

STILL

LIFE



**BUXTON
CONTEMP
ORARY**

Mikala Dwyer
Nicholas Mangan
Angelica Mesiti
Clare Milledge
Vera Möller
James Morrison
Jahnne Pasco-White
Isadora Vaughan
Adele Wilkes
Mulkun Wirrpanda
John Wolseley

Curated by Jacqueline Doughty

Still Life

Still Life brings together imagination and empirical observation to celebrate the interconnectedness of life.

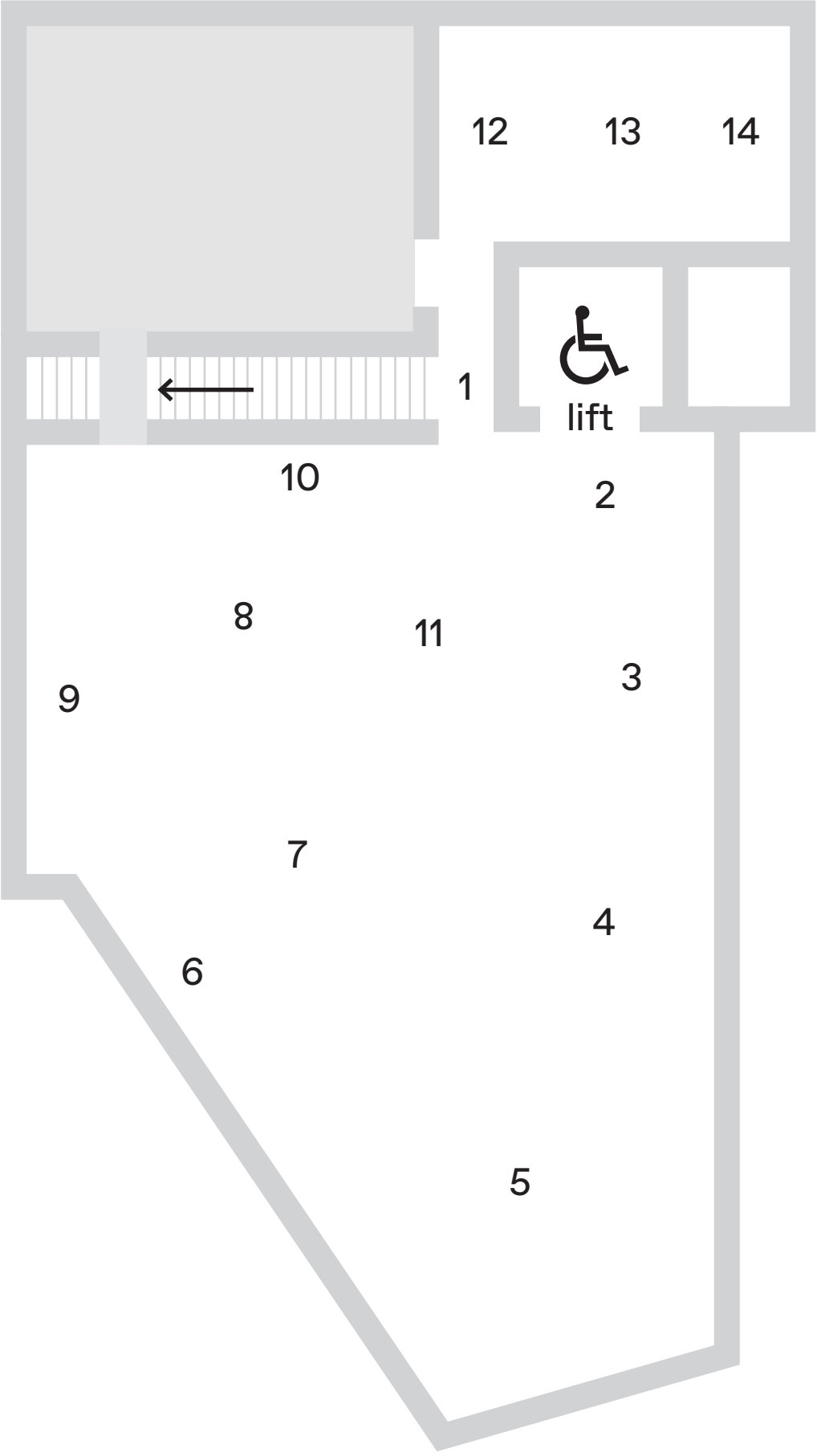
The exhibition comprises artworks by eleven contemporary artists that explore the complexities of nature, emphasising interdependence and shifting states of being. These works contrast with teaching objects from the University of Melbourne's Herbarium collection, a selection of watercolours and papier mâché models representing artistic and scientific traditions, in which natural organisms are depicted in static isolation from their environment.

