



## **November 2008 Interview: Sue Jane Taylor**

### **Working At Extremes**

**GEORGINA COBURN visited Sutherland-based artist SUE JANE TAYLOR in her studio to discuss her recent project in Tasmania and her latest work**

**GEORGINA COBURN: How did you become involved in the residency programme at Landscape Art Research Queenstown (LARQ), and what attracted you initially to the project?**

SUE JANE TAYLOR: Raymond Arnold who set up LARQ has been a working colleague of my partner Ian Westacott and has been coming to Europe for the last ten years, primarily working in Paris at the La Couriere et Frelaut print studios and building up a body of work based on the First World War. He also collaborated with Ian up here in the workshop on their series of 'double image' etchings.

After travelling back and forth to Europe Raymond wanted to establish himself in Tasmania (where he has always lived ). He wanted give something back to the West Coast so he decided to set up his studio and Landscape Art Research in an old schoolhouse right in the centre of Queenstown, a historic mining town.

Raymond wanted to set up an international artist residency as well as having Australian artists coming to Western Tasmania. The first residency was two years ago, a Canadian artist, Bill Smith from Newfoundland, who had worked a lot with the Inuit in Canada. He was interested in the remoteness of the west coast, did a lot of trekking and walking in the mountains and he set the pattern.

Raymond then approached me to ask if I would be interested in coming to LARQ for two months and actually drawing on site in the Vendanta mine, formally Mount Lyell in Queenstown, and in the Henty Hills. Really this followed on from my oil work. He thought that my work in the North Sea and the oil industry would stand me in good stead for drawing in the mines. He wanted someone who would be involved in the community and involved with the people actually working on site, in terms of communication skills and really being part of that scene for two months.

**GC: How did that relationship evolve? What was the response from the mining company and the workers?**

SJT: CMT at Mount Lyell, it's still called CMT although its owned by an Indian company called Vendanta, were slow to reply at first. They are a huge mine and mining is booming so I think the last thing on their mind was to have an artist on site. Raymond pursued it and they agreed to me coming. Henty immediately replied; because of my experience drawing in industrial and dangerous sites they were really open to me coming.

With CMT I needed to establish a relationship with the managers, to gain their confidence of my seriousness, that I wouldn't be doing anything silly, because it is very dangerous underground. So it took longer to establish with CMT. Henty

is a smaller mine and the public affairs manager was open to everything we suggested. Both sites were fascinating and very different. You think that mining is all the same but its not, its quite different atmospheres and feelings underground as well.

**GC: What was your underground experience like? How did you negotiate working underground?**

SJT: CMT Mine Rescue Department looked after me and they were in charge. Luckily the Manager of the Mine Rescue was very open to what I wanted to do underground. I really wanted to work underground, although there are a lot of workings on the surface too, I wanted to be drawing down there most of the time. I had a minder wherever I went and he was there for me assisting with where ever I wanted to draw.

**GC What was the draw for working underground for you?**

SJT: Compared to the surface?

**GC: Yes.**

SJT: It was like being under the surface of an ocean. Just that experience of being a couple of miles under rock, in a surreal artificial environment where these massive huge trucks are travelling to and fro in very tight claustrophobic tunnels, everything is dark – DARK – and hot, 24 or 25 degrees. They have created these huge workings under the earth and these huge machines. There are men and women working there, (at CMT there are about 20 women, which is a lot and they are truck drivers, charging up, preparing bore holes to put dynamite in – a lot of women like doing that and

driving the huge trucks.) The attitudes have changed in mining, it is usually very male orientated but women are supervisors and drivers. It was very interesting speaking to them, fascinating.

**GC: So did you draw a lot of the workers?**

SJT: Yes, I was taken round first of all by the underground manager, down to the deepest level where they are still going to go deeper and deeper.

**GC: Was that a frightening place to be?**

SJT: Initially. Because I've been on oil rigs perhaps not quite as frightening and unsettling as it would be for the average person going in. But I was very wary. On the surface you just have this little port hole, an insignificant dark round tunnel, so you're driving into that and suddenly you're in the dark going down in this claustrophobic tunnel. You've got your lights on and the only communication is your radio. You're driving, winding down and down and down, then occasionally you'll stop, you hear on the radio that there's a big truck coming and so you have to reverse into a siding and there isn't much room.

