

BIOSPHERE – A sense of belonging

Stephen McLaughlan Gallery

3 – 20 November 2021

Curated by Felicity Spear

Gracia Haby & Louise Jennison, Harry Nankin, Felicity Spear, Debbie Symons, Rosie Weiss

Biosphere – a sense of belonging comprises six artists whose practices share an empathy and concern with the natural world and the impacts of climate change. In this exhibition their work spins a sobering story of destruction and loss whilst also suggesting tentative threads of hope.

The symbiosis between living organisms and their environment creates the biosphere. The rapidly altering shape and patterns of the Earth's living systems through human-induced climate change has put the Earth as we know it in peril.

By definition 'belonging' refers to a secure relationship, an affinity. The primary meaning of 'belong' however, is to be the property or possession (of). This duality can represent different philosophies of being. When applied to the biosphere, the first meaning implies interconnection and care. The second represents human exceptionalism and the systemic proprietorial principles of colonisation, the root cause of climate change.

Rosie Weiss's works on paper reference Gippsland after the devastating bushfires of 2019/20. The artist recalls, 'It was overwhelming to find places...where no thing stirred, places of absolute silence, without a single green shoot, insect or bird.'¹ A drawing of charcoal debris on a hot-pink background is like a siren or a call to arms. The symbols evoke shorthand messages of care – a kiss and hug at the end of a message which may be offered as a heartfelt gesture or a hackneyed one. The title *Do you still love me? (Asked the earth)* is a question of care and ultimately, of belonging. It implies that there was once an affinity that is now in doubt. On the opposite wall are detailed drawings of couch grass on metallic ink titled *Breath Fracture* and *Do you still love me? Asked the earth (couch)*. Listed as the second most significant weed in the world², couch is highly invasive and causes widespread degradation of native species' health and diversity. There is irony in the artist's vision of couch being the lone survivor in the wake of an environmental catastrophe. On approach, light reflects on the drawings' metallic surfaces, withholding sections of the image, suggesting truths we cannot see or perhaps refuse to see.

A cluster of forms suspended from a tree branch emits bird calls – a shimmer of aural movement in the quiet space. Debbie Symons references the nest of the Yellow-rumped Cacique *Cacicus cela* in her installation, *Sing*. The artist encountered the bird on a residency in Manaus, Brazil in 2018. Symons observed the pendulous forms of their nests 'hanging above waters containing predators that are both mysterious and threatening'³. Symons has

¹ *BIOSPHERE - a sense of belonging*, exhibition catalogue, 2021

²

[https://keys.lucidcentral.org/keys/v3/eafrinet/weeds/key/weeds/Media/Html/Cynodon_dactylon_\(Couch_Grass\).htm](https://keys.lucidcentral.org/keys/v3/eafrinet/weeds/key/weeds/Media/Html/Cynodon_dactylon_(Couch_Grass).htm) accessed 1 February 2022

³ <https://debbiesymons.com.au/sing-2020-21/> accessed 1 February 2022

woven nests in imitation of the Cacique, but instead of using endemic Amazonian fibers, Symons' are constructed from African oil palm fronds. Oil palm is cultivated on an industrial scale, resulting in rapid deforestation across some of the world's most biodiverse hotspots including the Amazon Rain Forest. Secreted in Symons' nests are speakers releasing a recording of the Cacique's song. This work raises ideas concerning ecocide, species adaptability and the liminal space between belonging and extinction.

On the back wall looms Felicity Spear's larger than life drawing *Darkness falls*, referencing a black geometrid *Melanodes anthracitaria*. Due to its colour, the moth's name derives from 'anthracite', a pure form of coal. With charcoal as her medium, Spear draws a connection between the moth and the moth's namesake - a fossil fuel that when burnt is the single largest contributor to climate change⁴. The moth lies flat, affixed to the wall, cloaked in soft powdery tonal patterns resembling topography. Moths are nocturnal creatures, millions of years older than butterflies. Their fragility and transience are potent reminders of the brevity of life. The moth is oriented towards the luminous moons hanging on the adjoining wall.