Many of the artworks in *Still Life* take as their starting point representational strategies from the natural sciences, such as botanical illustration, macro photography, specimen collection and field recordings. In the artists' hands these methodologies move beyond the observable world into a realm of abstraction, symbolism and fantasy.

Focusing on symbiotic relationships and interspecies entanglements, the artworks allude to underground mycelial networks that connect forests, giant termite mounds that provide a home for collaborative communities, and microorganisms that inhabit human bodies and are integral to our existence.

The artists in *Still Life* emphasise the benefits of mutualistic ways of being to our relationship with nature, and as a pathway to a sustainable future.

First Floor Floorplan



1

Malcolm Howie

born 1900 Melbourne; died 1936 Melbourne

Amanita ochrophylla 1934

Amanita spissa 1934

Boletus 1935

Clathrus gracilis 1934

Clavaria 1935

Collybia velutipes 1930

Coprinus comatus 1935

Corinarus cinnabarinus 1934

Corinarius violaceus 1935

Cortinarius 1935

Fomes rimosus 1934

Lactarius deliciosus 1934

Lepiota rhacodes 1935

Lycoperdon 1934

Mycena 1935

Pisolithus tinctorius 1934

Pleurotus 1934

Polystictus versicolor 1934

Psaliota 1935

Trametes cinnabrarina 1934

watercolour on paper

Collection of The University of Melbourne Herbarium, School of BioSciences,
The University of Melbourne

Mikala Dwyer

born 1959 Sydney; lives and works in Melbourne

Pigeon 2022

vinyl

Mikala Dwyer

born 1959 Sydney; lives and works in Melbourne

James Hayes

born 1973 Binghamton, New York, United States; lives and works in Melbourne

Ode to the 'ō'ō 2022

audio

7 min 12 sec

Collection of the artists, courtesy 1301SW, Melbourne

The Kaua'i 'ō'ō was a small black honeyeater with vivid yellow leg feathers, one of many Hawaiian birds driven to extinction in recent years by invasive species and habitat destruction. Last sighted in 1985, its distinctive whistling song was last recorded in 1987. Mikala Dwyer has collaborated with composer James Hayes to re-mix this final mating call into an other-worldly soundtrack.

Those lucky enough to have heard the 'ō'ō's song in the wild remarked that it sounded almost human. Dwyer and Hayes emphasise this uncanny resemblance by overlaying the bird call with the distorted voice of the actor Carol Spinny in the guise of Big Bird, along with

magpie and bellbird calls. The result is an echoing, ghostly loop that transforms an ornithological field recording into a type of haunting. Dwyer often invokes magic and spiritualism in her work as an exhortation to move beyond the confines of rational thought, writing of this piece:

Trapped in our grid of reason, I imagine escape routes that can bend and dissolve bars, lines and geometries. Birds always remind me of escape, airborne into mesmerizing swarms guided by magnetic fields. Seeing things we have lost the ability to imagine.

Please enter the lift to listen to this work.

3

Clare Milledge

born 1977 Sydney; lives and works on Garigal Land

Eidothea: Immortal clones of the perlite deposits & hollow-bearer 2020

stained glass, lead came, oil, wood, bronze, perlite, copper, wax

Collection of the artist, courtesy STATION, Melbourne

This work is part of a wider project that advocates listening to forests as living entities. It takes its name from *Eidothea hardeniana*, or the Nightcap Oak, an ancient tree species originating from the Proteaceae family, a lineage stretching back more than 120 million years.

For Clare Milledge, art is a means to engage with ecology. Beginning with the methodology of fieldwork, her artworks develop through the translation of information and material gathered on ecological site visits. Milledge employs the figure of the artist-shaman in her work as a transformative metaphor, imbuing installations, otherwise based upon scientific data, with a mystical quality.

The child of two ecologists, who are frequent collaborators in her research, Milledge is interested in the fieldwork observations that are often excluded from published research – the conversations and marginal notes that ‘enrich the story in ways that pure data cannot’. The texts in this work derive from field trips with ecologists in the Nightcap National Park in New South Wales.

