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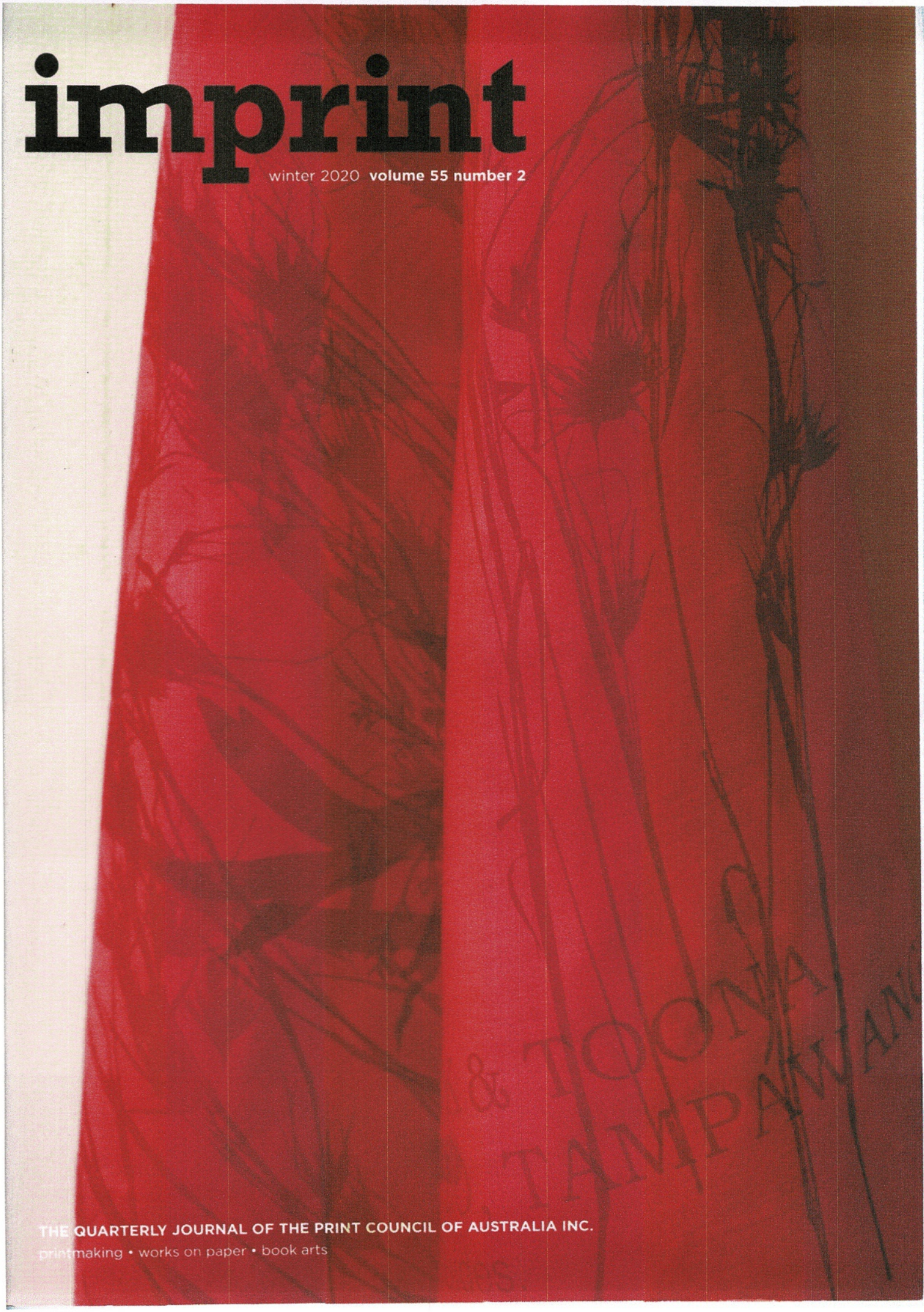

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The reality of the rural imaginary

