

For the past 25 years since the mid-1990s, Eager has travelled across networks of bitumen and dirt in various arts-based roles for Aboriginal organisations across the central and western deserts. He has mentored and assisted innumerable artists of incredibly diverse styles and strengths, and many that have received critical success. It is perhaps because of this exposure to the scale of, and unrelenting fervour for, the desert painting movement that Eager has continued to hone and consolidate his own visual language to – one that has become almost exclusively abstract.

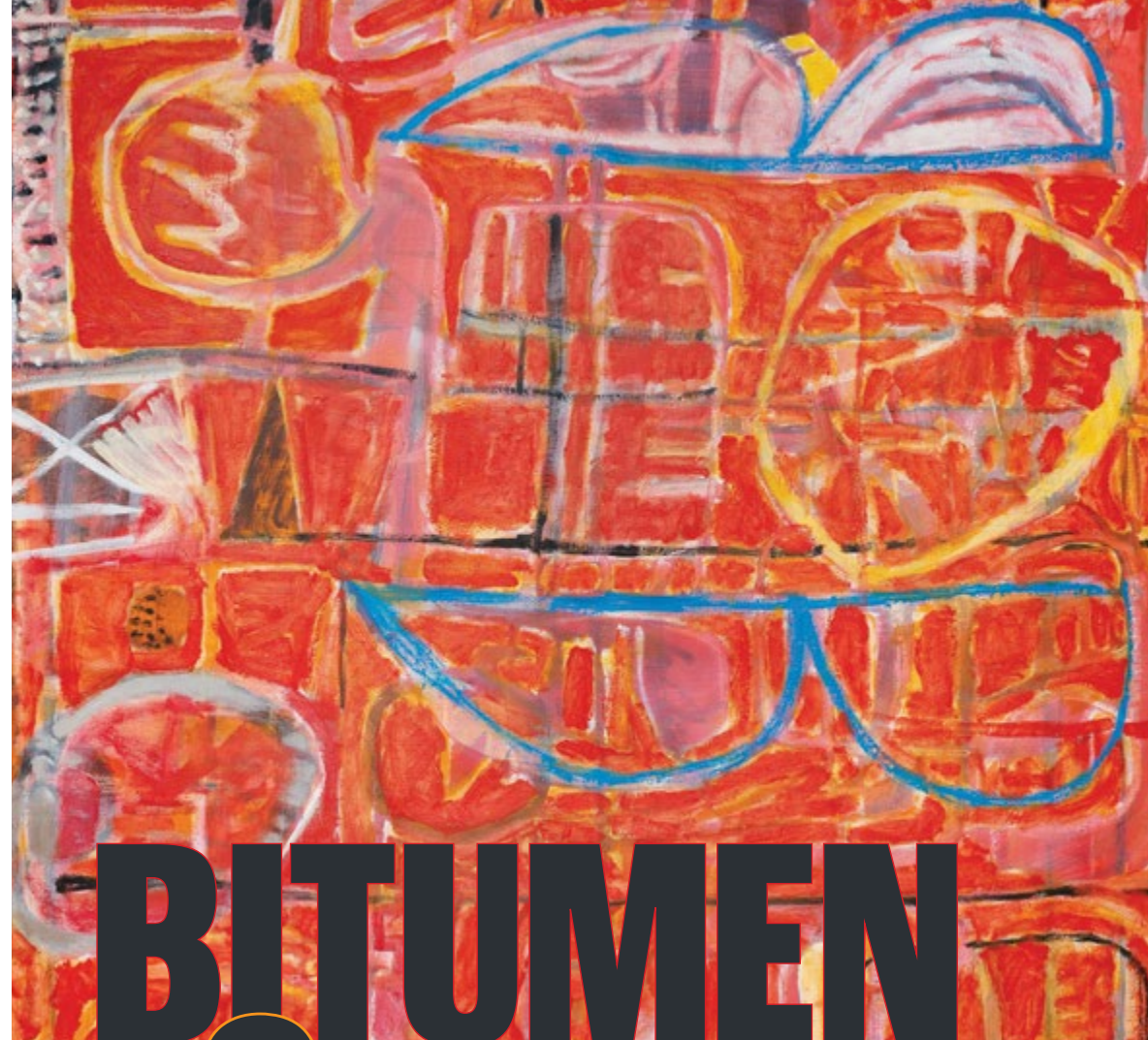
In 2004 and again in 2006, Eager and Strocchi undertook artist-in-residencies at Charles Darwin University's Northern Editions printmaking studio, creating a series of lithographs and etchings as astute observations of their time in the Top End. The residencies marked Eager's first foray into printmaking since art school and provided a new opportunity for him to conceptualise characteristics of the landscape through the different processes. Twelve of Eager's prints feature in the exhibition, with titles such as *Burnt Landscape*, *Build Up*, and *First Rain*.



Naramu Billabong, 1991, gouache on paper, 76 x 56 cm, courtesy of Robert Eager. Photograph: Viki Petheridge

Eager seems happiest painting robust compositions with equally robust oils on linen since the early 2000s and these works heave and burst with the light, colours and character of the bush. With titles such as *Hot Afternoon* (2005), *Desert Dawn #1* (2008) and *Red Town* (2018), these works employ line and palette as ruminations of the desert in all its forms and seasonal variations. With their grid-like structures and interjecting arcs and swirls, Wayne Eager's more recent works reveal a closer and more intimate observation of his surroundings. Having been captivated by the Territory for three decades seems to have finally satisfied something within him.

Kellie Joswig
Curator, *Bitumen & Dirt*
– *Wayne Eager: 30 years in the Territory*



BITUMEN & DIRT

WAYNE EAGER 30 YEARS IN THE TERRITORY
A Charles Darwin University Art Gallery touring exhibition

27 March – 14 June 2021
Araluen Arts Centre

22 October 2020 – 20 February 2021
CDU Art Gallery

CDU Art Collection preserves and documents the visual arts of the Northern Territory through the acquisition of artworks, created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists based in the Northern Territory or with connections to region. The collection also includes artworks from Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Comprising of more than 3,300 artworks - of various mediums - the CDU Art Collection is presented in public exhibitions and on-campus displays. The Collection is accessible as a teaching and learning resource.

CDU Art Gallery presents an annual program of exhibitions at its state-of-the-art gallery located within the University's Casuarina campus, Darwin. These exhibitions are professionally curated by CDU staff or are incoming-touring exhibitions from other Australian cultural institutions.

CDU Art Collection and Art Gallery staff;

Curator

Dr Joanna Barrkman

Collection and Exhibitions Officer

Eileen Lim

www.cdu.edu.au/artgallery

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West MacDonnell Ranges, 1994, oil on 3-ply, 30 x 214 cm, CDU Art Collection. Photograph: Anna Cadden

Bitumen & Dirt - Wayne Eager: 30 years in the Territory is a survey exhibition of paintings and prints by prominent Alice Springs-based landscape artist Wayne Eager. Featuring 78 works from public and private collections around Australia, including 14 from Charles Darwin University Art Collection, the exhibition charts Eager's career since he first arrived in the Northern Territory in 1990.

Early observations of the landscape have resulted in a large opus of figurative works in a gestural realist style however, Eager's visual language changed in the mid-1990s to a distinctly abstract one. He has honed his approach over the years to create densely layered paintings that reveal heavily structured compositions. The patterning of lines and dashes in many works in the exhibition evoke the lacework of dirt tracks and bitumen roads linking remote Aboriginal communities and outstations with the steadfast 'line' of the Stuart Highway - uniting the Territory from north to south. Together, the works can be read as a 'map' marking the far reaches of the Territory and its various topographies and juxtapositions of green, wet, humid tropics and red, dry, arid desert.