4

Jahnne Pasco-White

born 1987 Melbourne; lives and works in Chewton

Animals in the world like water in water 2 2019

crayon, turmeric and fabric dye on cotton

Becoming with 8 2019

acrylic, paper, canvas, pencil, crayon, oil pastel, pigment, cement oxide, cotton, paper, linen, mandarin skins on canvas

Becoming with 15 2019

acrylic, oil, wattle, lilly pilly berries, grass, pencil, crayon, oil pastel, flowers on canvas

Becoming with 16 2019

acrylic, oil, lilly pilly berries, grass, pencil, crayon, oil pastel, pigment, cement oxide, on canvas

Inter-giftedness 5 2020

raw pigment, earth pigment, rice glue, crayon, pencil, water, clothes, paper, natural dyes (beetroot) and acrylic paint on canvas

Rearranging my body 2 2021

earth pigments, turmeric dyed cotton, linen, pencil, beeswax crayon, cotton thread on canvas

Bodily feeling 17 2022

sand, soil, earth pigment, crayon, acrylic paint, natural dyes (olives, beetroot, pine bark, rosemary, cleavers, copper beech leaves, crab apple, avocado skins and stones), cement oxide, canvas, cotton, linen, paper, rice glue, PVA on canvas

Bodily feeling 18 2022

indigo, persimmon skins on cotton

Collection of the artist, courtesy STATION, Melbourne

The concept of kinship is central to Jahanne Pasco-White's work. Her understanding of the term is generous, circling out from nuclear family to encompass a web of interconnected living and non-living beings and things.

This inclusivity has been informed by the artist's experience of motherhood, and her realisation that even before she bore her first child, her body was not a singular entity, but host to a multitude of fellow travellers – the microbial companions without which none of us could survive.

Pasco-White's expanded painting practice embodies this profound realisation of relationality through its multiplicity and materiality. Her canvases hang free from walls and frames, draped and layered in constantly reconfigured conversations, recycled and reconstituted from exhibition to exhibition into new connections and forms.

Their surfaces are marked by traditional artistic media and organic pigments distilled from flowers, fruits and leaves; collaged with her daughter's drawings and bamboo baby wipes. They are, in the artist's words, 'a fleshy material archive imbued with stains, bringing together a fusion of artmaking that is not separate from life but embedded in daily encounters.'

5

Angelica Mesiti

born 1976 Sydney; lives and works in Paris

Over the Air and Underground 2020

five-channel HD video, 10-channel sound

9 min continuous loop

Collection of the artist, courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

In these five videos, flowers in various stages of decay are consumed by ghostly mushrooms and shrouded in threads of fungal mycelium. A contemporary take on 17th century Dutch 'vanitas' paintings, which employed symbols of mortality as a reminder of life's brevity, Angelica Mesiti's moving still life demonstrates how living matter is broken down and distributed back into the environment, revealing death to be one step in a symbiotic continuum.

The title of this work refers to different zones of plant communication. Above the earth, flowers express a sensory language that attracts pollinators such as birds and insects. The flowers in this work are illuminated by ultraviolet light, the spectrum in which bees perceive the markings that guide them towards nectar and pollen. Under the ground, roots are connected by complex networks of mycorrhizal fungi – a 'wood wide web' – distributing water and food, and transmitting information about pests and other threats. The soundtrack is composed of 10 individual voices humming in harmony with a 220 Hertz tone, the frequency of the electrical signals through which trees communicate.

6

Mulkun Wirrpanda

Dhudi-Djapu/Dha-malamirr

born c. 1947 Dhuruputjpi, Eastern Arnhem Land;
died 2021; lived and worked on Yolŋu Country,
Dhuruputjpi and Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land

Njādi ga Guṇdirr 2019

natural pigments on bark

Casper Wald Collection, Melbourne

Njādi ga Guṇdirr 2019

natural pigments on bark

Private collection, Melbourne

Courtesy of Outstation Gallery, Darwin and Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala

Mulkun Wirrpanda was a senior artist and respected leader of the Dhudi-Djapu clan of Dhuruputjpi in Eastern Arnhem Land. Her imagery is based upon empirical, observational Yolŋu knowledge. In 2012, concerned that the loss of plant knowledge in her community was resulting in poor diets and ill health, she shifted the subject matter of her paintings from sacred clan designs to traditional food sources.

These three bark paintings are part of her final project exploring the ecosystems of munyukulunju magnetic or compass termites, a species of eusocial insect that is endemic to northern Australia. Significantly, the series focuses not on the termites themselves, but on the many different species who share their mounds: njādi or northern meat ants, bees, moths, fungi and a

variety of birds such as striated pardalotes. In addition to illustrating the sophistication of Yolŋu scientific knowledge, these works speak of symbiotic living systems and a social balance based upon collaborative mutualism.