***Lucy Cripps** examines artistic responses to rural existence.*

Rural Australia: the land of red earth and fenced golden landscapes flecked with gum trees and waterholes, jumbucks, weatherboard homes, rusted iron, and leather skinned farmers donning dusty Akubras. This pastoral land, often misrepresented in media culture, is home to thirty five percent of Australia's population,[1] and is often seen as socially and culturally dissociated from a fast-paced, technology-driven 21st century Australia. Visual ephemera such as kitsch items, film and television with their *ocker* characters,[2] and the racks of travel paraphernalia drenched in images of brahman cattle, sunburnt land, and jillaroos on horseback in tourist centres, aide this mythological sense of the Australian nation embedded in the psyche of many suburban and metro people. This skewed vision of the rural has been described as 'cultural cringe', a term long used in Australia.

The genre of 21st century Australian pastoralist art looms from the historical romanticism that hangs like a halo over the rural and remote communities of Australia. This is thanks to prolific Heidelberg School impressionist artists Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, and the literary works of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson. There has been a focus in the landscape tradition in Australia on the representation of the visual aesthetics of the land, and not the lived experience. This omission of the lived experience often hides the reality of the people on the land, their interventions and their relationships.

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above
Jane Giblin, *The Skinner and his dog*, 2013, lithograph, 180 x 70 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

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left
David Frazer, *The Long Way Home*, 2007, etching, 44 x 69 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

This has helped create what can be described as the Rural Imaginary, a myth that has perhaps gained its place due to the way it has bound Australians to a sense of place within the world.[3] However, there is an alternative version of the Rural Imaginary, that is, the rural reality. Contemporary Australian artists Jane Giblin and David Frazer have used the mediums of print and drawing to capture sensations of the lived experience of the rural landscape from the settler perspective. Their rural oeuvres provide visual arguments dismantling the stigma of the utopian romanticism associated with the rural and providing representations of the reality of the human condition. It can be said that it is the inhabitants and their interventions with the land that define this unique place.

What is the lived rural experience? There are perhaps two critical iterations of the person who is described as the lived rural experience: those who occupy the township or municipality in a rural or remote area, known as the townsfolk; and those surrounding the township community working the land, that is the farmers and their labourers. Both groups have an embedded identity in the rural, sharing similar emotions and sensations of belonging,[4] however they still have a varied experience and denote different states of the rural human condition. Frazer holds the perspective of the townsfolk from his childhood rural community experiences and later adulthood living in a regional area, while Giblin is an outsider or 'tourist'[5] using her practice methodology to connect with those in the farmed, fenced landscape. Giblin, through *en plein air* drawing, records farmers and laborers, creating dynamic and instinctive work that pays tribute to and captures the physicality of the farmers and their labourers and the reality and often repugnancy of their tasks. Frazer and Giblin tackle the concept of the lived rural experience and provide strong visual commentary both naturalistic and expressionistic to capture sensations inherent in rural people.

Frazer, often creating poignant imagery through the deliberate omission of the human image, creates narrative-fuelled naturalistic rural scenes evoking sensations of nostalgia, longing and isolation. In his 2008 wood engraving *Lost*, the solitary caravan surrounded by the individual pastoral animals resides alone in the paddock overshadowed by the township on the hill, creating a scene of the lived experience of the townsfolk. The caravan in Frazer's work acts as a symbol for displacement and isolation. In comparison with the idea of stability associated with a built house, the caravan with its moveability and transient nature serves as a motif for the sensation of being lost or trying to find one's place. The tight placement of the buildings that constitute the township behind the caravan suggest a close community of people, emphasising the solitude of the caravan and its occupant within the landscape. The home on the hill sitting directly above the caravan, suggests longing for an escape to an easier and less lonely way of life with the caravan look up and out to the home; this articulates an aspect of the rural lived experience.[6] As well as hardship and isolation, a sense of resilience is implied through the texture and materiality of the caravan's exterior. The vertical folds of the awning and the decorative ridges flowing horizontally across the rear of the caravan are redolent of the structure of corrugated iron, a material central to buildings in the rural and remote areas of Australia. It is a hardy material that survives many hardships such as fire and drought and is metaphor for the resilience of the rural inhabitant.[7]

