

Octopus 21: On Fire

Curated by Tim Riley Walsh

Gertrude Contemporary
Saturday 26 June –
Sunday 8 August 2021

Exhibiting artists: Gordon Bennett, Naomi Blacklock, Michael Candy, Dale Harding, Tracey Moffatt, Mavis Ngallametta, Madonna Staunton, Judy Watson, Warraba Weatherall, and Jemima Wyman

Initiated in 2001, the *Octopus* series of exhibitions supports ambitious curatorial practice, engaging an invited curator annually to develop a project that draws upon their research interests and provides a platform for new forms of exhibition making. In 2021, Gertrude is delighted to be working with Tim Riley Walsh, art historian and curator, as well as the organisation's current Curator in Residence.

Octopus 21: On Fire is an iteration of Riley Walsh's exhibition and publication project *On Fire: Climate and Crisis* recently presented at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, profiling contemporary Queensland art in a time of dramatic ecological change and planetary dysphoria. The exhibition looks via an incendiary lens at climate threat in Queensland, its relatedness to the deep and ongoing damage of settler colonialism and extractivism on the local environment, and these themes' articulation through the work of ten artists.

On Fire's analysis is situated in the aftermath of the devastating 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires and an increasingly pessimistic discourse on the planet's terminal state. While acknowledging the precarious realities of global warming, the project opposes overt fatalism by foregrounding the central significance of Indigenous cultural fire knowledge and land management, and the importance of visual culture to comprehending the rapidly changing world.



Gertrude acknowledges the Wurundjeri people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we operate. We pay our respects to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and their ancestors and Elders - past, present, and future.

GERTRUDE

List of works

1. Dale Harding
Moreton Bay Ash branch smoulders slowly, 2020
Two-channel video, audio
19:26 duration, looped
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Dale Harding works across a variety of media to explore the visual and social languages of his communities as cultural continuum, drawing upon and maintaining the spiritual and philosophical sensibilities of his cultural inheritance within the framework of contemporary art internationally.

Harding's video *Moreton Bay Ash branch smoulders slowly* is a meditative study of the burning of the titular tree. Known also taxonomically as *Corymbia/Eucalyptus tessellaris*, this type of eucalypt tree is found in northern New South Wales, but is more common in the eastern half of Queensland and into the tip of Cape York. Filmed with an intimate proximity, the cross-section of charred timber glows internally with the flame's life, its heat pulsing through the wood. At times, plumes of grey smoke drift across the lens. Reflecting abstractly on fire's environmental and social stories within cultural landscapes, Harding's work communicates a sense of the element's deep innateness to this place—a quality frequently marginalised in colonial misrepresentations.

2. Mavis Ngallametta
Bush Fire Burning at Kuchendoopen, 2015
Natural ochres and charcoal with acrylic binder on linen
271 x 200 cm
Collection of Peter Lamell and Jane Campton, Melbourne

The paintings of the late Mavis Ngallametta (1944–2019) draw from the artist's personal, familial and cultural connections to Queensland's western Cape York. Ngallametta's works are known for their distinctive viewpoint: as if seen from a roughly 45-degree angle, flying low across the region. The regeneration of these environments by weather systems and land management is a persistent theme. Early work captures the vibrancy of life after the wet season. Later paintings depict the slow burn of fires and their renewing potency, often lit on Country by Ngallametta's son Edgar as part of cultural burning practices.

Bush Fire Burning at Kuchendoopen is emblematic of Ngallametta's bushfire works. Towering above the viewer, the painting reveals its subject across a series of dramatic undulations. Lines of tree-crested ranges are interspersed with active fire fronts sweeping across the land. Ngallametta's chosen medium incorporates both ochres from this region and the charcoal remaining after fire.

3. Jemima Wyman
Haze..., 2020-21
Digital print on chiffon
350 x 480 cm
Courtesy of the artist, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney; and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Scan QR code to access the full artwork title. Printed copies are available from reception.

Haze... is a large-scale chiffon work by the Los Angeles and Brisbane-based artist Jemima Wyman. This piece expands on the artist's ongoing photo collage practice, where Wyman accumulates images documenting global activism that are printed, hand-cut, and arranged in patterns recalling camouflage and other aesthetics of protest.

