

CAPE ARID

PHILIPPA AND ALEX NIKULINSKY





Dedicated to our son Andrei

contents

Introduction	4
Thomas River.....	8
Nuystia	16
Hill Springs	24
Mt Arid from Thomas Fishery campsite	30
Seal Creek	38
Gnamma.....	50
Burnt Banksia, Tagon Bay	58
Map.....	62
About the authors.....	63
Acknowledgements	64



introduction

Philippa Nikulinsky

For the past forty years or so, my life and work as an artist has been divided into thematic blocks with the connecting thread my love of wild places. My response to the natural world through my paintings is my need to share the joy and wonder I have being in the bush. I need to draw. It's like food and drink to me. I also need a project with continuity, interactions, and things that grow together – birds, insects, plants. I also revel in returning to a place year after year to walk the same paths in different seasons, weather, becoming familiar with the plants, animals and landscape and aware of the changes.

Alex and I had been going to Cape Arid for many years and already loved and knew it well when Professor Stephen Hopper suggested we collaborate to make a book describing this remote and magical place. We happily agreed. This would make the third book Steve and I have worked on together, the first being *Life on the Rocks – The Art of Survival* and the second, *Soul of the Desert*. All three are concerned with the ecology of harsh and arid places.

I asked Alex if he would contribute drawings of landscape. Over many years, our time in the bush, just the two of us together, has been a special part of our lives. Alex sitting in camp and doing his drawings and paintings and I doing mine, daily sharing our observations and excitements – or ‘happenings’. Happenings being events big or small, seen and experienced. Maybe a wasp catching a

