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WHERE DIRT MEETS DEITY

For Merrick Belyea, the Pilbara wasn't just a landscape to paint — it was a problem to solve and a myth to borrow.

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When **Merrick Belyea** drove his Ford Falcon utility north to the Pilbara, he was astonished by the 1,400-kilometre distance from his hometown of Perth. And while other artists tend to see the Pilbara in terms of red dirt horizons, rust hills and vast blue skies, Merrick saw a palette of far greater variety and weather patterns of considerable force.

"I was coming back to Onslow from Tom Price [a mining town in the Pilbara region of Western Australia], when I saw this red haze in the distance. By the time I got to Onslow, I was in a dust storm. And so the earth was literally above me. I'm sure the people of Onslow were used to it, but for a newcomer, it was 'wow, what do I do with this?'"

"Everything I saw just made me think of something mythological. And the weather is a huge factor there. It's cyclone alley so in certain seasons you can't get through the roads.

"I must say that everywhere I drove, I saw a **Fred Williams** Pilbara series. And when I first started painting, I was doing Fred Williams' paintings! Actually, I have a theory that the

Pilbara scared him a bit, he was forced to paint in a more elemental way, and it changed him."

Did the Pilbara experience change Merrick too? "Oh, yes, but I think every painting you do does, if you've got an idea that was trapped wordlessly inside and you've got it out into the real world."

Merrick's Pilbara series title *Saturn Eats his Own* refers to the famous Goya painting of Saturn devouring his own infant children to prevent them destroying him. That the mineral-rich Pilbara landscape is also being 'devoured' by a seemingly voracious human appetite fits neatly into Merrick's sustained interest as an artist in how humans inhabit and change places.

"The exhibition's generally about journey through the landscape, physically and metaphorically, to which I attach bigger ideas in the studio like the title *Saturn Eats His Own*. I'm trying to get some sort of a mythology that I know about into a landscape that I'm relatively new to — maybe join those mythologies together."

So is there an implied commentary in the use of that title? "Yes, basically, it's mining, isn't it?"

It's us in the landscape. And yet I'm very conscious of the fact that I wouldn't be able to drive to Tom Price without those roads that mining created. I'm conscious of that because as artists we're meant to critique, and I think an honest critique actually includes your own contribution to a problem. I keep on coming back to that idea that what I'm using, what I'm driving through, what I'm consuming while I'm waiting for the sun to set, is all part of what we see as a problem — consumers, capitalism, mining etcetera.

"So I'm trying to find a space where I can critique but also acknowledge that I'm part of it. I've put that into my work from day one at art school."

Once he'd driven back down south and shaken the red dirt out of his swag, Merrick spent nearly two years creating his Pilbara series.

"I made sketches up there — I don't work in photographs, because that kills a painting for me, you're copying rather than making. I might use them as an aid to memory, but I do lots of oil sketches."

"These Pilbara works are actually painted on aluminium, which is ironic," he adds wryly.



“It’s (the product of) different mining, they cut down the jarrah trees to extract the bauxite underneath.” The unusual choice of material came about when **Lloyd Horn**, a respected art collector and patron from Bunbury, sourced a pile of second-hand aluminium composite panels usually used for building and cladding. “Lloyd said to me ‘I’ll get it for you as long as you don’t clad your house with it. You do paintings!’”

But was there an artistic reason why Merrick agreed? “Yes. I’ve always set up a series of problems before I start anything. So that might be, in earlier work of mine, a really restricted palette - two tones, maybe two colours — to see how much I can get out of that problem.”

His patron’s offer posed a new set of problems applying paint on the aluminium plates. “It’s really hard because it almost rejects paint. It’s slippery, it doesn’t absorb anything you do to it. There’s a point where you can go too far and you’ve either got to scrape off and start again, or it’s destroyed. “The problem I set up for myself is that I wanted to score into the aluminium, but

not to draw a picture with the scoring.”

What does he use to make the marks? “The best tool is a very, very sharp builder’s nail. By sharpening the end, it’s like using an etching tool. I’d score the surface randomly and make a horizon line, scratches up in the sky. And in a way, they kind of led the picture, I had to fight against them as well. I like the fight in getting a picture to that point where you say, ‘All done!’”

Born in 1969 in Perth, Merrick studied fine art at Claremont School of Art. “I came at painting quite young because I went straight from high school to art school. My high school exam score was worse than I thought, so before either of my parents saw it, I looked around and found Claremont School of Art, rang them up and said ‘how do I get in?’ So it was really just to keep my parents out of my hair.”

Since his first solo show in 1995, he’s exhibited regularly and was included in the *Art Collector Australia’s Most Collectable Artists* list in 2004 and 2006, was guest exhibitor at the Australian Embassy in the Philippines in 2001 and at Art

Stage Singapore in 2015. His work is found in many prominent collections, including the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Wesfarmers Arts, Artbank, Janet Holmes à Court Collection, and numerous university and hospital collections. In 2021, he was awarded the John Stringer Prize for his painting series *Brigadoon* and in 2023 he was awarded a Pilbara residency grant by the Mindereroo Foundation.

