

# Framing Nature



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curated by Simon Lawrie,  
The Balnaves Curator of Australian Sculpture

McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery  
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Cover image: Siri Hayes, Wanderer above a sea of images 2009, type C photograph, 108.0 x 135.0 cm, Monash University Collection. Purchased 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Monash University Museum of Art.



## FRAMING NATURE

Landscape has always held a significant place in Australian art, though conceived and represented in diverse ways. From the earliest paintings by Indigenous Australians through colonial art to modern and contemporary works, landscape has reflected a range of spiritual, social, political, scientific and philosophical concerns. Taken together, these varied approaches reveal the changing relationship between culture and nature.

European landscape painting rose to prominence during the Romantic period in the late eighteenth century, emphasising the emotional component of aesthetic experience and often foregrounding terror, beauty and sublimity. Awe-inspiring natural phenomena can be seen in John Constable's *Rainbow in the Westmore land fells* 1806. Concurrently the rise of travel and tourism allowed people to encounter the majesty of natural places such as that depicted in the early 20th century by Ethel Carrick Fox in *Alpine landscape* n.d. Into the 1920s and 30s and closer to home, the immediate local surrounds of Frankston and Carrum Downs attracted artists such as Polly Hurry and Harry McClelland. This intimate and personal experience of nature was central to the Romantics, and the artist's unique expression was highly regarded. Later in the 20th century, the painterly lyrical abstraction of Fred Williams' *Forest of Gum Trees II* 1967 reveals a distinctly Australian landscape of honey-coloured beauty. By eliminating the horizon Williams evokes the vastness of our continent, creating an immersive and infinite sense of space.

In more recent years there has been an emphasis on the problematic task of representing nature. Gabriella Hirst's *Force Majeure* 2016 demonstrates the futility of trying to capture the landscape in the face of such indifferent and overwhelming forces. Siri Hayes' *Wanderer above a sea of images* 2008 suggests that the proliferation of idealised images of nature hide the reality of our environment, presenting a more contemporary landscape with evidence of industry. Her *Crossing the Merri* 2002-04 contrasts with a picturesque 19th century view of the Yarra River by Nicholas Chevalier, to reveal the changing state of both the environment itself and our aesthetic appreciation of it.

The Romantic veneration of landscape is seen in part as a reaction against the Enlightenment's scientific rationalisation of nature, and a similar resistance to the exploitation of natural resources remains in Janet Laurence's *Forensic sublime (Crimes against the landscape series: Styx Forest)* 2008. Yet scientific developments have also deepened our understanding of the place we occupy in nature. James Geurts' conceptual works exploit the tools used to measure and analyse nature in order to disclose and disrupt our subjective relationship with the environment, while Paul Davies uses natural light and chemical processes to create a ghostly afterimage of his surroundings in photograms.

The Australian landscape is a site where cultures and histories compete, often subtly over time but also with abrupt violence. In this regard, Danie Mellor's *Natura naturans, Naturata, Natura naturata (the twenty first century)* 2015 involves a complex interplay between the landscape's physical and metaphysical elements. The title refers to philosophical concepts regarding nature's provenance and properties, contrasting with the Indigenous cosmology and understanding of Country that this landscape also holds. Demonstrating this schism, John Skinner Prout's *View from North Shore, Sydney* c1850 depicts an early site where conflict took place, but his serene post-settlement picture belies the brutal historical reality of colonial invasion.

Landscape continues to have a prominent role as a symbol of nature's fluctuation, its cycles of destruction, renewal and transmutation. Indigenous paintings, such as Dorothy Napangardi's expansive canvas *Untitled* 2005 and Angelina George's *My imagined country - rock face* 2006, imbue the topographical elements of the Australian landscape with mythological significance, rooted in an essential and enduring connection to Country. Frederick McCubbin's *Rainbow over Burnley* 1910, on the other hand, reveals the appropriation and exploitation of landscape for industry. Similarly, Brodie Ellis' video *The Crystal World* 2016 depicts landscape not as environment but as object, with found footage of mining detonations reconfigured in reference to science fiction and potential futures.

While John Farmer's picturesque mid-century etchings invoke familiar comfort, the strange otherworldliness of certain landscapes becomes apparent when considered objectively. In a contemporary context, Hanna Tai's *Botany Ostranenie* series of 2010 de-familiarises nature to highlight its peculiarity as a system of forms and energies. Outside the entrance to the gallery, her flag titled *Not not not not (Invisible Substance)* 2013 draws attention to the wind as an unseen environmental force. Disturbances to this delicate system of forces are becoming increasingly apparent through climate change, yet nature's destructive energies are often more blatant. Photographs from John Gollings' 2009 *Aftermath* series document Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires, and the precise coordinates in the title of each image highlight the physical location and very real effect of such events on the planet.

This exhibition draws on predominantly two-dimensional works which range in scale from Hanna Tai's *Botany Ostranenie* series to Dorothy Napangardi's *Untitled* canvas. These are displayed to evince their various sympathies and dissonances, yet all works have an equivalence in how they resonate with a truth of the Australian landscape.

