

## Henry's homage

Alice Springs artist **HENRY SMITH** honours Central Australia's trees – in their lives and deaths.

The tree stands old and proud as its vein-like trunk twists out of the riverbed. Perhaps 300 years old, its muscular beauty is slowly captured through the eyes, gentle hands and brush strokes of artist Henry Smith.

Henry has just spent hours driving through the soft creek beds that feed into Alice Springs in search of trees with meaning, character, strength and vulnerability. It's a process he's repeated for two years, culminating in 40 watercolours and three sculptures that have comprised an exhibition in Alice Springs.

Titled *Tree-Song*, the exhibition reflected the artist's obsession with old river red gums that are spread across Central Australia. But he isn't interested simply in capturing their images; preserving their locations matters too. All the works include the GPS co-ordinates for each tree, allowing buyers of his art to see the subject of the works in situ.

He describes the process as both a delight and a challenge. "Balancing the structure of a painting through drawing and then achieving fluidity through watercolour washes is always a challenge," Henry said.

These trees may ooze strength, but the lick of flames in tinder dry country can spell their demise. Henry also wanted to capture this vulnerability, so he put aside the painter's brush and picked up a blowtorch, pliers and steel.

His creation, titled *Carbon Copy*, is an imposing three-metre-high structure of polished metal that pays homage to a tree long gone. The work has just been bought by the Friends of Araluen Society in Alice Springs to celebrate the 25th birthday of the local Araluen Arts Centre.

A welded trail of words at its base tells the story: "In loving memory of river red gum born and died Todd River." Henry said the work was a tombstone for the estimated 300-year-old river red gum that had been burnt out many years before.

As the work arcs upwards, sharp metal fingers poke out awkwardly to represent shards of splintered wood that escaped the torrent of fire.

"The blackened and charred remnant of a tree is another aspect of its beauty that I have tried to capture through this work." He said trees were central to his exhibition because they were a powerful symbol of the world's delicate environment.

Henry has lived in Alice Springs since he dropped in to visit friends in 1994, and joined the university two years later. He brought skills as a painter, sculptor and set designer for projects for opera and ballet, art houses, television production companies and architectural firms.



### ANTENNAE

Henry Smith is a VET Lecturer in Art on the Alice Springs campus.



### LEFT

Artist Henry Smith in his home studio.

### BELOW

A close-up of a section of Henry Smith's sculpture *Carbon Copy*.

### TEXT

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### IMAGES

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