He’s also played a pivotal role in a number of artist-run initiatives, most recently as a foundation member and current Chairman of Art Collective WA.

Merrick lives and works in Fremantle. “I tried to escape interstate a couple of times but I came back because it’s actually a really good place to be an artist. It’s my community, it’s where I grew up with a lot of these people.”

Merrick Belyea: *Saturn Eats His Own: Pilbara Paintings* is showing until 18 April at Art Collective WA, Boorloo/Perth.



OPPOSITE: Merrick Belyea, *Minderoo Station Sunset*, 2026.
Oil on aluminium, 49 x 85cm. COURTESY: ART COLLECTIVE WA.
ABOVE: Merrick Belyea, *Saturn Eats His Own Children I*, 2026.
Oil on aluminium, 80 x 78cm. COURTESY: ART COLLECTIVE WA.



ALAN R. DODGE AM

Past Director, Art Gallery of Western Australia

Hitting the road from Port Hedland on the way to Karratha in Western Australia's northern Pilbara region, you would think that you were traversing the surface of some distant planet. Red earth, massive stretches of treeless plain and far hills broken by eons of weathering — with a little imagination, this could be the surface of Mars. The further from Port Hedland, the more the isolation creeps in and yet there is something magnetic about this bleak countryside. Once experienced, it stays embedded in your memory.

So how does an artist tackle this environment in paint? How does a painter show the scars of industry where mining meets these huge expanses in a way that conveys the power of this remarkable area? Merrick Belyea's new Pilbara series evolves from a platform of experience that is the culmination of his many years

of looking at the landscape on the urban fringe around Perth and beyond.

Belyea, who was awarded a Minderoo Residency in the Pilbara, has chosen to work with oil paint on aluminium to produce a set of marvellous evocations of this challenging landscape. On panels of often modest size, the artist has often used a view from a low horizon to push the ancient hills against the sky. There is little evidence of human habitation with the exception of distant industrial structures and smoke rising from far chimneys that read as some strange ruin left from another time.

To record his impressions of these ancient, worn down and vast reaches of land, Belyea has provided the viewer with a visual anthology of every possible means of applying paint — swathes of pigment cross the surface and dry brushwork scratches out the stems of

struggling growth accompanied by blunted forms indicating denser plant life. Deft strokes define changes in the earth, gullies gouged out and shadows formed on crusted escarpments. Factice hints at knowledge of former artists that have tackled this same area or the unforgiving centre of Australia like **Fred Williams** and **Sir Sidney Nolan**.

Belyea has stated that his concern is with issues of environment and the results of human presence in the landscape, in particular this area which has been extensively mined for its mineral resources. Having said that, what captures the viewer is the ability of the artist to make the eye jump happily between the play of the brush stroke and the recognition of these markings as an evocative landscape — a powerful tension that makes even the smallest panel sing its sense of place.

FELICITY JOHNSTON

Director, Art Collective WA

Merrick is a highly accomplished painter and his contemporary depiction of the WA landscape is both thought provoking and majestic. In past series he has explored the places where the environment and development intersect and in this latest body of work he turns to the harsh beauty of the Pilbara region of WA. The layered textures formed by the scratching and scarring of the paint and surface reveal his sophisticated skill and considered approach.

Merrick's last three exhibitions at Art Collective WA were sold out, with many works acquired by institutional collections. Pricing will see a modest rise on the previous exhibition yet remain positioned to encourage strong

sales, reflecting the shared desire of the artist and gallery for the works to be acquired by committed collectors. The artist has a broad market with both local and interstate private collectors as well as collections that include universities, local government and corporate organisations. As very few works become available between solo exhibitions or remain from past shows, we are anticipating strong demand for the new works. In particular, the artist's successful showing at Sydney Contemporary has introduced his practice to a new national audience.

The new series, which references the Pilbara landscape, will resonate with many

collectors in particular those with a connection to the Australian bush and its vibrant colours. Merrick's mastery of paint is evident in the confident mark making, layered surfaces and subtle shifts in tone that characterise this body of work. Painted on aluminium, the new works carry a distinctive luminosity and physical presence that heighten their connection to the landscape. While the paintings are beautiful objects in their own right and easy to live with, the underlying investigation of the tension between industry and environment gives them a depth that rewards sustained attention and will appeal to collectors and collections who appreciate art that provokes reflection.

OPPOSITE: Merrick Belyea, *Near Karijini 2*, 2026. Oil on aluminium, 18.5 x 30cm. COURTESY: ART COLLECTIVE WA.

RIGHT: Merrick Belyea, *Wheatstone*, 2026. Oil on aluminium, 18.5 x 21cm. COURTESY: ART COLLECTIVE WA.

