



Magic of the Daintree

Gay McDonald describes how this poignantly beautiful film, book and touring exhibition came to fruition.

As the lights dimmed, attention focused upon lush green tropical vegetation thickly covering the slopes which led down to where the river met the sea. In the distance lay a huge expanse of crystal-clear blue water, fringed by white sandy shores.

The peace and tranquillity of the scene were broken only by the sounds of wings beating as two brilliantly coloured lorikeets flew past one's line of vision. Further afield, a middle-aged man and his young son quietly pattered toward the shoreline. The young boy stretched himself over the boat's edge to gaze at the magnificent textures and colours of the coral reef which lay only metres below the water's surface.



Once on the beach the young boy's attention turned to the rainforest which adjoined the reef. As if under a spell, the boy was drawn deeper and deeper into the forest, staring up in wonder at the immensity of the trees towering above him.

Faint sounds of a didgeridoo and the whistle of birds calling permeated the air. Ghosts of times long since past materialised, then slowly vanished. Was this to be interpreted as a symbol of foreboding? How long could such a vision of paradise, with thousands of years of natural history to its credit, survive undisturbed by man?

Artist Jeannie Baker's prediction for the future of the Daintree is indeed a sobering one. The last scene of her 10-minute film **Where the Forest Meets the Sea**, features shadowed images of extensive real estate development, litter bins complete with McDonald's food wrappers hanging ghost-like over the Daintree forest. Her concern for the Daintree-Bloomfield region of North Queensland is indeed timely. What better way to stab at our dulled collective conscience than by producing a film, a book and an exhibition which will tour six venues in three States of Australia during the Bicentennial year?

Where the Forest Meets the Sea constituted four years of intensive effort. Rainforests generally had always been of great interest to Baker who wished to incorporate their mystical quality into her work. She is as keenly interested in rainforests as a conservation issue. The Daintree was selected specifically as the basis for the project because of the extraordinary diversity of rare plant types and tree species which meet a coral reef.

As with all past projects, Baker's art practice relies heavily on considerable research being carried out prior to commencement. Her initial visit to the Daintree was preceded by a trip to Cairns where she was to collect a wealth of information about the region, appropriate locations, equipment and possible dangers to be aware of. Much of this information, in hindsight, proved to be highly misleading, based more on local myth than fact. Baker was advised to carry a gun as protection against wild pigs and a particularly deadly variety of snake (not indigenous to the region) and, lastly, humans who were supposedly cultivating illicit drug plots within the forest. Baker's next contact, the ranger/caretaker at Cape Tribulation, dispelled her fears. He proved to be an invaluable source of information, providing realistic suggestions on how she could best explore the Daintree.

Cape Tribulation became a base camp for the next month, with Baker setting forth into the forest for one, two and three-day excursions. Equipment was kept to a minimum; she carried only maps, compass, camera, drawing equipment, food and a plastic sheet if she decided to stay overnight. The aim of Baker's first visit was to collect sufficient visual resources in order that she might ascertain how the special charm of the Daintree could be re-created through film, book and the exhibition. The camera proved to be of limited assistance. Detail within the forest was extremely dramatic and varied, but difficult to capture on film. Beautiful green dappled light was cast by sunlight filtering through many layers of plant life overhead. On the forest floor the lighting levels were so low that even Baker's camera, on tripod, equipped with fast exposure film, had difficulty in accurately recording its effects. This factor, combined with the very breadth and scale of the forest, resulted in a very poor selection of photos being reproduced. Baker therefore was forced to rely upon her detailed drawings, her memory, additional research and her experiences with a family who lived within the region. The husband and wife and their three young sons existed by growing fruit trees, catching fish and wild pig, and trading their produce for essential items. Baker formed a very close relationship with the family and enjoyed exploring the rainforest with the three boys, who had an intimate knowledge of their tropical playground. The father and son who were featured within the project were modelled loosely upon members of this family.

Where the Forest Meets the Sea required a massive input of time and human and financial resources. Each component facilitated the growth and development of the next.

The book was begun first, evolving through several different stages of artistic and editorial comment. One of the major changes suggested by the editor was that the boy who explored the forest do so in shorts. Her reason – nudity was not so well received on the west coast of America. It was also suggested that the boy call his father 'My Father' instead of 'Dad' – formalising the relationship somewhat.

Film pre-production was begun halfway through the development of the book, proving an advantage to Baker who was now made to view the whole project from a new perspective. She had previously felt some dissatisfaction with the way in which her collages had been visually flattened when translated into book form. A new system was devised for some pieces whereby the foreground and background were physically separated. As a result, Baker was provided maximum control in lighting also, allowing a contrast to be created between the light thrown on the foreground as opposed to the background.

It is near impossible to ascertain the scale of Jeannie Baker's collage constructions, especially when viewing the film projected onto a cinema screen. Even at this scale, her meticulous attention to detail is most apparent. In fact, each of the panels used in the film is deceptively small, the largest panel measuring 86 x 61 cm, the smallest panels measuring 22 x 28 cm and 1.3 x 0.9 cm.



