

# Looking at or being landscape



David Middlebrook, *Lost*, 2020, Pigment ink on canvas 77x102cm, Courtesy of the artist

Ada Bird Petyarre taught me the difference between 'looking at and being landscape'. For the last three years of Ada's life we were friends. To me friend is a strong word, and it is an important connection I had with a person that changed my concept of landscape. I had met Ada Bird by chance encounter. I recognised her as one of the key artists from Utopia, a community 230km North East of Alice Springs. Ada worked in both painting and batik, which were exhibited nationally and internationally and collected by major galleries around the world; an important and inspirational artist that was part of an early Indigenous art movement.

The people and art of Utopia belong to two language groups, Alyawarre and Anmatyerre. The artists of Utopia collaborated and produced a work that

proved to The High Court of Australia that Utopia was their land. The traditional name of their land is Atnangkere. For thousands of years it was Indigenous land that was taken from them c.1875 in horrific circumstances. There are numerous documented atrocities. It was then given by the Australian Government to white settlers as a pastoral lease where the traditional owners worked without pay. At the end of the lease in 1979, Utopia was purchased by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission. The people of Utopia fought back and The High Court ruled that this was Ampilatwatja and Arlparra land. They had proven a connection to country. The paintings and batik as maps were instrumental in this project, and as a result their land was 'given' back to traditional owners of Utopia c1990. Ada Bird Petyarre, her sisters including Gloria Petyarre,

Kathleen Petyarre along with Emily Kngwarreye, Lindsay Bird Mpetyane and so many artists were instrumental in this.

Ada was an elder in her community of Utopia and had the right of painting women's bodies for ceremony. It was this narrative and variations of it that she used as the subject of her canvases. The other part of her Moiety, was the Mountain Devil Lizard, Apnkerthe. The elaborate patterns of this animal's back allowed her to combine both aspects of Dreaming into her art. Her laugh and her smile were infectious and always kind. Whenever we met we drank a lot of tea and we talked about painting, and the land, her family, we had fun. English was Ada's second language. I spoke no Anmatyerre, and sometimes this made conversation difficult, but we always worked around it. She always wanted to see my drawing books and if she recognised the landscape, she would sing it. To hear my drawings converted to song was to bring my drawings to life. Ada told me about her land and was so proud of it. The land that gave her food and shelter. She said, "I am earth" that there as no separation between her, the mountains and trees and animals, or earth.

Ada never understood the process of my drawing. She liked them and sang them. The few times I had offered her paper, ink and brushes, she shook her head and laughed. Her paintings were done by unrolling canvas on to the ground, painting the canvas black, to represent her skin, and then painting the moment it was dry. Bright, strong colours danced across the canvas, without hesitation. Singing was very important to this process as it connected her to land. One afternoon Ada and I were watching a storm from a veranda at Mulga Bore, Utopia. I was drawing and Ada singing. Ada started to draw on top of my drawings with her

finger, patterns in the sky, no ink, just her dry finger tracing internal thoughts and responding to my drawing. I handed her a brush, and over my drawings Ada drew. She drew beautifully, strongly, and again without hesitation, her body art, echoes of the landscape, and her connection. The more she sang the more moved I became. She found more drawings in my folder and drew more. No two were the same, but each a strong connection to her land. Then Ada drew and passed me a brush. The process was reversed. It was a moment in time that changed me. Ada Bird was land. She was part of everything. Her being was earth. I had no such connection, I was only a visitor, someone who had no connection to any land except as a viewer. I was someone who only looked at landscape, heading to the horizon constantly searching for more, the connection that I will never find to place, with someone who was and always will be part of land.

I spent time with Ada Bird Petyarre, in both Alice Springs and Mulga Bore Utopia. Ada passed within weeks of my last visit.

### **Dr David Middlebrook**

I acknowledge the Gundangurra and Darug peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which I live and work. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and extend my respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Sovereignty never ceded.