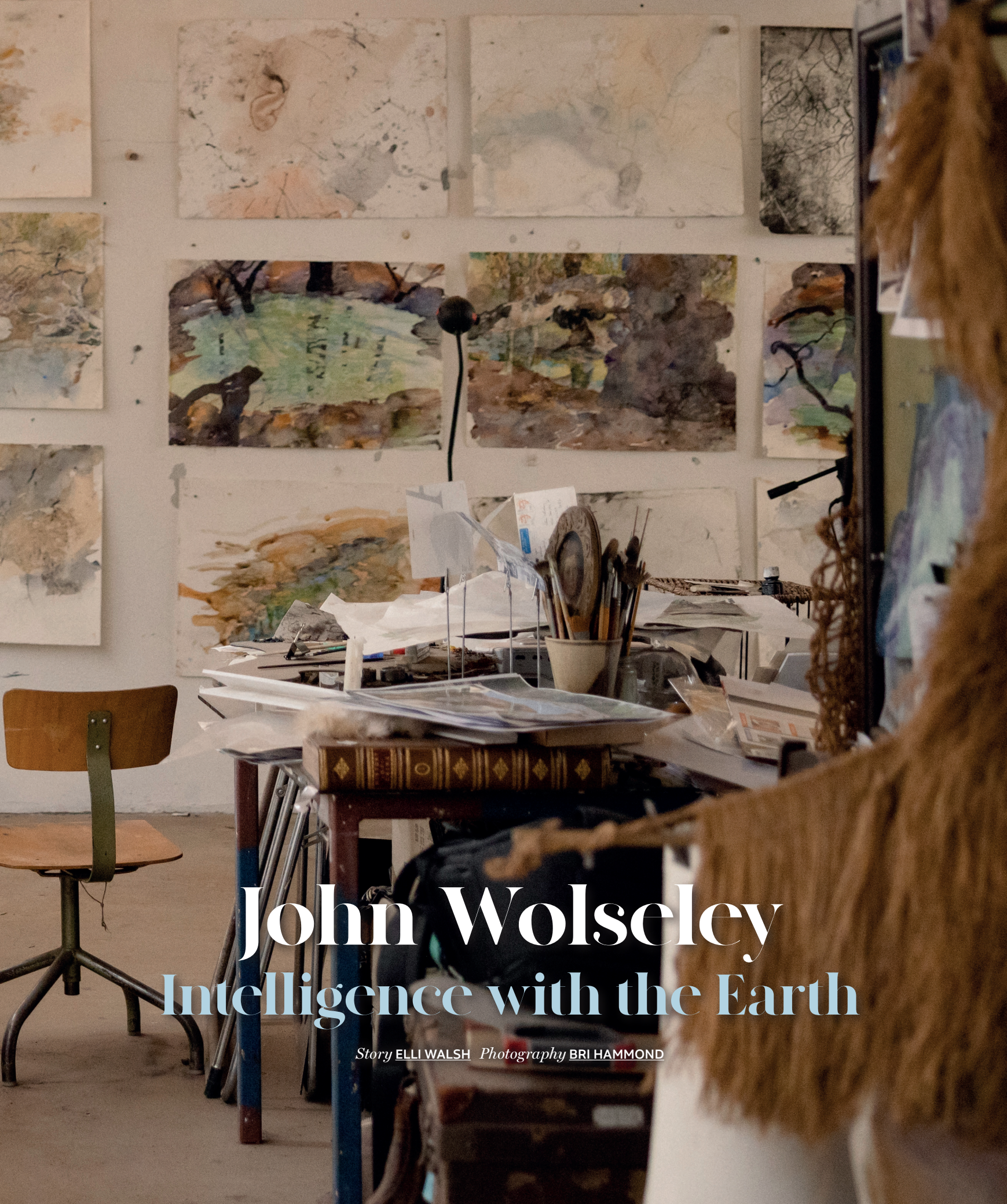




John Wolseley
Intelligence with the Earth

Story ELLI WALSH *Photography* BRI HAMMOND



01

OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES, JOHN WOLSELEY'S WORK IN WATERCOLOUR, DRAWING, PRINTMAKING, AND INSTALLATION HAS FORMED A CAVERNOUS MEDITATION ON THE EARTH AS A HARMONIC LIVING SYSTEM. HE HAS LIVED AND WORKED ALL OVER THE CONTINENT, FROM THE MOUNTAINS OF TASMANIA TO THE FLOODPLAINS OF ARNHEM LAND, TRACING THE CREASES AND COURSES OF THE LIVING, BREATHING LAND.

