

# Silent Ice: Deep Patience

*"Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as the loss of silence. ...Silence no longer exists as a world, but only in fragments, as the remains of the world."*<sup>1</sup>

She is a fragment collector. Traveling in the open country of the Australian Outback and the tundra regions of the Canadian Arctic, Dorothy Caldwell responds to the subtle amplification of the visual and physical silence found in these landscapes. What results from her artistic research are impressions translated as dense textile maps that speak of the regenerative power of remote earthen silence. Somewhere below language, between body and land, the deep sensuality and essential qualities of these distant landscapes where the human mark is sparse become discernible. Her work, which evolves as a language of response, reveals a desire to reshape intimacy with land and to honour the sources of beauty and vitality found there.

## Becoming Threshold

With each new venture to a new location comes a new map. Through rituals of entry, Caldwell opens herself to reading the language of place. As she adjusts to a new geography, she notes first impressions. One drawing from her travel journals records her landing at Pangnirtung, Baffin Island. A current of lines becomes animated on the page as she tracks the path of the plane's descent. The drawing, a stratum of tremulous parallel lines, signals the moment of the body becoming threshold to place. It is both invitation and record, at once welcoming and registering what is felt on the corporeal plane as a phenomenological dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Max Picard, "The World of Silence," Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1988, p. 212. Special thanks to Saja Tourbah for this quotation.

Stop. Walk. Gather. Know where you are.

Once on the ground in the quiet, huge expanses of these places, she walks the land, sometimes barefoot, into canyons and meadows, where, with dilated attention, she observes and collects indigenous materials: countless plants, earth pigments, rock, bone, and other fragments of the local ecology. Through sustained awareness, she builds connections with a world of textures, patterned markings, colours, and sounds that trace natural and human energy. This poetic data then feeds energy back into her work. Samples accumulate as evidence of immersion; physical actions inscribe meaning in tactile form.

One might ask, why seek engagement with wilderness landscapes so vastly different and so far away? Imaginatively bound to the theme of land, Caldwell says that the Australian landscape chose her long before her first visit. An internal map had already begun to take shape for her through visualizations of this land encountered in stories and images. Dating back as early as 1987, there is evidence of her growing curiosity in a notebook entry, in which she refers to Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*. At length she ruminates upon his explanation of how the aboriginal people carry the structures of the land

