



Recovery

THE FLOOD OBJECTS PROJECT

paintings by Deb Mostert

We live in a country of contrasts and in the state of Queensland, floods are part of the fabric of our lives. The flood in the Brisbane River valley has a long history of representation. Indigenous ceremonies, art and myth about the Brisbane River often referred to a malevolent, brooding spirit who held the power to destroy as well as provide sustenance.

Historical records from the earliest European visits to the river reveal sketches capturing the amazement of John Oxley and fellow explorers who witnessed flood debris high on cliffs bordering the placid, beautiful river. The impact of a succession of floods from the 19th century was recorded in fragile black and white photographs. Personal memories of the 1974 flood mark for many in my generation an epic story about this place and the experience of flood. The 2011 floods, affecting so much of Queensland, was an event now etched into our collective experience. The physical response to the 2011 natural disaster was amazing. We will forever remember the 'mud army' of community reaching out to help neighbour and stranger.

It is often long after the physical response has been met that we invite artists and sages to provide the community with images and stories to help make meaning of the flood experiences. While floods can be explained scientifically or given historical benchmarks in metres above flood level, the understanding of flood to those who experience its effects calls for meaning making. Artists, storytellers and sages give accounts and try to shed light on the trauma and mystery of the flood experience through images, stories and performances.

Human history abounds with epics of great floods and the consequent human desire to give meaning to the experiences. In the great flood of Noah, we have a personal and community story of trauma, loss, survival, redemption and renewal of hope. The dove became more than a bird retrieving an olive branch.

It became the universal visual symbol of peace and promise. The destructive rain became the very means through which the sun shone to create a rainbow (a visual symbol of hope and renewal). Ordinary things such as doves and rainbows became signs and symbols of hope and promise. They became sacramental signs. Sacrament is when the ordinary becomes sacred and the sacred becomes ordinary.

Mostert's project about the flood of 2011 is sacramental. She presents objects that carry deep significance and they become sacred, containing grief, loss, redemption and hope. They are a lament on the transience of all things. Mostert continues in the artistic tradition of Belgian artist René Magritte who often used ordinary everyday objects such as hats, pipes and candles to represent something beyond the things themselves.

Mostert used her personal connections with people and asked them to elect precious objects redeemed from the flood waters. These paintings portray objects that came back to them, items that were salvaged from the mud, or saved from the waters. They are things that hold some measure of memory and value. They are also a lament on the transience of all things and are painted as modern day Dutch still life Vanitas or Flower Paintings, venerated as sacramental because of all the human experiences they represent but reminding us of our fragile existence.

This body of work asks us to look again not just at the thing represented but at what it points to...as seen in the mirror of the human condition and the window that sees beyond to the transcendence of the divine.

Dr Lindsay Farrell,
Associate Professor ACU. 2012

Mick and Anita live at North Booval and as their home was near a creek, they watched the waters rise with some trepidation. They thought they may have escaped too much damage when it seemed the flood water might stop short of their upper level but it was not to be. The flood waters rose a foot into their top level, inundating most of their possessions.

When I asked what they had rescued I was taken on a tour of the salvage. The random items included model planes and trains, a football mascot, childhood sports equipment, a pool table shifted by the waters, a lonely sports shoe left wedged in the rafters and a swollen cupboard filled with trophies.

For the painting, they settled on Mick's treasured antique train signal lamp, Anita's warped childhood tennis racquet and their son's model coal carriage as a sample of what they had kept despite damage and clinging flood mud.

They had many stories of help and hindrance, of acts of selfless generosity from strangers and neighbours alike, wrangles with insurance companies, praise for the way their teenagers coped and helped out.

Standing later on the front lawn, Mick gazed around his neighbourhood and said quietly

'It was surreal and traumatic'.

Mick and Anita, North Booval. 2012 oil on board 40 x 62 cm





Marty and Becky were away on holiday when their family home in Brisbane's Western suburbs was overtaken by flood waters. Sometime later they received a phone call from a man who said he'd found an Aussie Rules football with their phone number written on it. His offer to return the ball was gratefully accepted by Marty who relayed his family's address.