Wyman's recent work features plumes of smoke from flares or deterrents, utilised to disorient activists' senses by police/military forces. The material translucency of *Haze...* recalls the physical experience of the rising environmental smoke of a fire front—a familiar indicator of bush or wildfire for Australians and Californians. This dual experience is further engrained by the sharing of firefighting equipment and personnel between the two locales, their increasingly catastrophic and extended fire seasons, but also more broadly—via the collaged images replicated on its surface and documented in Wyman's detailed titles—the overlapping environmental and political concerns that fuel activism.

4. Warraba Weatherall
To Know and Possess, 2021
Cast bronze plaques
10 parts, 10.1 x 15.2 cm each
Courtesy of the artist

Warraba Weatherall's installation-based practice explores archival structures, analysing cultural histories' existence within institutional repositories. Weatherall's work draws from his research into Kamilaroi objects held within Australian collections and their accompanying systems of categorisation. *To Know and Possess* is a result of the artist's specific engagement with index cards, used for documenting objects within museums. A product of the Enlightenment, these cards became a global standard disciplined through education. Paradoxically, through the act of the objects' removal from their environment and intended use, these items' 'preservation' also means they effectively cease their objecthood and are valued only as data.

Ten of these cards have been replicated by Weatherall as cast bronze plaques: an aesthetic ubiquitous with memorials. Despite connoting 'authority', the original cards' telling omissions—especially the circumstances for these objects' acquisition—speaks to a broader barbarism inherent in the normalised practices and outdated logic of museological and institutional possession. These plaques thus mark a point of death, but at the 'hands' of the archive.

5. Gordon Bennett
Relative/Absolute (Fire), 1991
Acrylic and Flashe on canvas
116 x 89 cm
The Estate of Gordon Bennett, Brisbane

Relative/Absolute (Fire) is from a series of works by the late Brisbane-based artist Gordon Bennett (1955–2014), begun while living abroad in Hautvillers, France, from 1991 to 1992. Bennett's art drew particular influence from postcolonial, postmodern, and poststructural thought. As an artist of Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic descent, Bennett frequently critiqued the binary relationships (such as black/white, civilised/savage, self/other) that structure our perception of the world.

In this series, Bennett considers the titular binary. Each work includes a pictorial icon and its linguistic equivalent across six European and indigenous languages. These evidence the relativity of subjects in language, with their myriad of names, and in opposition, the consistent, shared, and seeming absolute-ness across cultures of these same subjects as they exist within the world. However, Bennett shows the supposed 'absolute' as itself also inherently relative: meaning different things to different peoples, and utilised in our various worlds in crucially divergent ways.

6. Madonna Staunton
The Light on the Hill, 2014
Acrylic on linen
20 x 25 cm
Private collection, Melbourne

A hilltop glows at night with a warm, bright yellow. Contrasted with the ominous blacks beneath, the peak exudes, at first, a quality of sunny optimism. A work by the late artist and poet Madonna Staunton (1938–2019), this ambiguous emanation invites speculation: is it due to the dawn approaching, just over the angular horizon? Or something more sinister, like the light of a bushfire? The scene echoes a shared experience of looking to the environment for signs of hope or hopelessness.

Staunton returned to painting late in life, after beginning her artistic career as an abstract painter in the mid-century. These later works bring together the artist's skill with words and images. Recalling Samuel Beckett, Staunton's paintings are introspective, sometimes communicating a sense of anguish, tempered by others' will-to-life. This work's text—like the hill's glow—also invites reflection. In 1941, Australia's 16th prime minister, Ben Chifley, utilised the same phrase to evoke the 'great objective' of the Australian Labour movement as 'the betterment of humankind'; a light whose promise appears increasingly distant.

7. Judy Watson
australian mean temperature anomaly, 2021
 Acrylic, graphite, pastel, and chinagraph on canvas
 269 x 179.5 cm
 Assisted by Leecee Carmichael
 Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Known predominantly as a painter and printmaker, Judy Watson's canvas works incorporate expressive use of colours, as well as layering shadow-like images of cultural objects, plants, and scientific data. These pieces conflate the 'cold' information of empirical research with evocative washes and imagery—enlivening these subjects through feeling.