"I suppose it all started when my mother committed suicide, when I was five." John speaks deeply, slowly, every word heavy with the weight of a lifetime. Boulders roll off his tongue with heart-knocking profundity, and yet he is impossibly eloquent, sentences feather-light and frank. John tells me about the origins of his love for the natural world, about how his earliest years were spent on a farm in the south of England, where every day he would escape the fierce nannies employed by his father – into the forests, the streams, the ancient trees. "I think," John pauses, "I was looking for my mother."

From his home on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, Whipstick Forest, John recalls his childhood with cadences of wonderment and wounding. It's clear that he became obsessed with insects, animals and reptiles as a respite from humanity. Once, he spent so many hours observing lizards on a decayed walnut stump that his father contacted a child psychologist. At the age of six Wolseley was sent to a boarding school on the other side of England, where he collected various pets – including a salamander, and England's first hamsters from a litter in Syria. "That's when I started thinking I was a naturalist," he recalls. As he grew up, John became increasingly interested in looking at the world through the eyes of other creatures, using art as an instrument to enter the circuitous processes of the cosmos.

Wolseley's conversation is stippled with quotations from his favourite naturalists – Gilbert White, Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russel Wallace, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and James Lovelock – plucked verbatim from the vast library of his extraordinary mind. Like a scientist, his art practice relates the



02



minutiae of the natural world to the abstract dimensions of the earth's dynamic systems. Leaf, feather, moth, and termite become Gaian microcosms, which he often collages onto the river, the tree, the macrocosm. "Funny old Humboldt described the earth as a natural whole animated and moved by inward forces," John tells me. "What I hope I'm painting is a natural whole animated and moved by inward forces, which morph into the lizards and beetles and moths." He follows this swiftly with a second analogy: "Goethe said that each creature is but a patterned gradation of one great harmonious whole. I'm trying to paint what you might call a patterned gradation of energy fields, which turn into a moth or a lizard. As they fit into the painting hopefully it becomes one great harmonious whole." His art, and his very being, can be read as a sort of photosynthetic absorption of the ecological world; where symbiotic forces are converted to mark, mood, and material.

The pulse, the energy, the flow of the earth – what the early Greeks called phusis – is empathetically distilled by Wolseley in his works. He seeks to close the aperture between himself and the natural forms he paints. In the work *Umwelt – The life world of the mangrove oyster, the Teredo worm and the Giant marbled eel*, 2019, the artist engages with Jakob von Uexküll's concept of umwelt, or "lifeworld," whereby in order to understand nature one must undergo a kind of shape-shifting and enter into the umwelt of creatures. Liquescent forms drift in and out of recognition as Wolseley stretches the pooling, swampy fibre of watercolour to its limits. Oyster, eel, and worm appear as wild phantasms, uncapturable by the eye yet always present. Layered around them, abstracted marks made with carbonised wood and graphite hover on the paper like nature's hieroglyphs transcribed through a patient and benevolent hand. This composition feels cartographic, mapping the umwelt with a dialect intimately shared between the artist and his subject.

Wolseley has a collaborative soul. His oeuvre is an ecosystem, seamed with complex interrelationships of scientists, naturalists, poets, artists, philosophers, and nature itself. His artistic process involves visiting a site without any prior learning before travelling around with a naturalist and scientist specialising in that area. He then reads their work, and consults his great library – which, John assures me, is the largest library of poetry held by any artist in Australia. He engages the poets who have written in that region, and seeks out the

01 *Song of sea, sand, and salt – Monibeong,* 2006, watercolour, graphite carbonised wood on paper, 151.5 × 175.5 cm

02 *Flight of ventifacts, Mallee,* 2006–2011, charcoal, watercolour, and synthetic polymer paint on 57 sheets, dimensions variable

03 *Murray Sunset Refugia with Ventifacts,* 2008–2009, carbonised wood, watercolour, and graphite on paper, 120 × 232 cm; 267 × 459 cm overall

04 *Umwelt – the life world of the Mangrove oyster, the Teredo worm and the Giant marble eel,* 2019, watercolour, corbonised wood, grapite, relief print and chine-collé on paper, 153 × 346 cm

05 *Termitaria: Indwelling II – The eusocial life of arboreal termite nests with pardalotes and golden shouldered parrots,* 2020-2021, woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage, and watercolour on cotton, Mino washi and Gampi paper, 205 × 120 cm



