

earth cry



**S**LIPPERY THOUGH the interventionist tactics of government and self-serving commercial interests may be, most of us today recognise the cost of our abusive impact on the environment. We comprehend, with the benefit of outspoken independent science and green activity, a crucial need to stall things, to turn it all around. This means changing habits and acting to preserve the ecological integrity of remaining unspoiled regions, as well as the Indigenous cultural footprint they bear.

In the arts, in this country at least, the ecological imperative is often (and legitimately) expressed as a critique of colonialism and industrialisation, with an implicit declaration of guilt and hope for redemption. It may also be expressed as a protest or plea for the safeguard of threatened sites and/or increasingly endangered flora and fauna. Much contemporary art now takes ideas associated with environmental protection and our relationships with the natural world very much to heart. The real challenge, and one that all the artists in this exhibition meet, is to do so using an aesthetic strategy undiluted by either cliché or sermonising.

Tasmania is the heartland for most of our local outrage on environmental issues. The logging industry has been clearing old-growth forests and poisoning wildlife through its practices for many years. In 2003, the industry inadvertently killed Australia's largest tree, a *eucalyptus regnans* known as El Grande, mobilising an army of demonstrators to the Styx Valley and launching a tree-sit in the threatened giant eucalypt known as Gandalf's Staff. Two of the artists in *Earth Cry*, Adam Geczy and Susan Norrie, travelled to the Styx Valley as did many artists motivated by concern over the plunder. They, and over 200 colleagues, contributed work in 2003 to the touring exhibition *Barking up the wrong tree*, a formal collective affirmation of the green voice in Tasmania and activists in general. Curated by the Wilderness Society's Felicity Wade and gallerist Stephen Mori, the exhibition backed up the commitment of the artists with the raising of funds.

Geczy's concern is restated in *Earth Cry* with a new video installation in collaboration with composer Peter Sculthorpe. In presentation, it is a companion piece to their earlier work *From a remote, lonely place (Port Arthur elegy)*, 2003, which is based on Port Arthur's dark history as a former convict

settlement and more recently as a site of brutal massacre.

*What the earth said* suggests a similar sense of grave site and grief now directed at the environment. The bare ravaged hills of Queenstown (logged as a result of mining) are juxtaposed with the broken wastelands of the Styx in converging tilted projections. The surreal colour, tilt and staccato pace of the imagery combined with Sculthorpe's lush musical protest (and William Barton's didgeridu) invoke ineffable despair and defeat any possible ambivalence.

"Artists are often a barometer of events in the world," Susan Norrie maintains in a statement that underscores her practice, "and can synthesise both socio/political and environmental concerns with powerful visual encapsulations."<sup>1</sup> In the immersive exhibition *Susan Norrie: notes from underground* at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2003, Norrie's examination of humanity's environmental impact – and the hazards generated, tolerated, perhaps even encouraged – was chilling. Her works in *Earth Cry* are characteristically unsettling. By miniaturising towering Styx Valley eucalypts in six small-scale gouache paintings on card, Norrie undermines the promise of longevity. Without appropriate care and conditions the subject of the work is just as fragile and vulnerable as the art object itself. Setting the images in heavy frames reinforces that sense of vulnerability and also suggests, on the one hand, entrapment and containment; and on the other, the form of religious icons, each tree totem subject a god to be revered.

Any romantic reading of the *Styx collection* gouaches is interrupted by the proximity of the larger oil painting *1080*. Simply black, it bears only text relating to compound 1080; a poison commonly used in Tasmania to cull animals grazing on new seedlings on clear-felled forest floors, inducing a slow and excruciating death. In the installation of Norrie's work in *Earth Cry* veneration and shame, preservation and violence come face to face.

Violence and preservation have also been said to collide in the practice of Maria Fernanda Cardoso<sup>2</sup>. The three works in this exhibition are constructed of feathers gleaned from emu farming, a strictly regulated industry producing emu oil, leather and meat. The feathers are salvaged in an uncultivated

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state from the discard heap and subjected to a lengthy process of selection and restoration before use. This laborious process produces works that are compelling and repellent in equal measure. They are a by-product of death and a reminder of mortality, yet they are seductively beautiful. They resemble tactile commodities: *Emu rectangle*, a cape, and *Emu feather hat*, an exotic hood. Our awkward fascination with them hangs there like a dare.

