



# COTTON, WOOL

Cotton is closer to the skin;

of wool, memories are fonder;

singlet begets rag,

pullover begets patch

begets pulse,

skein's cord,

knotted in the vein;

elbows rub away in time,

needle across needle,

no clack to cotton

nor thread to maintain;

layered garment,

hand me down

through ties and winding,

wrists of rope,

hopes and fears

flood in fine

as lanolin;

cover me in purl;

nacre knurled

plain as day;

and when the wear is worn

beyond patches,

hatches, matches and dispatches,

stand in issue

for silverfish,

left loved

lost in lavender and tissue

(long after cotton is forgotten

on a rack);

exoskeletons in a closet

between chest and drawers.

Mal Robertson

skeins from bones to open doors

March 2005

and a warm way back.







Warmer today, the lizard has got up and is coming in for a visit through the open door.

## DEVELOPING THROUGH ART A BOTANICAL AND LANDSCAPE CONTEXT IN A SETTLER SOCIETY

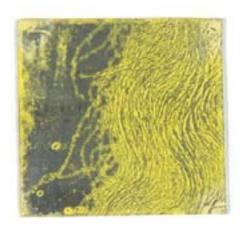
## **Steve Hopper**

Steve Hopper is Foundation Professor of Plant Conservation Biology at The University of Western Australia, a position he has held since 2004. Prior to this he was Director/CEO of Kings Park and Botanic Garden in Perth for 12 years. He has more than 30 years' field experience in Western Australia and elsewhere, pursuing studies on evolution and conservation. In October 2006 he takes up a new role as Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in London

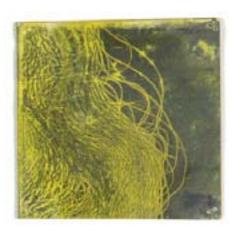


INVETERATE COLONISTS FROM SETTLER SOCIETIES encounter culturally new and challenging circumstances with each migration. History suggests that reactions to such experiences range from enlightened to outright destructive. Regrettably, the latter has been more common. It seems that not until settlers embrace new lands and cultures in their own art, drama, music and science does antagonism and xenophobia give way to acceptance and enthusiasm for a locally appropriate sense of place.

Much of Holly Story's art revolves around this dilemma associated with settling in new lands. Her's is an exploration of the initially unfamiliar, revealing the ultimate triumph of a willingness to understand through careful and detailed investigation using all the senses. Differences, they say, are only skin deep. But are they? Are there not places, plants and peoples so different that bringing them together in a world view of mutual respect is seemingly unattainable? This is a core issue towards which Holly's present work draws our attention.







Earlier a kangaroo, dark with rain-wet fur, slipped quietly across the track and disappeared.

In 1879, when Charles Darwin met legendary botanical and landscape artist Marianne North to discuss her plan to present the world's most interesting and unusual plant life through oil paintings created in situ, he immediately suggested that Miss North travel to Australia. There the flora was like no other. By this time, Darwin's views on Australia had mellowed from his infamous comments penned at the end of the five year Beagle voyage, where he advocated, particularly in relation to southwest Australia, that "... he who thinks with me will never wish to walk again in so uninviting a country." With hindsight, and undoubtedly influenced by his scientific confidant, one of my forthcoming predecessors Sir Joseph Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Darwin had come to realize just how special and unusual Australian plants were in a global context, particularly those of the southwest.

Such plants are the primary source of the ideas about place and our place in the natural world expressed in Skin Deep. Holly draws upon intimate familiarity of the forest flora of the southwest's Walpole region. She presents

examples using a mixture of approaches old and new, such as impressions cast on lead sheet (nature printing) and dyes extracted from wild plants impregnated onto varying textiles. A simple daily narrative brings into sharp relief a sense of place and time, particularly spent walking and looking, contradicting Darwin's youthful misjudgement of the southwest as an uninteresting place not worth a second walk. The organic connections and links of wild plants with a settler people are apparent in Holly's work with plant specimens, dyes and textiles, as are the ghosts of Noongar cultures, only recently receiving the revival of respect and interest these cultures so richly deserve.

