

Country LIFESTYLE

A work of art

Two Dutch artists are using art to explore the live export trade, reports **Lara Ladyman**



Dutch artists Wouter Osterholt and Elke Uitentuis, at the Fremantle port where in the 10 years from 1999 to 2008 more than 34.5 million sheep have been loaded for export. They have spent the past few months in Lake Grace, exploring the live sheep trade through their artwork.
PHOTO: DANIELLA BEVIS

A visit to Lake Grace, an isolated village in WA's southern Wheatbelt and miles from anywhere — especially by European standards — has sparked an intriguing work of art exploring the live export trade.

Artists Wouter Osterholt and Elke Uitentuis, both hailing from the Netherlands, knew little about WA and nothing about the live sheep trade before arriving in the State two months ago as part of an international residency through the Australian art group IASKA.

Their time was spent largely in Lake Grace where their first impressions were of “the endless landscapes and the vast amount of open space”.

Wouter said: “The distances between villages are enormous in comparison to what we're used to.

“WA has the size of mainland Europe but with only two million inhabitants. We were also confronted with many road kills along the highway.

“Everything in WA seems to be big. If you travel along the main highway, for example, it is common to see road trains transporting goods up and down the State... sometimes with four full trailers.

“Furthermore, we encountered numerous livestock trucks that transported sheep. The sheep are packed on top of each other and are transported to harbours (for export).”

AN IDEA TAKES SHAPE

It was seeing these road trains laden with sheep and hearing of their journey to the Middle East — with sharks apparently in-tow, waiting for the carcasses to be tossed overboard — that set the seed for Wouter and Elke's piece of art.

The farmers they spoke with knew the importance of the trade from a commercial perspective but had little understanding about what happened to the sheep once they left Fremantle.

In the Middle East, the ritual of sacrificing a sheep or another animal in the name of Allah is an important tradition in some religious festivals. However, the Dutch artists, who have spent some time in Egypt, said little was known about where the sheep came from.

So bridging the gap in cultural un-



The woolen carpet being made by Wouter and Elke, to reflect the journey of sheep exported from WA to the Middle East. Wool for the rug was shorn near Lake Grace and the carpet itself will be used in the sacrifice of an Australian ram in the name of Allah in the Middle East later this year, as part of the Muslim religious festival Eid al-Adha.

derstanding between the two localities, beyond the exchange of money for a product, is also an important focus of their work.

Their art work, with the working title ‘To the other end’, is not a painting as such to hang on the wall but more a “process work” to be illustrated through a carpet and a book.

The book, which depicts the life of a sheep from the point of when it is born to when it dies, will be based on research and interviews Elke and Wouter did with farmers and others while in Lake Grace.

The research they started for the book will be continued by Lake Grace artist Michelle Slarke.

The journey of the sheep will be visualised through the rug that Elke and Wouter are creating, which, in turn, is on a journey of its own. The rug has also been designed as a communication tool between the two localities.

The rug's journey began formerly in Lake Grace where Elke and Wouter watched the sheep shorn, learnt how to hand spin the wool and started to knot the carpet.

The design, however, is adapted from a funeral rug used in Iran. The middle section of the rug depicts a map of the stars and galaxy, which is meant to show the dead the path to the afterlife.

It's a time consuming task: after two months in Lake Grace, they have knotted about 20cm of the rug and it is expected to take another three months to complete.

In November, 2010, the rug's journey will continue to Bahrain, chosen because it is one of the major destinations for WA's live sheep exports. In 2008, 716,000 of the 4.2 million live sheep exported from Australia were destined for Bahrain, and the country is also a hub for Australian livestock industry staff.

Wouter and Elke plan to buy an Australian ram at the market in Bahrain — at the moment worth around \$A300 — and ask someone to Halal slaughter a sheep on the carpet as part of the Muslim festival Eid al-Adha, or Greater Eid.

The Festival of Sacrifice, as it is also known, commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son as an act of obedience to God, but instead he was allowed to sacrifice a ram (by God's command).

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

From Bahrain, Elke and Wouter are hoping to bring the rug, stained with the sheep's blood as evidence of the sacrifice, back to WA.

However, Australia's quarantine laws — despite the carpet being made from Australian wool and the sheep killed being an Australian sheep — will make this “mission impossible”. Elke and Wouter know they will

Everything in WA seems to be big. If you travel along the main highway, for example, it is common to see road trains transporting goods up and down the State... sometimes with four full trailers.

WOUTER OSTERHOLT, ARTIST

probably have to clean the rug to ensure it's journey can be completed.

Intertwined through their investigations in the subject is the controversy and conflict associated with the live export of animals.

Inevitably, they found this out first-hand, since many of their requests to gather information or see aspects of the trade were rejected because people were suspicious of their intentions.

Their stay in WA included visits to see the saleyards at Katanning, woolstores, Wellard's feedlot at Baldviss and watching sheep being killed on farm for their meat. Elke and Wouter had wanted to see a live export ship being loaded but timing and access proved to be tricky.

In addition, they were hoping to see how sheep were Halal killed at WAMMCO in Katanning, but were told it would take two months to get board approval.

As well as interviewing farmers, they spoke with animal activists against the live trade to gain an understanding of the issues from their point of view — but they were conscious not to take sides.

“For us, it's not so important what our opinion is. We try to sit on the fence, as one shearing contractor put it. I think it's more important to understand the complexity rather than judging,” Elke said.

The stories, the documents and images collected during the whole process will be the eventual work, which they are hoping will go on display in Fremantle in 2011.