Simon Lawrie  
The Balnaves Curator of Australian Sculpture  
November 2017



Ethel CARRICK FOX  
*Alpine landscape* n.d  
oil on wood  
26.1 x 35.0 cm

Born in England, Ethel Carrick Fox travelled widely in Europe, North Africa, and the South Pacific before settling in Australia at the outbreak of World War I. She began her career working *plein air* in the Impressionist style, but fairly quickly moved to a more Post-Impressionist style featuring simplified compositions and strong colour contrasts. Some of the works produced around 1911-12 are distinctly Fauvist in their saturated colours, loose handling of paint, and highly abstract compositions. Although undated, *Alpine landscape* was likely produced around this period.



John CONSTABLE  
*Rainbow in the Westmore land fells* 1806  
watercolour  
21.9 x 32.7 cm  
Collection of McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery

John Constable was an English Romantic painter working in the early nineteenth century. He was one of the first artists to respond to the landscape directly in plein air preliminary sketches and was particularly attentive to atmospheric conditions and ephemeral elements of landscape such as clouds and rainbows. True to the spirit of Romanticism, Constable cultivated a deeply personal response to each landscape and would often include poetic descriptive notes in his paintings, such as those seen in the top left of *Rainbow in the Westmore land fells* 1806.



Nicholas CHEVALIER  
*The Yarra River, Victoria* n.d  
watercolour and pencil  
21.4 x 28.0 cm  
Collection of McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery  
Gift of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch AC DBE, 1985

Nicholas Chevalier was a Swiss/Russian painter who worked in Australia from 1855 to 1869. He was among other European artists of this time, such as his friend Eugene von Guérard, who brought elements of German Romanticism into an Australian context. He regularly travelled to find scenic natural subjects, such as that depicted in *The Yarra River, Victoria* n.d. In the late 1850s he joined Georg von Neumayer's scientific expedition of Victoria, which covered the Western District, Cape Otway, the Grampians and the Wimmera to record meteorological and magnetic data. He then returned to Great Britain where he worked as a royal court artist.



Paul DAVIES

*View through a lens at Taliesin West, photogram #2, 8.47am, sunny 6 degrees, made between student residencies and atrium studio and apprentice court 2016*

gum bichromate and vinyl copolymer on paper

45.5 x 60.5 cm

Collection of McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery

Gift the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2017

Paul Davies is an Australian artist working in Los Angeles, whose paintings, sculptures and photographs concern the relationship between architecture and nature. The two photograms featured in this exhibition were made by Davies during the Taliesin Artist Residency at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture in Phoenix, Arizona, USA in 2016. Here he developed a new series of twenty-four works responding to the notion of 'organic architecture'. Sunlight and moonlight were captured on paper painted with gum bichromate, a photosensitive solution developed in the 1800s. Using a stencil cut from a photograph of the building's exterior, the resulting image was reduced to a silhouette, which blends architecture and landscape.



Brodie ELLIS  
*The Crystal World 2016*  
SD video and stereo sound  
dimensions variable  
'Found' footage (internet open source)  
Video and sound editing by Brodie Ellis  
Musicians: Brodie Ellis, Jake Clover and Cameron Robbins  
Courtesy of the artist

Brodie Ellis is based in Castlemaine, Victoria, and her work often attends to contemporary ecological issues between science and ethics. *The Crystal World 2016* incorporates open source found footage from the internet of Australian mining detonations. This material is edited together to form an ongoing series of explosions, as barren desert landscapes suddenly erupt in plumes of earth. The work evokes elements of Land Art and Abstract Expressionism, while the soundtrack, composed of mechanical clinks and technological groans, was recorded by Ellis with fellow artists Cameron Robbins and Jake Clover. The title refers to a 1966 science fiction novel by English author J. G. Ballard, in which a physician tries to find a secluded treatment facility deep in a jungle where an apocalyptic phenomenon crystallises everything it touches. In the context of Ellis' work this becomes a metaphor for the environmental consequences of the anthropocene.



John FARMER  
*Country road* (1940-60)  
drypoint printed in sepia on buff paper  
13.1 x 11.0 cm  
Collection of McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery  
Purchased through The Fornari Bequest, 1982

John Farmer studied under the influential tonal artist Max Meldrum in 1917, and through him met fellow artists Harry McClelland and his future wife Polly Hurry. Farmer had been a practicing artist for over 20 years before being encouraged by the renowned Melbourne printmaker Victor E. Cobb to try printmaking in 1943; it became a passion that would define his later career. Farmer's prints present a variety of detailed scenes from around the Frankston area, where the artist moved with his wife in 1957. While his picturesque depictions of the landscape are drawn from European artists such as Rembrandt, Constable and Corot, they are unique in their intimate evocation of the Mornington Peninsula.