There is a deliberate sparseness to Frazer's work. While the composition seems full of the township, trees, sky and fauna, the pictorial space is composed and structured. He has carefully composed the image with key figural and architectural elements. For example, Frazer's depiction of pastoral animals is not to place them in herds, but to use them sparingly, as signifiers of pastoralism and the rural way of life. In the central foreground is a solitary Pipee stacking plastic chair.[8] An icon of Australian outdoor living, the Pipee is a nod to working-class and middle-class living,

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above
David Frazer, *Lost*, 2008, wood engraving, 15 x 20 cm, edition of 30. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

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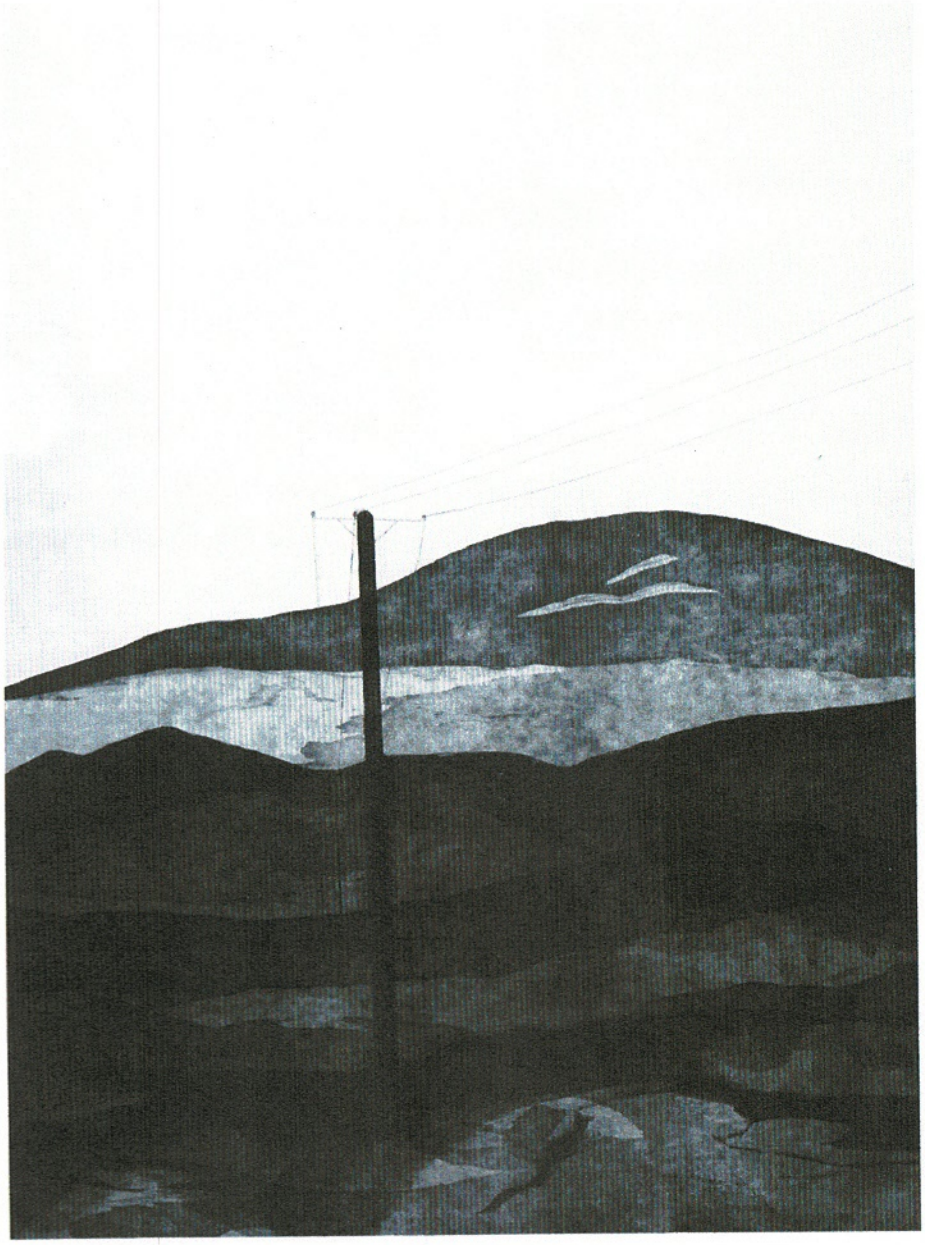
right
Jane Giblin, *Stockman 009*, 2017, gelatin silver print, 25 x 26 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Olivia Moroney, *between lines and hills*, 2017, etching and aquatint, 60 x 80 cm, edition of 5. Reproduced with the permission of the artist and Handmark Gallery, Salamanca and Evandale, Tasmania.

