

THE KIMBERLEY SERIES BOOK AND PHOTOGRAPHS

On 6 May 2009, Joel Smoker spoke to the Kimberley Society about his book and photographs titled *The Kimberley Series*. The photographer Richard Woldendorp wrote the foreword to the book, describing it as a 'publication of photographs that does justice to the landscape and to Joel, the artist with a camera'. High praise but richly deserved. In his presentation, Joel used a projector to display the 40 images from the series, and he left each one in place long enough to comment on its location or content and on factors considered when he took the photograph. The audience was captivated by the clarity and vividness of the images and, for the many who are not skilled photographers, there were practical tips on how to get great shots. Joel's introduction to the book, reproduced below, explains how the series came into being.

In late 1982 I'd had enough of living in the Perth hills so I packed up my kiln and ceramics gear and put it all in storage in my father's garage and moved to Fremantle, where I rented a bedroom at Ken and Anne Kelso's house in Suffolk Street in the heart of the city. I had plans of setting up a ceramics studio in Fremantle, which was then still a sleepy village full of artists and musicians. I was teaching art at Gosnells Senior High School so the distance between Kalamunda and Gosnells and Fremantle and Gosnells wasn't all that different. I figured that to find a suitable place in Fremantle to set up I needed to be there with my ear to the ground.

All this was to change when I got a call from John Read, the Superintendent of Education at the Kimberley District Education Office based in Kununurra. His call was an offer for me to take up a position as an Arts Advisory teacher in the Priority Country Areas Programme, a federally funded programme servicing government and non-government schools in the Kimberley from the District Office at Kununurra. It was totally unexpected. I asked for a day to think about it. The Kimberley is my spirit home. It was where I was born and raised so the prospect of going back there for a period was very attractive, but I had an exhibition of my ceramics booked at the Undercroft Gallery at the University of W.A. for the following year and I wasn't sure how I could reconcile the two options.

The next day I got a call from Ray Sampson, the Superintendent for Art with the Education Department of W.A., urging me to take up the offer. I had been on a weekend trip to Kununurra earlier in the year to take a ceramics workshop, which was attended by Nancy Read, John's wife, and she had suggested that I would be a good person for the job. Nancy is a lovely person, so her recommendation was important. Ray suggested that it would be too good an opportunity for me to pass up. By the time I got back to Fremantle in the late afternoon I was of the same opinion and rang John to confirm. He sounded pleased and I had a good feeling about it. Our family had left the Kimberley in the early seventies and I was excited about reconnecting with the people that I had grown up with, particularly the Aboriginal people.

The problem of the Undercroft Gallery exhibition needed addressing so I asked Phillip Douglas whether I could rent his studio space at the Bannister Street Workshops in downtown Fremantle for the summer holiday to make all the pieces for the show. He kindly agreed and when school finished I brought all my moulds and my slab roller and set up in his ceramics studio. It was a pleasure to walk from Ken and Anne's house in Suffolk Street to Bannister Street every day that summer, stopping off for a coffee at Papa's on the way back at the end of the day. I worked flat out and with Phillip's help I was able to make, glaze and fire all the

pieces that I wanted for the exhibition. I packed the work in cardboard cartons and left it all in the garage of my long suffering parents to be collected by a courier in the middle of the year and delivered to the Undercroft Gallery. Ray Sampson graciously agreed to give the opening address at the exhibition.

Working so furiously on the large ceramics pieces had strained my back and I was advised to visit Andre Gajeck, an Osteopath based in Burswood. While waiting in the reception area I met up with Hal Missingham, an artist who I knew from Darlington, so I told him about my plans to go back to the Kimberley. Hal was also an accomplished photographer so I asked him if he had any old cameras that I could buy from him, as I knew that I would be visiting a lot of pretty country. He said that he had an old Nikon F, which I could have, but it needed repair. I arranged a time to visit and took along one of my ceramic platters as a gift. I managed to get the camera repaired in time and took it with me on my flight to Kununurra. It was a heavy camera with a 50 mm lens, but I was so pleased to have it that the weight was only a minor concern. I've still got it and it still works.