Suddenly you hear this huge thing chugger past and you wonder what world you're in. They bring out 900 tonnes a day 24 hours a day, its mind boggling! It's like a churning machine, like witnessing a churning industrial underground world. Further down you stop, put your tag on to say that you're going down to the deeper level. At the deepest level you get out and walk and its just dripping water, they try and make the surface smooth but you really have to watch your footing, you just have your lamp on your helmet as your guide.

Suddenly you come across someone who is working, in the dark. It is quite amazing. I always felt secure because there was always someone with me who knew exactly what to do, I didn't feel vulnerable or in danger. You just had to watch where you were walking all the time – it is hard to orientate yourself in darkness.

### **GC: How did you draw down there?**

SJT: The best places to draw were the underground workshops. I would spend the mornings down there drawing the machines and the people. In terms of drawing the people (because I couldn't get them to stop as they had to work for their production targets) I used to get up about 4.30 in the morning to go to the muster room, where everyone would congregate to look at the day's projections and working targets.

I used to get there early, watch them coming in. I stood out, people thought I was a new comer – a new starter in the company. They were curious and would come up and speak to me and ask me what I was doing. Some of them just could not believe that I had come all the way from Scotland to draw! I would then ask if I could draw them and I would draw them for 20 minutes in a room beside the muster room.

It was very difficult because they have a schedule and can't stop, but I drew 6 or 7 people and I still have to finish these drawings. I had to get them to stand and talk to me to try and get to know some of them, to find out more about them; why they want to work there and where they've come from. A lot of them are what they call "seagulls" – they aren't staying in the town but are just renting a flat and going back to their homes in Victoria or other states elsewhere.

Some fly in and out. The labour force is scarce, they are crying out for skilled people, this industry is absolutely booming and they are looking at disused and abandoned 19<sup>th</sup> century mines to see what can be excavated.

**GC: What has that economic boom done to the area and how did you explore this in your work?**

SJT: I tried not to make it political, that's getting into ground that I am uneasy about – one can see it in my work but not obviously. I didn't want to pursue the political angle, I just wanted to observe what I came across. What I can see from Queenstown is that the community is dying in a way, in terms of what it used to be. They used to have a footy club which was famous, a pipe band and lots of things that brought them together as a community, now lots of people rent accommodation and don't get involved in the area. They don't actually spend much money in the Queenstown area.

**GC: So there isn't as much of a personal investment in the town or landscape?**

SJT: No and the locals are quite worried about it actually, they speak about it openly. Up the road the mining companies have in the past and present made vast profits, it's the way it has always been. Queenstown people survived and stayed proud because of their strong community values. There hasn't really been a huge social and environmental investment in the area. In terms of tourism and heritage they have managed to keep alive – through enthusiasts rather than mining companies – the steam railway to Strahan, which is wonderful. In present day it is almost a life-line to Queenstown.

Because sustainability in employment is key to Tasmanian governmental policies through the years, past state premiers have been subservient to the mining companies, until recently in the 1990's they have heavily subsidised the mining companies to keep working mines alive in spite of the atrocious pollution to the whole area. That's what struck me when I first arrived in Queenstown was its river, The Queen, which is bright orange – the red is derived from the high amount of iron contained in the lease run-off which is highly acidic.

The present company deal with their own mine tailings, but they don't deal with the past hundred year's environmental destruction. All the rain water that's dripping down through the rock just comes out directly from the old mine portholes and flows down into the river, its basically sulphuric acid. It was worse before, grey sludge, because it had everything in it, millions of tonnes of tailings material in sediment banks have gone into it and the river is dead.

The Queen flows into the King further downstream, destroying its water. Nothing lives in these rivers and it all flows out into the delta and then the sea. Estimated discharges are Tailings 95 million tonnes, smelter slag 1.4 million tonnes and Topsoil 10 million tonnes. This does not take into account the town's untreated waste which also flowed straight into the Queen.