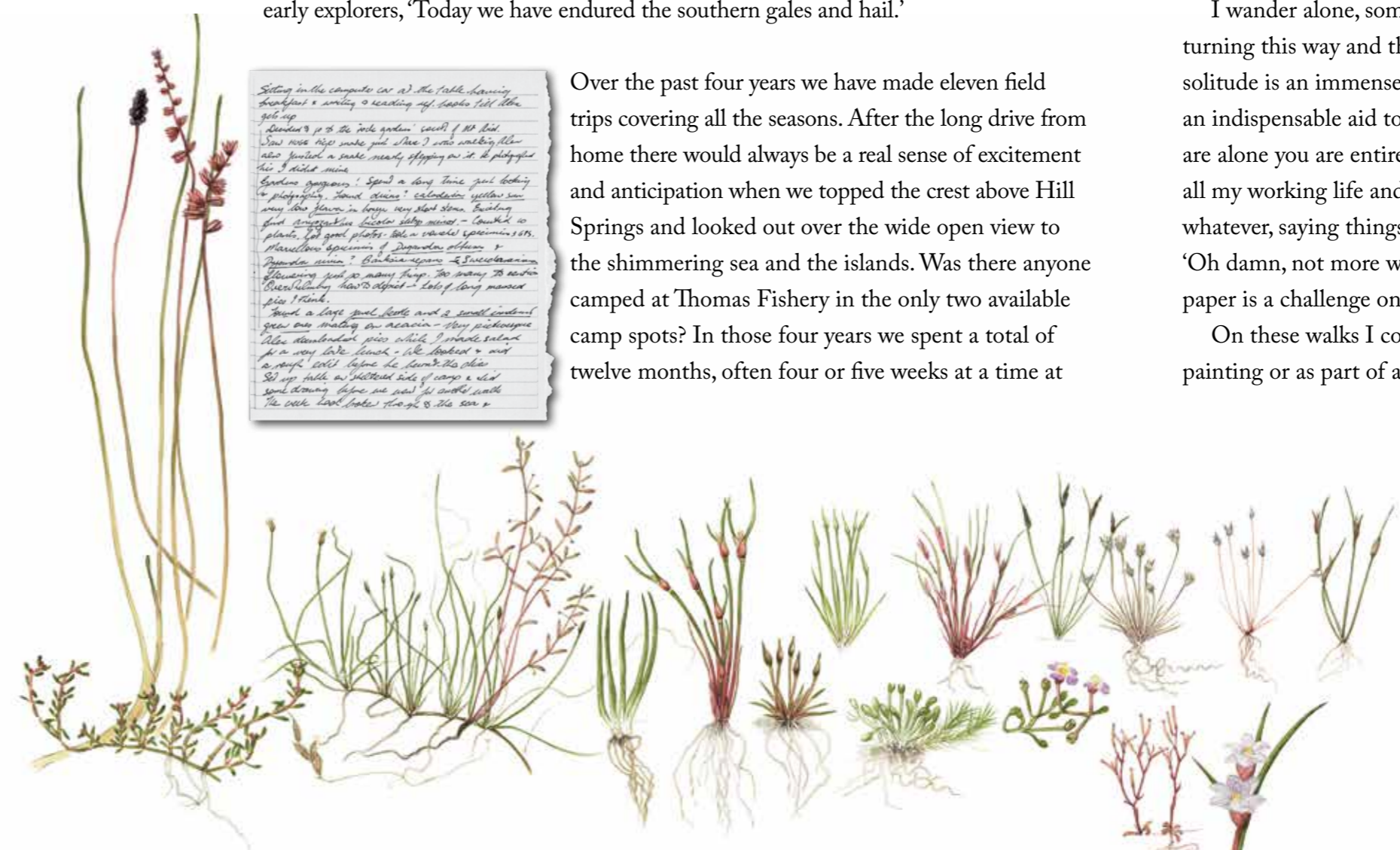


spider. Huge waves rolling across the horizon. Patterns on the sand changing with the wash of the tide. Birds fledging. Things of the moment. Another term we have for these things is ‘soul pictures’. A soul picture has to be experienced. It can't be photographed because it loses its magic. Having Alex directly involved in this third book seemed ‘just right’.

After some four and a half years of collaboration, the project had become so big that Steve and I decided to break it into two separate but complementary publications. *Cape Arid* being an artist's perspective of Cape Arid with Alex's and my art works, and a forthcoming book by Stephen Hopper reflecting the scientist's perspective.

Cape Arid National Park is some 1000 kilometres from home. It is a remote and comparatively little frequented national park on the far south-eastern coast of Western Australia with the islands of the Recherche Archipelago dotted off shore. The field work takes a lot of logistical organisation. It is usually a week of packing and planning before we set off from Perth. Some places have no water and the nearest shop is several hours drive away so we have to be self sufficient. Being on the south coast the vagaries of weather are often a trial. It is extremely difficult to draw or paint when the wind

is howling, blowing gritty sand, or, in another season, sleeting rain. On occasion in summer the temperature reaches 43 degrees and the flies are in their thousands covering every surface. A regular comment to each other on such days was, ‘Please remind me of how much fun we are having.’ One cold and wet day when we were trying to keep dry under the open canvas shelter which we pull out from the back of one of the troopies, I wrote in my field diary, using the language of the early explorers, ‘Today we have endured the southern gales and hail.’



Over the past four years we have made eleven field trips covering all the seasons. After the long drive from home there would always be a real sense of excitement and anticipation when we topped the crest above Hill Springs and looked out over the wide open view to the shimmering sea and the islands. Was there anyone camped at Thomas Fishery in the only two available camp spots? In those four years we spent a total of twelve months, often four or five weeks at a time at

Cape Arid; just being there, not moving around much – exploring the Thomas River, Thomas Fishery, Poison Creek and Mt Arid areas of the park. We feel very privileged being able to spend such extended periods that allow us time to be one with the land. With very few tracks open to vehicles because of the encroachment of dieback, it meant lots of walking along what remains of the closed tracks and fire breaks, but what better way could there be to see and find.

I wander alone, sometimes whistling, mostly strolling, but often stopping and just standing – turning this way and that taking everything in. Robert Hughes in his memoir says, ‘Freely chosen solitude is an immense blessing. Solitude is beyond question one of the world's greatest gifts and an indispensable aid to creativity.’ And if that doesn't say it all, Leonardo da Vinci wrote, ‘If you are alone you are entirely your own man’ (add woman here). I have done this wandering alone all my working life and occasionally, yes, I do actually talk to the place, plant, outlook, tree or whatever, saying things like, ‘Aren't you beautiful?’ or ‘How on earth am I going to paint you?’ or ‘Oh damn, not more white flowers and millions of you to boot!’ (Painting white flowers on white paper is a challenge only artists would appreciate.)

On these walks I collect and photograph and sometimes take notes. I collect things I see as a painting or as part of a painting. I really need to see my subjects in their environment, among the

things that grow with them. I need to see the whole history of the plant – the old, the burnt, the insect damage; the old nuts, leaves, seeds. I feel I need to do justice to the life of that plant and show how it has endured and survived. I don't look at the plant as a specimen or a piece to identify, which often means that sometimes later down the track I have a problem trying to find a particular pressed piece in order to ascertain the proper identification.

It took several trips to Arid before any painting was started. I would walk and look and mull over what to paint and what layout I needed. I decided that my work couldn't be a series of plant portraits as there are just so many thousands of species and that would be an impossible task.



- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Triglochin linearis</i> (flowers) | 11. Mudmat, <i>Glossostigma drummondii</i> |
| 2. <i>Triglochin linearis</i> (fruit) | and aquatic moss sp. |
| 3. <i>Myriophyllum tillaeoides</i> | 12. Mudmat, <i>Glossostigma drummondii</i> |
| 4. <i>Isolepis producta</i> | 13. <i>Isolepis cyperoides</i> |
| 5. <i>Lepilaena</i> sp. | 14. <i>Stylidium inundatum</i> |
| 6. <i>Crassula natans</i> | 15. <i>Centrolepis strigosa</i> |
| 7. <i>Isoetes trippis</i> | 16. <i>Centrolepis pilosa</i> |
| 8. <i>Centrolepis aristata</i> | 17. <i>Centrolepis polygna</i> |
| 9. <i>Centrolepis glabra</i> | 18. <i>Tribonanthes violacea</i> |
| 10. <i>Seboenus sculptus</i> | |

My intention was to show the wide, low, tangled heathland with all its amazing diversity of shape and colour. Unfortunately, when we arrived at Thomas Fishery in March 2008 to start work on the project, we found ourselves in a vast blackened landscape, quiet and empty, the scene punctuated with the stark, black, tortured shapes of burnt trees. There were few if any birds, insects or animals. On repeated trips over the following years we watched and felt part of the regeneration. This is why several paintings show the burnt branches and nuts as reminders of the fire: the black and dead contrasting with the vital, fresh, new growth.

From the centre of the black cage which is formed when the burnt branches curl inwards with the heat of the fire, I watched the first shoots of *Eucalyptus sweedmaniana* sprouting from the underground lignotuber. Then, later, the first buds, the first flowers and several years later the mallee becoming dominant again as those burnt cages greyed and decayed and sank to the ground. What a memorable experience it was for me to be able to watch and paint the whole life history of this plant.

I noticed the first seed leaves and the fire dependent orchids come through the blackened sand and was excited when I saw the first spiders in their webs, magically recolonising. The few birds battling and fiercely defending their nectar sources in the few remnant unburnt stands of bush were the focus for one of the first paintings.

Evoking mood and mystery, Alex's drawings portray a sense of time and place. My intricate paintings bring into focus some of the detailed magic within that place. For these I chose a particularly wide format to try to capture the broad low heathland aspect of the landscape.



Alex Nikulinsky

We visited Cape Arid on many occasions over the years, the first trip being some ten years ago. As we became more familiar with the place we grew increasingly more aware of its unique qualities: its brooding presence, wide horizons and relative isolation. It soon became one of a growing number of places we revisit on the sojourns that we have been making throughout Western Australia for the past forty years. We gradually got to know it, and 'to know is to love' as someone wisely said. We continue to be fascinated with its moods, its many weathers and its seeming indifference to our presence.

When Pip asked me whether I would consider doing a set of drawings in the style of the first ink drawing included in this book, I happily agreed. For now my fascination with Cape Arid has acquired a purpose.

Horizons

Horizons are the dominant visual reality of Cape Arid. They are wide, seemingly featureless, essentially monochrome, contrasting with an ever changing bright sky, with the sharp line occasionally resolving itself into a fractal. There seems to be a quality to the horizons here that most other places do not have. I was fascinated with the complexity of that bounding edge. It was indeed a fractal, an infinite filigree between earth and sky.

Seduced by detail

Looking at Pip's work, the blindingly obvious struck me. Microscopic detail has always been a feature of her work. The scale of the landscapes is at the other extreme, several orders of magnitude larger than that. But there is a curious recurring quality in both the fine detail of Pip's work and in the landscapes. It is no coincidence that self similarity is one of the criteria describing a fractal, which is a reiterative mathematical construct capable of producing patterns of mesmerising infinite detail. These fractal qualities are also recognised in the natural world: in clouds, in coastlines and in the shapes of plants. And here, in the images in this book, are fractal echoes providing a thematic link between the microscopic detail of Pip's botanical subjects and the endless filigree of detail in my pen and ink landscapes.

Landscape

To produce a composite portrait of Cape Arid in just a few images required choices. A landscape is essentially indifferent to me as a viewer. It is unknowable, remote and aloof, but lends itself to my interpretation. A classical landscape is almost always a cultural interpretation. Dürer's watercolours, I think, may be an exception. Although Dürer studied in Italy, his observations of the natural world were his own, uninfluenced by the cultural fashion of the time. For example the watercolour *A lake bordered by pine trees* is a subject we recognise as a landscape. This image would have surprised his contemporaries in Italy for its lack of a classical interpretation. The painting is devoid of a humanising presence, of interpretation, of idealisation. It is pure observation. This, I feel, was also true of many of his other studies of animals and plants.

Samuel Beckett observed something similar in Cézanne, whom he saw as the first painter to depict landscape as 'incommensurable with all human expression whatsoever.'

Cape Arid has a strong resonance with these observations.

Through its apparent emptiness and remoteness, it nevertheless hinted at something mysterious underlying all that I could see: a capacity to display infinite detail, myriad rhythms and patterns. It stands aloof of my presence and exists entirely on its own terms.