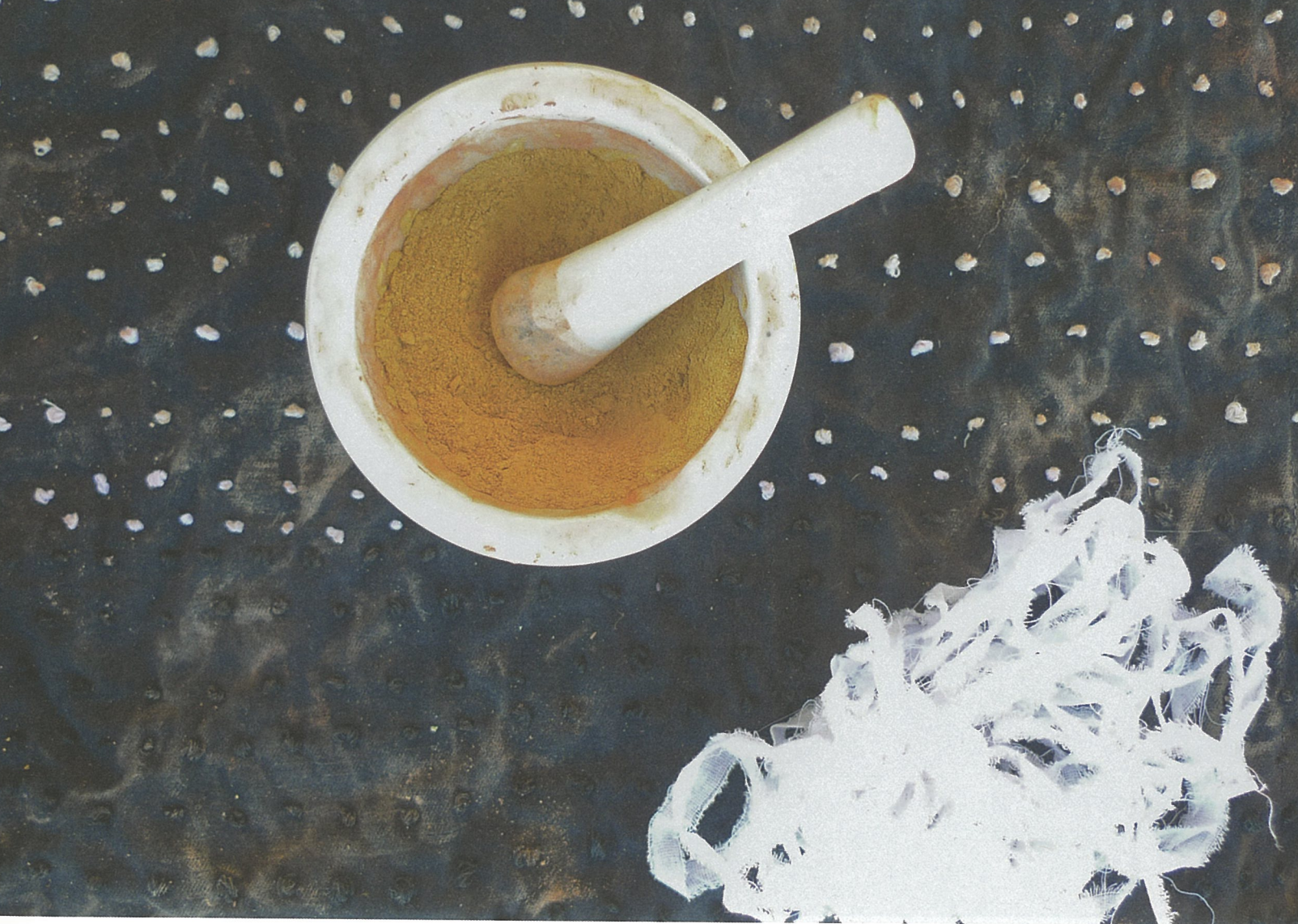




in their heads, through songs and “map” paintings, and how these interweave pathways across the land and shape creation myths and geological landmarks. In 2004, an intersecting moment occurred when an opportunity arose to experience Australia firsthand. With an invitation from Australian Forum for Textile Arts to teach a master class and present a public lecture, supported by a grant from the Canada Council, she was able to travel, develop visual documentation of the landscape, and study aboriginal textile work. She stayed for two months. Eventually, after many years of return trips, there was enough infrastructure in place to realize her dream to be in one

place and carry out work in the Outback. With India Flint, an internationally renowned artist of eco-dyeing, she began working in the Northern Flinders Ranges, a place known for its red ochre. As her working practice was renewed and deepened by experiences amidst this geography, she began to see parallels between Canada and Australia. Both countries consist of huge wilderness areas with minimal human settlement around the edges. Seeking a Canadian equivalent for her research, she applied for and received grants from the Canada Council to travel to Pangnirtung, Baffin Island and Bathurst Inlet in the Arctic in 2010 and 2011.





## A Collected Sense of Place

Caldwell's work reflects an accumulative way of making. Her map making is generative, arising from an immediate experience of location wherein she observes, gathers, and translates her understanding. On every travel excursion she takes her portable studio of lightweight materials and tools: Japanese paper, pre-stitched fabric, a soft graphite crayon, India ink, brushes, a small plant press, a mortar and pestle, a digital sound recorder, and a magnifying glass. With these materials and tools, she is able to work freely on site. She relishes handling and holding fragments of

place and recording their sensuous textures as a means of deeply feeling where she is. Hers is a physical way of knowing in which the human body has an active role in perceiving the world. Evidence of this method of working is archived in her research station, now on display in the exhibition. Caldwell has literally moved her studio into the gallery, unveiling the rich panoply of sense information from her fieldwork. A collection of small format paper cards and book works are the direct capture of actual plants, gathered and sometimes altered, and there is likewise fabric dyed and coloured with plant material.