As viewers we are tested in a similar see-saw of experience with Narelle Autio and Trent Parke's *Mercy Street* series. Again the works are rich, seductively beautiful and repugnant in turn. There are emus - wombats, rosellas, echidnas - and there is death. Violence, and preservation only in the riveting record of the consequences of that violence. Parke and Autio, who often work in collaboration, photographed native species as roadkill to acknowledge the many thousands of animals that are maimed or killed on our roads every day.

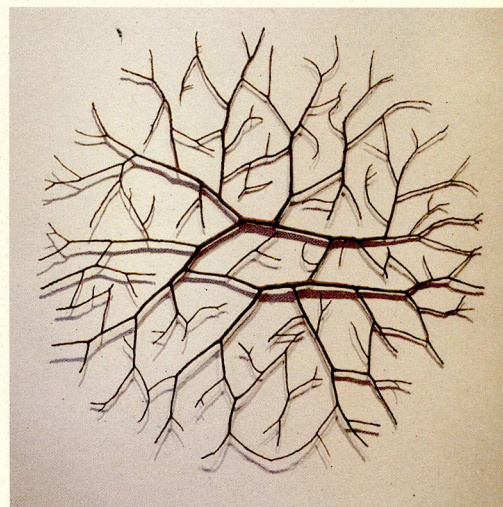
The *memento mori* meditations of both Hossein Valamanesh and Nicola Hensel are deeply poetic and derive from nature's details in the artists' own neighbourhoods. Valamanesh took inspiration from the broken branch of a white cedar tree found in his street to create an elegiac tribute to the fallen in nature with his bronze mandala *Fallen branch*. Valamanesh also favours the material of the natural world - seeds, bark, leaves - as medium for his work. In *Converge* he uses a strange marvellous magic to seamlessly join the many fingers of two eucalyptus branches in a gesture of communion.

Dry broken twigs in the backyard and an olive branch from a tree planted by her children are the subjects of Hensel's two large, yet intimate multi-panelled installations. Hensel made a deliberate choice to draw the lifeless twigs in 25 random configurations on white paper, and the resilient olive branch, with its positive symbolism, on black. By subverting conventional metaphorical associations she keeps hope alive, and in the format she has chosen also calls attention to the uncertain and fragile in nature.

Fiona Hall is no stranger to poetic aesthetics but is more celebrated for her relentless scrutiny of complex social, political and environmental issues. By exploiting the narrative potential of process, context and materials, she loads each component

of her works with enough information to reward even the most superficial analysis. *Drift net* is one of a series of works produced with its own vitrine - conceived to interrogate classification systems as much as to create evocative display solutions. The division of the two levels creates a waterline to which four discrete objects relate: a coral head made of mother-of-pearl buttons and glass beads (the currency of colonisers), a length of densely perforated PVC piping, a compass and an inscribed bottle. Alongside the deeper multifarious references to colonial history, dislocation and migration, there is a more immediate ecological reading. Hall's coral object is precious and fragile like its counterpart in nature (though interestingly colourless) and prey to the threat implied by the other two objects: the plumbing as a potential conduit for waste and the bottle as a container for contaminant.

The narrative is again layered in the lithograph *Cross purpose*. Hall weaves an early Australian bank note through an English bank note to form a cross and enmeshes another cross of botanical illustrations (an English oak leaf and Australian eucalyptus leaf) to create a holy symbol. Colonialism, consumerism and trade are the foundations for environmental sacrifice.



As the lone Indigenous voice, the sound of William Barton's didgeridu insinuates itself beyond the confines of the Geczy/Sculthorpe installation to become the voice of the earth itself. It is an insistent presence, a pulse joined by the chorus of these works to remind us that we should be listening.

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<sup>1</sup> From a statement to the author April 2006

<sup>2</sup> Clare Lewis, catalogue essay: Maria Fernanda Cardoso 'death became her...', GRANTPIRRIE 2004