

Daphne Cazalet

Biography



The artwork embraces my personal story. Starting from certain autobiographical elements, I explore experiences from childhood, from an assimilationist perspective - deeply shaped by personal shame - to that of an adult encountering and expressing a post-colonial inspiration for hybridity of culture, diaspora and an identity of self.

Having lived firstly in the sub-continent of India, a land beset by colonial domination as well as an Indian caste system, I migrated as a young girl with the rest of my family to Britain, the mythical 'mother country', where we were surrounded by a very different kind of class-consciousness: English society and its culture of the 1950s. Only years later did I comprehend the huge extent of this displacement. For a family with four young children, migration to a new country had many bitter-sweet consequences.

My own migration from England to Australia in 1982 gave me an absorbing critical and analytical focus on my individuality, identity, culture and creativity. Australia has become a third personal, physical space as well as a third metaphysical space for me in which to explore the layered issues of self-discovery.



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Water Over Skin II

3 October - 9 November, 2008

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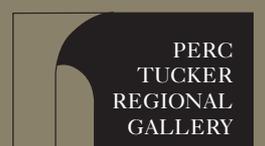
Images:

Front cover: *Behind the Gaze*, acrylic on canvas, 225 x 225 cm

Page 1 (top): *SariScrolls* (detail)

Page 1 (bottom) & Page 2: *Layered Eclipse* (details), acrylic paint on mogami paper, 288 x 336 cm (16 sheet grid - completed work)

Back cover: *Layered Eclipse Series, Installation SariScrolls* (detail), *Installation WallPaperGrid* (detail), *Installation SariScrolls* (detail)



Water Over Skin II



An exhibition by Daphne Cazalet
3 October - 9 November 2008



Foreword

Perc Tucker Regional Gallery supports and develops the visual arts of north Queensland. Daphne Cazalet began formal training in visual arts in Townsville and is now based in Darwin where she is completing her Doctorate in Visual Arts.

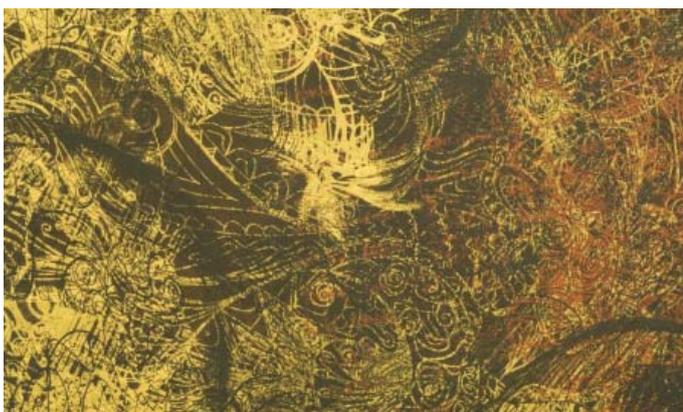
Cazalet has a rich personal history and is talented in both the performing and visual arts. Creative expression in visual arts has meant for Cazalet a cathartic re-exploration of her rich and, at times, painful personal experiences. It has been necessary for her to mine, re-examine, explore and gain a different understanding of her past, in order to move forward on her life's journey.

Simultaneously, Cazalet has investigated different media and artistic processes to find ones that express her ideas. *Water Over Skin II* makes use of a range of media that suit her purposes, and a painting technique heavily influenced by printmaking processes.

I am delighted that we can support this journey, exhibit this complete exhibition, and witness the artistic development of a favourite creative daughter of Townsville.

My thanks to Daphne Cazalet, to Dr. Sarah Scott for her essay, and to the Gallery team and volunteers.

Frances Thomson
Director



Water Over Skin II

Daphne Cazalet has worked variously as an artist, actor, writer and community arts worker. This multidisciplinary background has enriched her studio-based investigation of her experiences as an “Anglo Indian woman” who was exposed to the impacts of colonization, diaspora and dislocation. *Water Over Skin II* is the final exhibition that marks the end of her doctoral candidature at Charles Darwin University.

As her biography explains, Daphne's long-term residence in Australia away from India and Britain provided her with a space – similar to Homi Bhabha's “third space” - in which she was able to undertake this “interrogation of self” involving an exploration of gender, race, history, identity, memory and language.