**GC: How do you begin to deal with the past in that kind of environment?**

SJT: I have done a small series of coloured ink sketches of the archaeological remnants on the surface of the mine, the smelters, the old buildings, its bald and bare red rock surrounding hills. In a way that is a kind of mark. The

government still hasn't stepped in to stop all the pollution going into the river yet. They know how they could deal with it, putting in microorganisms to neutralise the acidic water, but it would take millions of pounds that they say they don't have so the pollution goes on. It is estimated that it will take 1,000 years for the river to begin to recover if the proposed water purification begins. People in Queenstown have put up with a polluted river since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**GC: So it's part of the landscape?**

SJT: Yes, they were just industrial effluent channels. Everything has changed now, but people aren't sure what they can do about it, they're embarrassed, they're also helpless. The statement of Queenstown is the orange river, The Queen. It's very shocking.

**GC: It is very strange emblem.**

SJT: It's like a third world country, you go into Queenstown and see this pollution and yet all that raw rich mineral material that Australia and Tasmania has, all the profits that the shareholders are getting from it in terms of mining, nothing is being done about it – the government isn't pushing it. It's like the dams, almost every river in Tasmania has been dammed and although environmental campaigners in the mid-1980s won the Franklin campaign, they were exhausted. They didn't have the energy to carry on with other wilderness areas near by which were dammed and controlled. Whole unrecorded natural habitats were wiped out.

**GC: Is there any sense of the natural value of the area left then?**

SJT: Some locals don't like the trees and vegetation coming back, there was a petition against plantations, because this is the signature of Queenstown – the bald hills.

**GC: Is that just familiarity?**

SJT: Yes, resources are seen as abundant.

**GC: I guess too younger people coming in to work aren't there permanently so there won't be that personal investment in the place.**

SJT: Queenstown is a fascinating town because it attracts all kinds of people, people who want to get away from it all, people who are extremely poor and can't move out, and artists – there are a lot of artists moving in.

**GC: What do you think is drawing them to the area?**

SJT: Well it's the environment, incredible mountainous environment, also the treatment of the environment in past generations.

**GC: That whole conflict?**

SJT: Yes it's a conflict of industrialisation in the wilderness and the attitude to their previous generations, to the Piners and the mining.

**GC: So does it feel like a front line in that respect?**

SJT: Yes, it's the conflict and also the people who live there too, there is a fascination about people who have lived and mined there for generations.

**GC: So it's an edge and a frontier on lots of levels.**

SJT: Yes.

**GC: What draws you personally to work in environments like that, because a lot of the sites you choose to work on are on the edge of extreme environments or extreme working environments? How does that work in your own practice?**

SJT: Maybe because I experienced it myself growing up on the Black Isle, because then it was a rural, remote area – you wouldn't think it now. Within twenty years of the opening of Kessock Bridge the Black Isle has become a busy suburb of Inverness. Industrialisation arrived – the oil boom which I experienced during my childhood.

Also living in the Highlands today, there is still the industrialised presence of the oil industry in the Cromarty Firth and offshore and now with the numerous land wind farms dotted everywhere in the hills and straths. It's that contrast again – remote, rural, beautiful landscape and the infiltration of man trying to alter the natural environment. One cannot also ignore the fact that the Victorians also decimated natural habitats within the Highlands.

**GC: Or tame it.**

SJT: Yes. Also in Australia there is this romanticised idea about the bush, Australia being the most urban population. It's romantic, this vision out West in Tasmania, this idea of it being the most remote environment in Australia and untouched, but it isn't.

**GC: We also think of the Highlands as untouched and it's not, it has been completely altered by man.**

SJT: Yes, constantly wearing rose tinted glasses, which is great for tourism and brushes a lot of the conflict under the carpet.

**GC: So is that one of the central functions of having an organisation like LARQ in that area?**

SJT: Yes, very much. Raymond is bringing in artists of all different backgrounds and disciplines. Next year a German installation artist is coming over and she's going to be sited at Lake Margaret, the first power station in Tasmania, dated 1914. It was the power source for Queenstown and the mine, the first lake that was created.

**GC: Man made?**

SJT: Yes.

**GC: That should be an interesting dialogue!**

SJT: Yes, I know. There were three installation artists from Sydney who came down to Queenstown to experience this area. Raymond showed them around the hidden sites of interest. He also holds exhibitions of artists' work, including local artists within his own gallery space. For example there is an older woman artist in her 80s who is exhibiting early next year and she was one of the first artists to come and settle in Queenstown in the 1950s.

