

a dry eye

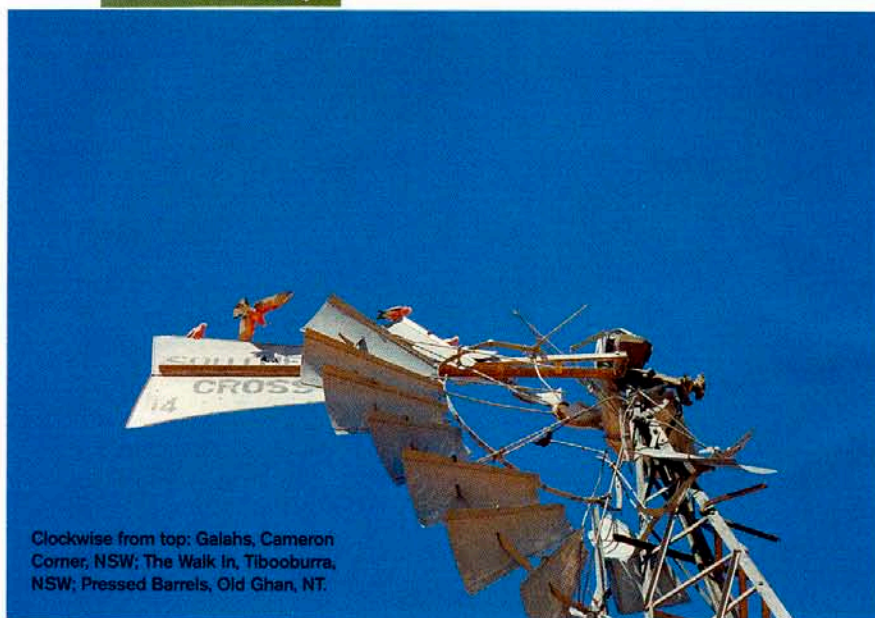
A CHILDHOOD FASCINATION DREW JASON KIMBERLEY BACK TO THE RUGGED BEAUTY OF THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK. HIS YEAR-LONG TREK ACROSS THE CONTINENT IS CAPTURED IN A STUNNING BOOK AND EXHIBITION

✦ It's ironic that the ill-fated expeditions of Burke and Wills would leave a four-year-old Jason Kimberley bedazzled with the Australian landscape. Upon reading their story in a children's book, he wanted to see for himself the country that had defeated the men and their teams of animals. What struck him about the explorers was "the way that they had set out from Melbourne with all the pomp and fanfare of all the Victorian English standards... they didn't know what they were getting into," says the photographer. And on encountering the earthy landscape, "they fought it rather than tried to work with it".

"Even when they were dying, Burke refused food from the Aborigines and shot at them and refused their shelter and [declined] to get assistance from them, which could well have saved their lives," says Kimberley. "Instead he was eating from poisonous seeds, which he was grinding up into a flour which was [slowly] killing him and sending him mad [laughs]. I suppose it was a complete misunderstanding of the countryside."

Kimberley's own perspective on the Australian landscape, as captured in *Australia Exposed*, his new exhibition and self-published book, is undeniably more evolved. He notes water and conservation issues have developed greatly over the years he has journeyed cross-country since the first family trip during his childhood.

"Once you'd drop the bore into the Great Artesian Basin and the water would come blasting out, and now it's stopped to a trickle and dried up, so I think there are lot of land management and water issues which people in the bush are certainly very aware of," he says. "There's [been] this realisation in the last 20 years that we need to stop and [check] what's being done and what's going to happen in the future."



Clockwise from top: Galahs, Cameron Corner, NSW; The Walk In, Tibooburra, NSW; Pressed Barrels, Old Ghan, NT.

Despite the many outback treks over the years, it was Kimberley's last journey around the country that became the subject of *Australia Exposed*. He took a year off with his wife and spent the time exploring the rugged, idiosyncratic boundaries of Australia with his wife. "To spend a year with your partner, where you're never more than 100 metres from them, is probably five years of marriage crammed into one," he quips.

From the cracked contours of dry lakes to the wash of blue on brittle sand, Kimberley documented his journey with his mother's 25-year-old camera. The idea of putting the images together as an exhibition and book actually occurred after the fact; he isn't even a trained photographer, Kimberley keenly points out. It was when he had "the first 12 or 15 rolls of film" developed that he realised these pictures might end up as something more than holiday snaps.

Australia Exposed is more than a detached document of the alternately tough and lush Australian landscape. Kimberley's experience is embedded in the images – from the regrettable impromptu fight he signed up for while watching Fred Brophy's Travelling Boxing Troupe one night (which left him with a broken eye socket) to the rodeo riders he depicts at Laura, north-west of Cairns. Many memorable characters also peopled his journey, from the poet who created outback paintings on the back of lino tiles to the storekeeper at Rabbit Flat in

the Northern Territory, who barricaded himself in a nine-metre high mini-fortress with corrugated iron walls and barbed wire. He would serve customers through a hole the size of an A4 sheet of paper, notes the photographer. "It's the only place in Australia where the population doubled overnight, when his wife had twins about 20 years ago."

After completing his challenging journey, Kimberley says he felt "a bit more enlightened about the country. But [I'm] happy to get onto the next thing." □

Australia Exposed, published October, RRP \$49.95. Exhibition at Nellie Castans Gallery, Melbourne until November 9; Arthouse Hotel, Sydney, December 2-23. The self-published book RRP \$49.95.