The *SariScroll* installation and poem *Water over Skin* (printed in the catalogue) deftly weave together fine arts, autobiography, poetry and critical theory, and mark the culmination of her Doctoral research. The title *Water over Skin* hints at the racial prejudice Daphne encountered after leaving India, crossing the Indian Ocean, and arriving upon the shores of Great Britain. Following India's partition in 1947, her Anglo-Indian family was forced to flee violence and reprisal. The artist has described how “Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others who had once lived together in towns and villages were driven from their homes. Eleven million people were made homeless. A million people died in violent religious riots.”

Unfortunately, as Daphne vividly describes in her catalogue autobiography, England in the 1950s, “the mythical mother country” was not the “ideal” she and her family had imagined. It was grey, cold and bleak. Children asked her if she lived in a wigwam, and her needlework teacher told her to wash her hands.

The title *Water over Skin* evokes these racial taunts. But Daphne's poem also suggests the powers of water to transform. It conjures up images of Hindu cleansing rituals in the river Ganges, where the women wash and renew themselves in faith. Water and rivers are a metaphor of life signifying “the endless journey of the diasporic self” and the potential for the questing, energetic spirit to take unexpected courses.

This installation is a visual poem, building up layer upon layer of fragments, memories, meanings and metaphors. The rolls of paper overlaid with silk-screened images or softly sponged blue paint variously suggest long lengths of printed, patterned sari cloths, skin, rolls of film, wallpaper and rivers. Their rich patterning evokes both the intricacy of Indian cloth and hennaed hands – and the



claustrophobia of wallpapered English bedrooms. Flicks of red paint suggest blood and violence. They vividly communicate the frustrations that the teenage Daphne felt, stranded between her mother's demands and the pressures to assimilate to an "English" way of life – or, as Daphne describes it, "between the exotic burden of my mixed race, my gender and the cultural tradition of Indian femaleness." Alternatively these paint flicks could suggest the seeds of the diaspora hunting for new life.

Amongst the intricacy of the patterning are sections of Hindustani writing but surface appearances deceive. This is actually the artist's own imagined language. It is a partly-remembered script recalled from the year that Daphne spent learning Hindustani – "the language to talk to Ayahs." Her use of this imagined language raises questions about how our identity is constructed through language but it also poses fascinating questions concerning the 'reading' of identity. It is only those inside the culture who recognise the subtle differences between this language and Hindustani. This "in between" language mimics the subtle readings of skin colour within India – skin that is simply assumed as "other" beyond the continent.

The installation *WallPaperGrid* features faded sepia photos and shadowy black photographs of Daphne's mother, grandmother, aunts, brothers and sister. They suggest pieces of a damaged silent film – with sections missing. These photographs movingly convey Daphne's experience of loss caused by cultural dislocation, but they also reveal how we all construct a narrative from our own lives – from shadowy memories and fragments that shift and change over time.

These "faded" images, also bring to mind the under-represented, "unrecorded" history of women. Photographs of Daphne's mother and grandmother speak of generations of female history and knowledge. So too do the references to rich cloths – the limited space into which women's creative spirit was channeled and subsequently undervalued within a patriarchal society. Similarly, the allusions to wallpaper within the installation suggest "a woman's domain", the private, domestic, restricted and largely

unrecognised creative space open to women.

Water Over Skin evokes both the physical space of the artist's own studio and the process of creating the artwork within it. The subtle inclusion of a mind map with the heavily circled word: HYBRIDITY provides a key to reading *Water Over Skin* and gives a clue to the creative seeds that germinated into this exhibition.

Prior showings of *Water Over Skin* in Darwin involved celebratory gatherings organised by Daphne. She successfully brought together a diverse group of people who both interacted with and became active participants within the work – sometimes sharing their own stories with each other. Daphne's generous communication of her own experiences through her work provides an environment in which others may also feel empowered to recall, speak about and face their own experiences of racism, shame, sexism and abuse.

By overturning assumptions, by transforming the private feminine space into a public one in which we can gather, share our stories and thereby change, by turning a racial slur into positive statement, Daphne's work creates an environment that ultimately offers the possibility of change and hope.

Dr Sarah Scott

Lecturer in Art History and Theory
Charles Darwin University

Water Over Skin

*water flows, encircles
washes and renews
(my skin)*

*retrieves an understanding
memories from without
(my senses)*

*whirlpools unrestrained
unrestricted and entwine
(my mind)*

*rushing up against the shoreline
maintain a silent rhythm
beating skins of time
of hands
and face
and feet*

*in ceremonial washing
of pain
and shame
and violence*

*overwhelming sounds of drumming
demand relief
(my tears and laughter)
in celebration
of the colour of my skin*

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