These paintings should be viewed in conversation with the adjacent and related works by John Wolseley.

7

Isadora Vaughan

born 1987 Melbourne; lives and works in Melbourne

Hide 2020

latex, glass fibre, tea tree

Figure ate 2020

heat-formed polymer, beeswax

Spherical cows 2022

milk powder

Collection of the artist, courtesy STATION, Melbourne

In Isadora Vaughan's work artistic control ebbs and flows in conversation with environmental forces and organic materials. Her sculptures are relational and dynamic – they ooze, slump and crack, embodying a natural world that is constantly in flux.

Here a trio of works speak of animal and vegetal transformations from liquid to solid. Latex and beeswax are fashioned into visceral forms that suggest cells, eggs and organs. Milk powder is misted with water that evaporates to leave a crusty 'stain' on the floor. Together these works evoke bodily and biochemical processes such as digestion and fermentation.

Milk is a vital, nurturing substance that both sustains and hosts life. It contains complex microbial communities, including various strains of lactobacilli that turn milk into yoghurt and promote a healthy stomach biome. At the

heart of a dairy industry that has mechanised the milk production of cows for human benefit, it encompasses the full spectrum of interspecies entanglements, from reciprocity to exploitation.

In this work it typifies the way that Vaughan explores the scientific, cultural and formal qualities of organic materials to prompt a consideration of our interconnectedness with the natural environment.

8

Nicholas Mangan

born 1979 Geelong; lives and works in Melbourne

Termite economies: Phase 2 #1 2019

ceramic powder, gypsum, cyrilinate, acrylic paint, steel, plywood, fluorescent light

Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Mound-building termites are sociable and inter-dependent creatures with sophisticated systems of communication and organisation. Their colonies are often described as superorganisms, housed in multi-chamber dwellings connected by tunnels and ventilated by shafts that regulate temperature. Giant termite mounds, some several metres high and hundreds of years old, are created slowly and collectively through the gradual accumulation of soil and saliva.

In Nicholas Mangan's three-phase project *Termite Economies*, the incremental building methods of these industrious insects are mirrored by the process of 3D printing. To create his sculptures, Mangan utilises algorithms modelled on termite collective swarming behaviour. The resulting forms are suggestive of mine shafts and neural networks, and speak to the artist's interest in analogies between brain function and systems of power and social organisation. If brains are adaptable, speculates the artist, then surely we can reformulate political and economic systems into more collaborative and equitable alternatives.

9

John Wolseley

born 1938 Somerset, United Kingdom; lives and works in Bendigo, Whipstick Forest

Termitaria: Indwelling I – Interior of an Arnhem Land termite dwelling with fungus gardens, nursery galleries and the royal cell 2020–2021

Termitaria: Indwelling II – The eusocial life of termite nests with pardalotes and golden shouldered parrots 2020–2021

Termitaria: Indwelling III – Tree wood termite mould with forest kingfisher 2020–2021

Termitaria: Indwelling IV – Arboreal termite mounds with owls and ants 2020–2021

woodcut, linocut, etching, graphite frottage and watercolour on cotton, Mino washi and Gampi paper
Woodblock printer: Kaitlyn Gibson

Collection of the artist, courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Describing himself as a ‘hybrid mix of artist and scientist’, John Wolseley combines experimental print, drawing and watercolour techniques to convey the dynamism and complexity of the natural world. One of his characteristic methods stems from the 18th century amateur scientific practice of ‘nature printing’, in which specimens are covered in pigment and pressed between sheets of paper.

The Termitaria series was developed in conversation with Mulkun Wirrpanda, whose bark paintings are displayed on the adjacent wall. These companion works reflect a decade-long friendship between two artists from different scientific and artistic traditions, who met annually to explore and share knowledge about the living systems of Arnhem Land. Wolseley described the impetus for this series as their joint discovery of a collapsed termite mound, which had the appearance of a 'ruined city':

I could see the nursery galleries, the fungus gardens, and even what could have been the Royal cell where the queen had lived with her diminutive King. I found remains of compost in the fungus 'combs'. And I could see why scientists had described these mounds as bodies with stomachs holding the composting gardens where the termites farmed their fungae.