There are tentative, speculative paintings generated as she figures things out: rubbings, drawings, and washes using natural pigments and dyes. There are also moss, bones, shells, pressed flowers and leaves, as well as artifacts and sound recordings—all found while walking in the ochre pits or in the concentrated tundra microclimate. There are scrapers, rusted nails, a shearer’s blade, fishing hooks, working tools, handmade string plied and dyed, and “wire drawings.” Collectively these objects and drawings evoke a language—a way of reading a layered history of place. This language is one deeply imbued with nature and traces of human settlement on the land. From this language emerge direct links to her work,

where she guides this source information toward beautiful ends. In *Lake, Flying over Salt Lakes, Pink Hill, Human Trace, and Absorbing Place*, her ochre work series from 2013, we see directly how she enhances the visual content of the textiles with local materials.

Like the physical stitches in her work that connect and layer, Caldwell’s maps of place are reinforced through study in museums and also by stories, songs, and myths. Together, they comprise a rich index that links and leads us through her documentation practice, coalescing in the stories of the human imprints, big or small, left on the land.



For example, her personal research station (cited above) finds precedence in a beautiful old museum, the *Museum of Economic Botany*, located in the Botanical Gardens in Adelaide. Caldwell describes this museum as a rare depository of natural materials gathered when Europeans first arrived on the continent. Here, she witnessed how people came to know place, and how natural materials, when appropriated by the body for practical use, carry an exquisite weight as currency. The way we take in the world around us is ultimately how we come to understand ourselves and is thus what guides our values and beliefs, as well as our capacity for survival.

Through watching and interacting with local women artists as they handle material, tell stories, and share songs, she develops skills, learns traditions, and observes how to respond to the subtleties of the land. Her work celebrates the power of these bonds—the gift exchange of wisdom, cheerful generosity, and pragmatism. From Flint, her partner in the Outback, comes a knowledge of specific plants and methods of plant dying, as well as an understanding of how to travel into “the bush” with preparedness and how to make a space in open country to creatively work.





Learning to make string, for example, is a skill important to aboriginal women. It is also now a significant activity for Caldwell, who first began making string while on car rides to the Outback. Now she makes it all the time. For her, handmade string is a means of spinning a tale with fibre, expressing the journeying process. Caldwell recalls the story of Charles Percy Mountford, a part-time ethnographer, who spent time in the 1930s with the Adnyamathanha people in the Northern Flinders Ranges. On one occasion, he gave out paper and asked the people to tell a story. This effort met with mixed results. He described

how some women, unfamiliar with the idea of drawing, preferred to tell stories in string and then trace the string story onto paper.<sup>2</sup> This intelligence of women shaping spaces with thread and stories is the narrative ground of Caldwell's work. And it is this ground where Caldwell joins women across history and place as she maps space and invokes journeys through material. This is readily apparent in how she titles one of her works, *Wandering Time* (2011), named after an Inuit women's song with the lyrics: Ayii, Ayii. Glorious it is to follow the ebb-marks of the sea. Glorious it is When Wandering Time Has Come. Ayii. Ayii.<sup>3</sup>

2 E-mail correspondence with the artist, 9 August 2014.

3 E-mail correspondence with the artist, 9 August 2014.





## Back Home

*Ultimately one comes back to the familiar landscape with renewed perspective and ongoing questions about the interplay of images and values of another culture in light of one's own experience.<sup>4</sup>*

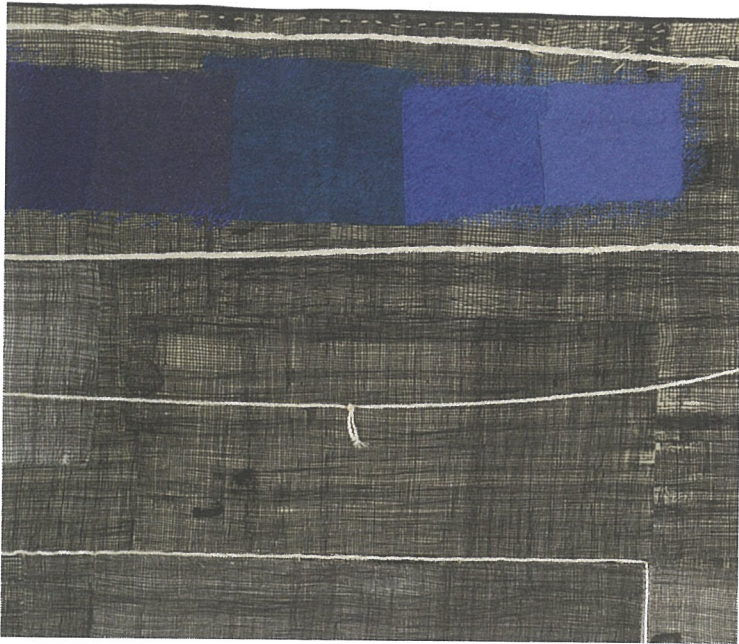
From Caldwell's empirical research emerges a body of work balanced with spirit and humility. All of her research is distilled and regenerated in the form of her textiles. What she has recorded and preserved in her encounters with landscape now becomes cloth. We touch all that she has touched. While incorporated, it outstrips

