











# Barka /Apocalypse

Etchings and aquatints

by

Alex Byrne

2020

Barka/Apocalypse was exhibited April – May 2021 at Gaffa Gallery in Sydney, Australia.

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# Barka/ Apocalypse

I acknowledge the Gadigal people on whose traditional land I live and pay my respect to the Elders, past and present. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land!

Climate catastrophe surrounds us. The very extensive and devastating fires on the east coast of Australia through the summer of 2019/20 followed a long lasting drought. In turn, the fires were followed by floods and then the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Rivers dried up, coral bleaching blighted the Great Barrier Reef repeatedly, great dust storms blew across the continent, east coast lows brought violent thunderstorms, torrential rain and hail.

Mirrored around the world, these manifestations of extreme instability in the global weather system magnify and accelerate the normal changeability in climate. Driven by global warming, they result from neglect of the environment while pursuing unchecked economic growth since the industrial revolution. They challenge humanity to respond with thoughtful commitment to new ways of operating and containing global warming in the hope of returning the planet to a tolerable equilibrium.

Australia was colonised in parallel with the industrial revolution and our environment has been profoundly damaged by the processes of colonialism and modernisation over the 250 years since Lieutenant James Cook claimed the east coast of Australia.

The land management practices of Indigenous peoples, developed over more than 60,000 years, have been ignored, leading to widespread erosion, unmanageable fires and the extinction of many species, species which were unique to Australia.

The aquatints and etchings in the Barka/Darling and Apocalypse series explore the consequences of colonialism on Australia's natural environment.

Barka was inspired by several trips along the great Darling River, seeing it bone dry, with water trickling down at last and with a good flow. Extending from the junction with the Barwon in northern New South Wales close to the Queensland Border, it flows to the junction with the Murray at Wentworth near the South Australian and Victorian borders. In good seasons it benefits from rain in Queensland and, in turn, feeds the Murray down to its mouth at Lake Alexandrina and the Coorong in the lands of the Ngarrindjeri.

Much of its course flows through the lands of the Pakaantji who called it the Barka and enjoyed its fish, mussels, yabbies and surrounding plants and animals. They traded with other peoples and met at ceremonial grounds including magnificent Mutawintji. The etchings and aquatints recognise their presence and ownership but avoid appropriating their imagery. I pay my respect to Paakantyi Elders, past and present and recognise their continuing ownership of that land.

Following exploratory visits by Sturt, Mitchell and others, settlers grabbed land and brought in their sheep and cattle. Paakantyi were driven off and subdued by massacres and the Native Police. The river became known as the Darling and became a highway for paddle steamers as port towns developed at Wentworth, Louth and Bourke.

The etchings and aquatints present vignettes of this history. The camel trains and paddle steamers of colonialism are followed by the fish kills and goats of today. The striking Sturt Desert Pea reminds us of the blood shed as the frontier extended to the west and north.

Thirty seven aquatints and etchings are printed on a nine metre length of Velin Arches paper, recalling the charts or river maps used by the paddle steamer skippers on the Darling, Murray and Murrumbidgee, when they were mighty rivers.

As with the originals, the paper is mounted on two rollers in a timber case so that it can be rolled from one to the other, revealing the prints one by one. For the exhibition, it was unrolled it from the case and stretched along a wall. A selection of the prints was framed and hung nearby together with a slide show of all the prints.

Apocalypse responds to the horrendous fires of summer 2019/20 and the other environmental shocks including COVID-19 which is believed to have jumped a species barrier due to interference with nature.

The seven images present the Seven Last Plagues in the Book of Revelation Chapter 16 which begins with

*And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth.*

Whatever our religious beliefs, we must recognise that wrath and respond wholeheartedly to the challenges of climate change. Barka/Darling and Apocalypse together seek to highlight that need.

These two series of etchings and aquatints build on the work I exhibited at Gaffa in 2016 and 2020. I have continued to explore the potentialities of the etching process developed by Nik Semenoff which employs a copper sulphate/kitchen salt mordant applied to aluminium plates

Alex Byrne  
Sydney, March 2021

Barka/Darling





Alex Byrne, *Barka Navigation Chart*, 2020

Tasmanian Oak Box with perspex window containing Velin Arches Blanc 300 gsm 9 metre x 535 mm roll of 37 Aquatints and Etchings of the Barka/Darling series on Hahnemuhle 300 gsm; dimensions 645x590x140.

Inspired by charts made by paddle steamer captains that showed the river's course, landmarks, woolsheds, hotels, homesteads, and dangerous river sections. See, for example: *Paddle steamer captains navigational chart of the Darling River*, rolled, cloth/ink, 1870-1890. Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, accessed 22 February 2021, [<https://ma.as/55518>](https://ma.as/55518).





Alex Byrne, *Barka 1 – Regret*, 2020

Aquatint; Barka/Darling series on Hahnemuhle 300 gsm 1 AP + 5;  
390 x 310

The occupation of the lands of the Paakantyi and other peoples of western New South Wales was accompanied by horrific violence including massacres. The Rufus River Massacre occurred on a bend of the Rufus at Lake Victoria, west of Wentworth, on 27 August 1841. At least 30 Aboriginal people died, concluding a six month long guerrilla war by the Aboriginal people, during which they successfully blocked the overlander route from Sydney to Adelaide through their land.

