live up the road from The Gully and have spent many hours walking, sitting, photographing and contemplating its unique and traumatic history... My way of knowing or understanding a place is greatly helped by representing it visually. Within the exhibition are random drawings of spots within the spaces that have attracted my attention. Of these Craven A Nos. 1-4 (previous page), four charcoal drawings of grasses against the racetrack, represent a section of the Catalina Racetrack fencing that has been partially swallowed by grasses and nature reclaiming its former territory. I included the words Craven Filter as a reference to the sponsorship of the racetrack in its early days of the sixties. There were several motor accidents that occurred on the Craven Corner'.

Wendy Tsai, *Drawing Kedumba*, Blue Mountains City Art Gallery October 2019



# 'THE BEST WAY TO KNOW COUNTRY IS TO WALK COUNTRY'

Launched this year is yet another important publication from Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, a new book edited by Kelvin Knox and Eugene Stockton entitled *Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains – Recent Research and Reflections*.

In the Preface Eugene Stockton—who is acknowledged for his seminal archaeological work in the Blue Mountains—describes Aboriginal people as 'likened to a venerable olive tree, deeply rooted in the soil, while the newcomers of the last few hundred years are like the branches of wild olive shoots, come from across the sea, now grafted on the old stock, sharing its roots and sap, so that the two form a single living entity on this continent'.

There are many moving and memorable quotes in this book: Stockton quotes Charles Perkins saying of Aboriginal culture and all that goes with it, 'it's all there waiting for us all. White people can inherit 40,000 or 60,000 years of culture and all they have to do is reach out and ask for it'. It is a stunning thought and a generous invitation which many of us would seem unaware of. All contributors exhibit this incredible generosity, indeed there is a familial feeling running through the book. Some contributions are couched in technical archaeological language while others are informal and conversational.

The format of each chapter, ending in 'Reflections', provides an opportunity for contributors to give their personal postscript. Jim Smith, writing about *Rock Art of the Burratorang Valley*, raises the debate over the imminent threat to these sites if the proposed raising of the Warragamba Dam wall goes ahead.

In another chapter contributed by Jim Smith, *Discovering Gundungurra History: A Personal Journey*, he prefixes the chapter with a quote from Carmel Schrire's *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (1995): 'Only imagination fleshes out the sound and taste of time past, anchoring the flavour of lost moments in the welter of objects left behind.' Imagination is the warp and science the weft of the fabric which we create when weaving together stories of the past.

Eugene Stockton on *Shaws Creek Kill* refers to news published in 2014 from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology saying that 'a genetic study has found ancestors of modern Indians may have come to Australia about 4,000 years before Europeans colonised the continent'. Stockton points out that 'about 4,000 years ago throughout Australia there was a sudden intensification in flaking stone and producing small tools... What spread quickly was not so much a useful addition to the toolkit as an idea, a fashion, that was quickly copied and taken up by neighbouring groups'. He imagines a scenario where a vessel ventured or drifted off course from perhaps the Indus Valley (Mohenjodaro or Harappa) and its occupants found themselves in our great



*Blue Mountains Deep Time*, photo taken from Mount Hay Range 2013 by Kelvin Knox

Southern land. A thesis such as this puts me in mind of David Hockney's about the adoption of camera lucida by artists around 1420 in another article in this issue.

Reading the hypotheses and reflections of these archaeologists and enthusiasts brings the study of our extraordinary and ancient civilisation to life. Evan Yanna Muru Gallard describes his and his father's study of ceremonial stone arrangements. 'The great task of recording the sacred events of the Dreaming was the responsibility of the spirit doctors... called Koradji... They very carefully recorded this knowledge through song, dance, cave painting, rock engraving and stone arrangement. So future generations of people can learn, practice and pass on this ancient wisdom. In this chapter, I share some knowledge about stone arrangements including some of my photographs and my father's diagrams of different types of arrangements.' So the pile of rocks (if not made by a more recent bushwalker!) may indeed have been a ceremonial placement by Koradji in ancient times.

Gallard explains in his Reflections: 'I remember clearly as a little boy being struck by wonder as I sat within

a mesmerising sacred site that I had found. Dad was proud of me but despite a good knowledge of culture he did not know the answers to some of my questions about certain engravings. Some people could say well that was just the traditional way of holding back knowledge until I was ready for it, but the bad news is, we lost much of the local detail in our sacred knowledge due to Colonisation. The good news is that many people like the ones contributing to this book are helping to restore this knowledge by sharing parts of their life's study of Aboriginal culture. Knowledge that they have gained over a lifetime by listening carefully to Aboriginal people and countless hours out in the wild bush enjoying the challenge and the teachings of our great Earth Mother. With her restored as our number one big boss and teacher we can restore the detail of our local Lore.'

Wayne Brennan concludes his chapter with a blessing: 'Let the spirit wind be your friend.' While Michael Jackson has the final word in the last chapter: 'The best way to know country is to walk country.'

**Carolynne Skinner**

*Aboriginal Heritage of the Blue Mountains — Recent Research and Reflections* edited by Kelvin Knox and Eugene Stockton, Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, 2019 [www.bmert.org](http://www.bmert.org)



View of Darug Hydraulics Site Looking South Photo Kelvin Knox