The moon is, among a great many things, a sacred symbol, keeper of tides, weather influencer, and signaller to life on Earth. In *On reflection – ebb and flow*, Spear presents two digital prints of a full moon reflected in a dam. The movement of life in the water agitates the surface, creating ripples that act as a second lens. Suspended like an ovum, this distinctly biological impression of the moon invites ideas of human and nonhuman reproduction, such as the spawning of the Great Barrier Reef when the corals release their egg and sperm bundles after a full moon. The moon is an almost untouched natural environment that in dark moments both literal and metaphorical can be a potent reminder that perhaps not all is lost.

Gracia Haby and Louise Jennison have collaborated artistically for over twenty years. Their artists' book, *Something reverberated* was created especially for this project, and grew from a deepening engagement with the natural world that was inspired by walks in remnant forest in and near Melbourne. These encounters generated speculation about the ecologies of place predating colonisation, and the subsequent impacts of land theft and capitalism. Encompassing some 240 layers of collaged elements referenced from the archives of the State Libraries of Victoria and New South Wales, the concertina forest extends and contracts in its book form, creating layers of memory and imagined histories. In sepia tones and black and white, the imagery suggests echoes of past ecologies, traces of which may lie sleeping still, waiting under the roads. 'The forest was bordered by roads, but it was still ancient, deep down, in the parts we [colonial settlers] allowed to remain.'⁵ Meanwhile, fragments of coloured foliage and bird life speak to the still-living bush, the remnants that remain. Perhaps the *Something* [that] *reverberated* is the resonance of deep time and knowledge, that life on Earth will go on irrespective of human presence.

Harry Nankin's pictures tell a story of climate change in Australia's alpine region. Hung in three tiers, the works span twenty-six years. The central panel, *Moth liturgy*, is a

⁴ <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data> accessed 15 February 2022

⁵ <https://gracialouise.com/works/something-reverberated> accessed 28 January 2022

shadowgram of Bogong Moths *Agrotis infusa*. Created in 2011, the moths landed on exposed photographic film near their migratory destination at Mount Buffalo, leaving behind their shadows. Nankin enlarged the image and infused it with colour, making the moths more visible to the human eye. The Bogong Moth is known for its astonishing ability to navigate using celestial optical cues and an internal magnetic compass. Each spring this keystone species travels hundreds of kilometers from the lowlands to hibernate in the alpine caves. Above and beneath the moth image are prints of the surrounding alpine landscape. *Winter light, Mount Jaithmathang*, a large format photograph, depicts the mountain in 1995; the scrub is encased in snow, and alpine peaks rise mythically in the background. In contrast, a series of smaller black and white images titled *After the fire* document the landscape in the aftermath of the 2019/20 bushfires. The forms and textures of these images are stark - charred sticks and branches appear petrified alongside granite boulders, like exposed bones in the landscape. The Bogong Moth once migrated in great numbers, pollinating plants, and providing an important food source for many species. In 2021 it was declared endangered. As the Earth's climate changes, beings such as the Bogong Moth struggle to survive. Species extinction degrades the biosphere, inciting a rapid cascade effect on the ecosystems upon which we all depend.

The sphere motif recurs throughout the exhibition. Rich with symbolism, it evokes coming full circle, in the sense of a life cycle. It can also be a void, a nullifying of existence. Or the source itself, a place of mystery, new beginnings, and hope. Scientist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her celebrated book *Braiding Sweet Grass*, 'She [sweet grass] reminded me that it is not the land that has been broken, but our relationship to it.'⁶ The survival of the biosphere as we know it depends on the well-being of the networks of mutual care in which we exist. Weighted with sorrow and precarity, the works in this exhibition embody an affinity with the natural world that highlights a critical need to reflect on human belonging as part of a larger network of care.

Penelope Gebhardt
February 2022

© Penelope Gebhardt 2022

⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen of the Potawatomi Nation), 'Braiding Sweet Grass', (Penguin, 2003), 336.