The organic reality of plant skins embodied in the artwork immediately signal botanical stories of significance and wonderment. The outline of a banksia seedling's leaves is a close match to impression fossils found across southern Australia in deposits 40-50 million years old. This is serious plant heritage, of great and long-lasting antiquity, beyond comprehension in the short time frames over which our lives unfold.







The path grew fainter and gradually petered out, then started up again a little further on.

The outline of a slender inflorescence of *mean* (*Haemodorum spicatum*) also has deep historical resonances. Although placed in the same plant family – Haemodoraceae - as the kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos* species, represented in the work by the tall evergreen kangaroo paw *A. flavidus*), *Haemodorum* has closest relatives in South Africa and the Americas. Initially it was thought that the Haemodoraceae might trace their origins to the southern supercontinent Gondwana, which existed up until about 150 million years ago. However, DNA sequencing data acquired over the past decade suggest that the family is somewhat younger (though still immeasurably old), so some members must have dispersed across oceans rather than just drifted on land as Gondwana was split asunder into today's southern lands.

In the southwest, *mean* became a staple food of Noongar people known as Mineng or Meananger (those who eat *mean*), its fiery red bulbs ground up into a black jelly, mixed with earth from termite mounds and baked to make edible material as different from that familiar to the colonial European palette as you can get. Only now, despite an estimated 45,000 years of use

by Noongars, has such a food source attracted new generations of today's settler society as a subject worthy of serious investigation.

The kangaroo paws themselves represent another striking historical story of the southwest – the presence of ancient groups of plants found nowhere else on earth. The antiquity of such unique branches of the plant tree-of-life has only become evident through recent applications of DNA sequencing, a relatively new but repeatable methodology that has introduced unprecedented scientific rigour into exploring questions of evolution and biological classification. We now estimate that the unique southwest Australian subfamily of the Haemodoraceae represented by kangaroo paws split off from the other subfamily represented by *mean* about 80 million years ago, when dinosaurs still reigned supreme. Other unique southwestern lineages such as the mysterious dasypogons (pineapple bushes and allies) have ancestors extending back more than 120 million years. Few other places on earth seem to have such an unusual community of truly ancient plant groups. For example, substantial parts of Eurasia and













Opring is come. The air is soft and fragrant, the bush noisy with chattering birds.

North America were under ice just 18 thousand years ago, and today they contain a youthful immigrant flora of oaks, roses and conifers, to name but a few well-known plants.

It is clear that the community of plants represented in Holly's artworks from a confined locality near Walpole has a deep history with global connections. These are distinctive plants, their silhouettes unmistakable, uniquely evolved.

And what of new connections and future communities? Holly's novel exploration of native plant pigments and their use in dyeing textiles may well signal closer intimacy with plant life from an old landscape. Through exquisite and creative artistic expression, a new side to an ancient native flora is revealed. Here is challenged the old attitude of settler society that most that is local and native is hindrance and worthless. We are asked to think that perhaps some powerful stories of place and persistence in so seemingly infertile and hostile a land exist right under our noses as we travel at 110 kph in our mobile vehicular cocoons, insulated in transit from sensual encounters with wild things found nowhere else.

Just as science only now is beginning to make sense of the strange and unique flora of this land, we need artists like Holly to help us come to grips with valuing and understanding what lies before us in quiet but stunning diversity of global significance. Conservation is about transmitting from one generation to the next what is considered significant. As settlers in the strangest of the world's lands, lands whose geological and botanical history have much more to do with soils and plant life in South Africa and Conan Doyle's *Lost World* in Venezuela than with eastern Australia or fertile and evergreen Europe, we need every assistance possible to break out of the destructive mould of inappropriate and unsustainable living.