Silence followed on the phone and when Marty asked where he'd found the ball, the man's puzzling reply was that he'd picked it up on the beach at Mooloolaba! Had the ball really been able to travel that far, from their garage, bobbing along in the flooded waterways and up the Brisbane River into the Bay and beyond? They will never know for sure but how great it was to retrieve something from the devastating flood waters.

Becky had her own object returned to her. Weeks after the flood, while watching her children play in the backyard still swamped with stinking mud, she felt what she thought was a rock under foot. She dug down into the mud intending to hurl the 'rock' away but instead, decided to wipe it clean and to her delight she uncovered her grandmothers' locket with her silver thimble still inside. Becky had stood on the only patch of mud in their acreage property concealing such a personal family treasure!

For Becky, It became something of a symbol of hope and redemption in the cruel times of clean-up.

Marty and Becky, Pullenvale

2012
oil on board
46 x 61 cm

Wim and Rachel live at Riverview and as the name suggests, they indeed had a view – of Six Mile Creek as it swelled and crept up to overtake their property. They had moved some things out of the house but didn't get to the shed where they had many books Wim had collected and catalogued, in storage. They were housed in a wall made of milk crates, each stacked full with his treasured tomes. These were sadly all irretrievably damaged and had to be thrown away.

Philosophical, Wim laughed at the recollection of coming back into the flooded house to realize the last book he'd been reading, that had sat forgotten with his coffee cup on the coffee table, was perfectly fine. He believes the round, pine coffee table floated up with the water, staying stable and then gently came back down with his Reader's Digest and cup still dry.

Rachel was born in Hong Kong and a student of Chinese Art, particularly ceramics of the Tang Dynasty. During their travels over 3 years throughout China, Wim and Rachel visited many kiln sites and had a piece of culturally valuable Changsha Ware pottery. The broken fragment from a pitcher was in Rachel's studio, in the flooded shed. Rachel was careful to explain to volunteers who came to help in the clean-up, that if they found a broken piece of pottery, not to throw it away as it was about 1200 years old and rather precious! The pottery fragment depicted was thankfully recovered.

Wim and Rachel both practice the Chinese art of calligraphy and although they saved many wall hangings from the waters, sadly most of their calligraphy brushes were ruined.



*Wim and Rachel,
Riverview.*

2012

oil on board

34 x 44 cm

Margaret lives in Goodna and has the auspicious honour of having lived in the same property through the 1974 flood and a damaging house fire in 1984 only to be totally submerged yet again in 2011. She has many stories associated with a home and yard she loves despite the disasters and now looks forward to a time when the newly developing home and yard create their new narratives.

Margaret was at work on the Tuesday the waters started to encroach on her property so her newly married son and daughter-in-law braved the rising waters to see if they could save anything. The roads were already cut and despite the danger they managed to carry several large, heavy bags of hastily gathered possessions over their heads through the waters to safety. Margaret's son made the effort to retrieve his mum's favourite perfume from her room instead of saving any of the wedding presents the couple had stored there.

During the overwhelming flood clean-up many hard decisions were made and much of Margaret's possessions ended up as a huge pile of wreckage on the footpath. The sad and sorry remains of the bride's wedding veil was pulled from the mud, looking like a decrepit rag. A friend washed and coaxed it back to life and I have combined it with a water damaged wedding photograph of Margaret's parents she couldn't bear to throw away. I also included that perfume bottle made memorable by the thoughtful way it was rescued.



Margaret, Goodna.

2012

oil on board

26 x 36 cm

Benitta, Goodna.

2012

oil on board

46 x 62 cm



Steve, Oxley.

2012

oil on board

45 x 53 cm



Benitta lives in an adjoining unit to her sister in Goodna. During the flood, they were waiting for police to return and advise them if they should evacuate when it became very apparent that the water was not waiting. They fled to higher ground and watched as everything went under. Only a few weeks out from a major exhibition of her works, Benitta lost all her possessions including 2 years of artworks and all her art materials. Her home of 8 years was damaged beyond habitation and her sister was in the same situation.

When I visited Benitta, she was back in her newly refurbished, very slick and uncluttered unit. She described a strange feeling of faint panic when she contemplated retrieving her art materials and spreading them out over the unit to work as was her previous method. It appeared that there had been a shift in her psyche and she now felt more comfortable with less clutter and more order and structure.