My brother Paul, and his mate, Howard, met me at the Kununurra airport. They had jointly purchased a red Holden Statesman sedan so I was delivered to my new place of lodging in style. The house was a Government Employees Housing Association house, a bit different to standard G.E.H.A. houses, as it had been purchased from a private owner. There was supposed to be a key in the letterbox but it wasn't there. Paul and Howard drove me around to Eddy Flint's house to see if he knew where the key might be. Eddy was the principal of Kununurra High School and we thought that he might know about the missing keys. He didn't, but offered to go around to the house to see what could be sorted out. He had a quick look around but to no avail. He then went to the back of his four-wheel drive, pulled out a tomahawk and said, "I'll fix this". Then he went back to the front door, smashed a small hole in the adjoining window, put his hand through it and opened the door, saying, "There you go. We'll find the keys tomorrow at school"

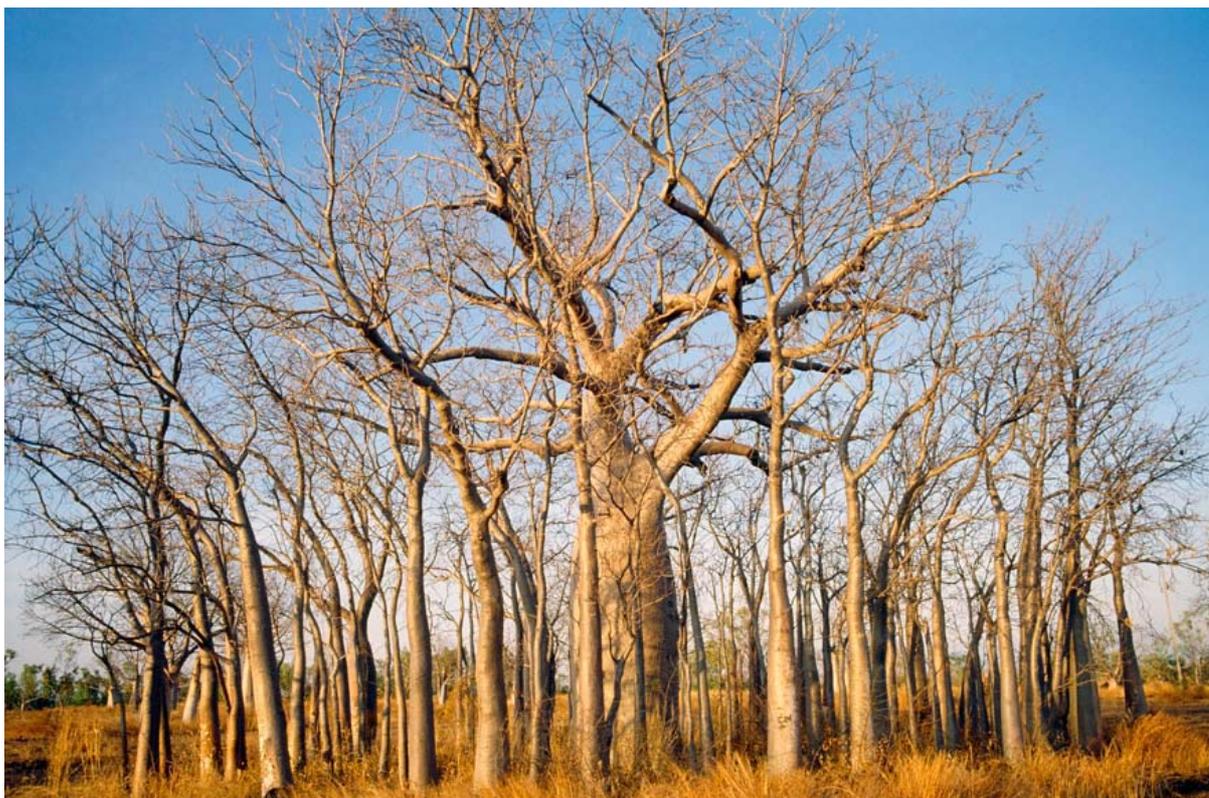
Kununurra was still something of a frontier town, even in 1983, but it didn't take me long to settle in. I was sharing the house with Lane Schooland and Adrian Porter, the art teacher and manual arts teacher respectively, at Kununurra High School. My job involved travel to schools around the Kimberley, including state schools, Catholic schools and independent Aboriginal schools, so I was away a lot. I had access to a four-wheel drive Nissan for much of my travel. At times I chartered small aeroplanes to get to some of the communities when the roads became impassable. I took my camera with me wherever I went and began to build a collection of photographic slides of the places that I visited. My trips would often last a couple of weeks so I made sure my weekends were in places that would offer good opportunities for photography.