James GEURTS

*90 Degrees Equatorial Project* 2007-14 (2017)

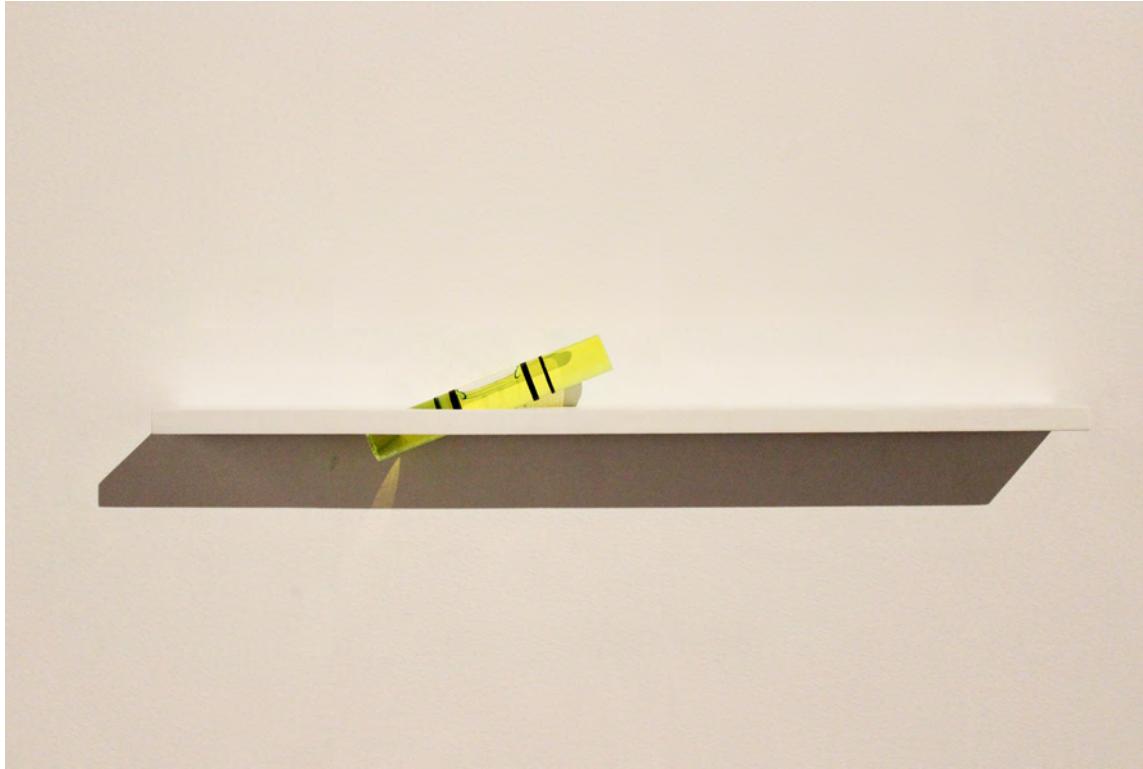
site and time-specific ephemeral Land-Art project, Sumatra 100° East, (10am); Gabon 10° East, (4am); Ecuador, 80° West (10pm); Kiribati Island, 170° East (4pm)

fabricated acrylic sculpture with solar powered light

Durotran prints with light box, 240.0 x 240.0 x 8.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

James Geurts is based in Melbourne, though often undertakes residencies and site-specific fieldwork as part of his practice. Informed equally by American Minimalism, Land Art, and Golden Age Dutch painting, his conceptual works exploit the tools used to measure and analyse nature in order to disclose and disrupt our subjective relation with the environment. *90 Degrees Equatorial Project* 2007-14 (2017) negates our instinctual reading of landscape as flat panorama, and instead encourages a larger perspective on our global and astronomical parameters. Geurts travelled to four locations at 90 degrees from each other around the equator, documenting his portable right-angled sculpture at six hours apart. In a similar and direct way, *23 1/2 ° Orbital Horizon* 2007-14 (2017), a tilted spirit level that is based on the axis of earth's orbit around the sun, unsettles our orientation in the immediate environment and our sense of place within the cosmos.



James GEURTS  
*23 1/2° Orbital Horizon* 2014 (2017)  
cast resin, Plexiglas, wood  
4.5 x 35.0 x 3.8 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Angelina GEORGE  
*My imagined country - rock face* 2006  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
200.0 x 160.0 cm  
Collection of McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery  
Purchased through The Fornari Bequest, 2006

Angelina George was born in 1937, the daughter of the first Aboriginal pastor at the Roper Anglican mission in Southern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. She worked in pastoral station camps as a young woman, spending much time with her relative Ginger Riley who became the key figure in the Roper River painting movement in the 1990's. George started painting as a child and quickly developed her own style by imagining the space and structure of the landscape. The core of her work from 2004 to 2013 brought the mountains of her Ngyameratjara Country south of the Roper River to intense, imaginative life. *My imagined country - rock face* 2006 has a rough gestural quality that highlights the materiality of the landscape.