Although explanatory notes should not be needed in order to appreciate these landscapes, I nevertheless would like to add to the visual narrative by sharing with the reader some context behind each of them. These seven drawings are in reality just so many marks on paper, but the arrangement of these marks has been inspired by a remarkable place, through the familiarity of repeated visits and the filter of my interpretation.

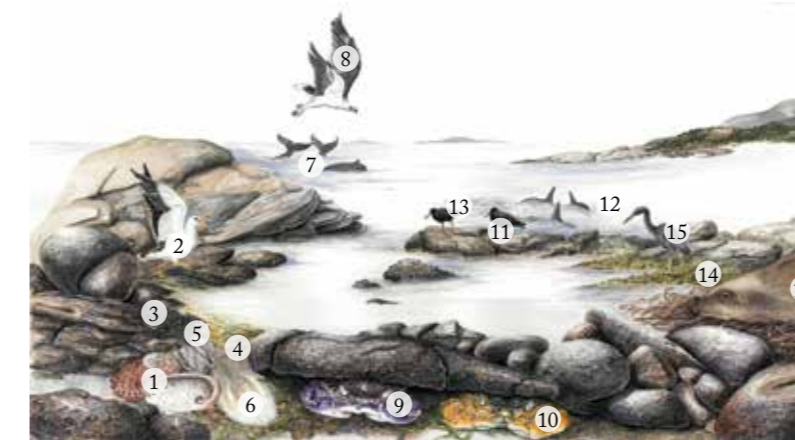


thomas river

Pip's request – a sweeping view looking east from above the Thomas River estuary towards the distant Cape Arid. It is twenty-six kilometres to the end of the beach, a risky drive if one doesn't take notice of the tide. From this vantage point the far end of the beach is beyond the edge of perception and the soft outline of Mt Arid often obscured by cloud. This composition caused me a lot of pain. It was difficult to see how to depict all the space and yet show the important elements.

One day I was wandering over the high ground trying to find the right valley from which to show the view to best advantage, when I noticed a movement. A beautifully marked python was gliding towards me, majestically, as only a python can move. Remembering a very nervy confrontation with a large Black Headed Python in the Pilbara, I steeled myself and this time stood my ground. This handsome creature continued to advance, without deviation, over both my boots and on towards its destination. Romantic sentiment kicked in. This was a sign. This was to be the vantage point from which I would draw the view. The composition includes a wide sweep of broken water and little foreground, but the choice was made for me by the spirits of the place.





1. Roe's Abalone, *Haliotis roei*
2. Pacific Gull, *Larus pacificus* subsp. *georgii*
3. Black Nerite, *Nerita atramentosa*
4. Fibreball Weed, *Posidonia australis*
5. *Hormosira banksii*
6. Giant Australian Limpet, *Patella laticostata*
7. Southern Right Whale, *Eubalaena australis*
8. White-bellied Sea-Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

9. Purple Rock Crab, Swift-footed Crab, *Leptograpsus variegatus*
10. Tjiurddaqaar, *Leptograpsus* sp.
11. Sooty Oystercatcher, *Haematopus fuliginosus*
12. Common Dolphin, *Delphinus delphis*
13. Australian Salmon, *Arripis truttacea*
14. Sea Nymph, *Amphibolis antarctica*
15. Eastern Reef Egret, *Egretta sacra*
16. Australian Sea Lion, *Neophoca cinerea*

12 October 2010

Big fat seal on the seaweed this morning – yawning. Eventually flopped into the water. Watched him through the telescope and saw him catch a pike and slap it round on the surface before eating it.

Oystercatchers stuff the little blue shellfish into cracks in the rocks to hold them while they 'dig in' to eat.

Grey reef heron with his big yellow feet patrolling the weeds and rocks at low tide. Dolphins circling in bay. Lots of 'happenings' today.

Are the purple and orange rock crabs the same? Male? Female?



on the hill saw Alex go off in completely the opp. direction - he didn't have his 2-way and I started to speculate that he was out so just kept on to show I was going. He later turned on his 2-way and said he'd been waiting for me - I said he'd have to wear the deck but he didn't seem fazed. However he had a dreadful time - he said he almost panicked in the tangle & started to run water. He ended up talking a lot longer but me. He got to the rock gardens - I counted 15 plants of *amphibolis* & took some photos and a bit as I hadn't saved the previous recording. How could anyone do a 'day trip' here & hope to find & understand the variety & complexity - I see something different every day and that's just within walking distance from camp. Over a year had change must one see. He tried the new flush system in the field - Alex had carried it in his back pack along with his rain jacket - sad phone - 2-way - first camera - \$50 - coffee (2 jars) - small bottle of wine - 2 litres of water - all the bags. His bag weighed a ton. I did a long walk along the sea side of the granite - as it had been burnt a couple