At times throughout the movie and while glancing through her book, I had to look again and again to ascertain if the areas in question were not live footage. Her photo realistic effects are by no means easily achieved. With immense dexterity and much patience, Baker combines natural and man-made materials such as preserved natural fibres, modelling clay, paper, timber, plywood and paint. The vegetation used is often natural, treated with chemicals, bleached, bathed in glycerine, then finely sprayed with oil paint to give permanent colour. Her works in 'real life' are deceptively shallow; having been constructed in relief then layered to create an illusion of depth.

The total effect is indeed awe-inspiring. How is it humanly possible to achieve such effects at such a scale? The desire to reach out and touch those exquisitely crafted textures is extremely tempting – the hands able to make sense of what the brain cannot.

In many respects, the film was the most challenging element of the project. With absolutely no previous experience with film, Baker invited the participation of Film Australia. Film Australia was most impressed with the quality and scope of the project. Film pre-production began soon after. A feasibility study was conducted to determine costs, technical problems and range of facilities necessary to bring the project to fruition. After a storyboard was produced, considerable time was spent testing out the artwork on film. The results were extremely disheartening for Baker – not being close enough to the way in which she had perceived the film to be. Outside advice was sought. With permission from Film Australia, a technical adviser, trained in special effects, was brought in to provide advice.

On the strength of his suggestions, extra tests were made, radically improving the quality of the film results. The technical adviser also suggested that a sophisticated polaroid camera, with exposure control, be purchased enabling Baker and the crew to ascertain just what the camera was seeing in terms of light. Her responsibilities in film production were many and varied

including the development of concept, words, design and artwork. Her time was divided between organising the artwork and directing the lighting, timing and shooting in the camera room.

One of the most fascinating aspects of film production was the task of bringing the static collage constructions to life. By using a variety of traditional and non-traditional techniques, a lizard, cockies, parakeets, the young boy and his father were able to participate in the unfolding story. Baker explained that the effect of the cockies wheeling and diving was created by turning around paper cutouts, a quarter the size of a fingernail, in order to achieve wing motion. The movement of the goanna was much more involved. The changing perspective and indicative sideways swagger of his descent was created by the use of 23 goannas – each of different size and leg movement. No one technique was suitable for all the various characters. Often new methods and materials were experimented with until the desired effect was achieved. Very often traditional animation techniques, such as cell animation, were manipulated to better suit the artwork.

For example, in cell animation, an image is normally painted directly onto an acetate sheet. Baker and her crew found they were able to produce a closer likeness between the original artwork by building up the image in paint and sometimes clay. The boy and his father were given freedom of movement by simple jointing of their limbs with needle, thread and masking tape.

Within all aspects of film production, Baker worked extremely hard at emulating reality. The soundtrack is no exception. A musician was commissioned to provide sound for the opening and closing scenes of the movie. His job brief – to use instruments to create sounds that would have the qualities of natural sounds of the coral sea and Daintree forest in order to evoke such feelings as wonder, uncertainty, happiness and timelessness.

A particularly effective selection of sounds was produced by clap-sticks and didgeridoo fed through a reverberation machine. The voice of the young boy is cleverly employed to produce a series of abstract and naïve sounds, used, for example, when the boy enters the forest for the first time.

The soundtrack is effective without dominating the film. It is at this point one realises how well Baker has fused the various elements of film together. Sound, lighting, artwork and animation work toward a common goal – that of revealing some of the magic of the Daintree: its vulnerability and preciousness.

When filming was completed, Baker reworked each of the collage constructions to work as self-contained images. Supplementing these panels is a series of abstracts where she has exploited the textures, shapes and colours of the tropical rainforest and reef.

The Daintree-Bloomfield region of North Queensland is one of the most important forest regions in Australia. Apart from the grandeur of the setting, the Daintree contains over 1000 tree species (catalogued to date) some of which do not occur elsewhere in the world. The recreational value of this region is outstanding, featuring beautiful scenery, freshwater and ocean swimming adjoined by treasures of the Great Barrier Reef.

There is now real danger that this last remaining area of virgin lowland rainforest will soon be lost to developers. Real estate speculation and improvements to the Cape Tribulation road have put increased pressure on the Queensland Government to release Crown land between Cape Tribulation and the Bloomfield River for development.



Jeannie Baker has ingeniously distilled the very essence of the Daintree within **Where the Forest Meets the Sea**. In such an accessible and visually delightful format, viewers of all ages have the opportunity to reconsider their natural heritage for its intrinsic aesthetic value, rather than as a hostile and alien environment to be exploited for monetary gain or as a source of survival.

Craft Arts International

Postscript: The Daintree area is now officially recognised and has been given World Heritage Status.

I would like to be able to say that since this recognition, the Daintree Rainforest has remained totally protected. Sadly I cannot. Changes are still happening there. Powerlines have been installed. Crown land is still being bought and sold in some of the most special places. Many more houses, a tourist resort and accommodation built. Tourism is having an increasing impact.

There are still some places in the forest that are truly wild and undisturbed: but we have to remain vigilant they stay that way.

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