We discussed what objects she would like to offer but she really didn't have much to choose from. Nearly everything was destroyed or thrown out by well-meaning but unthinking 'mud army' volunteers. The little red box was one of a pair she had bought and lugged all around Paris and was so glad to have found in all the mud. We selected a piece from a collection of costume jewellery a friend had salvaged and washed for her, and her sisters' novelty piano clock, complete with mud still coating the inside.

Steve was overseas helping out in Haiti when his Oxley rented home was completely inundated. His family came to rescue what they knew he would value, as strangers wouldn't have known what was of significance to him, what he couldn't live without or replace.

When I asked Steve to nominate his most precious items of salvage this big burly guy gave me his teddy bear and childhood bible, damaged beyond repair. The swollen bible with its pages stuck together was impossible to part with as it was Steve's first experience of his faith declared.

The bear had special significance because as a young boy living in South America, Steve and his family experienced an earthquake and spent a week living in their car. Upon going back into the house his mother made a bed under her dressing table to keep him safe. Months later Steve had to be lured into a normal bed with the promise of a new teddy bear. Teddy celebrated turning 35 by being submerged in flood waters for 3 days and emerged a little more battered but no less loved.



The much loved family home of Dorothy and Allan was threatened by rapidly rising flood waters in Karalee. They moved many of their possessions up to the top floor of their home before helping others in the street do the same, finally vacating to higher ground.

When I asked what they thought important to celebrate recovering, they carefully considered the question for a few weeks and then came to visit me in the studio with their offerings.

The couple grew fruit trees on their acreage property and the nectarine cutting they brought to me represented everything they hoped would survive and regenerate in their yard. A fruiting sprig of new life, this tender little plant shows the promise of hope and growth.

Dorothy also handed me a tangled pile of old and vintage biased bindings! As a textile artist, she couldn't bear the thought of these bindings going to waste, so she washed and even began ironing them back to some sort of life. I pulled the most fragile and beautiful old silk binding from the pile and used this in the painting.

Dorothy and Allan, Karalee.

2012
oil on board
30 x 50 cm

Agnieszka and Veronica, a mother and daughter who live in a small unit in Goodna, had their lives turned upside down and drowned in mud during the January flood. Veronica was overseas in Poland visiting family at the time, while her mum stayed behind and worked. Agnieszka went to work that Tuesday morning only returning home at mid-day when it became apparent that water was heading her way. She and a friend put all the important items up on benches and siliconed the front door shut thinking they had done enough to avoid incoming water.

However, they were ill prepared for the deluge that followed and as the water washed in, they barely had time to escape from the complex. Their car was only saved by pushing down a neighbouring street fence to reach higher ground. The water eventually totally engulfed the unit complex. When our family helped Agnieszka on the Friday, the water had receded and the carnage was shocking.

We managed to salvage many photos and items we could wash. However, so much was irretrievably damaged by three days of submergence and worse still, insurance was not forthcoming. Veronica stayed with us for over a month and her mum bunked down on the floors of workmates and friends, while they began the long journey back to habitation.

Veronica had bought her mum a novelty mug for Christmas before she left for Poland, the joke being that her mum was always bossing about how things should be kept neat and tidy around their home.

This mug survived the maelstrom of mud and afterwards they would stand in the wreckage of their home while Veronica presented it back to her mum, laughing ruefully at the irony. 'Still the boss of the house mum!!'



*Agnieszka and Vonny,
Goodna.
2012
oil on board
41 x 61 cm*



Nathan and Jill, Jindalee.

2012
oil on board
41 x 51 cm

Nathan and Jill live in Jindalee, not one block from the Brisbane River. In the lead up to the flood they watched the water thoughtfully and checked their insurance. As the river rose over the street and into their lower level, they moved what they could, but with limited storage space and pouring rain, their efforts to empty their home were restricted.

They had to make the painful decision to leave behind their beloved grand piano. They waited and hoped that the waters would stop rising but they ended up with muddy river water a few feet into the top storey of their two storey home.

When the waters receded and the damage could be assessed, the sad and sorry sight of the mud drenched piano was revealed. As it was manhandled into the front yard awaiting its fate, Nathan posed on top, fern frond clenched between his teeth. It's a picture of light-hearted fun in the midst of the heartbreaking mess.