Noongars have shown that more than 45,000 years of coexistence is possible on the ancient landscapes of southwest Australia. With some serious rethinking, and genuine changes to more sustainable lifestyles, there is a glimmer of hope that today's settler society might achieve similar longevity. Will we rise to the challenge that Holly brings into such clear focus?





# SKIN DEEP

### **Bronwyn Goss**

Bronwyn Goss is an artist, writer and environmentalist.

HOLLY STORY ARRIVED IN AUSTRALIA when she was seventeen. She said, "It felt like I'd fallen off the edge of the earth." Those of us whose descendants have been here for five, six or more generations, might think that our work of becoming Australian was all done, but Holly's practice, which gives insight into her own becoming, bears witness to the much deeper changes that we are all, still undergoing. Skin Deep, through familiar cultural objects and practices, respectfully and patiently watches these transformations.

About seven generations ago in Western Australia, the first wave of our European ancestors stepped into country whose Law was already known and lived. They arrived with minds that knew mono-culture and entered a land alive and understood by its people, in principles of eco culture. Having initially found the means of overlaying their familiar European patterns on this land, we are now finding that they have little relationship to the true dynamics of Australia's living systems. This is beginning to have effects on the potential of our physical survival here. But the land has been working on us, changing the way we think. We no longer have the minds of our cultural ancestors.









Tim Flannery in the introduction to the Wentworth's Group's Blueprint for a Living Continent, says,

> Three human lifetimes – about 218 years – is simply not enough to become truly adapted to Australia's unique conditions, for the process of co-evolving with the land is slow and uncertain.

> Yet it has begun, and the transformation must be completed, for if we continue to live as strangers in this land – failing to understand or live by its ecological dictums – we will forfeit our long term future here by destroying the ability of Australia to support us. 1

Holly's practice sits among those of artists like Elsje van Keppel, Christopher Robertson, Beth Hatton, and Nalda Searles; Australia's earth scientists; and the patient work of Aboriginal people, in assisting us to move from being strangers here into the process of co-evolution. 'Co-evolution' is from the Latin 'co' meaning together + 'evolution', rolling. Rolling together. Expressed like this it might be thought of as a kind of making love. The deeper undercurrents of love – in artistic practice, between lovers, within families, in friendships, joining humans and country - is grown through speaking and acting mindfully. It is a relationship where both parties have agency. In these ways in this place, consciousness is born of love.

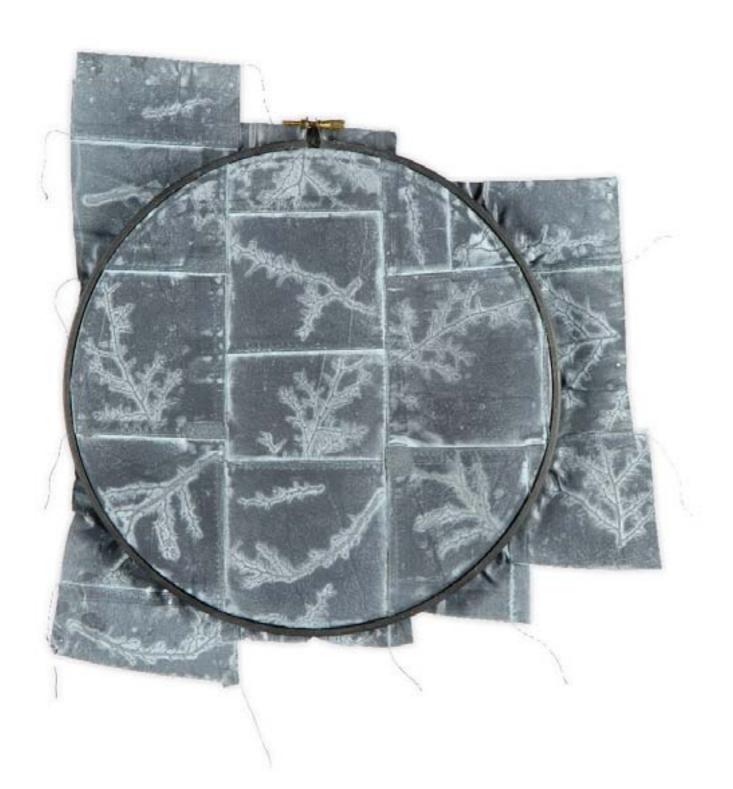
> "When we moved to Deep River, I began to see how beautiful Australia could be. I pressed flowers, bought a flower book and began to learn the names... and to understand the minuteness of the beauty."