**GC: How has the whole labour-landscape theme played itself out in this residency?**

SJT: At the moment I am trying to finish off these drawings I started in the mine and then working on new ones here. I'll see how they come out. I can't be sure until I have finished the work I started out on site. I want to show the power of these machines, the scale of things.

**GC: What about the human scale?**

SJT: Yes, you'll see that in the drawings. Also the human aspect to the job too, these characters – I want to bring that out strongly too in a series of individual portraits. I have this show coming up in March.

**GC: At the Zeehan Museum?**

SJT: Yes, LARQ, Tasmanian Art Gallery and Museum and 10 Days on the Island International Arts Festival are organising and hanging it. It will also be shown at LARQ in Queenstown. I would also like some of the work to be shown in the crib room where the workers eateries are underground. In the crib room anyway there's an installation created by past and present miners – you look up and there's teabags hanging from the metal grid, thousands of them. They flick them up and if they're lucky they hang on – it's fabulous, Turner Prize eat your heart out! It's brilliant.

**GC: What are the attitudes towards artists in the area?**

SJT: They're pretty open and interested, I would have to say. Australians are not as obsessed or as conscious as we British in terms of occupational and class differences. There are a couple of young artists who have set up a gallery, there are actually two galleries in Queenstown, they have their shop front right in the main street. The workers are seeing this as they walk along the veranda-covered streets.

As always some of the workers were pretty shy when I wanted to make drawings of them, because it's about them and no one has made a request like this to them before, it's uncharted territory. I pursued it though, and if the others didn't see them being drawn it was alright. Like the oil workers they seem pleased that someone is recording their work. Some people in town were a bit suspicious about Raymond's project at first. He has put this amazing modernist extension on the schoolhouse but he's in there, he's in the community, he's creating paintings of this area and showing them in Queenstown.

**GC: It also sounds as if he is collaborating with a lot of different groups which helps to build a network, people then have an understanding of he's trying to do.**

SJT: Yes. What helped me too in terms of social community integration was my son Finn who accompanied me to Queenstown and he went to the local school. I got to meet a lot of the miner's wives, so that link helped me play a small part within this community. I think being a Scot also helped, and being from the Highlands, all these markers. The managers also had my book (*Oilwork The North Sea Diaries*, published by Birlinn 2005) and had some knowledge to the background to my work in the oil industry.

I was also working on site in the mines all the time during the week, two days at Henty Mine and the rest at CMT. There is this fabulous old mining office, the original red brick office from the time of Sticht (the famous German chemist who established the smelters). I was working next door to his original office in the old finance office within this early 20th century building. I used this room as a base and studio and one afternoon we held an open day at the end of my

residency, workers from the mine and people from the town came to see my work in progress. About 50 people came that afternoon.

**GC: Were the outcomes of the residency set from the beginning or was this more fluid?**

SJT: It was fluid. I didn't know how I would react to this environment within my work. When we first arrived there was a week of school holidays and I walked everywhere in the town. I tried to establish myself in the town, newcomers stand out and people are very friendly. Volunteers at the local museum were helpful as well giving me access to old documents and recordings in relation to the mine.

**GC: Do you think there are applications of the LARQ project in the Highlands?**

SJT: There are lots of hints of it, Taigh Chearsabagh, Timespan perhaps, but these are not private individuals, these are organisations.

**GC: LARQ is also specifically focused, I don't have that sense of that kind of a reconnaissance mission going on here, perhaps in individual practice but not in the broader sense.**

SJT: It is a big ask for any artist but Raymond is very committed to that.

**GC: Reinvestigating the relationship between the Highlands, visual art and landscape seems very timely, that really interested me in relation to your residency in Australia. What sort of parallels can you see between**

**your experiences as an artist in residence there and here?**

SJT: I do see parallels because you're dealing with the environment, all the issues with offshore and on-shore wind farms, the oil industry and my work offshore and in a rural environment. Sometimes I had flashbacks of Wick during the mine residency too, especially with the museum volunteers recording everything before it is gone, that era of pioneers, the mining in Queenstown and the fishing in Wick.