Jill spent some time removing the middle C key as a memento and Nathan has put salvaged parts of the piano to good use. It lives on in their home, transformed into a TV sideboard and a coffee table with the great heavy iron carcass awaiting some yet to be discovered use in the garage.

Jill had her own objects to give me, of value because they were gifts from her father, now dying of cancer. The hand painted lacquered box was brought for her from Russia by her dad and held a special place in her antique display cabinet, the key of which I have painted alongside the grand piano's key.

Tegwen and Andrew own a riverfront property at Chelmer. In the lead up to the flood, while the swift moving waters of the Brisbane River were rapidly rising, the family moved out much of the important furniture and precious belongings. These were hastily stored in many garages belonging to both friends and strangers around the neighbourhood.

As they watched many pontoons and much debris wash past them, they were startled by a huge bang and realized their own solid jetty had been hit by something big. They decided it was prudent to evacuate and leave the house to its fate, rather than have anyone suffer an injury as the result of a surge.

The family of four was farmed out to live among friends and a home also had to be found for their elderly labrador, Summit. Summit is a retired guide dog and going back to his former owner was considered his best option. When the family went to visit Summit in the following days he was clearly not happy about being back at his old abode.

When the family moved into a rental property, Summit was duly retrieved and installed. In the early days he was distressed and anxious, and did not stray far from the door where he could see the activity inside the house. Summit was with them the day the bulldozers demolished the house which was irreparably damaged by the flood waters.

He promptly went into a depression which puzzled and alarmed the family. Summit refused to eat; he stayed in bed and wouldn't participate as usual. A visit to the vet showed nothing physically wrong but he continued to pine. It was some weeks before he was back to his old fun-loving self.

Twelve months after the floods, the family moved into the newly renovated neighbouring home as the owners were moving interstate. Summit has improved but no doubt will not be entirely happy until back in his own home.

At the time of writing the rebuilding of their home has yet to start...



*Tegwen and Andrew,
Chelmer.*

2012.
oil on board
26 x 36cm

front cover: Kate, Chelmer. (After Cotan)

2012 oil on board 62 x 46 cm

Kate and her husband were expecting a baby and had moved back to her parent's Chelmer home to save money when the flood hit. All their possessions were stored with them so when the Chelmer home went under water the family lost two household's worth of objects. Heavily pregnant, Kate was banished from the potentially health threatening mud and was thus left out of the salvage process.

Kate is an artist and on the first day of clean-up her entire studio was dumped in the heap of rubbish out the front yard. The studio ceiling had collapsed and nothing seemed identifiable let alone salvageable. When told nothing was saved and all her paintings and materials were gone she was devastated. Some days later her cousin bravely went through the stinking piles and found a small bunch of brushes. Kate had hundreds of brushes collected over many years and to get a handful back was wonderful. Amazingly they were some of her favourites.

The silver engraved childhood egg cup was one of the few things from her childhood salvaged and that she was able to pass onto her baby son born after the flood. The Christmas angel was important because it meant so much to Kate's mum. The family had a tradition of gifting a special decoration, some carted home from overseas, some remembering past loved ones, and this was probably the oldest of these, well-worn and often repaired. Not many decorations survived the flood but to have the angel back up on top of the tree meant that things were returning to normal and in this painting she hovers over the objects with quiet poignancy.

I chose to appropriate a Juan Cotan like arrangement for this piece and the disparity of the objects doesn't seem to matter when one knows the family ties that bind them.

Credits

The artist wishes to thank Dr Lindsay Farrell for his suggestions and essay, the generous folk who allowed her to share some of their stories, her family for their relentless support and all those who partnered with the project.

Photography by Carl Warner.

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Exhibition Venues:

11th January - 13th February 2013
(excl. 29 January to 3 February)
Ipswich Art Gallery, Nicholas Street, Ipswich Qld.

1st March - 29th March 2013
Dogwood Crossing Gallery, Miles Qld.

30th April - 18th May 2013
Gympie Regional Gallery
39 Nash Street, Gympie Qld.

23rd August - 29th September 2013
Rockhampton Art Gallery
62 Victoria Parade, Rockhampton Qld.

1st November - 15th November 2013
Vera Wade Gallery, St Andrews Cathedral,
Cnr Creek and Anne St, Brisbane Qld