and to the image of Australia. The chair is placed at the rear of the caravan and facing slightly to the left. Though the chair is facing the viewer, this slight tilt creates a feeling of disconnectedness, adding to this sense of isolation. Although this work is about the isolation and longing of a person in the rural setting, there is no human figure shown—only hints in the chair, gas bottle and dog. This omission of the human figure to render strong images of the sensations of longing in the rural and the townsfolk lived experience is continued in his etchings *The Long Way Home* and *On the Edge of Town (by day)*. The outskirts of a rural town are articulated again in *On the Edge of Town (by day)*, the landscape in the image is the paddock adjacent from the land in his wood engraving *Lost*. The eerie tones of the greens and blues illuminate the sensations coldness and the longing present in *Lost*, while the composition of the bare tree behind the fully leaved evergreen create similar tensions as the caravan and home. The deciduous tree standing alone in the cold on the fence is looking out into the distance.

Similar notions are created in *The Long Way Home*. The rusted-out carcasses of vehicles and farm machinery create a barrier to the land beyond the undulating golden hills. A dump zone of rotting machinery is a farm scenery staple, reflecting the history of the property through the years, therefore this rendering of the carcasses by Frazer could serve as a motif for either entrapment or struggle to escape a tradition or embedded way of life. Frazer captures the experience of being unsure in the rural setting, depicting a rural person not embedded in the farming way of life but instead trapped in the isolation of the rural community wanting to experience bigger opportunities or stability further afield.

Moving from the outskirts of a rural town and the townsfolk and into the realities of working in the landscape are Giblin's lithographic portraits. The landscape that she works inside has been observed by fellow Tasmanian Olivia Moroney, her etching and aquatint *between lines and hills* (2017) captures a scene of undulating hills. The only signs of human intervention in the vast landscape is the string of powerlines. Moroney has captured in this work the isolation and seemingly desolate land that Giblin has trekked and investigated and the loneliness of the landscape that articulated in Frazer's work.

Giblin's perspective is of someone who has a connection to the earth and a passion for representing those in the rural environment, but who has a suburban origin. Giblin explores those who reside permanently in the domesticated landscapes of the bush, watching them as they work, exploring the fenced farmed lands that they have changed since settlement. She captures the tenacity and visceral interactions, the tumultuous relationship between people and their beasts and the lived experience of the farming denizen. One of the most unpleasant jobs on the farm, one quite repulsive to those not acclimated to rural ways, is the slaughtering and skinning of a sheep. On a property in the north of the Tasmanian midlands, Giblin photographed and drew as she watched a farmer hang and methodically dismember a carcass. This resulted in the lithographic study *The Skinner and his dog* (2013). The application of the thick, bloody inks on top of the underlying lithographic portrait of the skinner demonstrates Giblin's active relationship with her medium. Rich dark red inks wiped across the background by the hooves of the sheep, and the splattering pool of blood spurting from the slain sheep's neck express the brutality of taking a life. The mark of the artist is captured by downward streaks made by dragging her fingers through the red ink. The overlapping of the skinner and dog creates a tension equivalent to the thrill of the kill. This layered composition poses the questions: who is in control? Who slaughtered the sheep? And what is the role of the dog in the domesticated landscape? For Giblin the dog and its relationship with its human masters provides an apt metaphor, enabling her to explore ideas

right
David Frazer, *On the Edge of Town (by day)*, 2006, etching, 47 x 79.5 cm, edition of 60. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

below
Jane Giblin, *The Testimony (The Skinner's Dog, The Skinner, The Shepherdess, The Shearer, The Shearer's Dog)*, 2014, lithograph, 180 x 400 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