**GC: What do you think of the artist as an intermediary between past and present, environment and labour, those opposites I suppose?**

SJT: It's a fascinating area if artists get the chance to explore it. In terms of Australia it's a bit like artists going to Antarctica. Australian artists have for many years been given the opportunity of travelling to this area as part of their country's research team. Artists view it in another light and their strength is the visual impact on the viewer whether it's an installation, painting or a drawing.

**GC: It's also a human connection with that environment as well.**

SJT: Yes, it's a human connection.

**GC: That's a baseline in all your work.**

SJT: Yes, it was also new ground for me. It was all total new ground. Although mining has similar health and safety regulations to the oil industry, it is a totally different ball game in a mine to an oil platform. On a platform you are aware of the sea all around and the sky, in a mine it's all in darkness.

People are more dispersed working individually either in their truck or on foot. Also the worker's own relationship to this environment is quite different. Although I have experienced people working in extreme environments before in Australia – I accompanied a female drover and her mob in Queensland and north west NSW – it is uncharted ground for me.

**GC: A complete antithesis. What has that done to your work?**

SJT: I'm working on it at the moment and still working through it in my head.

**GC: It will be fascinating to see how that influences your work, technically as well.**

SJT: Some people would say, well, you've been to the other side of the earth, Tasmania – what does that relate to your work, in terms of the oil industry, the UK or Europe? But everything is so global now. We are affected by everything that happens over the other side of the world. Really all this raw material going out of Australia to China and Asia, it all relates to us as well. How much can we go on with the mining? They say there's at least 50 years more copper in the Queenstown mine, as long as the price is right, but if it goes down they could always pull out. That's where the community is always being punished. It depends on the price of gold or whatever.

**GC: It's the whim of corporations and profit. A lot of labour here in the Highlands is tied into exactly the same dynamic.**

SJT: Yes, of course it is. The same old issue, ignore the environment – jobs, jobs are important, and that's still the ethos. Environment is secondary.

**GC: How do you think creative process or an artist residency challenges those ideas – or does it challenge those ideas?**

SJT: It depends on what level people are at. Artists have always challenged ideas and are perhaps more at the forefront of challenging ideas than everyone else. It takes time for people to understand and realise what is being portrayed in the creative process.

**GC: I guess too with a project such as LARQ it is an accumulative process, each project builds upon that understanding. I can't think of an equivalent here in the Highlands.**

SJT: No there isn't, you're right.

**GC: The issues are just as potent here.**

SJT: Of course they are. It is perhaps an obvious statement but in the case of Australia it has only taken 200 years to obliterate, it's taken 6000-7000 years here to obliterate ours. You look at the bald hills in the Highlands, they're not bald because it's natural, they're bald because there's too many deer and sheep. They're complaining about this traditional industry of sheep farming going, but it's not traditional, it's only 150 years old. There has got to be a balance. What is it doing to the environment? It's controversial.

**GC: It's like our memory only spans a lifetime.**

SJT: One should look at history more in a geological way, not only into our recent past of clearances or whatever – go further back to when vast stretches of land used to be covered in Caledonian forest and native woodlands. People are ignoring that in the Highlands, it's the farming, hunting and estates – afraid of losing the romantic vision.

**GC: It's the whole monarch of the glen thing – the area is still defined by Victorian myth.**

SJT: Yes, obliterating the whole native environment, taming it, recreating it, making it like a garden for our needs.

**GC: I don't think that here we are really looking at landscape as a cultural indicator. There are essential things that to be addressed that aren't being addressed at all.**

SJT: No, they're not addressed, it's frightening even with the attitudes of the Scottish government, its bias in its policies towards assisting large companies in the Highlands as opposed to the one person companies, and the proposed Donald Trump development near Aberdeen and the rest of it, scary stuff!

**GC: It must be difficult too when you're working in edgy environments like that, and I mean that on lots of levels, not to politicise the work.**

SJT: Yes it is, overtly. My work you can take it for whatever it is. I'm not putting pointers out, I'm not pro-oil company, I'm not pro-one or the other, it's just me looking at it in a creative sense and what ever you take out of that, as a strong indicator of the obliteration of the environment or whatever.

You can take it one way or the other. It is bringing it to the fore.

**GC: Also highlighting the human aspect of it, one of the primary focuses of your work are the workers themselves.**

SJT: Who are often forgotten. Like in the mines, it's the pioneering, the huge machines, the technology, the advancement that is talked about.