Some of the places were fairly remote. Balgo Hills springs to mind. This is an Aboriginal community off the Tanami Road in the south-east Kimberley that had been established as a Catholic Mission in the 1940's and was making the painful transition to an independent community during the time of my visits. I remember staying at the monks quarters and playing poker with them over bottles of wine to all hours on Saturday nights. In fact it was on one such Saturday night that my Ceramics exhibition was opened at the Undercroft Gallery and to all

reports, Ray Sampson gave a rousing address at the opening, making reference to the fact that I was a long way away from Perth on that night.

Other mission communities that I visited in the east Kimberley included Oombulgurri on the Forrest River, a plane ride from Wyndham, and Kalumburu, located on the Edward River near the northern tip of the coast. To get there involved a long drive up the Gibb River Road or a plane flight across country from Kununurra. The plane trips gave me ample opportunity for aerial photography. Oombulgurri had been an Anglican mission and Kalumburu a Catholic mission. Both communities were making their best efforts to take over governance of their affairs but it was a difficult and complex process and the teachers that I encountered on my visits had to tread a fine line between assisting with this process and not getting caught up in the politics of the moment.

The same was also true of the communities on the Dampier Peninsular, including the mission communities of Beagle Bay and Lombadina and the independent Aboriginal community of One Arm Point. In the Catholic mission communities the nuns and monks made me welcome and provided me with basic but good accommodation and meals. I do remember camping in my swag on the classroom floor at Lombadina School at a time when it was a state school. At One Arm Point I stayed with Ron and Margaret Pearson, the principal of the school, whom I had known for many years. I remember him as the teacher at Sunday Island School, just off One Arm Point, when the community left the island to move into Derby in the early 1960's. My father was the Superintendent of the United Aborigines Mission at the time who had to make the difficult decision to close the Sunday Island Mission down due to lack of water and financial resources. On one of my trips to One Arm Point, Ron took me and a couple of other teachers on a weekend sail through the Buccaneer Archipelago on his catamaran. It was a wonderful trip and I took lots of photographs, taking good care not to get my camera too wet.



Boabs, Kununurra. This photograph, which appears in colour on the cover of Joel's book, *The Kimberley Series*, provides some idea of the high standard of the images in the book.

There were other advisory teachers based at the District Education Office and one of these, Wendy Archer, sold me her two Pentax K1000 cameras complete with four lenses; a 50 mm lens, a 35mm lens, a 28 mm lens and a telephoto lens. I bought another K100 body and placed them in a silver, metal Field Test Unit case that my brother, Paul, had given me. I cut foam rubber to fit in the box so that the cameras could be transported safely and used these to augment the photos that I was taking with the Nikon F. The range of lenses gave me greater flexibility as I tramped around the Kimberley, but it was a fairly heavy case to lug about. With this combination of cameras I built up a substantial collection of pictures and made the decision to select forty images that could become my definitive collection of Kimberley images – the Kimberley Series. I commissioned Churchill Colour Laboratories to print cibachrome prints of the forty images and first exhibited the prints with an exhibition of Aboriginal Art from the East Kimberley at the Birukmarri Gallery in Fremantle in 1987.

By this time I had finished my three-year contract with the Priority Country Areas Programme and had taken up a job as the Art Co-ordinator of the Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Programme in Kununurra. This became a six-year project for me and, as with the Arts Advisory position, took me to many interesting places in the Kimberley. I took my cameras with me wherever I went and added to my collection of images of this region that was so special to me. The photographic exhibition at Birukmarri was designed to give a visual context to the new Aboriginal art that was then coming out of the East Kimberley, a renaissance that is still being experienced today.

I took the Kimberley Series exhibition to Hogarth Galleries in Sydney in 1992 to accompany an exhibition of recent works on bark from the Ramingining community in the Northern Territory, a community that I'd had the pleasure to visit. Putting the Kimberley Series images into a book has long been a dream of mine and I am pleased to have finally realized it.

Joel Smoker 2009

Editor's note: Joel Smoker's book retails at \$24.95 and can be purchased, with postage added, through his web site (www.joelsmoker.com). The web site also offers other works that include poster prints from the "Kimberley Series" and sets of 10 postcards from the "West Kimberley Series".