

The Land - The Stony Rises Project, RMIT 2009

My art deals with ancestral memories and identities of women of the Manifold family, an early pioneering family of the Western District of Victoria of which I am a part. I am the fifth Marion in this Victorian family.

My linocuts use Walther Wither's murals in Purrumbete, the original Manifold homestead, as a starting point to explore the lives of the Manifold women across 100 years. I compare the linocutting technique in carving these women's identities – the physical grind and skinning one's knuckles – to the hardships faced by the early pioneer women living in rough huts in great isolation and with only basic commodities.

I am an artist and historian living on a volcano overlooking the Stony Rises. My home Wiridgil, (meaning flying squirrel), is made from the earth's basalt, 'bluestone', and was built for my husband's grandfather's brother, Tom Manifold who was son of one of the original explorers and pioneers of the district, and whose legacy includes the Camperdown clock tower.

The early pioneering Manifolds felt at one with the land and called it 'the wished for land'. After initially being confronted by the Indigenous inhabitants, the Manifolds had long-lasting friendships and working relationships with the local Aboriginal people across at least the next 80 years.

Well-known Australian poet John Streeter Manifold wrote of his love of the land and respect for his Aboriginal friend Pompey Austin:

The Land
The hurt I hated most at nine years old
Was separation, not from kith and kin
But from the land, the factual tawny-gold
Acres whose barley brushed a rider's shin.

Fragrant in summer, kind to peregrine
And painted quail, yet cruel to withhold
Itself from me and not let me in.
I was a moody little boy, I'm told.

Angry at being made to feel a fool –
I couldn't eat it, kiss it, hold its hand
Or suck its breast – I tried to turn my back.
But used to dream of it at boarding-school
And envy Pompey Austin whom the land
Seemed to enfold and bless, since he was black.

The stony landscape was central to the Manifolds' lives. The stone was used to create stone walls in an attempt to rabbit-proof the land, clear the paddocks and contain the stock, and it was used

in the construction of their homes, and for their tombstones. One letter written by the first Marion Manifold in 1871 records the tragic experience of her child's sudden death.

Living in a Manifold family homestead I am surrounded by and live the history of the land. I recreate the sinewy manna gums (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) used by Walter Withers as coulisses to frame the scene. The fragmented women and iconography constructed from old photos, wills and letters, and the decorative idioms that followed – patterns from blinds, personal belongings, porcelain and china in my home – show the losses and little luxuries that were part of early women settlers' lives. I feel the presence of the women who came before me, and layer meanings and time in my work.

Marion Manifold, 2009

ⁱ W.G. Manifold. 1984. *The Wished For Land*. Ausbooks, Camperdown.