

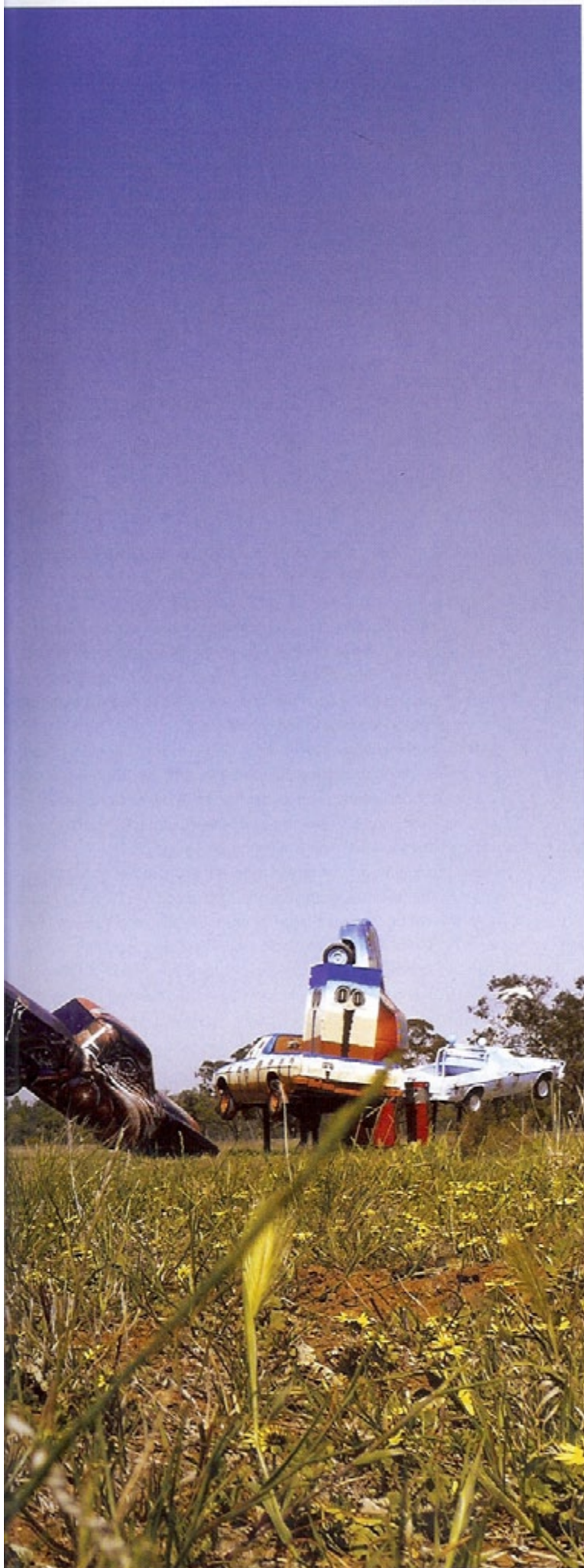
Ute gallery

Holden utes are canvases in an innovative paddock exhibition in the central west of New South Wales.

Story Ian Glover Photos Karen Tooth



Utes in the Paddock at Burrawang West Station is both an outdoor art gallery and a mecca for Holden devotees.



WHAT IS THE FASCINATION WE HUMAN BEINGS HAVE FOR sticking vehicles in the air on poles? We all know about the airborne WB Holden ute in Deniliquin, in southern New South Wales. There's also a Peugeot on a pole near Pooncarie, in the far west of NSW. Now, the geographic centre of NSW is about to take centre stage – pole position, if you like – with a 'Utes in the Paddock' display that is set to become a tourist attraction.

It all began when Sydney businessman Graham Pickles and his wife, Jana, stopped near the Texas town of Amarillo to check out Cadillac Ranch while driving on Route 66 in the United States. There, 10 classic Cadillacs have been partially buried, allowing tourists to paint their panels. "I couldn't believe it," Graham says. "In the middle of nowhere, this was attracting literally hundreds of visitors a day."

At the time, Graham and Jana had just bought historic Burrawang West Station at Ootha, between Parkes and Condobolin, NSW, which ran Angus cattle and operated as a Dorper stud. (For those who aren't up on their sheep breeds, Dorpers were originally bred in South Africa by putting Dorset Horn rams over Blackhead Persian ewes. Dorpers shed their fleeces, so there's no shearing, crutching or mulesing.) The station is also a luxury retreat, and Graham and Jana were on the lookout for tourist drawcards.