Watson's large-scale canvas incorporates systems for measuring Australia's median temperature. An evident influence on the likelihood of bushfires is heat and as *australian mean temperature anomaly* reveals, the recent decades' record dramatic increases is exacerbated by global warming. Watson tempers this sense of dread with a bright, energetic green – inspired by the vibrant regrowth on K'gari (Fraser Island) after the devastating 2020 bushfires.

8. Naomi Blacklock
Lecanomancy, 2020
 Single-channel video, audio
 11:09 duration, looped
 Video documentation: Charlie Hillhouse
 Courtesy of the artist

Naomi Blacklock's practice bridges experimental sound installation, sculpture, and performance to examine archetypes, mythologies, and histories that impact gender and cultural identity. The artist's installations often incorporate live activation using conventional instruments like cymbals and bells, as well as atypical noise-making, including contact mics that capture the friction of salt crystals on glass and the percussive dripping of melting wax.

This video documents a performance by Blacklock within a dark, imposing installation during the work's original presentation at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. An isolated pool of water is illuminated and surrounded by a charred pyre—a lyric allusion to scenes of destruction from *Black Summer*. Instead of offering a still surface, the reservoir ripples ominously as if attuned to an imperceptible, tectonic warning. The work's title, *Lecanomancy*, refers to a type of divination using a basin and reverberations as a prophetic device. This video documents Blacklock activating the work by playing a waterphone or ocean harp, a type of idiophone often used to create ethereal unease in horror film soundtracks.

9. Michael Candy
Azimuth, 2021
 UV-C bulbs, laser-cut aluminium, servo motor, wiring, fasteners, Mylar coating
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of the artist and Michael Bugelli Gallery, Hobart

Michael Candy's mechanical sculpture *Azimuth* is an unlikely combination of industrial-standard sterilisation and abstract, apocalyptic timepiece. Constructed from 3D printed and laser-cut components and propelled by a reaction wheel, the work's conical form turns in a circular orbit on the gallery floor. *Azimuth* is covered by twelve UV-C bulbs emitting a sanitising, germicidal light—utilised as an alternative to conventional chemical disinfectants. As a zoonotic virus, COVID-19 likely spread from animals to humans—with habitat destruction an important influence on the pandemic according to the United Nations.

Azimuth creates a contradictory environment for viewers. Although the work has been tested by a qualified UV consultant and certified as safe for public viewing, the audience is encouraged to not look at the work directly for extended periods of time. The work's bulbs are encased in a protective, translucent plastic to protect human eyes. Without this guard, the work's light 'cleans' the space by burning all bacteria, but thus also makes it largely inhospitable for organic matter. The device's metronome-like ticking and programmed rotation generates added suspense: either innocently demarcating time or, in a more ominous fashion, suggesting a doomsday-esque countdown.

10. Tracey Moffatt and Gary Hillberg
Doomed, 2007
 Single-channel video
 9:21 duration, looped
 Courtesy of the artists and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Brisbane-born, Sydney-based artist Tracey Moffatt and collaborator Gary Hillberg's series *Montages* (1999–2015) consists of eight short videos, each combining diverse scenes borrowed from the history of cinema. Each work focuses on a different subject, elaborating on the differing, but often stereotypical interpretations of these topics within the medium.

Doomed brings together cinematic depictions of crisis, disaster, and apocalypse. Accompanied by a pulsing soundtrack partly appropriated from 2003's *The Matrix Reloaded*, the work illustrates the ubiquity of fantasies about our planet's demise on film. By drawing from both 20th and early 21st century cinema, it also evidences that speculations of societal and planetary fragility are hardly new, and that through their repetition, these events gradually inure themselves to our minds, even becoming banal. However, this overfamiliarity is far from innocuous – especially in a present when such scenes are increasingly crossing over

The *Octopus* exhibition series is generously supported by Proclaim.

Octopus 21: On Fire, curated by Tim Riley Walsh, is an iteration of *On Fire: Climate and Crisis* originally developed for and presented at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

This project is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland and by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Gertrude Contemporary
 21-31 High Street
 Preston South, VIC 3072

www.gertrude.org.au

