

HOPE DIES LAST: ART AT THE END OF OPTIMISM

Vernon Ah Kee, The Escape from Woomera Collective,
Tony Garifalakis, Eric Jong, Andrew Liversidge, Todd McMillan,
Tracey Moffatt, Nell, Sanja Pahoki, Alex Seton, Grant Stevens and
Myuran Sukumaran.

Curated by Mark Feary

Gertrude Contemporary
Saturday 5 October - Saturday 9 November 2019

Margaret Lawrence Gallery
Friday 18 October - Saturday 16 November 2019

Hope Dies Last: Art at the End of Optimism is a curated exhibition of Australian and international contemporary art presented across two sites, Gertrude Contemporary and the Margaret Lawrence Gallery at the Victorian College of the Arts. The project focuses on how artists consider the depletion of optimism, how they might envisage the end of days, and how they make sense of these tumultuous times. Exploring themes of mortality, fatalism, extinction, pain (both emotional and physical), failure and downfall, the works largely focus on the specific moment when hope evaporates for the final time. Explored with compassion, humour, sadness and resignation, *Hope Dies Last* confronts our individual and collective anxieties around death, reminding us of the certainty of this fate, yet recognising this conclusionary moment as one we will experience alone. *Hope Dies Last* is one of the most depressing events of the year, an exhibition that will riddle us with sadness, and likely leave us more pessimistic than we have ever been before.

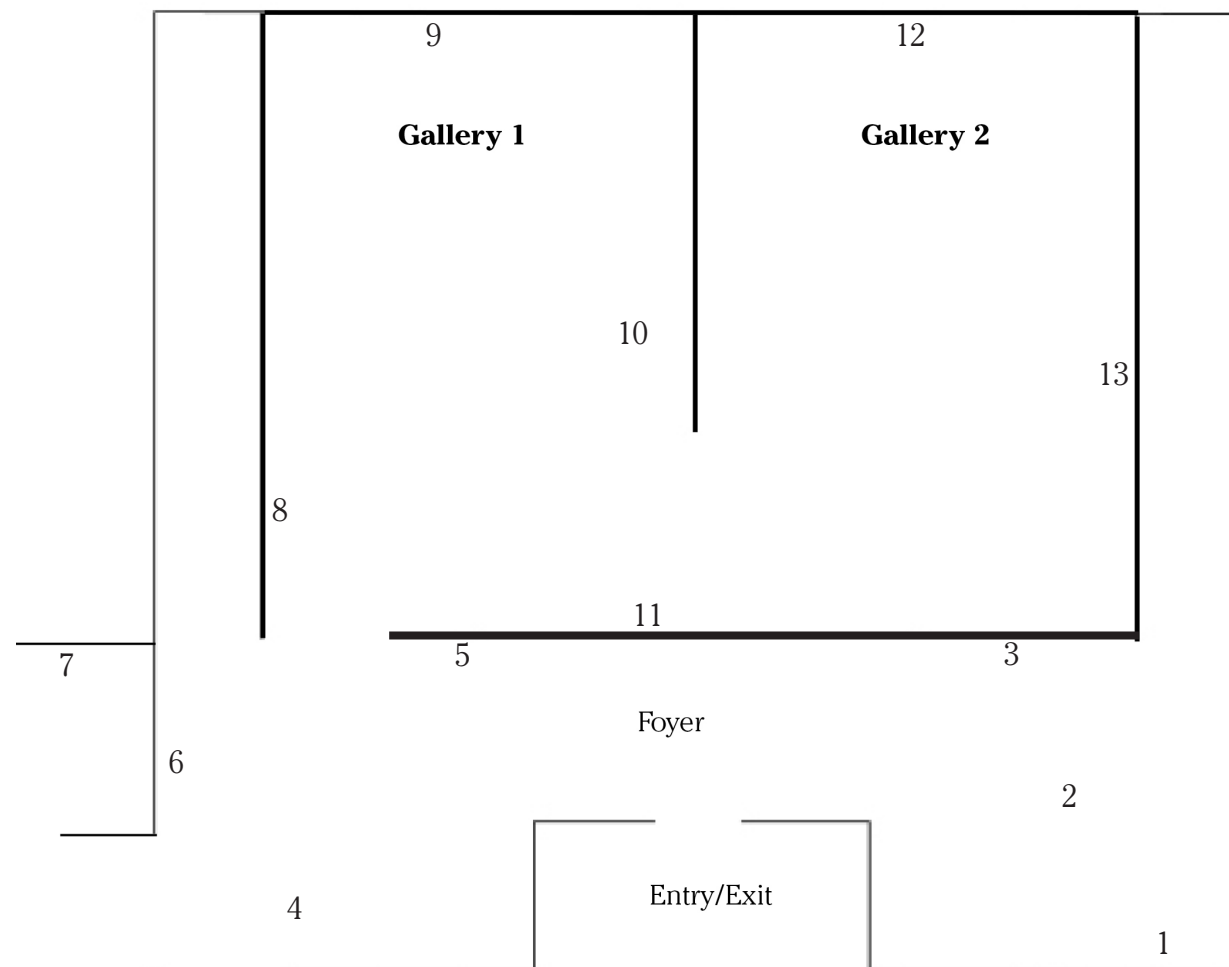
Presented in partnership with Melbourne International Arts Festival and Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, the University of Melbourne.

