

Desert River



The story of Rosy Dock is set in the central Australian desert. The story begins on aboriginal land, close to the source of the Finke River. The story follows the course of this river said to be the oldest surviving river course in the world.

The Finke is a huge river, nearly 700 kms long. I love this part of Australia and love the wonderful contradictions ... like this grand river that mostly has no water and has great trees growing out of its riverbed.

The river is mostly a river of sand.

It contains remnants of ancient rainforests totally surrounded by desert.

It carries huge floods of water at times but doesn't go anywhere ... the water just disappears into the Simpson Desert sands.

My European concept of desert was of a barren, lifeless landscape. I was surprised and impressed to find the opposite ... and how wonderfully rich in indigenous plant life our Australian deserts can be!

On being there I fell in love with this ancient landscape with its glowing orange red sands contrasted against the bluest of skies, its surprising wealth of vegetation; dry, cracked river beds and trees blossoming with parrots. The fieldtrips I did into this landscape for my book 'The story of Rosy Dock', were very special

I spent quite a bit of time in country close to the Finke River, which is featured in the work. Much of this time I was based in Hermannsburg, on Aboriginal land. The community were happy to give me the use of a house there if I worked with the children for an hour each day, making collages from materials collected locally. This was a wonderful opportunity to relate to some of the aboriginal people at Hermannsburg, especially the children. Some of the details in the work are taken directly from seeing aboriginals everyday in their country ... like the group of aborigines sitting in a circle under the shade of a tree, in the sandy riverbed and three or four small, naked children, sitting, one behind another, riding a wild horse, bareback.





Another very special experience was spending time where one of the usually dry fingers of the Finke River finally disappears into the sands of the Simpson Desert. I felt I needed to understand the nature of the landscape here and the variety of plants that would grow in this situation.

I made contact with the people at Mt. Dare an inhabited property closest to this part of the Simpson Desert (about six hour's drive from the Finke's end.) We arranged that I would be dropped off by mail plane with their weekly mail and then pay them to drive me on to where one of the fingers of the Finke disappears. I took the best maps I could find and they provided me with a tent and tin trunk so dingos couldn't get at my food and we set off.

We needed to travel quite a lot further than the map identified. Even though there was no water to be seen, it was obvious where the river ran for trees and bushes grew in its bed, nourished from water underground ... and so when the trees and bushes suddenly stopped we knew the river did too.

I clearly remember being left at one of the river's ends in the Simpson Desert, knowing I would be alone there for the next four days. My first thoughts were as I looked around me and as the cloud of red dust from the four-wheel drive that had deposited me there disappeared into the horizon, this is crazy, there's hardly anything growing here.

But as I became attuned to that particular landscape, I found such a variety of vegetation, I got to the point of being almost overwhelmed, wondering if I could make sense of it and identify the patterns and various species of plants I could choose between from the reference books I'd bought with me, so that when I returned to my Sydney studio I would have enough knowledge to give me freedom to play with and construct my own compositions.

Before setting off into the Simpson I'd been warned to be wary of wild camels in heat but especially of dingos ... that they could be dangerous. I wasn't sure how seriously to take this advice but a wise old man who'd spent much time alone in this country told me I'd be fine.

After my first night's sleep, I was up with the rising sun and while squatting down beside my campfire waiting for my billy to boil, I felt conscious of something watching me. I turned to find a pack of curious wild horses about 3 metres away, staring at me intently. I stayed still, not wanting to scare them away. But then the horses pricked up their ears at sounds of distant howling, bolted off over the sand dunes and disappeared.

That night as I was in the process of dropping off to sleep the horses came back. I could hear them banging around my campsite, obviously still curious.

Then the howling began again. Long, eerie, penetrating, howls. The horses took off. The sounds enveloped me ... I felt surrounded by dingos.

From deep inside I let out the loudest, most terrible noise I could muster. My throat hurt me for days afterwards. But the dingos left and they never returned while I was there. From that point I relaxed and began to enjoy being alone in this beautiful desert wilderness



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