

BOROONDARA  
ARTS



# Above the Canopy

TOWN HALL GALLERY

SAT 9 JUL – SAT 24 SEP 2022

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

## THE NATURAL WORLD: HEALING, MEMORY, AND WISDOM

### ESSAY BY

Town Hall Gallery Curator  
Rachel Keir-Smith

Nature is the elixir of life, an infinite repository of nourishment, solace, poetry, and adventure. Providing inspiration for millennia, artists have captured its rich and diverse beauty, while also documenting the impacts of changing weather patterns and commenting on unsustainable human practices. 'Above the Canopy' is a group exhibition featuring seven artists exploring the awe-inspiring yet fragile grandeur of the natural world. Hyperreal verdant forests, rocks, minerals, and observations of insect activity are shown alongside idealised landscapes, imagined plant species, and encounters with natural disasters, exposing the vital interconnectedness of people and our organic surrounds. The exhibition title embodies an aerial vantage, a bird's eye view of Australia, a confronting yet hopeful outlook acknowledging the significance of Country and our need to care for it.

The profound interconnectedness of all life forms underpins Janet Laurence's site-specific projects examining our physical and cultural relationships to nature. At the intersection of art, science, memory and loss, Laurence's practice incorporates architecture and natural history museum records with organic elements from her explorations in nature, including animals, plant matter and minerals.<sup>1</sup> 'Breath of the Forest' (2020) is an immersive installation exposing the vulnerability and transience of old-growth forests. Negative-film photographs and videos of trees from the Styx Valley and Tarkine rainforest in Tasmania, koalas, possums, bees, and other wildlife,

appear as unsettling, dream-like, painterly mirages projected upon suspended silk veils. Echoing the intimacy of encountering nature and its inhabitants, this work alerts us to the liveliness of the forest but also its fragility in a time of change and emergency.<sup>2</sup>

Creating prints and textiles, Rebecca Mayo examines the agency and subjectivity produced between "more-than-human life" and people and their interactions in important yet marginal spaces.<sup>3</sup> While moving between Melbourne and Canberra in 2019, Mayo's overgrown garden and family compost became a site of unexpected activity and interest. Referencing Charles Darwin's 1881 book 'The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms,' Mayo created 'At work with worms' (2020), a compost/ composite of Darwin's laser-etched text, her human tending, and the worms' business of eating.<sup>4</sup> Mayo reflects, 'I am trying to let the worms (even if unknowingly) have the last word about themselves by eating Darwin's text.' These gentle experiments and practices of close observation reveal how worms—working well below the canopy—transform the earth, affecting and benefitting all who live above.<sup>5</sup>

Sites, archives, memory, and Indigenous histories are embedded in the large-scale canvases of Waanyi artist Judy Watson. Through subtle inscriptions and expressive layers of charcoal, ochre, and pigment, Watson renders shadow-like images of cultural objects, plants, and scientific data to reveal the hidden stories within Country.



Citing the systems for gauging Australia's median temperature and fire danger, on display are two poetic responses to empirical research regarding the influence of hotter conditions on bushfires, alongside a specimen of coal. At the centre of 'fire danger rating' (2021) is the silhouette of a denuded tree. Across the faint, cinder-orange background are outlines of the fire danger signs often seen along regional road networks. 'australia mean temperature anomaly' (2021) shows staggering graphs of rising temperatures against an atmospheric, vivid green background, representing areas of regrowth following the devastating 2020 bushfires.<sup>6</sup> These works convey the lasting impressions of human presence on the landscape and the practices contributing to climate change.

Sarah Hendy's series 'Waiting for Daybreak' is a dramatic retelling of the night the artist almost lost her life when she was washed away in a flood caused by Ex-Tropical Cyclone Debbie.<sup>7</sup> Through stunning oil paintings on glass, vivid flashbacks of the dark, remote forest where she almost drowned are captured in vibrating detail. Painting back-to-front, Hendy has rendered the surrounding landscape in a state of stillness, including fallen branches hanging from giant figs, booyongs and flame trees, and the natural debris floating upon a now-calm river. Nature's profound beauty prevails despite the obvious destruction. The two featured artworks convey the terror of Hendy's experience, recording the changing light as she waited until daybreak to be rescued.

The palpable psychological impact of this violent and lonely experience is held in the tension within the rigid but fragile glass they are painted on.