Gertrude would like to thank all of the artists involved in the exhibition, Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Garifalakis, Eric Jong, The Escape from Woomera Collective, Andrew Liversidge, Todd McMillan, Tracey Moffatt, Nell, Sanja Pahoki, Alex Seton, Grant Stevens, and Myuran Sukumaran.

Gertrude would like to sincerely thank all of the lenders to the exhibition: Sophie Holvast and Michael Moran; Michael Jan and Peter Lovell; Simon Maidment and Vikki McInnes; Ian Rogers; and Raji Sukumaran. Our appreciation also extends to all of the artists' galleries, including: The Commercial, Sydney; Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide; Milani Gallery, Brisbane; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney; Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; STATION; and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney and Singapore. Thanks to all of our supporters at Melbourne International Arts Festival including Jonathan Holloway and Keli Allred; to our exhibition partners at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery including Dr David Sequeira and Nicholas Pearce; Michael Dagostino; Katharine Neil; and Matthew Sleeth. Thank you to the team at Gertrude, Tracy Burgess, Siobhan Sloper and Steven Stewart, as well as all of the volunteers who have assisted with the installation of the exhibition: Ian Bunyi, Paul Coleman, Sebastian Kainey, Noah Spivak and Maja Suljevic.



Gertrude Contemporary acknowledges the Wurundjeri people as the traditional owners and custodians of this land and pays respect to their Elders past and present.



1. Sanja Pahoki
Bang Head, Repeatedly, 2007
Neon, motor
Collection of Michael Jan and Peter Lovell, Melbourne
2. Nell
The ghost who travels will never die, 2018
Found trunk and hand-blown glass
Courtesy of the artist and STATION
3. Eric Jong
DEATH AND PAPERWORK, 2017
A3 certificate frames, redacted photocopies
Courtesy of the artist
4. Tony Garifalakis
Fucking Optimism, 2007
Cut felt and glue
120 cm x 95 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; and Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide.
5. Nell
Don't You See?, 2018
Acrylic and mixed media
100.5 x 80cm
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.
6. Tracey Moffatt
Doomed, 2007
Single-channel video (edited by Gary Hillberg),
10 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.
7. The Escape From Woomera Collective
Escape From Woomera, 2003
Video game
Courtesy of the artists
8. Todd McMillan
swim 5 (from the series *Ague*), 2009
C type photograph
131.7 x 87.8 cm
Collection of Sophie Holvast and Michael Moran, Eldorado
9. Myuran Sukumaran
28/04/2015, 28 April 2015
Oil on canvas board
40 x 60 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Myuran Sukumaran
10. Alex Seton
Life Vest (emergency), 2014
Bianco carrara marble
54 x 40 x 30cm
Private Collection, Melbourne
11. Andrew Liversidge
DEATH (I - X), 2017
Hydrocal White
99 x 59.5 x 3cm
Courtesy of the artist and The Commercial, Sydney
12. Grant Stevens
The Sun, 2016
HD video with sound
6 minutes 15 seconds
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney and Singapore
13. Vernon Ah Kee
The Doctrine of the Bigot, 2019
Vinyl adhesive on wall
4.5 x 1.8 metres
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

On the eve of his execution by Indonesian authorities following his decade-long detention within the infamous Kerobokan Prison for charges of drug trafficking, **Myuran Sukumaran** completed his final painting on the prison island of Nusa Kambangan, a representation of the Indonesian Flag. With the delineation of the red and white within the normally geometrically formal flag, appearing to be that of dripping blood, the work is a powerful coming to terms of the fate that had been sentenced to him in 2006. Powerfully, the work is signed on its reverse by his fellow death row inmates.

Todd McMillan presents his photographic work *swim 5*, from the series *Ague* (2009). These works emanate from a durational performative work attempted by the artist to swim across the English Channel. With little physical preparation undertaken in advance, and in spite of all optimism to achieve this physicality demanding feat, the artist's attempt to cross the Channel was perhaps predictably one of failure. In this photographic work from the performance, this realisation of failure is rendered explicit, with the artist's hand rising above the submerged, and potentially descending body of the artist.

Alex Seton's iconic marble-carved work *Life Vest (emergency)* (2014) is presented in dialogue with McMillan's work to create a connection between the now politically potent depiction of the life vest, and all of its connotations of dangerous modes of global migration emanating out of zones of conflict and poverty, and the representation of the (potentially) dying figure within McMillan's photographic work. Carved out of white marble, *Life Vest* stands as a symbol of safety, yet one that is has a weight which renders it incapable of saving lives.