10–11

Vera Möller

born 1955 Bremen, Germany; lives and works in Flinders
and Melbourne

Fictional hybrids. Kingswood Forest, Kent UK

2011/2022

blacklipped woodears

freckled rossarinas

greeninger

pale wingnuts

truebelles

weisskopf

pigment inkjet print on paper

Fictional hybrids 2009–2013

modelling material, mixed media

Collection of the artist, courtesy Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne

Vera Möller calls her plant-like sculptures ‘hypothetical specimens’. Embellished with dots and stripes, they look like fanciful mergers of coral, fungi and cacti. Despite its loose approach to botanical exactitude, Möller’s artistic practice is grounded in scientific knowledge. Prior to moving from Germany to Australia in the 1980s, she studied biology and microbiology with a focus on freshwater ecology and mycology (fungi). As an artist, she moves from a deep understanding of plant structures and ecosystems into a space of playful abstraction, walking the line between the real and the imagined.

During her 2011 residency at King's Wood, a protected woodland in the Kent Downs of England, Möller sculpted an array of speculative fungi in response to local concerns about encroaching fields of genetically modified canola. Using a macro lens she photographed the sculptures nestled amongst lichen and leaf litter on the forest floor. Each mushroom cluster has been assigned a taxonomic nomenclature that could almost, but not quite, fool us into mistaking these interlopers for the real thing.

12

James Morrison

born 1959 Goroka, Papua New Guinea; lives and works in Melbourne

Freeman Dyson 2008

oil on canvas

The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Michael Buxton Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program
by Michael and Janet Buxton 2018

Markham Valley 2008

papier maché and ink

The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Michael Buxton Collection
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program
by Michael and Janet Buxton 2018

Hamersley Range 2020

oil on board

Maitland River 2020

oil on board

Lily 2017

oil on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne, courtesy Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

James Morrison's intricate depictions of the natural world are founded upon a love of botanical drawing. Teeming with faithfully reproduced minutiae, his paintings and sculptures promise a truth to nature, then dispel the illusion with surreal incursions that disrupt

spatial and temporal logic. His work sits in a hybrid zone between landscape and still life, reality and myth, a dreamlike space inhabited by animals that demonstrate human qualities and vice versa.

In the painting *Freeman Dyson* an apocalyptic space-scape looms over a forest populated by crows, which appear to be picking through the detritus of a crash, or perhaps the end of human civilization. The work is titled after the British-American physicist Freeman Dyson (1923–2020), whose theories about space exploration and genetic engineering were simultaneously plausible and completely fantastical.

Dyson was sceptical about his fellow-physicists' search for a unified *Theory of Everything*. He considered magic and religion as complementary approaches to science in understanding the universe, saying in a 2000 speech, 'God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world.'

The University of Melbourne Herbarium Collection, School of BioSciences

The University of Melbourne Herbarium houses 150,000 specimens of plants, fungi and algae, including historically important collections and artwork. This exhibition includes examples from the Botanical Model Collection and the Malcolm Howie Watercolour Collection.

In the 1800s and the early 1900s botanical models were used for teaching purposes in universities throughout the world to demonstrate plant and fungi diversity, morphology, anatomy, and life cycles. This selection includes plants that are useful to human society in a range of ways, from agricultural to medicinal applications; alongside plants that share more reciprocal, mutualistic relationships with other animals

Prior to the wide accessibility of colour photography, watercolour illustrations were of great value for students of botany, particularly for specimens such as fungi that do not retain their distinctive features well when preserved. In the early 1930s, natural history artist Malcolm Howie created illustrations of over 200 species of Victorian fungi. The works on display are part of a set of reproductions commissioned by the University of Melbourne.

14

Adele Wilkes

born 1980 Lismore; lives and works
in Melbourne/Naarm

*The Poison Garden – Part 1: A Dark Spell Slowly Fading &
Part 2: Whelm 2021*

single channel HD video, stereo sound
22 mins

Collection of the artist

This work is part of an ongoing multimedia documentary project about a psychedelic botanical garden and the reclusive polymath couple who tend it. As the camera lingers on the garden and its bounty of medicinal and psychoactive plants, we hear the gardeners speaking with respect and deep knowledge about the historical uses, cultural significance and molecular composition of the plants they collect and imbibe.

In her work, Adele Wilkes draws upon theories of the 'more-than-human', a cross-disciplinary discourse that critiques the centrality of the human subject. Working from the increasingly urgent premise that human individualism and exceptionalism have led to environmental catastrophe, it proposes a more ethical, reciprocal approach to cross-species interrelationships.

The Poison Garden suggests a relationship between human and more-than-human that goes beyond caretaking – one in which plants are equal protagonists. It prompts the question, could the effects of plant-

derived substances on human consciousness and sensory perception be considered a form of plant expression?