For Plato, the experience of love is the beginning of the souls awakening and education.2

The narrative of this unfolding intimacy is recorded in Holly's diary and becomes a companion to the objects in Skin Deep.

To the Alchemists, spirit was not separate from matter. In their observations of the transformations taking place in their 'chymical vessel' Jung saw a symbolic expression of the psychological movements that happen as new aspects of self become conscious. In the chymical vessel of the studio, as an artist works with their materials, a similar process occurs. But artists' minds







detect the telic necessity of new cultural consciousness as well, and work these transformations through their chosen materials. In a transformation then, one needs to watch what the material becomes.

Holly's practice is bedded in quintessential women's work where the familiar touch of textile and skin, plants and soil, is part of a nurturing life. All her materials and processes then, have an ancient provenance which it is right to consider when contemplating her work.

### LEAD, SKIN, DEPTH AND INITIATION

On the table in her studio, Holly has a roll of thin lead sheeting.

The Latin name for lead is plumbum hence the chemical symbol Pb. From the nature of its material qualities come its uses as a plum bob – the weight at the end of a line used to determine water depth, verticality or alignment. Ensuring something is plumb has come to mean to be precise. Other allusions to things deep are found in the expressions, *to plumb the depths of despair* or *to plumb a mystery*, and also in the words plummet and plunge.

Lead is the oldest metal to be worked by man. It is dense and soft – its ancient use as a seal is still performed today. It is malleable and stretches like skin. And like skin it accepts an imprint.

Four years after Holly arrived in Western Australia, she and her husband settled on the south coast in country adjoining the Deep River. This part of the earth's living breathing skin is one of the most botanically rich regions of the planet. Here Holly's feet got to know this ground, her eyes, its forms, and here Australia made its first impression.

From between the pages of her home-made flower press, Holly takes the delicate pressed form of one of the species she had collected on her walks in the bush. She says that she collects in a non-discriminating way – the beautiful and the apparently ordinary, suspecting that even the insignificant might play its part in sustaining the happy health of this place. She lays the plant carefully on the lead shim and, using a press, embosses in minute detail a memory of the plant into the lead. It looks like a cicatrization mark – only finer.







In a chapter called The Kutjunka Image Making System as a Communication between Skins, Watson says that,

cicatrization was originally an important part of the Kutjunka marking system on the bodies of both men and women. Women were also cicatrized during women's ceremonies held at the same time as their sons' or nephews' initiation into men's Law. Kutjunka people compare the action of cicatrizing the skin with the action of drawing in the ground to tell stories of Ancestral travels and Law of country.3

Women are initiated into motherhood when they give birth. In Belonging by Peter Read, a migrant woman tells of her soul's initiation into Australia when her body met this place upon the birth of her child.<sup>4</sup> Holly's three sons were born on the south coast. Like mothers everywhere, she has locks of their hair. Again she takes the soft metal and into its skin, impresses the hair of her son. There is a fruitful ambiguity as she places its root-like patterns next to the foliage imprints of the other works. These outward marks are the signs of the deeper emotional and physical threads that bind us to each other and the places that sustain us on our beautiful blue planet.