Doomed (2007) is a video collage assembling representations of doom and destruction as depicted with within Hollywood cinema by **Tracey Moffatt** working in collaboration with Gary Hillberg. Utilising cut and paste editing techniques, the work creates an unrelenting assault of Armageddon-like footage, taking various forms of flooding, explosions, earthquakes or any other major event likely to cause total destruction. With all other forms of precursor narrative removed, *Doomed* positions itself in the exact moment when disaster presents itself. Drawing on footage from the history of cinema, the work distils an infatuation with cataclysmic events, and how popular film has given visualisation to the end of the world.

Offering a moment of levity, **Nell** offers a pairing of a sculptural work and painting. In the sculptural installation *The ghost who travels will never die* (2018), featuring a glass-blown ghost figure sitting atop a grouping of aged travel cases, as if to suggest that in the moment of passing, we leave behind the baggage of this world. As a spiritual follower of Zen Buddhism, Nell introduces a sense of death as being but a stage of passing into the next stage of existence, rather than an end in itself. This acceptance of the cycle of life is rendered with both humour and fatality in her painted work *Don't You See?* (2018), within which a smiley face is accompanied by the text 'We're all going to die...'

Grant Stevens' video work, *The Sun* (2016), presents a digital animation of our solar system's sun while a narrator discusses facts about our closest star. Initially appearing as a scientific documentary, the narrator discusses the composition of the sun and its evolution over the past 10 billion years or so from an enormous cloud of gas and dust to its present form. In discussing the tumultuous nature of the sun's constant state of change, the narrator goes on to elaborate on the what will occur when the sun eventually combusts, leading to the destruction of earth and all life on it. At this point the narrator glibly concludes, 'the laws and logic of physics may remain, but all else will be meaningless. There will be nothing left to salvage in the pure darkness'.

Eric Jong contributes the work *Death and Paperwork* (2017) draws upon his work with Bereavement Assistance, a funeral parlour providing destitute funeral services. Working in this role while studying at art school, Jong gathered masses of paperwork produced by the organisation as a means to reveal some of the bureaucracy that impacts us not just in life, but also in death. With all personal information redacted, the 65 framed works offer an unemotional audit of meagre possessions and the absence of next of kin in many of these instances. In this act of presenting these documents as a form of memorial, the artist draws attention to the state mechanisms for the administration and organisation of death, with a clinical distance from what it is to consider the memory and legacy of those who have passed.

Presented in the front window of Gertrude, looking out to passing pedestrians and traffic is a neon work by **Sanja Pahoki** with the resignatory title *Bang Head, Repeatedly* (2007). Rendered as a simple stick figure sitting at a desk, animated to relentlessly bang its head, the work speaks to the monotony of work life and a frustration with its incessantness. The work takes the form of commercial signage, and indeed, its positioning in the window connects the work to the promotion of a retail business. Yet in this instance, the work is not advertising food or other wares, but rather, sends a proclamation of exasperation.

Appearing as a series of headstones mounted to the wall, **Andrew Liversidge**'s death tablets are arranged with a similar formalism to the configuration of cemetery. Each of the ten works is marked by a simple geometric shape and the word DEATH. With this simple word, the tablets direct us to confront our inevitable fate. While all of the works are unique, collectively they initially appear as uniform, omitting any form of personalisation or tribute generally depicted upon cemetery headstones. Through this, the tablets become less a memorialisation for those who have already passed away, instead, registering as a brutal reminder of our own end.

Tony Garifalakis' felt banner work *Fucking Optimism* (2007) is drawn from a wider series of works produced by the artist which remake infamous suicide notes, titled *Mourning Glory*. For this work, a black banner features an inverted red crucifix with gothic text stating 'So much for my Fucking Optimism'. With suicide notes being a form of explanation or apology for a life rendered too painful to continue, as a final message left for those known to the deceased, they take on the gravity of the final thought before one's tragic death. In this work, the message is less one of rationale for the depletion of the will to live, than it is a statement of regret for ever being positive.

Titled *The Doctrine of the Bigot* (2019), **Vernon Ah Kee**'s new work continues the artist's engagement in language's capacity to confront. In this work, the artist powerfully defines the respective duties of two opposing forces. It is a binary addressed in the singular, but intended as an expansion of us and them, a recalibration of divides and a rebalancing of power. Addressing the trauma of colonialism in this country, the artist defines what he views to be the doctrine of the oppressor, a motto for continuing bigotry, and reflects this back at us to make us confront our own relation to structural inequity.

In 2003, a group of artists, activists, gamers and hackers banded together to produce *Escape from Woomera*, a point and click adventure video game based upon one of the most secretive and contested sites in the country at that time, the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre. Foreshadowing the establishment of offshore processing facilities for refugees on Nauru and Manus Island, Woomera became a symbol of the cruel treatment of asylum seekers. In what would later become a source of political contention, the collective received government funding through the Australia Council for the Arts, with politicians taking umbrage at providing funding to a work highly critical of immigration policies. In the unfinished game, players assume the character of Mustafa, an Iranian asylum seeker imprisoned within the facility. With his bid for asylum denied and fearing death at the hands of government forces in Iran, Mustafa decides that he must embark on a daring journey to escape.