mimesis, and is recreated instead in intimate tension as a vocabulary of marks in abstract space. The result is a brilliant language of fragments, imbued with suppleness—a web of gestures. The final work refines and sharpens these gestures into compositional fields of felt value.

## The Insistence of the Mark

Her textiles are time-intensive works that evolve organically, even messily, as draft constructions. She is not a planner. Rather she likes to invoke surprise, even errors. Given that all textiles wear and break down, Caldwell conceives of cloth as a mutable surface.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in the exhibition.



She likes the graphic quality of the mark—its kinetic variation and dimension. The drawn mark, the painted mark, the textile mark: all are beautiful graphic marks with rhythm and action, tone and immediacy. Over the years, she has created an index of marks in “handbooks” in which she pays careful attention to the density and proximity of the same mark, over and over again. These journals serve as rich source material from which she develops her textile surfaces. For her base fabric, she copies pages from a given journal and enlarges them together to make a film positive for silkscreening, which takes place in a large silkscreen studio in Toronto. This process allows her to produce fine patterning on a large scale.

Building layers of black print paste on black fabric followed by a discharge process (in which a damp sponge with bleach is worked into the cloth) encourages a subtle palette of greys, reminiscent of the quietest hues discovered when walking with the Inuit or of the muted tones revealed in the leaf dying process. This fabric becomes the ground upon which she works. Inevitably there are mistakes. And it is these flaws that beckon her to respond. Back in her studio, on the wall, she reconstructs the cloth through processes of mending, gradually repairing the damage. What transpires is a push and pull of making marks, stitching, patching, mending, and reconstructing multiple units on a loose underlying grid. And it is precisely this



approach that becomes the vitalizing tension in the work. In the end, the reimagined landscapes reveal how everything is continually in the process of being formed and also inextricably linked to everything else.

## Markers of Place

One of the dominant characteristics of Caldwell's work is her preoccupation with shape. When attending to shape, her marks speak differently. Within her textile maps, landforms become diagrammatic abstractions in thread. She renders curves (ellipses and parabolas) with the integrity of the stitched

line, instilling confidence of place. In the same way the presence of a fjord, hill, or rock anchors a community, Caldwell uses the physicality of these geographical landmarks to map her experience of land. They are a chunk of reality taken from the context of place, mirroring the way the body inhabits a particular landscape. The compositional elegance of the generous curves in *Fjord* (2008), *A Red Hill/A Green Hill* (2012), *Red Hill/Black Hill* (2013), for instance, presents a view of landscape not as illusionistic conceit. These works invite us not into a contrived world of foreground, middle ground and distance, but rather into a place between spatial and volumetric expressions where there is no legible discrepancy between near and



far, active and still. The land doubles as both distant and intimate. Mirrored halves also exist in dialogue with one another, becoming active participants in the textile space. These fields invite inhabitation wherein the body finds resonance with the open land as resting place.

## Maps Without Words

Caldwell's works remind us that sensory language plays a large role in substantiating our existence, as well as in constructing and altering the world around us. Through the patient, meditative practice of textile making, she refines and sharpens our own intimacy with the senses, beseeching us to feel the

textured play of the world. In our digital culture, so cut off from the reality of ochre and rock, bone and leaf, she calls us to contemplate, with care and attention, what is around us. Through her textiles, we become woven into ecologies of place where nothing exists in isolation. Caldwell repositions us in accordance with the ways our bodies have always read landscape—not as view but as container. Her textiles, all maps without words, align our inner body structures with the land body, inviting us to gauge our place in stillness within remains of magnificent landscapes on this earth.

Anne West, 2014  
Providence, Rhode Island