of power, desire, and sexual compulsion. The print is a dynamic array of line and scratched marks defining the forms of the skinner, the anthropomorphic canine and the slaughtered sheep. The merging of the two live bodies in the print prompts a conversation on the instincts and conditions of rural dwellers and their lived experiences. This multi-faceted work also comments on the desensitised nature of the rural human condition. The grotesque rendering of the skinner and his anthropomorphic dog creates a shock or moment of horror and disbelief for the squeamish or unexposed everyman disconnected from the rural lived experience. It asks what it is to be someone working in this environment, questioning their humanity and attitude towards their stock. *Stockman 009* is one of the images from a series that captures this rural reality of the primitive relationship between human and dog. Within the farmed fenced landscape, the dog is both companion and labourer.

We have seen these roles of the canine in Giblin's lithographs *The Skinner and his dog*, and the pentaptych *The Testimony*. This photograph presents a mediator on the sensations of lust, pleasure, and vulnerability present in both humans and canines. *The Testimony* (2014) continues this theme of the lived experience creating a tribute to the rural dwellers and workers in the Midlands of Tasmania.[9] The pentaptych combats the nationalistic, romanticised masculinity inherent in the Australian rural imaginary through the rendering of confronting images of a hunter/skinner, shearer, their dogs and a solo female sheep farmer. Giblin's objective in making this print was to represent the 'energy and work'[10] of the rural population, their connection to the land, and the monotonous and occasionally repugnant nature of the job, which remains 'mostly hidden from those thousands travelling the highways of Tasmania and Australia... but exists just beyond the horizon or just up a dirt road, beyond an immediate barrow or conglomerate of hills.'[11]

Central to Giblin's country images is acknowledgement of the history and ownership of the land and also, importantly, the representation of women in the Australian rural imaginary: their place within the landscape, and their relationship to the animals in their care. The central panel of *The Testimony, The Shepherdess*, addresses the role of women in the rural imaginary and seeks to deconstruct and counter the masculinity perpetuated by rural stereotypes. As in Ethel Spowers' 1932 linocut *The Harvest* the female figure is placed centrally among the male workers, activating the role of the woman as a worker. Drawn in a simple khaki-brown line, the shepherdess sits above her dog, which is arched over, protecting the woolly sheep crouching below. Giblin uses line to search for the connection between the woman and the land. The figure is almost ghostly, drawn in a monotone line, her pure white skin contrasting with the warm earthy yellow ochre and flesh tones of the background. *Stockman 009* continues a constant question in the artistic practice of Giblin: the woman's place in the domesticated landscape. In contrast to Frazer's narrative scenes providing arguments for the psyche of rural townsfolk, with limited connection to the land of famers, Giblin's recognition of the shearer, skinner and female farmer provide discourse on their roles in Australia today and provide insight into a life often hidden from plain sight, off the beaten track and down dirt roads.

Notes

1. *Demography and Population*, Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health, March 17, 2015, https://sarrah.org.au/content/demography-and-population.
2. Lorna Kaino, "Woop Woop(s) and Woolly Film-Making: Rural Representations of Culture in Contemporary Australian Feature Film," *Rural Society 10*, no. 3 (January 2000): 319–27, https://doi.org/10.5172/rsj.10.3.319.
3. Traudi Allen, *Homesickness: Nationalism in Australian Visual Culture* (South Yarra, Vic: Macmillan Art Pub, 2008), 5.
4. Graeme Davison and Mark Brodie, *Country Life*, in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia* (Clayton, Vic.: Monash University ePress, 2006)
5. Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, ed., *Contemporary Gippsland Artists: A Touring Exhibition 1990-1992* (Morwell: Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, 1990), 10-11, 15-16.
6. Davison and Brodie, *Struggle Country*.
7. Allen, *Homesickness*, 137-145.
8. A heavy duty and durable stackable plastic chair moulded from a single piece of plastic, widely used by councils, clubs, schools and churches for indoor and outdoor use.
9. The Print Council of Australia, *Jane Giblin: The Earth Muzzle*, April 27, 2018, https://www.printcouncil.org.au/jane-giblin-the-earth-muzzle/.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.