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Indigenous elders of a place. Through methods of direct physical or kinetic contact, Wolseley also collaborates with nature. Collage, frottage, decollage, crumplage, chiasmage, grattage, prollage, and rollage (the lexicon of modernism) see the artist converse with the actual ecologies of a particular site. He has made etchings, rubbings, and relief prints of beetle larvae as they tunnel under the bark of trees in Victoria and Arnhem Land. He has found ways of enabling the spawn of coral in tropical seas to fix themselves directly onto the paper. He's buried unfinished drawings for months or years so that the movements of the earth can continue the work (a process he terms "sedimentage"). Through these ways of working, of surrendering, Wolseley avoids imposing ideas on the landscape, instead acting as a medium through which nature reveals itself. For *Murray Sunset Refugia with Ventifacts*, 2008–09, Wolseley let loose papers in scorched desert scrub for months, to rise and fall in the desert winds. Each sheet travelled long distances, discovered in the arms of trees or huddled in banks of sand, recording along their journey carbon traces in the form of grazes and marks drawn by the charcoal fingers of shrubs (what he calls "frots" and "frotting"). Having been made soft from dews and showers, and dried and tossed by the wind, they had become fixed in a variety of sculptural forms, termed "ventifacts" by Wolseley. There is something decidedly circulatory about this work – respiratory, even – with each ventifact breathed in and out by the land, riding the ripples of its heartbeat.

Perhaps Wolseley's greatest collaborator has been the late Mulkun Wirrpanda, a renowned Yolŋu artist and ceremonial leader of the Dhudi-Djapu clan of East Arnhem Land. Wolseley met Mulkun in 2009 while in Baniyala, and after a day spent harvesting tubers and yams, Mulkun asked him to be her wawa (brother), giving him the name Langgurrk, a type of beetle grub living in mud and yams. Since then, until Mulkun's passing in 2021, the pair met regularly in the Midawarr season, wandering through the floodplains of Northeast Arnhem Land, gathering, documenting, and painting the rich diversity of yam, termite mounds, medicinal plants, and fruit. What connected these artists was an intense belief in the originary importance of the natural world, and a shared awareness of how our accelerating loss of connection with Country will result in terminal damage. In 2017, their collaboration and extraordinary friendship was celebrated at the National Museum of Australia in *Midawarr Harvest: The Art of Mulkun Wirrpanda and John Wolseley*, a major exhibition charting the plants of Northeast Arnhem Land through their shared obsession with traditional Yolŋu plant use.

It becomes apparent, talking to John, that his life journey has been one of escape. He arrived in Australia in 1976 when he was thirty-eight, a migration that he recalls was "partly to get away from history, but also to get away from the rigid way the English land and country had been so reconstructed and structured and dumbed down. I wanted to escape to a country where you could still see the bones of nature and huge areas of original ecologies." His paintings are, indeed, seeded in moments of escape to wild country when the land reveals something of its secrets; where it unfurls for an eternal second, flashing the perfect connectedness of its systems in breathless splendour.


" I'm trying to paint what you might call a patterned gradation of energy fields, which turn into a moth or a lizard "



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06 *Magnetic, arboreal and subterranean termite nests on the savannah plains of East Arnhem Land* (detail), 2020–2021, woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage, and watercolour on cotton, Mino washi, and Gampi paper, installation view, *The National 2021: New Australian Art,* Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2021, photographed by Felicity Jenkins

07 *Windblown insects on the salt –Lake Tyrrell (for JC),* 2018, etching chine-collé over watercolour, 10.57 × 68.5 cm, edition of 10, photographed by Luis Power

08 *Huon Pine Slab from Lake Pedder engraved with Four Endangered Red-Tailed Black-Cockatoos,* 2006, wood cut, 187 × 45 cm

09 *17. Wathe reserve Ventifact with Singing Honeyeater,* 2008, found charcoal, graphite, and watercolour on paper, 29 × 25 cm (irregular)



10

While Wolseley originally sought wild ecosystems, these days he's also exploring nodes of symbiosis between humanity and the earth. He was involved in Earth Canvas, a project pairing artists with regenerative farmers in the Riverina, and has since followed various rivers on regenerative farms in the Wimmera and the Mallee. This year he spent time in Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary, painting burrowing bettongs and bilbies, looking at the ways bettong warrens have altered the landscape.

No number of words can encapsulate John Wolseley's life, work, and mind. He is an artist who thinks and feels so endlessly about the world that it has become his raison d'être. As our conversation reaches its natural end, John says – each word fervently inflected – "I'll end with a quote from old Henry David Thoreau: 'Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?'" ◘

EXHIBITIONS

Tracing the ephemeral rivers of Wimmera Plains –Recent paintings and etchings by John Wolseley
22 November – 10 December 2022
Australian Galleries, Melbourne

John Wolseley
20 January – 11 February 2023
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney



11

10 *1. The harmonic patterns of Mallee birdsong – Finch Eagle and Bush Curlew,* 2004, carbonised wood, watercolour on paper, and music stands, installation, overall approximately 200 × 350 × 150 cm

11 *Echidna Riddler,* 2019, French oak champagne riddler with 30 beetle-engraved branches (blackworm, redgum, grey box, yellow gum), two hinged panels at 149.5 × 72 × 5 cm each; installation dimensions variable, photographed by Luis Power

Courtesy the artist, Australian Galleries, Melbourne and Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney