Line of Dogs
a site, non-site installation
by Stephen Mulqueen
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# Line of Dogs

Stephen Mulqueen doesn't believe in 'art for art's sake.' Instead his art practice is resigned to unraveling and reconciling the economic and political within the poetic landscape as cultural outcome.

Already a respected sculptor in his native New Zealand, Stephen has lived mostly in Southland and Otago. A graduate of the Otago School of Art, Dunedin and Australian National University Canberra his practice has traversed a number of transformations. Rejecting formal qualities only for more specific representations his recent works embrace insights into the complex relationship between the local and global and the functions which post-industrial practices bring to bear upon a contested post-colonial landscape.

Stephen first came to Townsville as a visiting artist at James Cook University while en route to Cape York and Weipa in 2003. He was taken by the metallic landscape of the Townsville-Mt Isa rail conduit, and began to discern a relationship with themes that he had already developed in his work. 'Line of Dogs' fulfils the promise of these contemplations. The new forms expand the geographical and conceptual scope of Stephen's work while maintaining its coherence.

Earlier forms explore layers of cultural interaction around Motupohue/ Bluff Harbour on the south coast of the South Island. They evoke translations; ventifacts and residues of stone adzes left behind by Maori implement makers, and metal ingots produced by an aluminum smelter built on the Tiwai Point site in 1971. 'Line of Dogs' invites an intuitive consideration of comparable aspects of North Queensland's past and present.

Hybridity is an idea at the heart of the site, non-site installation. Railway dogs support the rail irons on the gallery floor. Stretching to the horizon in long mechanical sequences, they are an apt metaphor for the driving force of colonisation and industrialisation. But dogs are also animals, and therefore a medium through which humans come to terms with the landscape and the natural world. Again, as dingoes—and Dingo is a Queensland railway town—dogs are symbols for an adaptation to landscape. Just as the dingo as a pure breed is compromised, so adaptations to the land by sequential human waves gradually blur distinctions between the indigenous and the non-indigenous. 'Line of Dogs' visually evokes the line of meeting between cultures as potentially a site of mutual illumination.

More broadly, the installation invites the viewer to explore imaginatively the continuing linkages between North Queensland and the international industrial complex. The 'line of dogs' transports copper, zinc, lead and silver from the core of the land at Mt Isa to Townsville, poised on the edge of an ocean that gives access to nations and to international manufacturing companies. Some of the ore from Mt Isa goes through the Townsville copper refinery, while 80% of the copper is exported. The Line of Dogs carries gold from Mount Leyshon, south of Charters Towers, to the London bullion banks.

Copper and zinc in chemical combination make brass. In the installation this fusion suggests the multitudinous transmutations of the land's raw products under industrial processing. The transmuted minerals of north-west Queensland are used to build houses and factories, to sink new mines, to produce hardware, computers, TVs and refrigerators. They are made into farming and medical machinery and into cars, ships, aeroplanes and helicopters. Certainly they serve the global military machine in the form of bullets, missiles, bombs and guns. Some minerals and their products are consumed as energy. Others circle back to North Queensland disguised under a vast array of usable forms. The 'Line of Dogs' is a two-way system, and each person in the region and beyond is connected to it. This is the final connection that the installation encourages each viewer to contemplate.

Cheryl Taylor

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