**GC: So how is someone like Sticht regarded?**

SJT: Yes it's interesting, he's on a wee platform. In Queenstown there's Sticht Hill which is a slag heap from the smelter. It's quite beautiful in a way. There are all these wattle trees growing on top of it, trying to stay on there because there's landslides – there's very little top soil for them to hold on to. It's a reminder of Sticht, that's the statement. He was also a great collector of Art.

**GC: He sounds like the all round cultured “progressive”, we have those in every age. It's what they leave behind that's interesting – and problematic!**

SJT: Yes I know. Sticht's old office is regarded as a bit of a sanctum. You're stepping into his past, it's quite unnerving.

**GC: Is any of your imagery related to Sticht and his legacy?**

SJT: Archaeological reminders on the site built during his time as manager.

**GC: So in terms of human marks on a landscape rather than an individual's mark?**

SJT: Yes. There was the Mount Lyell mining disaster where 52 men were killed just before the First World War, the people still mourn and still talk about it. From that disaster the unions became stronger and safety issues were better addressed. There is a huge legacy from that disaster in the town. How that will transpire into my work I do not know – it might not.

**GC: It is interesting what continues to resonate in a place from past events.**

SJT: Yes, there's a letter from a miner writing to his wife back home which I am going to use in the catalogue describing the conditions in the mine in 1899. *[She hands it to me to read - GC]*. The conditions are still pretty tough, lifestyles are tough.

**GC: In a strange kind of way in Australia that is a source of pride, it's that pioneering work ethic. It's that whole idea of advancement through labour, whatever a person's background, the idea that by working hard you overcome difficulty and get ahead. Labour has a different connotation I think in the New World to what it has in the UK – it's your ticket out of whatever situation you were born into.**

SJT: We still have class structure here.

**GC: I guess the population in Queenstown would be much smaller today than in its heyday?**

SJT: Yes. That's the fascinating thing, there are towns that have come and gone. There are two or three deserted towns

nearby that the forest is gradually growing over it. The dams have had an impact too, when the water is low you can walk out to the old smelters and townships.

**GC: We've several sites like that up here too.**

SJT: Yes. There were no protests or investigations into the building of the dams here in the 1950s they probably did wipe out natural environments. In Tasmania there have been books written about what a disaster it has been. Here it's now classed as renewable energy.

**GC: What images of Queenstown and the surrounding area will stay with you as you continue to develop this body of work now that you're back?**

SJT: The river, The Queen, and the whole experience of being underground – that whole world going on under the surface. That's what has stuck in my mind, all the people working there, the women working underground, the work ethic and the migrating workforce. The remoteness of Queenstown, just how cut off it is, much more so than anywhere here in the Highlands. Especially in the winter, they don't salt the roads so it's dangerous to travel far. A lot of people don't go to Hobart but to Burnie or Wynyard two or three hours north. It is fascinating speaking to artists who are living there too.

**GC: How does the Ten Days on the Island Festival fit in to promotion of the area through the Arts?**

SJT: The festival is Tasmania-wide. Most of the venues are in Hobart and the other centres, they do have two or three events in the west coast as part of the festival. It will be interesting to see how Raymond Arnold continues to develop

LARQ. I did a lecture at Hobart University, of which the art school is part, at the end of my time there.

People are very aware in Hobart and in the arts community of what is going on with LARQ. There are other residencies by Arts Tasmania in other rural and remote areas, Lake St Clare, Port Arthur. There's an Aberdeen artist, an installation artist in residence who was there at the same time, who was giving a lecture a couple of weeks after me. These are very well attended, it's good to see.

**GC: What do you think are the benefits of partnerships between arts and industry and to the community you're working in, in relation to this type of residency?**

SJT: Certainly it's recording of that time, that period of what's going on in the mine, the people who work there. Lots of artists have visited the mine through the past years but very few have gone down and drawn underground. Raymond has done it and Jan Sensbergs, an Australian painter, is famous for his work in Queenstown in the 1980's. Perhaps communities as a whole don't quite realise what artists are contributing for they are not directly monetary but cultural in value. Interested individuals make it worthwhile, like for example the new primary head teacher is a strong supporter of LARQ and values its vital presence. He views it as a cultural link for the children and parents at his school, as viewing exhibitions by professional contemporary artists was non-existent before.