Wayne Eager first arrived in the Northern Territory in 1990 and had held his first solo exhibition at William Mora Gallery in Melbourne the previous year. He was in the throes of wider national recognition. Following formal studies in Painting at the Victorian College of the Arts (1976-79), where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Eager became a founding and committed member of the avant-garde Roar Studios, established in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy in 1982. For years, the output of work generated by the Roar artists was the exciting antithesis to the entrenched modes of artistic expression across the city, and exhibitions and events at Roar Studios were the place to be for many of Melbourne's younger cultural set. So why leave it all behind?

Ever the adventurer and perhaps seeking a slower pace, Eager had set off for the Territory in search of new experiences and inspiration in its vast and varied landscapes. To experience the 'great outback', it seems, is a rite of passage for many urban Australian artists. But, despite Eager attributing a long list of European, American and Australian modernist artists as his formative and enduring influences, two tenets of the Roar Studios also resonated deeply with his sensibilities and which continue to be a driving force - the foregrounding of landscape art as subject matter and a keen interest in the cultures and artistic output of Australia's Indigenous people (the Western Desert painting movement, in particular).



Orange Landscape, 2007, etching, 25 x 62 cm, WP (edition of 25), Gifted by the artist and Northern Editions in 2007, CDU Art Collection, CDU1606. Photograph: Fiona Morrison

Front cover detail: *Red Town*, 2018, oil on linen, 138 x 122.5 cm, courtesy of Wayne Eager. Photograph: Joyce Van Dyke

Indeed, the expansive deserts of the central region - 'home' for the past 28 years - with their monumental landforms, open blue skies and intense light, provide an inexhaustible resource for Eager's paintings and which underpin his entire oeuvre. However, the breadth of his work also includes visceral accounts of journeys to the Top End with its dense bush, high humidity and heavy clouds.

The works Eager produced during his first visit to the Northern Territory - that included a four-month stint staying with his brother at the CSIRO Kapalga Research Station in Kakadu National Park - was a series of gouache paintings on paper, rendering the dry season savannah in a sweeping figurative style. Despite being mostly representational, some of these early works offer a glimpse of the trajectory of his oeuvre and feature a more rigorous abstraction, such as *Dry Season Kakadu* (1990) and *Naramu Billabong* (1991). Another one, *Regrowth After Fire, Kakadu* (1991) - akin to Fred Williams' pared-back expressionism and the later works by Ian Fairweather - shows a sparse composition of broken black lines evoking a recently burnt landscape. It is a composition that would be revisited and reworked many times over in the ensuing years, as if the line itself sought a journey of introspection, mirroring the constant travelling of its creator: out, beyond, and back again.

With his partner Marina Strocchi, Eager spent five and a half years from 1992 to 1997 based at Haasts Bluff in Luritja country west of Alice Springs, establishing and later managing Ikuntji Artists. His time in this spectacular place was pivotal, and the imposing form of the West MacDonnell Ranges, soaring age-old like a jagged spine across an otherwise flat expanse of desert, provided the impetus for many works from this period. Eager's style continued to oscillate between figuration and abstraction in his quest for a true or pure expression, with this tension finding resolve in several impressive works including *Sandhill Country* (1995) - with its synthesis of striking palette of orange and yellow, evocative of the searing heat and an ancient torpor-like energy, and the segmented structures representing topographical undulations - *Whimsy* (1995) and *Lasseter's Last Letter* (1996). However, most of the paintings completed during Eager's time spent at Haasts Bluff were rendered in the painterly style of The Hermannsburg School, an example of which - *Ulumpawarru* (1994) - is held in the Charles Darwin University Art Collection.



Salty Blue, 2019, gouache on paper, 68 x 50 cm, courtesy of Wayne Eager. Photograph: Anna Cadden



Ulumpawarru, 1994, gouache on paper, 50 x 69 cm (image), 55 x 73 cm (paper), Purchased for CDU Art Collection in 1994, CDU227. Photograph: Fiona Morrison