On the long journey through to Los Angeles, the germ of an idea grew in Graham's mind. While Cadis are quintessentially American, Holden utes are iconically Australian; and instead of letting tourists loose on the cars with a spray can, why not approach recognised artists to transform the utes into works of art? "When the first ute went up in the paddock, everyone thought we were mad," Graham laughs. "But, by the time the second one was in place, the community was right behind it, donating utes ('I've got this old EH in the shed ... I was going to restore it, but I'll probably never get around to it') and helping by sanding, priming and preparing the cars for the artists – it's been great."

Graham originally planned to feature 12 painted utes in his outdoor 'gallery', but donations have been so generous that the collection now covers all of Holden's 17 different body shapes. Lightning Ridge artist John Murray was the first to get involved. "Graham had been aware of my work for a long time, having visited my studio many times," John says. "When I received an email asking if I was interested, I thought it was a crazy idea but it appealed to me because I was doing something equally nuts at the time – trying to build a 16-metre-high statue of a bird in Birdsville."

John visited Burrawang to determine whether Graham was 'fair dinkum'. "He really believed in the project and was so enthusiastic that I couldn't help getting involved," he says. "The pay's great – nothing! But Graham is very generous in putting artists up – and it's a nice place to be. I put him in touch with other artists, and it's all gone from there."

John's canvas, a 1971 HQ now titled *Circle Work*, features a flock of galahs, and is held aloft by a galah. "You know circle work – driving a ute flat out in circles around a paddock, preferably when 'Bundled-up' at a B&S," John says. "The galahs represent the larrikinism, and the galah towing the ute away represents the 'fun police'."

While some of the contributing artists are from interstate – one is from Adelaide and one from the Sunshine Coast – most are from west of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. Peter Browne, of Silverton, spent a lot of time with his mate Pro Hart before he died. He painted a 1976 HJ ute with 'Oh



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: John Murray's HQ ute *Circle Work*; John and Burrawang West's *Graham Pickles*; 'Clancy' stops the Bundy bottle from spilling in Peter Mortimer's *Clancy Stops the Overflow*; mechanic Mike Taylor, of Condobolin, assists with Peter Browne's *Emute*; *The Stockman* by Michael Jones.

Mister Hart' style spontaneous splashes of colour across the bonnet, plus his own signature emus. Not surprisingly, it's called *Emute*.

Living 'just down the road' at Broken Hill, Shane Gehlert created *Epitaph to Fossil Fuels* – a 1977 HZ ute painted in outback colours of red, orange, yellow and blue, standing on its tailgate between two antique petrol bowlers. The ute features Shane's signature creature: a chrome 'robo-roo'.

Peter Mortimer lives in Dubbo but returned to Condobolin to create his masterpiece *Clancy Stops the Overflow*. It features a 44-gallon drum attached to the nose of a ute, which is painted to represent a Bundy bottle, 45-degrees in the air. The drum is the bottle top with a steel cable running to a steel horse, and Clancy has both hands up pushing at the front to stop the bottle spilling.

Sydney-based artist Paul Blahuta scored the FX. He has painted a drover and Ned Kelly in a wagon, pulled by three horses going full-pelt. The horses are three-dimensional, made from sheet steel (at \$700 in raw material for each horse, an expensive business).

According to Graham, the project has almost turned into a competition among artists with a love of the outback. "I feel ripped off," John Murray jokes. "I reckon I put in a good effort, but the guys are getting so ambitious; I want another ute to paint."

He adds the Utes in the Paddock project has been a boon for outback artists. "Outback artists are getting together and talking again, but the

really great thing about it is that it's all for the good of outback Australia."

But the question remains: why? "Basically, it's a platform to promote the idea of visiting outback New South Wales," Graham says. "And while I'm not suggesting that it can rival Uluru, we'd like to suggest that it can be an initial reason to come to the central-west."

"We're working with the Forbes, Parkes and Lachlan tourism departments, devising holiday plans that incorporate drive routes and take in other local events, such as the Parkes Show or picnic races. Put simply, we want people to see the central west as a great place to have a holiday – that there are plenty of things to see and do."

Local musicians are writing songs for the Utes in the Paddock website (currently under construction). One group is composing a ute song which will be the soundtrack for an online slide show depicting the progress of the utes in the paddock – locals sanding utes, priming them for painting, cutting out rust, then the artists painting them. Another is a central west song that will be run over a collage of local scenes.

Whether or not the tourist potential is realised, Utes in the Paddock will probably become a 'religious' site for Holden ute fans. It might even become the site of an annual pilgrimage – perhaps the weekend closest to November 29 (the day the first FX rolled off the production line) would be a fitting date.

For further information, visit www.utesinthepaddock.com.au 



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Shane Gehlert created *Epitaph to Fossil Fuels* on a 1977 HZ.