

## Harsh and intricate and right in front of you

**A**t a trowel's length short of three metres, it's wider than your average farm gate, or the dripline of any young tree. On first encounter in a gallery space, it could be an elaborate graphic score, say, for percussion ensemble. But if you know the country, even a little, there's no need for musicians. You can hear it, straightaway, both harsh and intricate: this walking into human vandalism, land's vitality, endurance of human, animal, forest kinds. John Wolseley, [History of the Whipstick Forest with ephemeral swamps and gold bearing reefs](#) (2011), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.\* You can hear the quartz grains and gravel underfoot. You can hear the scratchings of charcoal and pencil, as well as high cicadas pulsing, honeyeaters, a rattle of branches, winged ants and dragonflies ... heat trapped in bark- and leaf-litter. Listen for colour washes stroking the paper, then soaking below a soft horizon line, from light to dark in the space of a breath. Yes, with its scant layer of shrubs, and scattered, open trees, mainly Green Mallee, Grey Box and Yellow Gum, woodland like this can feel quiet, nowadays. You're following a dusty track, a scar, a scent of – no, never just one scent or sound, texture or story. In the shifting linework there's also a geological map, maybe a Department of Mines map from the 1920s or earlier, showing reefs, shafts, soils and gullies. Look again for the delicate hatching of a hand-drawn map. And cursive writing, too, clustered in petals that add to the impression of a hyper-magnified, cellular landscape where the space between things is most alive, thrumming in counterpoint to visible marks and signs. 'There once were fences', reads an inscription. For the sudden luminosity of water pooling, for mottling moss and lichen: stains of cobalt chromite blue (perhaps). For the sands, wild wattle, and smears of old scats; for the gleam of mineral wealth, and the still-bare tailings: light yellow ochre (perhaps). Plus a few specks of iron oxide straight from the ground. You sense bright red, though. Not just if you think of the Red Ironbarks nearby, leaking their deep ruby sap. There's the blood in the artist's walking, listening, markmaking body – and in patient memories of those shimmering swamps, as the land, these days, becomes drier and drier, and you notice the new fire ecology right in front of you.

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\*Featured in the exhibition *John Wolseley – Heartlands and Headwaters*, April–September 2015, National Gallery of Victoria, Federation Square, Melbourne.