Similarly channelling an emotional response to the landscape, Catherine Nelson uses computer collaging techniques to transfer hundreds of photographs of nature from their 'reality' into a more painterly, imagined world of her devising.<sup>8</sup> 'Gully' (2014) is a nostalgic reimagining of the artist's experiences growing up in Sydney and the thrilling, endless exploration available in vast suburban parks. Scaled up large and installed on the gallery wall, a feeling of enormity in the landscape is captured as if through the eyes of a child. A sense of spiritual elation is also embodied in the central, cathedral-like trunk of the Moreton Bay Fig tree. 'Drop' was filmed in 2019 as a direct response to climate change and the severe drought in Australia, which culminated in the devastating fires of 2020. This work is a visual poem about the way rainwater droplets become heavy and fall to earth, highlighting an intrinsic element of the world's water cycle.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing on the colours, shapes, patterns, and genetic features of natural forms, Michael McHugh has created his own botanical language. Collecting photographs and drawings during research trips to museums, libraries and gardens around the world, the artist imagines new species that resemble organic botanical shapes and plant forms from the sea, swaying in an ocean current or floating across a night sky.<sup>10</sup> For this

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exhibition, McHugh was commissioned by Town Hall Gallery to create a large-scale painting celebrating endangered or extinct plant forms. 'Swimming in the Clouds' (2022) wonders what new hybrid organic forms will evolve from climate change, when plant species are washed away, and land is engulfed by saltwater intrusion that includes complex sea life microcosms.<sup>11</sup> Across six metres of canvas, layers of lush acrylic paint, riotous colour and obsessive mark marking renders whirling vines and textured, macro, and micro details of abstract natural forms. This joyful, kaleidoscopic encounter honours the haven of nature, which calms our nerves and heightens our senses.

Interested in artificial experiences of nature embedded within everyday technologies, Grant Stevens investigates the prevalence of natural imagery as a therapeutic response to today's cult of speed and hyperactivity. Applying the visual languages of video games and the wellness industry, 'The Forest' (2020) is an endlessly panning, panoramic experience that reveals an immersive and idealised computer-generated forest.<sup>12</sup> The digital simulation uses stock nature imagery of waterfalls, terrain and trees assembled through algorithms to create an infinite, picturesque landscape devoid of animal life. Released during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020, 'The Forest' is simultaneously seductive, relaxing, and unnerving. A satirical response to initiatives of the wellbeing industry and their claims of rejuvenation, Stevens pays homage to

the non-homogenous intrigue of the natural environment.

Revealing the interconnectedness of all natural organisms and our existential struggle to act and adapt to the changing climate, 'Above the Canopy' is a theatrical, immersive, and regenerative experience celebrating our amazing planet in all its majesty.

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1 "Janet Laurence", accessed 30 June 2022, <http://www.janetlaurence.com/>

2 Janet Laurence, email correspondence, May 2022

3 Rebecca Mayo, email correspondence, May 2022

4 "RAT-RUNS AND WORM HOLES", Rebecca Mayo, accessed 30 June 2022, <https://rebeccamay.com/more-than-human-the-animal-in-the-age-of-the-anthropocene/>

5 Rebecca Mayo, email correspondence, May 2022

6 Tim Riley Walsh, "On Fire: Climate and Crisis", Institute of Modern Art (IMA), accessed 30 June 2022, <https://roomsheet.ima.org.au/on-fire>

7 Sarah Hendy, "Waiting for Daybreak", Mars Gallery, accessed 1 June 2022, <https://marsgallery.com.au/2019-sarah-hendy-waiting-for-daybreak/>

8 Catherine Nelson, email correspondence, May 2022

9 IBID.

10 "Michael McHugh", Artist Profile, accessed 1 June 2022, <https://artistprofile.com.au/michael-mchugh/>

11 Michael McHugh, email correspondence, May 2022

12 Grant Stevens, "The Forest" artist statement, Sullivan+Strumpf, June 2020, <https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/gOuVCp81LqFm4gpTvsFZR?domain=sullivanstrumpf.com>

13 Nina Miall, "Grant Stevens: The Forest", Sullivan+Strumpf, accessed 1 June 2022, <https://www.sullivanstrumpf.com/httpswww-sullivanstrumpf-com/englishnew-news-list-news/grant-stevens-the-forest/?year=2020>





Figure 40: Fire Danger Rating System in each jurisdiction<sup>30</sup>



## IMAGES

### COVER

Catherine Nelson, 'Gully', 2014, pigment print, edition of 3, 150 x 188cm, image courtesy of the artist and Gallerysmith, Melbourne.

### ABOVE

Janet Laurence, 'Breath of the Forest' from the 'Theatre of Trees' series, 2020, Silk Voile di-sublimation print, dimensions variable, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

### BACK COVER

Judy Watson, 'fire danger rating', 2021, acrylic, graphite, pigment on canvas, 267 x 179.5cm, image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

### CENTRE SPREAD

Michael McHugh, 'Swimming in the Clouds', 2022, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 600cm, image courtesy of the artist.

### OPENING HOURS

Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm

Sat, 12–4pm

Closed public holidays

### HAWTHORN ARTS CENTRE

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Hawthorn, Victoria

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Visit our website to learn more about the City of Boroondara Climate Action Plan.

Town Hall Gallery is a member of the Public Galleries Association of Victoria.

Town Hall Gallery participates in the Cultural Gifts Program.