### STRING AND THREAD

The significance of string or thread to human beings is in what it has allowed us to do and how its form and functionality have allowed us to think - to put thoughts and feelings into language and text. The word text is derived from the Latin texo, which means to weave, to twine together, intertwine, plait, put together, connect, construct, build, and of speech or writing, to compose.5 String's archetypal efficacy is borne out by its recurrence in ancient myths. In Pueblo Indian myths, the creatress of the world was Thinking Woman, or Spider Woman.

She first spun two threads to the cardinal directions, so that they would cross at the centre of the world and create the four horizons. Then she could proceed to populate the earth with plants, animals and people.6

This initial cross is the first 'knot' – the principle of relationship of spirit and matter, the web which binds all life, the beginning of form in the woven cloth

But the first 'string' is the one spun by the body of woman.











A brilliant blue day. Summy all morning for my walking.

An ancestral story, from the Balgo area, which tells of the proper practices for boys' initiation, says,

The stranger is cutting the men's hair and spins it to make fine long strings. He coats the strings with red ochre and makes a head-band, minyeri. ...And the stranger also had something else, always using the hair of the men: thick long strings coated with red ochre. We call them, makarra, womb.7

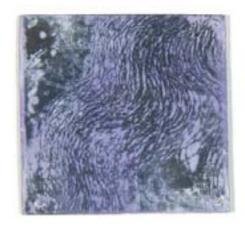
Between her fingers, Holly twists the silky strands of her son's hair. Gently, fluently, she twines a hair string, forms it into a circle and clasps it with a crimp of lead. She places it on her pile of plant-dyed blankets.

Women still wear a curl of hair of a loved one in a locket – next to the skin, close to the heart. In Victorian times after the death of Queen Victoria's beloved Albert, the memento mori became a popular form of jewellery. The hair of the deceased was twined in knots and framed behind glass in brooches and pendants, or braided to be worn as a necklace or ring. The phrase 'momento mori' is usually translated as 'remember you are mortal'. It is the same reminder as that given by the Moirai, Greek goddesses of fate and time who spin, measure and cut the thread of individual life.

But knots, spirals or circular motifs can denote continuity and the eternal nature of Life. Holding the awareness of our plied existence in the temporal and eternal worlds is our delicate task as human beings.

In walking into Holly's work, one feels a sense of order. Garments are hung, blankets folded and stacked. There is the sense of being held in a loving mind – and hands capable and familiar with the quiet rhythms of nurturing. The embroidery hoop was once commonly seen in the sewing basket next to a woman's chair by the fire. Here at night she would stitch and reflect. The embroidery hoop works, both in lead and linen, allude to threads of thought that re-flesh the bones of new beginnings, stitch old country with new country, old stories with new stories and weave together souls frayed by dislocations.

She was weaving and sewing and mending because he carried in him no thread of connection...of continuity or repair...she sewed so that the warmth would not seep out of their days together, the soft inter-skin of their relationship.8







A full moon last night, the bush full of shadows.

#### **BLANKETS AND SKINS**

Holly has been collecting and using old wool blankets in her work for several years. She finds them in op-shops and receives them as gifts from friends and acquaintances. The blanket as a 'European artifact,' arrived in Australia, wrapped around the bodies of the first settlers. In her practice Holly says,

> "The blankets started with the feeling of cloth against the skin – the basic thing that humans need – an animal provides them with a 'skin' that they haven't got... Blankets are for nurture and care and looking after the 'body in the world' at a human level."

Aboriginal people across southern Australia made possum skin and kangaroo skin cloaks for warmth and protection against the wet and cold winters. On the inside, ochre was used to mark patterns thought to be connected with kin, country and totemic affiliations. Similar patterns are painted on the skin of men and boys in preparation for ceremonies and initiations. Here one's skin and country exist in a dynamic relationship.

#### TRANSFORMATIONS

In Alchemy transformations are effected by the reiterations of processes. We come to know and deeply understand things best by repeated experience and reflection upon the matter that's working in our lives. This is the characteristic nature of artistic, scientific and religious practice. Transformation always produces something more noble than the original matter brought to the 'vessel' for the work. Holly's observance of humility and love through the processes, making and presentation of this work, point to the means by which our co-evolution with this awesome and ancient land might move happily into the future.