**GC: In direct response to the place they're living in.**

SJT: Exactly.

**GC: Quite often culture is seen as something that is parachuted in. That's certainly true of here.**

SJT: It is.

**GC: Shall we go into the studio and take a look at the drawings so far? *[We move outside to the studio]***

SJT: These are the drawings. *[She points to a series of large scale graphite drawings on the wall]*. They are looser than the large drawings I have been doing on the Beatrice Project. I was quite determined to get the mechanical side accurate, getting the linear outline and basic composition. These were all in the workshops underground.

**GC: What was the light like in the mine workshop?**

SJT: Very dark. They only had limited light where they were working and these were overhead which really didn't radiate or illuminate outwards.

**GC: You get that feeling from how everything is receding tonally; it feels like peering into blackness.**

SJT: Yes that's how it felt, it was quite difficult. With people you saw their reflectors before you saw them.

**GC: The scale is interesting. The machines are like living, chomping entities.**

SJT: They're massive machines. Everything is mega scale.

**GC: Psychologically what is it like being underground?**

SJT: It's like being a diver, like going underwater, it's quite surreal. One can almost feel the pressure and weight of rock above you.

**GC: How long are the shifts?**

SJT: Twelve hours, they have their breaks in the crib room underground, they don't go to the surface. Shifts are five days on and five off. It puts a lot of pressure on families and relationships. A lot of people prefer to fly in and fly out. In the mine when you're driving up to the surface you see this tiny white light in the distance. That's the surface, you don't quite register it, as you get closer and closer the light becomes bigger and bigger and more focused.

**GC: There's something quite biblical about that!**

SJT: I know. It's unsettling.

**GC: As an artist though unsettling isn't a bad thing.**

SJT: No, it's exciting!

**GC: That whole tension fuels the work.**

SJT: Yes, I had been underground for five hours one day and hadn't even noticed! I was so stimulated by my environment in which I was drawing.

**GC: There is a natural strong sense of dark and light in these drawings in the workshops and tunnels. Has colour entered the work in other areas?**

SJT: Yes, in the portraits which are in conte and the surface drawings in coloured pen and ink washes. In the

underground work I wanted to emphasise tonally the density of rock and darkness and the vulnerability of human figures.

**GC: Yes, I can see in the scale.**

SJT: There is the noise, you have to wear earplugs, a hardhat, it was heavy carrying the oxygen mask, the battery for your light attached to your belt and then the drawing gear. I carried a rucksack on my back full of drawing materials and if I had forgotten anything back on the surface it was too far and logistically impossible to get it. I wanted to make these drawings immediate.

**GC: I'm sure there are so many aspects of the residency you could explore in your future work. It's a once in a lifetime experience.**

SJT: It is. Being able to have that concentrated working period was fantastic, total focus. This is some more underground work from Henty.

**GC: The layering of ink in these is beautiful, the saturation – it has a dream-like, surreal quality to it even though you still get the real industrial monumentality of the machines in the tunnels.**

SJT: It is difficult to define the rock, especially when the only light on it is artificial. The colour changes, different areas of rock seams coming through.

**GC: Yes the way you've handled the ink really captures that shifting quality.**

SJT: I love the drawing, the drawing on site. The drawings on the surface are different. *[She arranges series of sketchbook pages to reveal panoramic views of the surface.]*

**GC: It's got that scraped, barren feel to it.**

SJT: It's where the smelter used to be, all those marks. That's what remains. I'm just going to keep these small scale.

**GC: There is something very raw about the landscape.**

SJT: Yes it's battered and barely surviving.

**GC: I think that's why in Australia most people are urban dwellers. We're all just clinging to the edges of this vast hostile island. It's very unforgiving, even the light. Would you look to do a residency elsewhere in Australia?**

SJT: I'd love to go to Kalgoorlie (Western Australia), to other mines over there, and the Kimberleys, where 30% of the workforce are aborigines. It would be fascinating.

*Sue Jane Taylor's latest work will be on display at the Zeehan Museum, Tasmania in March-April 2009 and LARQ Gallery, April-May 2009, as part of the Ten Days On The Island Festival of The Arts, 27 March-5 April 2009*

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