



Art for Eternity

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By Adrian Glamorgan

In 1972, at Whitsunday Mass in St Peter's Basilica, an Australian geologist milled amongst a crowd gathering to receive the Pope's blessing. No one knows why the traveller did what happened next: the Italian courts found him insane.

The 33 year old Australian jumped the marble balustrade, and with a sledgehammer assailed Michelangelo's Pieta, declaring "I am Jesus Christ!" In 15 blows - imagine them - went the Virgin's arm at the elbow, a chunk from her nose, and the chip from an eyelid. The courts defined this fellow a "socially dangerous person," confined him to a mental hospital for a couple of years, then deported him back to Australia, where he has lived in well deserved obscurity ever since.

Now travel to a rare part of the world, the Dampier Archipelago, 42 islands in the warm waters of northwest Australia. The largest, Dampier Island, is called Burrup Peninsula locally, but the local Yaburara Aboriginal people knew it as murujuga, "hip sticking out." It's an amazing place. You can amble along the boulder strewn ridges and red-brown rocky corridors, and after a while something remarkable occurs. You start noticing pictures carved out of rock faces. At first, it's one or two, what could be an emu here or something else there, but then it dawns on you. These petroglyphs are everywhere. You are in valleys of Aboriginal stories. By Indigenous reckoning, the marga - ancestral creator beings - left these

petroglyphs as spiritually powerful reminders of the Law.

All sorts of petroglyphs abound. There are the telltale stripes of a thylacine (Tasmanian tiger), extinct for a few thousand years in the Pilbara. A "stick" woman extends exaggerated hands; "archaic faces" are believed to be among the oldest art on our continent. There are stone arrangements, bedrock grinding patches, and stone artefacts, as well as ceremony sites and "enigmatic stone features" including standing stones. There is the extraordinary problem of the "sheer quantity and variety of the art," as a report by Caroline Bird and Sylvia Hallam for the National Trust of Australia in August 2006 notes. They explain, "The minimum density of rock art in well surveyed areas can be as high as 1135 individual motifs per square kilometre, and particular localities may have thousands of motifs." We can only guess at the logic for the positioning and relationships between these motifs. Hopefully, one day, this extraordinary continuous cultural landscape will be properly mapped and its deeper meanings understood.

Australia's Dampier Archipelago turns out to nurse the world's largest concentration of rock art. What a treasure! These petroglyphs and stone arrangements speak from people somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 years ago, easily comparable to

the Palaeolithic art of Western Europe. What secrets might these stones one day reveal? Last year, a preliminary Australian Heritage Council report stated the entire peninsula qualified for national and world heritage listing. Indigenous claimants, the International Rock Art Federation and the National Trust nominated the site for inclusion on the National Heritage list earlier this year.

Standing amongst the rocks, just behind you, is the spread of industry. Since the 1960s, the area has been developed as a port for iron ore and gas. Plant infrastructure, roads, powerlines have progressively resulted in the destruction of hundreds of cultural features, and thousands of individual petroglyphs. on the Burrup peninsula; 1800 petroglyphs have already been relocated. There are fears that acidic air pollution may be eating away at the surface of the rock. Not much protects these relics: the state Aboriginal Heritage Act allows approvals to disturb individual registered sites, which Bird and Hallam call "disastrous for heritage conservation " But there's more,

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much more.

There's a new development being proposed for the Burrup, the massive "Pluto" on-shore gas plant. We all know the once- planet Pluto out in space has been demoted, but on planet Earth this Pluto gas plant is big and getting bigger. Woodside Petroleum wants to remove 12% of the remaining artworks. In order to calm community concern, the state government has released a plan to save 60% of the peninsula. Some Indigenous voices have called for federal intervention.

The Premier may not have much to worry about. Environment and Heritage Minister

Ian Campbell has said that the rock art would not be allowed to derail the five billion dollar liquefied natural gas plant. The Minister argues a compromise is possible: "No one in their right mind would propose saving every single last bit of heritage on the peninsula unless they wanted to close down the economic development of Australia."

When our Minister for Environment and Heritage made his first ever speech in parliament as a first-time senator, he offered these words for the public record: "Past generations of Australians have been responsible for visiting some major environmental disasters upon this nation, but I do not think it is fair, relevant or helpful for us to place all the blame on our forefathers. What is relevant is that our generation assume responsibility for rectifying those past mistakes. What we must also do is ensure that our natural environment - and our knowledge of how to manage it - is passed on to the future generations in a far better condition. This is a goal I will work towards as a senator and a goal I will encourage my generation to share."

For what was and what might come, the National Trust has had the Burrup on its Endangered list since 2002. In 2003, the World Monuments Fund added Dampier Rock Art to its list of 100 Most Endangered places on the planet - the first site in Australia ever to be listed. This recognises the art belongs to humanity, including future generations, not just years but millennia from now.

To damage a Michelangelo threatens to rob the world of a great work of art. Who will watch over a million petroglyphs?