#### Notes:

- 1. Wentworth Group, (2002) Blueprint for a Living Continent WWF Australia, p2.
- 2. www.lapismagazine.org/archives
- 3. Watson Christine (2003) Piercing the Ground, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, p65-66. The Kutjunka people live in the Balgo region of WA.
- 4. Read P (2000) belonging, Cambridge University Press, p140.
- 5. Cassell's Latin Dictionary (1968) Macmillan.
- 6. Walker B, The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects
- 7. Watson C (2003) Piercing the Ground Fremantle Art Centre Press, p175-6.
- 8. Nin A (1959) Ladders of Fire, Swallow Press p 57, 58 in Weiner B and Schneider J (1989) Cloth and HumanExperience, Smithsonian. p2.
- 9. Powerhouse Museum website www.amol.org.au/nqr/fabri



# **HOLLY STORY**

Born 1953, arr. Australia 1971. Lives and works in Fremantle. Western Australia.		2001	City of Joondalup Invitational Art Award.	
			BankWest Contemporary Art Prize, PICA, Perth.	
Art Education			Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Invitational Art Award (winner).	
1990	BA Visual Art, Curtin University School of Art, Perth.	2002	Tracking Cloth, Wollongong Regional Art Gallery and travelling.	
1992	Post Graduate Diploma Visual Art, Curtin University School of Art.		West Australian Artists in Shanghai, Shanghai University, China.	
Professional Experience		2003	Mix Tape, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.	
	•		BankWest Contemporary Art Prize, PICA, Perth (winner).	
1992	Tutor, drawing, Curtin University School of Art.	2004	Shifting Ground, Moores Building, Fremantle.	
1991–93	Editor, Craftwest, Crafts Council of WA.		Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, touring nationally.	
1996	Curator, Re-coverings, Moores Building, Festival of Perth Exhibition.	2005	The Place Where Three Dreams Cross, Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart.	
2000-4	Board of directors, Artists Foundation of WA.		City of Perth Art Award, PICA, Perth.	
2001	Mentor, DADA, Exile Project, Fremantle.	Public Art and Commissions		
	Curator, WA Fibre Textiles Association, Second Glance, Fremantle Arts Centre.	1995	101 Squares, Ngala Family Resource Centre, Perth.	
2002-5	Project Coordinator, Shell Fremantle Print Award, Fremantle Arts Centre.	1997	Stories from the Old Block Road, Joondalup Regional Library.	
Solo Exhibitions		1999	Kings Park and Botanic Gardens Water Gardens, Perth (with C Lowry).	
1995 Alphabet, The Door Exhibition Space, Fremantle, WA.			Timelines, Booyeembara Park Fremantle (with C Lowry).	
	·	2001	Granite Garden, Albany Primary School Percent for Art (with K Thamo).	
2000	Fancywork, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology, Bentley, WA.	2002	Sensory Playground, Piney Lakes reserve, City of Melville (with C. Lowry).	
2001	Cross Stitch, Fremantle Arts Centre.	C	Grants and Awards	
2002	Land Marks, Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra.			
2003	Holly Story, The Church Gallery, Claremont, WA.	1991–95	Awarded tenancy at Old Customs House Studios Fremantle.	
2006	Skin Deep, Span Galleries, Melbourne.	1997	Australia Council for the Arts New Work grant.	
Selected Group Exhibitions		1999	ArtsWA New Work grant.	
1988	Stitch and Famous, Crafts Council of WA, Perth.	2000 2001	Art on The Move West Australian Exhibitions Touring grant.  Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Acquisitive Art Award.	
	City of Perth Craft Award, Crafts Council of WA.	2001	ArtsWA Creative Development Fellowship.	
1991	Textiles from Western Australia, Hobart, Tasmania.	2002	BankWest Contemporary Art Prize.	
1992	Work, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art.	2003	Artist in Residence, Canberra School of Art.	
1993	Studio FX, Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle, WA.	2004	Art Angel recipient, The Church Gallery.	
1993	Absence of Evidence, Fremantle Arts Centre.	2000	ArtsWA new work grant.	
1994	•		THE WITHOUT WORK GLAILE.	
1005	Pride of Place, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.	Works Acquired		
1995	Symbol and Narrative – Contemporary Australian Textiles, Asialink touring exhibition.	1990, 1995	Curtin University.	
	Fragments, Art Gallery of Western Australia.	1993	Art Gallery of Western Australia.	
	Shell Fremantle Print Award, Fremantle Arts Centre.	1995	City of Fremantle.	
1007		2000	Western Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.	
1996	Art, Medicine and the Body, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art.	2000	Museum of Arts Crafts Itami, Japan.	
1996	Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, touring nationally.	2001	Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Collection.	
2000	Essential Truths, Adelaide Festival Exhibition.	2002	Helen Maxwell Gallery.	
	Miniatures, Japanese touring exhibition.	2003	Artbank.	
	20th National Acquisition Craft Award, Museum of the Northern Territory.		BankWest.	



