

**Fran Callen – Grindell’s Hut Residency, Just Add Water
For Hahndorf Academy August 1 – September 30 2021
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In 2019, Adelaide artist Fran Callen travelled to Grindell’s Hut for an artist’s residency funded by Country Arts SA in partnership with The Department for Environment and Water through the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park Co-Management Board. Grindell’s Hut sits in the heart of the Vulkathunha – Gammon Ranges National Park in the Flinders Ranges. The park forms part of the traditional country of the Adnyamathanha people and is rich with cultural significance.¹

The residency allows artists to work for three weeks in this starkly beautiful and remote location, country and community Callen had connected with as a child when she travelled there with her father, geologist Roger Callen, and slept under its teeming arc of stars. Later she returned in her teens to work and learn with locals in the community of Iga Warta, painting murals. These were treasured and transformative experiences in Callen’s life. She returned to Adnyamathanha country this time with her own family, partner Yusuf and their four children, Kayaan (12) Bilal (11) Acacia (6) and Zakki (4).

Callen’s observations of the arid landscape, the traditional owners’ knowledge and care for country, and the effects of the changing climate here are closely linked to her own mothering and care work. *Idthi* the Zebra finch, adapts songs sung to their eggs in times of drought, preparing their young for arid conditions. Callen conceived of this residency as a family project from the outset. Her children are central to her art practice and processes, as she instils in them respect for the land and for the knowledge of the Elders, and the usefulness of artmaking in serious dialogue.

Underlying Callen’s art is a deeply serious message, of environmental degradation and the violence of colonial legacies, but the work is also joyous – in its making and the end result. In a process of learning-through-making, the whole family is involved in creating these works that unfold across the gallery walls, tracing rich and complex landscapes in mixed media – including bushfire ash, dirt, ochre, tea, coffee, wine and sap - across a range of surprising surfaces. You might find yourself moving in closer, squinting at the work, like a child studying a lizard or an interesting leaf, to discover stories that reveal themselves to the curious and the careful.

Grindell’s Hut is about six hundred kilometres north of Adelaide and a long, rugged drive from the nearest small community, Nipapahnha. Callen’s plan was to pack light and to use what natural and household materials were available for art making. She packed a huge pot of gesso (acrylic primer), a bag of plaster, some drawing materials and a roll of recycled canvas. These things were squeezed into the car alongside food and provisions to sustain the family for three weeks. Amongst the boxes of tea and fresh fruit and vegetables were instant porridge packs as a camping treat. These bright boxes brought from the city, with

¹ ‘Grindell’s Hut Residency.’ *Country Arts SA* online <https://www.countryarts.org.au/news/grindells-hut-2021/> (viewed 5/07/21)

their cheery instructions, “Just add water” were even more incongruous in a land that hadn’t felt rain for four years. Desperately in need of water, the land was silent and dry. There were some wallabies, some zebra finches near the water tank. But even the feral goats were dead or gone. Yet these arid lands have sustained human life for tens of thousands of years. Callen and her family worked with Elders Uncle Cliff Coulthard and Uncle Terry Coulthard, learning about local plants and their Adnyamathanha names. But the waterhole was dry and a lot of the bush tucker dead or too dry to eat. In comparison, the supermarket food was so easy but it all had to be brought in by car, and all the packaging was building up and up. Callen saw the direct impact our lifestyle of convenience has on the natural environment.

And so the packages themselves were recycled as the grounds for artworks. Tea and porridge boxes were gessoed in preparation for layers of watercolour, charcoal and local ochre, gifted by Uncle Cliff, three different colours from Yalmarralpana Ochre Pit. Red, yellow, and purple ochre, a subtle lavender colour, so soft against the red of the earth and bright blue of the sky. Callen and her family worked outside in the cooler early mornings and evenings. They held packaging down with rocks. It was windy and dusty and the dirt blew into the gesso and made textures. The kids enjoyed collaging leaves and rocks and what they could find onto the packets and laying them in wet plaster, poured into diggings to cast the earth to make ‘fossils.’ Callen recalls childhood trips with her father, invoking geological words he used to teach them about the local rocks, words like striation, erosion, conglomerate, abrasion, sedimentary layers. Callen uses mark making techniques and local pigment to apply these layers to the plaster, honouring the geological time scale and attesting to her awareness that she is just passing through momentarily.

After a time Callen felt the work needed to grow in scale, so rolled out the canvas on the ground, weighted it down with rocks and worked on it with ink, paint, wine, coffee and dirt. When she needed still more room, she used her family’s worn out clothes, her partner’s old jeans and her daughter’s torn t-shirt. These too were painted with gesso, hung on the line to dry, then embedded with dirt and charcoal, taking on aspects of the landscape.

This exhibition is the work of an artist and her family, living briefly on and with country in a specific and dramatic site, recognising their domestic impact on its natural rhythms, and the broader impact of our actions in the world. They come and go, leaving perhaps a child’s shallow diggings in the dirt, some bones piled near the hut, a collection of interesting and beautiful leaves and twigs and a dead lizard that have now blown away. Just add water is a longing for rain, and an acknowledgement of the importance of care for fragile environments. Perhaps Callen’s art is like water, the way it can seep into a person and renew them and make them bright again. It can bind us to family, to each other and to country.