

## **Yasmin Smith: Ntaria Fence**

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text by Eleanor Ivory Weber

*'Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.'*<sup>1</sup>

Despite its title and undeniable resemblance to a human-made barrier for separating one thing from another, Yasmin Smith's most recent work, *Ntaria Fence*, is a porous, flesh-like frontier. Fences can serve an array of metaphors for keeping things out, protecting oneself, ejecting the other, delimiting private property, preventing human or animal movement, and demarcating difference. Fences imply a duality of inside/outside, here/there, mine/not-mine, which derives largely from a colonial, bourgeois understanding of land, not to mention a Cartesian understanding of the self. *Ntaria Fence* could easily be viewed from this perspective; as an exploration of the sense of conceptual and actual distance one feels, for example, between coastal city centres like Sydney and remote locations like Ntaria, 130 kilometres west of Alice Springs in the Central Desert region of the Northern Territory.

Yet dislocation and separation are far from what pushes Smith to create this specific fence. Her motives are not conceptual but physical. When something is porous it means it absorbs and thus changes; is affected by things around it; its state alters and moves. State can be understood as physical state, from earth to clay, from wood to ash to glaze, from skin to blood, from NT to NSW and back, from desert to coast; the way the light shifts, how temperature effects the reaction of bodies – human and otherwise; feelings, in short, through place, things and time. Crossing the gallery temporarily, *Ntaria Fence* is all about this movement – difficult to name for it escapes the terms we have at our disposal. One could imagine here that the word 'fence' is a barrier, but one that exists on this corporeal level; the heart passes through with ease, for it's the heart's fence.

In February 2015 I went to the Northern Territory for the first time. Yasmin, a friend and colleague, invited me along on her last trip before this exhibition. This was her third visit since early 2014, when she went to Ntaria to work with the local Hermannsburg Potters community on the Old Church Project. My initial response, recorded in a small notebook:

*25.2.2015 Purchased at Alice Springs airport. Waiting for Yasmin to arrive from Sydney. I just came from Melbourne. Felt a sense of unknown that I haven't travelling anywhere in a really long time. Like somehow the most unknown place is this one in my own country, a place where I've only ever traced the borders. This 'fear' or anxiety goes to the heart of Australian alienation, or why we are alienated from ourselves. What could I possibly be afraid of here, what is so unknown here that isn't anywhere else? The taboo of 'un' or 'non' civilisation, of indigeneity? Of the 'wild', of heat and open space...*

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, 'Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness', *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*, South End Press, Boston 1990, p. 148

Maybe when I said ‘we’, I actually meant ‘me’; one shouldn’t presume to speak for others. Though of course, as ‘they’ say, it’s easier to speak in generalisations than of individual emotions. Without going too much into the centre-periphery question, maybe the problem is reversed in the Australian context. Here, the physical centre is the metaphorical periphery, the unknown, the ‘wild’, as I clumsily noted – at least for people like me, who come from the coast. This is where this sense of disorientation comes from: the outside has been the thing that concerns me (we) for far too long.

The red centre is a heart, which is a life force, it pumps and pulsates softly away, creating vibrations around it, speeding or slowing depending on surrounding factors, yet sustaining itself and its members, even when they choose to ignore it. If that was the reason for my apprehension in Alice Springs airport, it is a quite common and banal fear of life. Yasmin wrote in an email to me:

*‘I think the reality of alienation that you speak of is what makes me see with unrestricted eyes a strange fence almost kind of mirage-like in the heat ... To me [Ntaria] is a place that is alive and pulsating with silica and iron that transfers through the trees. And the heat of the place makes it feel like everything there could at any second melt back into the sand.’<sup>2</sup>*

On a day-trip from Alice Springs we visited the Hermannsburg Historic Precinct, comprised of several 19<sup>th</sup> century heritage buildings with fading information panels to describe the original function of each. We heard Evangelical Aboriginal Arrernte hymns from a CD stereo in the old church and learned nyinta, tharra, tharra-ma-nyinta (one, two, three) – anything beyond three is called a mob. As we were leaving Hermannsburg, we drove by Smith’s former share-house, on Pareroultja Street. This house has a fence parallel the road, about waist height and made of metal wire, with gum branches stuck vertically in the gaps. There are plastic objects wedged in the fence, too: a bucket, an ice cream container, a fridge shelf. Whether all this is for reinforcement, concealment or decoration, one can’t know. It’s as mysterious and unassuming as a front fence can be.

The branches Smith used to make moulds for the ceramic pieces of *Ntaria Fence*, and the iron-rich ash (the burnt remains found in fire pits of River Red Gum, Mulga and Palm Tree wood) that she collected to make their glaze, all come from around locations in the area that are important to her; the yard of the share-house, the claypans, her friends’ house in Alice Springs. In an essential way, Ntaria made the work.

What does it mean to make work away from the centres, yet in the red centre? In 1877 two Germans made their way from the coast of SA to the middle of the continent, near the Finke River, to establish the Lutheran mission of Hermannsburg (Ntaria) on Aranda land. This journey to the peripheral centre affected what this land is today, and will continue to do so. As long as I’ve known Yasmin she has been a ceramicist; passionate about the molecular changes that occur when temperatures rise or drop, how this affects colour and form, as much as she is awed by the implication of clay and iron in human and geological history.

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<sup>2</sup> Yasmin Smith, email to the author, 1 July 2015

A functioning shower made of ceramic crates that reference those used for storage in her mother's house in Dundas; two hard bags of cement, limed with age, separated by rods of iron atop which stand a pair of dainty ceramic chicken legs inspired by a hen in Cumnock; the angular *Apprentice Welder* series with copper-eroded barium blue glaze where clay is made to look like steel and delicate integrity mocks the facade of solidity. These three earlier works of Smith's, like *Ntaria Fence*, herald what she might call 'the magical mystery hour' – the mid-zone in any firing process 'the symbolic moment of creation, where alchemical changes occur'<sup>3</sup> – that is, fusions of the molecular, the geological and the personal.

It seemed obvious that the house we passed by on our way back to Alice was a place of emotional attachment, being there was important, though its fence was ambiguous. A barrier that is neither a priori and universal, nor totally singular. It could be torn down or reinforced. It is a fence that separates the front yard from the street, a line of distinction between private and public, between past and present. More so than that, *Ntaria Fence* is a piece of personal, local and geological history, embodied and re-embodied through endless processes of energy distribution. There are no peripheral limbs without a heart and the justification of one without the consideration of the other would be like saying the fence predates the law. Here a fence is recreated in the spirit of the red centre, with the force of heat and the assurance of a heartbeat.

*'Then again, it's decided well before this firing as to what the colour of the ash will be. It's decided by place, by the land, and tiny particles of sand and iron ... Just imagine if that iron particle had consciousness, and had a narrative. And it does in the end because it makes us alive today.'*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.