## LIST OF WORKS (all sizes in cm H x W x D)

- **Front and back cover**: *green pelt*. 2006. 193 x 130. Blanket, silk thread, plant dyes. Detail.
- P.2 Beaufortia sp. D'Entrecasteaux National Park, WA. 2006.
- **P.4** *deep river notebook: visit.* 2006. 34 x 60. Embossed lead, oil paint, solvent transfer on rag paper.
- **P.5** *deep river notebook: kangaroo*. 2006. 34 x 60. Embossed lead, oil paint, solvent transfer on rag paper.
- **P.6** *deep river notebook: path.* 2006. 34 x 60. Embossed lead, oil paint, solvent transfer on rag paper.
- P.7 moss. Deep River, Walpole, WA. 2006.
- **P.8** L R: green pelt; pink pelt. 2006. 180 x 35 x 28. Blanket, silk thread, plant dyes, wooden stool.
- **P.9** *deep river notebook: fragrant.* 2006. 34 x 60. Embossed lead, oil paint, solvent transfer on rag paper.
- P.10 new growth, Banksia grandis. Walpole Nornalup National Park, WA 2005
- **P.11** hair string ball. 2006. 6 x 6 x 6. Twined hair.
- **P.12** night work. 2006. 16 x 55. Embossed lead.

- **P.13** *night walk series.* 2006. Approx. 30 x 30 each. Embossed lead, embroidery hoop.
- **P.14** *night walk series.* 2006. Approx. 30 x 30 each. Embossed lead, embroidery hoop.
- **P.15** *night walk series.* 2006. Approx. 30 x 30 each. Embossed lead, embroidery hoop.
- **P.16** view series 1 3. 2005. 22 x 21 each. Linen, silk thread, plant dyes, embroidery hoop.
- **P.17** L R: *view series 4*. 2006. 22 x 21. Linen, salt, acrylic binder, plant dyes, embroidery hoop. *view series 5*. 2006. 22 x 21. Linen, silk thread, plant dyes, embroidery hoop. Details.
- P.18 Hardenbergia stem. Deep River, Walpole, WA. 2005.
- **P.19** *deep river notebook: blue.* 2006. 34 x 60. Embossed lead, oil paint, solvent transfer on rag paper.
- **P.20** *deep river notebook: moon.* 2006. 34 x 60. Embossed lead, oil paint, solvent transfer on rag paper.
- **P.21** offerings. 2006. 47 x 40 x 40 each. Plant dyed blankets and wooden stools.
- P.23 full moon. Deep River, Walpole, WA. 2006.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Holly Story Skin Deep

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